



# Alpha Unbound

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** I didn't come back to Wild Hollow for redemption. I came because the mountains wouldn't let me stay away.

The town needed a sheriff. The pack needed an alpha. I just wanted quiet, coffee, and to be left the hell alone.

Then Kate McKinley blew into my life like a warm Appalachian storm, bright, sassy, and completely impossible to ignore. She runs the general store like a queen in boots and flannel, with a pet goose named Hank, and enough charm to make even a battle-scarred wolf forget his scars.

My wolf knew her the second we locked eyes. Fated mates. The kind of bond you don't walk away from—not even if it rips your life in two. But Wild Hollow doesn't play fair. Old feuds are stirring. Her family's name is tangled in half the town's secrets. And while I'm trying to drag this place into the light, she's caught in the shadows, torn between loyalty to her outlaw kin, and the pull of something wild between us.

Now I have a choice: uphold the law or protect the woman fate gave me.

And Kate? She'll have to decide if loving me is worth turning her back on everything she's ever known.

Because in Wild Hollow, secrets don't stay buried. Not in the soil. Not in the blood. And sure as hell not in the heart of an alpha who's finally found his mate.

**Total Pages (Source):** 55

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

## PROLOGUE

KATE

McKinley Homestead

Wild Hollow, West Virginia

Thirteen Years Ago

It's snowing fat, wet flakes when I find him.

Hank, puffed up and pissed off, is huddled in the corner of the chicken coop, honking like a maniac whenever a hen twitches. He's got a mean streak, even for a Canada goose, and a beak like a snapping turtle. But I see the tremble in his wings.

I see something else, too—something I recognize. That stubborn refusal to go quietly. That look that says, 'I know you've already decided what I'm worth, but I'm not done fighting.' Maybe I'm not just saving him. Maybe I'm saving something in myself, too. I see the fear behind the bluster.

And I see the red string tied around his foot—the McKinley family version of a death sentence. It's something he's done since before I was born. None of the others ever question it—everyone seems to approve and most of them even help.

Granddad—the unofficial alpha of our bloodline, even if we never said it out loud—does it every year.

He picks one bird, marks it with the string, and says, “That’s Christmas Dinner.” Then someone—usually a cousin looking to score points—rings its neck before supper on the twenty-fourth. It’s tradition.

Hank doesn’t know about tradition. He just knows he’s cold and alone and that something bad is coming.

I crouch down, boots sinking into the straw and mud, and whisper, “Easy now.”

He hisses.

“Don’t make this harder than it already is,” I say, edging closer. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

He lunges. I lunge faster.

I wrap my arms around his flapping, furious body and haul him to my chest. He bites me. Twice. Draws blood. I swear like my Uncle Joey and clutch him tighter, ignoring the sting. I know I’m not just risking bruises—I’m defying the rules written in blood and family loyalty. Girls in this family don’t make waves. They don’t steal dinner. They don’t stand up to Granddad. Not just in this house, either. It’s a rule written across most of the McKinley pack: girls keep their heads down while the boys inherit the fire.

But I do. And there’s no going back now.

“You wanna die out here, go ahead,” I mutter. “But if you wanna live, shut up and come with me.”

He keeps honking. Loud enough to wake the mountains. But I don’t let go.

By the time I get back to the house, my hands are frozen, feathers cover my coat, and Hank is still fighting as if he believes he can win.

Inside, the McKinley kitchen is nothing but clattering chaos. Cousins. Uncles. Wolf-shifters in flannel and denim, and too many opinions. The smells of cider and smoke and roasting meat fill the air. Laughter bounces off the walls.

“Kate, what the hell is that?” Aunt Frankie demands, brandishing a ladle like it’s a weapon.

I square my shoulders. “His name’s Hank.”

“That’s Christmas Dinner, girl.”

“Not anymore.”

Granddad’s voice cuts through the room like a blade. He doesn’t shout. He never has to. “Put the goose down, Kathryn.”

He’s sitting at the head of the table, nursing a mason jar of apple pie moonshine—eyes like chipped slate. His beard’s white, his temper worse. And when he calls me ‘Kathryn,’ it means I’ve crossed a line.

But I don’t back down. Not this time.

“No.”

## Page 2

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There's a pause. A hush. The kind that only happens right before something breaks.

“What did you just say?”

“I said no,” I repeat, louder now. “He's not food. He's mine.”

Laughter bursts from the table—half of it mocking, the other half disbelieving. A few of the younger cousins nudge each other. One of my uncles snorts. Even my mama looks like she wants to disappear into the floorboards.

I know what they see: a girl with windburned cheeks and straw in her hair, holding a feral bird like it's some kind of puppy. But I also know what I feel: something sharp and electric, twisting in my gut like it wants out.

Power.

I never thought it would feel like this. But it does. It's like the moment right before a storm hits.

Granddad rises. Slow. Deliberate. “You live under my roof. You eat what I put on the table.”

“I'll make something else,” I say. “I'll cook for myself.”

“You don't get to decide...”

“I just did.”

His eyes narrow. “Don’t forget who you are, girl.”

“I’m a McKinley,” I snap. “Same as you. And if being one means killing something just because it’s tradition, maybe it’s time we made a new tradition.”

Someone whistles. Someone else groans. Mama’s eyes go wide. Dad looks like he wants to crawl under the sink.

But I don’t care. I’m tired of following rules I didn’t make. Tired of playing quiet and sweet while the men talk and the women clean up after them. Tired of pretending I don’t see the cracks in everything they worship.

Hank lets out a defiant honk, as if to second my declaration.

Granddad glares at the bird, then at me. “You’re soft.”

“No,” I say. “I’m just not cruel.”

He stares for a long beat, then downs the rest of his moonshine and slams the jar on the table. “Fine. Keep the damn goose.”

I don’t smile. I don’t gloat. I just turn and walk out, Hank still clutched in my arms, heart thudding like a drumbeat in my chest.

I make a nest in the corner of my room. Two years ago, I carved out a part of the attic and claimed it as mine—my first real act of independence. A space above it all, away from the eyes and expectations downstairs. I don’t trust my family not to try to eat Hank, so I turn my sanctuary into his, too. It started as a retreat. One day it might have to become a fortress.

I line the corner with old towels and half a bag of pine shavings, tucking him in like

he's always belonged here. Hank watches me like he's waiting for the punchline. I bring him a bowl of grain and warm water and sit beside him on the tile floor, nursing my bleeding fingers.

"You bit me," I tell him. "I hope you know that means we're bonded for life."

He flaps one wing and settles into the corner like he owns the place.

Outside, the snow's still falling, blanketing the mountains under a silent shroud of white. Inside, the McKinley house goes back to its noise and smoke and stubborn traditions. But something changed tonight. I can feel it.

For the first time in my life, I said no. And no one dragged me back into line.

I curl up beside the goose I saved and whisper, "You're not just a bird, you know."

He tilts his head.

"You're a middle finger with feathers."

Present Day

## Page 3

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Hank's still here.

He's meaner now. Older. Smarter. He stays behind the counter at McKinley's Mercantile like it's his personal command post, but he'll fly at anyone he considers a threat to me. He still doesn't like strangers. But he likes me.

The store's mine now. Has been for years. It's been in my branch of the McKinley family for generations, but I'm the first woman—hell, the first anyone under forty—to run it on her own. The pack didn't like it. Said I should stick to stocking shelves, not signing vendor agreements. Said the store needed a man at the helm, someone to 'keep the family's reputation intact,' which is kind of funny considering most everyone in the Appalachian Mountains knows we're moonshiners and have an outlaw streak a mile wide.

I wasn't exiled. Not exactly. They still invited me to family dinners and kept a box of my favorite tea in the kitchen of the main house. But I was the question mark in a long line of periods. The one who didn't marry young, didn't join the hunt, didn't pretend blood meant blind loyalty.

One of the older pack members even tried to freeze me out by canceling supplier routes through our territory. I found alternative routes. Better ones. Outsmarted him and made a profit doing it.

Broke with tradition. Again.

And every time I look at Hank, I remember I didn't just save a goose. I remember snow soaking through my boots, the weight of a hundred eyes in that kitchen, and the



rush in my chest when I realized I wasn't afraid anymore. That night ignited a fire within me that I never let die. Every decision I've made since—the store, the fights, the independence—traces back to that moment. To that choice.

I saved a part of myself that day. The part that refuses to roll over and obey. The part that knows love doesn't have to come with a leash.

And God help the next man who tries to tell me otherwise.

## CHAPTER 1

### HUDSON

#### Wild Hollow, Appalachian Mountains

#### Present Day

The town sign creaks in the wind as I drive past. Welcome to Wild Hollow—Population 3,112. That number's a lie. Half of those names don't show up on census records. The town holds humans, shifters, and those almost swallowed by the mountain's deep roots.

There's something about the air up here—thicker, heavier, like it remembers things. Secrets. Blood. Burdens. I step out of the truck and yank my coat tighter against the cold. The cold wraps around you like old stories, clinging to your skin and whispering warnings in the wind. Pines lean in close, and the mountains brood in silence, ancient and unmoving. Every step on the gravel sounds louder here, every breath carries weight, and even the sky feels darker—like the land itself is watching. Waiting. Like it remembers me. And it doesn't forgive easily.

I'm back.

I didn't come home for the nostalgia. Didn't come back for the badge, either. I came because Elias Rawlings is dead—the head of the Rawlings pack—and the alpha's seat is empty, and this town is circling the drain. Someone's gotta keep the pack from tearing itself, and the town, apart.

Apparently, that someone is me.

The sheriff's office still smells like stale coffee and old pine. Deputy Morris left me a set of keys and a hand-scribbled list of things 'still broken.' It's half the damn town. The roof leaks, the back door sticks, and the file room's full of half-solved mysteries. My kind of welcome.

The police scanner's guts are scattered across my desk—wires frayed, the mic chewed up like something had gnawed on it during the last thunderstorm. The office creaks around me, the radiator coughing like it's dying in slow motion, and outside, the wind scrapes the windows with skeletal fingers. It's the kind of quiet that feels wrong. Heavy. Expectant. I just get the damn thing back together when the scanner crackles to life, static dragging like a blade.

“Disturbance at McKinley's Mercantile. Again.”

McKinley's. Of course it's the McKinleys... it's always the McKinleys.

I slam the file shut, clip my badge to my belt, and head out.

The McKinleys were always a thorn in the town's side—and a stick in mine. They weren't the main pack in the Hollow—that was us, the Rawlings pack. But the McKinleys operated like a rogue pack when it suited them.

Elias always said the McKinleys were wolves who thought the law was optional and traditions were to be ignored when inconvenient. Half charm, half chaos, one hundred

percent pain in the ass. I remember their kids cutting class, running shine through the holler like it was a damn family sport, and laughing at anyone dumb enough to try and enforce any rule against them.

Looks like nothing's changed.

The bell over the door rings like a dare when I walk in.

McKinley's smells like cinnamon and danger. The store stocks everything from canned soup to locally made soap. There's a display near the register advertising 'hand-knitted whiskey cozies', which is exactly the kind of nonsense that thrives under the McKinley name.

Then I see her. Kate McKinley—with her wild riotous red curls and shining green eyes.

And I'm not the only one staring. There's a guy standing stiff in the far corner by the greeting card rack—middle-aged, khaki shorts in winter, camera around his neck, and a very recent bite mark on his forearm. His eyes are wide and jittery, like he just barely escaped a horror movie. And Hank, still proudly posted beside the register, lets out a low hiss in his direction like he's not done yet.

## Page 4

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Figures. Hank's the disturbance. This guy must've called it in.

I remember Kate as a kid—skinny knees, scraped knuckles, always climbing trees she wasn't supposed to or sneaking into meetings to eavesdrop. A little tomboy with fire in her eyes and a mouth full of mischief. She once stuck a dead fish in the muffler of my dad's truck and laughed for a week straight when it took the mechanics three days to find it.

She was part of the McKinley's red wolf pack—technically not one of us —born of our blood but bound to their own alpha. They had their own way of doing things, but Wild Hollow cared little for borders back then. I didn't either.

But the woman standing in front of me now? She's something else entirely. The kind of stunning that makes your breath stop and your blood start to simmer. Wild red hair piled up on top of her head like she forgot she was beautiful, curves that weren't there before, and a mouth that still looks like it's always two seconds from trouble. My wolf lunges toward her with recognition, primal and certain.

For a heartbeat, I forget why I came. Forget the badge. Forget the tension chewing through this town. There's only her—sunlight wrapped in thorns. And I'm already bleeding.

She's leaning against the counter, arms crossed. That messy knot looks like she did it in a rush, and yet it's still distracting. Her eyes are amber and sharp. Her mouth curves like she's already thinking of three ways to annoy me before I speak.

And Hank—the damn goose—is beside her on the counter, glaring at me and hissing

like I owe him rent.

“You’re late,” Kate says.

“I didn’t realize you were expecting me.”

“You’re the sheriff now, aren’t you?”

“Reluctantly.”

She shrugs. “Good. I hate enthusiastic cops.”

“What’s the disturbance?”

“That damn duck.” The tourist standing in the corner of the store points at the bird.

“He’s a Canada goose,” Kate rejoins.

“Doesn’t matter. It tried to attack me.”

I look at Hank. I can’t believe Kate still has the damn thing resting comfortably near her. “He attacked someone?”

Kate snorts—that very unladylike sound I remember from childhood. “Technically, he flew at him. Hank doesn’t bite without provocation.”

I stare at her, then at the tourist still cradling his arm like Hank nearly took it clean off. “Glad to know I’m risking frostbite and flat tires to referee barnyard brawls. Next thing you know, I’ll be issuing tickets for chickens loitering too close to the liquor shelf.”

She leans in, voice low and honey-warm. It hits me like a shot of good whiskey—slow burn, no warning. My jaw tightens against the way it makes something inside me lean forward, like I want to chase that sound, wrap my hands in her hair and see if her mouth tastes like it sounds. Bad idea. Every instinct says to back off. But I’ve never been much good at following orders—even my own.

“This is Wild Hollow, Sheriff. If you’re looking for neat little rules and polite folks, turn that badge in now and drive back to wherever the hell you came from.”

I take a step closer—and immediately regret it. She smells like pine, brown sugar, and something wild that hits me straight in the chest. It's too much. Too tempting. Every alpha instinct I've spent years shoving down claws its way to the surface. And just to drive the point home, Hank lets out another hiss, louder this time, like he's daring me to make a move. Getting close to Kate McKinley is a bad idea for more reasons than I care to count. Starting with the way my body reacts and ending with the feathered hellbeast that clearly sees me as a threat.

“I didn’t come here to play games, Kate.”

She tilts her head, grin bright and cutting. “Then why does your jaw twitch every time I smile?”

She’s infuriating. And intoxicating. I remember the time she out-bluffed a table full of grown wolves at a backroom poker game when she was maybe sixteen, walked off with two bottles of whiskey and a fifty-dollar bill she claimed was 'interest.' There’s nothing simple about Kate McKinley. She’s as unpredictable as spring floods and twice as dangerous—and somehow, that just makes her more impossible to ignore.

“I came to clean this place up.”

“You mean like with a broom? Or with a gun?”

“Whichever gets the job done.”

Kate arches a brow. “Big words from a man who's been away a while. It's as if you've had a wild animal caged up too long.”

My blood spikes.

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She sees it. Smells it.

Something flickers between us. That crackle that lives in the space between challenge and instinct. My wolf wants her. Marked her as mine from the second I walked through the door. But I don't move. Not yet.

She pushes off the counter and walks toward me, casual like a cat circling prey.

My chest tightens. There's something in the way she moves—unbothered, bold—that lights every nerve ending on fire. I wonder if she knows. If she can feel the pull as much as I can.

Hell, maybe Hank does. The goose hasn't stopped glaring at me since I walked in. Maybe he's trying to keep me away from her. Maybe he senses what she is to me. My mate.

And maybe she does too—and that's why she's smiling like sin and walking like temptation. Maybe she knows, and she wants to pretend it's not real.

“Well, Sheriff Rawlings,” she purrs, “if you're here to bring law and order, you should know you're standing in the middle of both and neither.”

“And you?” I ask. “Where do you stand?”

She stops inches from me. She grins malevolently; I wonder what the hell it means... nothing good, I'm sure. “I don't. I run the place.”



Hank hisses in agreement. It's not the casual kind of hiss either. It's sharp, aggressive, territorial. Canada geese are naturally protective—nasty little bastards when they want to be—but this is more than that. This is personal. Protective. He's pacing the edge of the counter like a sentry, wings twitching. It's not just me he's warning. It's anyone who gets too close to her. Damn bird acts like he's her mate, not me. And the worst part? I can't tell if she wants him to keep it that way.

I stare her down, jaw tight. "Get the goose under control."

"Or what?"

"I'll arrest him and have him for dinner."

"Not likely. " Kate says with a grin before throwing her head back and laughing loudly. It's not dainty. It's loud, full-bellied, and dangerous. I've heard war drums quieter. "You can't be serious."

"Try me. You'll find I don't bluff." I never have. You clear enough rooms in dead cities overseas, you learn real fast that bluffing gets people killed. You say what you mean. You do what you say. And when someone challenges you, you make damn sure they don't do it twice.

Her smile fades just a fraction. "Neither do I."

There's heat between us now. Palpable. Coiled.

My wolf pushes at the edge of my skin, restless, hungry. I shouldn't want this. Shouldn't want her.

But Kate McKinley doesn't just stir the beast—she dares him, and I've never been good at walking away from a dare.

She steps back, slow and deliberate. Hank flaps his wings with a self-satisfied honk, hopping off the counter like he just claimed victory in a turf war. He circles her feet protectively, puffed up and strutting like he's made it clear who really runs this place—and it sure as hell isn't the sheriff.

"I'm sure you've got actual crimes to solve," she says. "You know, ones that don't involve poultry politics."

"I do."

"So go solve them." She turns, heading into the back room, hips swaying like she doesn't give a damn if I watch. At the door that leads into the back, she pauses and says, "Take the tourist with you and lock the front door on your way out."

I look down and see the only lock is a deadbolt that can't be locked from the outside. I can't help but watch her and feel mesmerized by the way she moves.

"I can't do that with the kind of lock you have."

She doesn't look back, but her voice floats back over her shoulder before she disappears.

"Then leave it, and I'll take care of it. But don't come back here unless you plan to buy something."

"What if that deranged goose of yours threatens someone?"

She stops and leans back out the doorway. "I tell you what—you don't arrest my goose, and I won't tell people what you used to get up to behind the library in high school."

She winks and is gone... her goose trailing behind her with what I swear is a triumphant look on his face.

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I walk the tourist out, his wounded pride bruised more than his arm. He mutters something about reporting Hank to Animal Control if the damn goose strikes again. I don't think he realizes Wild Hollow doesn't have an animal control department. He nods fast and stumbles off like Hank might still be lurking in the shadows.

The silence that follows is thick. I stay there a beat longer than I should, staring through the glass, fists clenched, pulse ticking.

Goddammit.

This town's still got claws in me, roots tangled around every bone. The mountain's watching, same as always. And she—Kate McKinley—is a secret the soil refuses to bury.

This place might kill me.

But if it doesn't, she will.

## CHAPTER 2

### KATE

Hank's staring at the door like he expects Sheriff Tall-Dark-and-Broody to come marching back in for round two. His beady eyes are full of righteous fury, and his feathers remain puffed. My focus should be inventory, but I am instead elbow-deep in a box of canned peaches, muttering curses that would make my grandmother cross herself with a ladle.

"You know, Hank," I say, pulling out a dented can and squinting at the label, "if you keep flying at tourists, we're gonna end up on Yelp under 'Places Where You Might Get Mauled by a Goose.'"

Hank lets out a defiant honk. I know he's a menace—feathers, fury, and far too much attitude for something without teeth—but he's also saved my hide more than once. Ran off a drunk with wandering hands last summer and stood between me and a copperhead the year before that. He may be more bite than brain sometimes, but he's mine. And I adore the stubborn, overprotective, sharp-beaked bastard more than most people I know.

"Yeah, yeah. I know he was asking for it," I sigh, setting the can aside. "But the new sheriff doesn't exactly have a sense of humor. Or a pulse, far as I can tell."

He honks again, louder this time, and flaps his wings once for punctuation. It's his way of saying he's still on duty, still watching. I swear the bird takes his job more seriously than half the wolves in this town. Maybe it's because he's seen what I haven't said out loud—how many times I've had to smile through clenched teeth, play nice with men twice my size, twice as loud, but never half as loyal. Hank doesn't just guard the store. He guards me. And he never needs a reason.

I roll my eyes and push the box aside, wiping my hands on a dishrag. I've known Hudson Rawlings since we were kids, but that man who walked in today? That was not the boy who used to sneak lemon drops from the jar at the counter when he thought no one was looking. That man embodied coiled steel and quiet anger. Built like a nightmare. Eyes like smoke. And he looked at me like I was a problem he couldn't wait to solve—or bury.

And God help me, something in me responded. Hot. Immediate. Unwelcome. A low thrum in my belly that settled like a spark in dry grass and refused to die out. It wasn't just his size or the brooding. It was the way he looked at me—like he saw too

much. It stirred something I hadn't felt before. Need. Want. And I want none of it now.

When I took over McKinley's Mercantile without asking anyone's permission, I knew I was setting a match to the old way. I've worked too hard to be independent, to be untouchable. I built this life brick by stubborn brick, fortified it with sarcasm and self-reliance, and I've kept every damn wall standing through storms worse than Hudson Rawlings.

The last thing I need is to come undone just because he walked back into Wild Hollow like a storm in boots—with that voice, that presence, that impossible pull that messes with my head and heats my blood like I don't get a say. But I do. I have to. Because if I let myself fall, there's no guarantee I'll get back up again.

I glance at the mirror behind the counter and scowl at my reflection. Flushed cheeks. Hair trying to escape from where I tried to corral it in a messy bun, like even it can't keep it together. My heartbeat's still thudding like I sprinted up the ridge. Useless. All of it.

I don't do this. Don't swoon. Don't stare after a man like I've forgotten how to stand my ground. And yet one look from Hudson Rawlings and I'm flushed and fidgeting like some lovesick teen at the county fair. That kind of distraction gets people hurt. And it's not just that he's beautiful—it's the way he sees me. Like he's already unwrapped every layer and isn't the least bit sorry for it.

The last thing I need is to get distracted by broad shoulders and smolder. Not when there's actual trouble brewing. Not when shadows are starting to creep where they don't belong and folks are already looking to the McKinleys to blame.

"C'mon, Hank. Time to make our delivery."

He waddles after me as I grab the box for Old Man Kerrigan. He's been buying shine and peaches from the McKinleys since before I could walk. Half-blind, fully cranky, and sharper than anyone gives him credit for. He lives two ridges over in a rusted-out trailer with a view that should've made him a poet and a temper that made him a legend instead.

The truck growls as it starts. Hank jumps into the passenger seat as if he owns it, settles into the cushion as if it were made for him, and glares at me until I roll down the window. He wants air, of course—he's picky about airflow—but I also think it's his way of asserting dominance. He doesn't like when I'm rattled, and Hudson showing up definitely rattled me. He watches me the whole time I back out, like he's trying to decide if I need scolding or protection. Probably both. And the truth is, I'm glad he's here. There's something comforting about his steady presence. He's a surly feathered constant in a world that keeps changing under my feet.

"You're the worst co-pilot," I mutter.

The drive up the ridge is winding and quiet. Too quiet. Normally the mountain buzzes with hidden life—crickets chirping, birds wheeling, the distant rustle of something always moving just beyond sight. But today? Nothing. It's like the whole ridge is holding its breath, waiting. The kind of silence that presses against your ears and makes your instincts twitch.

Hank must feel it too—he's become still in the seat beside me, head tilted, eyes scanning the trees like he's expecting something to step out.

I slow the truck as we round a bend, eyes darting over the shoulder-high weeds and crooked fence lines. Every inch of this road is familiar—I grew up bouncing around these turns in the back of my daddy's pickup—but it feels different today. It's as if the land appears to have been disturbed.

The usual hum of the mountain feels muffled, like the trees are leaning in to listen instead of whispering their usual gossip. The birds aren't singing. Not a single squirrel chatters. The quiet is too quiet. The gravel under the tires crunches louder than it should, and every shadow feels like it's watching. Like we weren't the first ones to come this way today—and whatever came before us might still be out there, just waiting for us to stop.

I don't like it. My fingers tighten on the steering wheel, and my foot hovers over the brake like I'm waiting for something to lunge out of the tree line. My instincts are rarely wrong—too many generations of wolf-blood intuition to ignore when it whispers warnings. It's not just quiet. It's wrong. The kind of quiet that feels heavy, watching, loaded with teeth you can't see yet.

Kerrigan's place comes into view just as the sun goes down over the ridgeline, throwing long shadows like reaching fingers across the clearing as I park my truck and get out. His trailer squats on the edge of a slope like it's defying gravity and good sense, rusted and hunched, part relic, part warning. Smoke curls from the stovepipe in thin, reluctant ribbons, and the porch groans under his weight as he squirms in his chair, like the wood itself is tired of holding secrets.



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It should be familiar. Comforting, even. But the air is thick, still clinging to that unnatural hush. The hair on my arms won't lie flat, and there's a pressure in my chest like the forest hasn't let us go. Like the shadows followed us through the trees and are just now settling in to watch. Kerrigan's sitting there like a sentinel, an old rifle across his knees, a chipped enamel mug in his hand, eyes narrowed and face unreadable.

The whole scene feels like something out of an old mountain ghost story—the kind whispered by firelight and never written down. Only now, I'm not sure I'm the audience.

A single dry twig snaps in the woods behind me.

I freeze.

Hank makes a low, throaty noise deep in his chest, something between a warning and a growl. My heartbeat stutters, then kicks hard.

I think I might be in the next chapter.

“Took you long enough,” Kerrigan says, voice gravel and smoke.

“You're lucky I like you.” I hand over the box.

“You bring the good stuff?”

“Peaches and pie whiskey.”

He grunts, inspecting the jars. Then his eyes flick toward the tree line. “You see anyone on your way up?”

I frown. “No. Why?”

“I’ve seen tracks by the old still site. Fresh ones. Big. Two sets. One smelled off.”

My spine goes tight. “Off how?”

“Like rot. But covered in pine. Like someone’s trying to hide under the wrong scent.”

Hank honks low, uneasy. His head jerks up, feathers twitching, body tense—not like his usual bluster, but something sharper, more instinctive. He doesn’t honk at squirrels or shadows. Not like this. This sound is lower, heavier, vibrating with a kind of primal warning I’ve only heard a handful of times. Every time it meant danger.

He’s picked up something I haven’t yet. Something wrong. And the unease rolls over me in a wave.

“You think it’s tourists poking where they shouldn’t?” I ask.

Kerrigan shakes his head. “Tourists don’t know where to find the old still sites. And they don’t cover their scent.”

I glance toward the woods. The breeze alters its direction—slow, deliberate, as if the mountain itself is exhaling—and something in me stirs. A ripple of warning threads down my spine. Not sharp, but slow and spreading like a shadow at dusk. The trees don’t sway; they lean. The leaves don’t rustle; they whisper. It’s like the forest knows something I don’t know yet. Something it’s not sure I’m ready to hear.

Hudson might’ve been a pain in the ass today, but I have a feeling I’m going to need

him before long. And that might be the worst part. Because needing him means opening a door I've spent years nailing shut. Letting him in—into my business, my territory, my life—feels a lot like stepping off a cliff and trusting the wind to catch me.

And that man doesn't strike me as gentle landing material. He's all hard edges and slow-burning fire. He looks at the world like it's already guilty, and at me like I'm the one who set the charges. I don't need his protection. But God help me, a part of me wonders what it would feel like to have it. To stop being the one who holds the line, just for a moment.

I can still feel the heat of his gaze from earlier, the way his voice rumbled low when he warned me about Hank. It settled deep, like a secret I couldn't shake. I didn't ask for and can't quite forget.

That thought alone is enough to make me shove the door shut all over again. I've survived without him. I can survive with him watching from the other side of the room. Just not any closer.

"I'll check it out," I say.

Kerrigan snorts. "You always were too damn brave for your own good."

I give him a tight smile, but there's no humor behind it. "Somebody's got to look, and I don't see anyone else getting off their porch."

As I head back to the truck, Hank trailing close, I can't shake the feeling that the shadows in the woods aren't just watching—they're waiting. There's a thickness in the air, a breath held too long.

The wind grazes my skin like a warning, and every instinct I have whispers the same

thing: trouble is coming.

Hank stays close, closer than usual, his feathers ruffling every time I glance toward the trees. The quiet isn't empty anymore. It's charged. Heavy. And familiar in the worst way.

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Something old is stirring in the Hollow—not magic, not myth, but memory. The kind that festers when left alone too long. And someone—maybe pack, maybe not—wants to unearth it.

### CHAPTER 3

#### HUDSON

The scent hits me as I step out of my truck up on Sorrow Ridge—faint, unfamiliar, and laced with something that doesn't belong. It's not rot, not quite. More like old blood soaked into cedar, masked in cheap pine oil and poor intentions. I slow, boots grinding into the frost-hardened earth. The air's too still, too clean. Wild Hollow always smells like damp stone, pine needles, and ash. This? This is artificial. Covered up. Wrong.

A second scent hangs lower in the mix—faint but acidic. Old sweat and iron, almost metallic. Like someone nervous. Or bleeding. It clings low to the ground, lingering near the moss like it's trying to hide. Not fresh, but not old enough to ignore. It crawls through me in a way I can't shake—like prey just realizing it's being hunted. Too late to run.

I kneel near the base of an old marker stone, the kind that's been standing longer than the county lines, etched by claw and hand back when pack law carried more weight than any man's decree. It's covered in moss, a soft green shroud, but I can still make out the symbols beneath. Worn. Faded. Sacred.

Except this one shows signs of tampering.

Deep gouges cut across the stone—not natural erosion or weather, but fresh, angry slashes meant to deface. It's like someone wanted to erase the past... or provoke the ones still loyal to it.

The scratch marks are fresh. Deep. Not random—deliberate. A message, maybe. Or a challenge. They cut through the moss like someone was in a hurry but wanted it to last.

I let my hand hover over it, not touching. The scent is here too. Weak but present. Someone's crossed into protected land—and they didn't bother to ask. It's pack land. Not Rawlings-owned or leased, but sacred ground written into bloodlines. It belongs to no one and yet it is ours nonetheless.

My wolf pushes against my skin, restless. Curious. Not just about the scent, but about her. About why my pulse hasn't settled since she appeared with fire in her eyes and that goose at her side. The need to shift, to feel the forest from the inside out, isn't just instinct. It's a distraction. One that doesn't work nearly as well as it used to.

I step behind a dense thicket and remove and fold my clothes neatly—habit. Practical. Necessary. They won't come with me. Shifting strips everything away, including the fabric and flesh of human life. When the mist rises, all that's left is the wolf.

The change comes easier for me than most. My wolf never fights the shift—it waits for it, hungry.

Still, I fold the clothes. Maybe it's about control.

Or maybe it's just a reminder that I'm shifting back—that there's a man who walks this forest too, not just a beast.

The first time I learned that lesson, I wasn't careful. I shifted back in a clearing,

surrounded by three of the old pack elders, naked as the day I was born with nothing but a single pine branch and a bruised ego. My old alpha tossed me a hoodie and jeans, saying nothing, but the disappointment was loud enough to stick.

Lesson learned.

The shift comes easy, like exhaling tension into the ground. The mist rolls up around me—cool and charged, curling with streaks of pale silver. Thunder rumbles low, distant but real, as the world fades and the forest sharpens. Energy gathers in my bones, lightning-bright and fast, and when the mist drops, I'm running.

Gray fur, fast breath, wind in my ears. I'm big in this form—taller at the shoulder than most, built like a boulder with claws. My coat is thick, storm-colored, threaded with pale silver along the ridge and tail. My eyes stay the same—ice-pale, sharp. The kind that makes prey freeze and challengers think twice. I move silent, fast, each paw a whisper against the forest floor. The trees part for me, and the cold doesn't bite as deep when I run like this—born to the wild, spine humming with instinct and purpose. The man thinks. The wolf knows.

Everything is clearer now. The scent leads north, shallow prints pressed into the frozen ground. They veer just enough to suggest intention, not accident. Whoever left them moved through here with purpose, not panic. I follow, low to the ground, every step silent, body aligned with the rhythm of the wild.

Frost cracks softly beneath each pad, but I stay fluid—a shadow stitched into the trees. My nose stays close to the trail, drinking in every broken pine needle and overturned leaf. The prints pause once, near a ridge of rock—a hesitation. A decision point. Then they push forward, deeper into Rawlings pack-protected land. This isn't just a boundary violation. This is a test. A provocation. And I've never been one to walk away from either.

Whoever came this way didn't care who they pissed off. They crossed a line etched in blood and memory, one the pack still honors even if the world forgets. That kind of boldness isn't random. It's calculated. Which means someone wants to be noticed. Or worse—wants to start something they think they can finish.

I track the scent for miles—over streambeds crusted with black ice, across fallen logs frozen into the forest floor, weaving through the tight choke of pine and laurel until the branches claw at my flanks. Partway in, the trail doubles back—sharp, deliberate, crossing itself at an angle designed to confuse. Whoever laid it knew exactly what they were doing. It's not a desperate run; it's bait. A lure. A challenge. The kind of move that says, 'Come find me'—and I've never been one to turn down a dare.

The prints end at another stone marker, this one older than the last, crumbling and half-swallowed by roots gnarled like arthritic fingers. These stones weren't just territorial—they were oaths. Set by hand and claw when the first packs bound themselves to this land. But they too have been marked by deep gouges. Moss climbs the face like it's trying to hide the past etched beneath. The scent dies here too—abrupt, like someone stepped out of existence or vanished into thin air.

That means nothing good.

They were here for a reason. The question churns in the back of my skull, heavy as a coming storm. Not just scouting. Not just passing through. Whoever it was, they came with purpose—and left without a trace. That doesn't happen by accident. Not in my territory.

Fifteen minutes later, I crest a rise overlooking Old Buck Hollow, where the trees knot together like fingers clenching a secret. It's the kind of place stories come from—the old ones told in low voices over moonshine and firelight. Nothing here moves. Not the wind. Not the leaves. Not the birds.



I shift back slowly; the mist swirling thick around me before fading. It leaves me crouched and bare in the damp leaves, steamrising off my skin where heat meets cold. The air bites hard now, and there's no coat, no boots—nothing but skin and instinct. I ignore the sting. I've endured worse.

I crouch low and reach down, brushing moss off the stone, every movement quiet, watchful. More gouges. Someone appears to be marking something—new territory? Trail routes? They were here for a reason. But what?

A twig snaps behind me. The sound cuts sharply through the quiet, but the scent hits first—citrus, warm spice, something that curls low in my gut like heat meeting gasoline. I know it before I see her. Kate. I could find her blindfolded.

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And there it is—that damn buzzing in my skull, the subtle change in the air, the pull like a hook lodged somewhere behind my ribs. I felt it earlier, tried to dismiss it as adrenaline, as memory, as anything else. But standing here, naked and already half undone, there's no use pretending. That dizziness, the disorientation, the way everything around her feels louder, sharper—it's the mark of being in the presence of a fated mate.

And it pisses me off.

I didn't think fate had a mate left for me. Didn't believe I'd ever feel this. Not after everything I've seen, everything I've done. I thought I had sealed that door shut a long time ago. But here she is. And here I am—relieved in some raw, stupid part of me, and annoyed as hell at the rest. Because of course it's her. Of course it's Kate McKinley, all sass and wildfire and stubborn smiles.

The universe must have a twisted sense of humor.

I don't bother turning. "You following me now, McKinley?"

Her voice comes like warm whiskey. It slides over me, low and steady, and something in my gut clenches. My body reacts before my brain catches up—tightening, warming, wanting. I try to will it down, but I'm naked in every sense of the word, and her scent—sharp citrus and something sun-warmed—is not helping.

"You're not the only one who noticed the markers had been tampered with."

I rise to my feet and turn, slow and steady. Kate stands ten feet away, and I can feel

the heat of her gaze before I meet it. Her eyes sweep over me—broad chest, scarred arms, every exposed inch of skin—and linger just a beat too long at my hips. Her cheeks darken, but she doesn't look away. If anything, she lifts her chin like she dares me to call her on it.

She sees everything. The muscles tight from shifting, the steam still rising off my skin, the visible result of her presence and the way it's messing with every instinct I've got. My arousal's impossible to hide, and she notices it—blinks once, slow, but doesn't flinch. That almost undoes me more than anything.

There's no shame in her gaze—just curiosity and maybe a flicker of appreciation that stokes the fire already smoldering in my gut. And that pisses me off as much as it turns me on. I'm not used to being this exposed, not just physically but emotionally—laid bare before someone who looks at me like she sees all of it and isn't afraid. Vulnerable. That's the word I don't want to admit. But here, now, under her gaze? I feel it. And I want her anyway.

Hank's not with her. Probably for the best. The last thing I need right now is a damn goose with a hero complex while I'm fighting every part of myself not to close the distance between us.

“You shouldn't be here.”

She crosses her arms. “That's rich, coming from a man standing barefoot and naked in the woods.”

I don't move. “It's protected territory.”

She lifts her chin. “It's McKinley land.”

“No, it's Rawlings land. The McKinley's lost it a long time ago. But it doesn't

matter, it's not a damn tourist trap."

Her gaze flicks to the stone. "You find what you were looking for?"

"Depends. You looking for a reason to rile me up today?"

Her lips curve into that maddening grin. "You're already riled. I think you were born that way. I'm just here for the view."

The tension's thick between us—spiked with frustration, heat, and that damn pull I've been trying to ignore. Her scent tangles in my lungs. Sweet. Wild. Unmistakable. It lingers on the back of my tongue like dark honey and lightning. I remember how she looked behind the counter—flushed, defiant, mouth ready to make trouble. My wolf remembers, too. Every muscle in me tightens.

She's always been fire—fierce, wild, untouchable. But now she's something else entirely. She's not just heat, she's gravity—pulling at me from the inside out, anchoring and destabilizing all at once. The air around her hums with tension, her scent like smoke laced with something sweet and unshakable. She doesn't just spark desire—she reignites it. Old want, buried deep, rises raw and reckless, threatening to rip through every wall I've built to keep it down.

My wolf stirs again.

Kate takes a slow step forward, glancing at the tracks and the gouge marks. "What do you think they were doing here?"

"Looking for something. Or leaving a message."

She nods. "My family's been feeling things beginning to unravel for a while. Old debts. Old feuds."

“And old mistakes,” I say.

That earns me a glare. “Funny. You left town. We stayed. We kept this place running while you played soldier.”

I step in close, crowding her space. “My family, my pack bled for this town long before I left or put on this badge.”

She doesn’t flinch. “Then act like it.”

Silence stretches between us, thick as smoke. Her eyes flash, not afraid—never afraid—but sharp and daring, like she wants to see how close I’ll get before I burn. I should walk away. Hell, I should’ve never turned around. But I don’t.

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My fingers twitch at my side, jaw tightening, every muscle locked against the urge to close that last inch between us. Even with the cold biting at my skin and every instinct screaming caution, she's the only thing I feel warm near. And I'm tired of pretending I don't want to reach for the heat.

I reach out and brush a leaf from her collar. Slow. Deliberate. My fingers graze the fabric, then the heat of her neck just beneath. Her breath catches, soft and sharp, and her eyes flick up to meet mine. For a second, neither of us breathes. Her pulse jumps under my fingertips, and I feel her lean the tiniest bit toward me before she catches herself.

She doesn't step back. Her breath is still shallow, pupils wide, lips parted like she's holding back a dozen things she wants to say—or do. My hand's still hovering near her shoulder, close enough to feel the electricity rippling off her skin. Gravity pulls me toward her, but her refusal to take that one defiant step devastates me. She could've pulled away.

She didn't.

"You don't want this," I murmur.

Her voice drops to a whisper, thick with challenge. "Don't flatter yourself."

The space between us crackles like a live wire in a thunderstorm. She's warm—blazing, really—an anchor and a spark all at once. She's stubborn in a way that makes me want to press her up against the nearest tree just to see if she'd still talk back with my mouth on hers. She's too damn close, and every inch of her

proximity makes it harder to breathe.

I want her. Not just physically—though every cell in my body is screaming for that—but wholly. Viscerally. With a hunger I didn't think still lived inside me. A hunger I swore I'd buried in the deserts and dirt of places I left behind. But she's not a memory. She's here. Real. And the pull is unbearable.

And the worst part? I think she knows it.

But the unfamiliar scent still lingers—low, like an echo fading into dark water. It coils under the trees, hidden in bark and moss, waiting to be noticed again. Whoever trespassed isn't just curious—they're patient. Calculated. And still close enough to be a threat. The feeling crawls up my spine, setting my teeth on edge.

This isn't over.

Someone crossed sacred lines and marked the stone with intent. That's not just disrespect—it's provocation. And if they're bold enough to do it once, they'll do it again.

Soon.

"I need to finish the trail," I say, pulling back. "Go home, Kate."

She doesn't move. "Don't tell me what to do, Sheriff."

I turn, biting back a smile I have no business feeling. The heat of her still clings to me like sunlight after the storm, and I can feel the pull of the wild rising again in my blood.

I don't bother hiding it. The need to track, to protect, to move—it barrels through me

like thunder, and this time I don't resist.

The mist rolls up from the earth, swirling silver and thick as fog. My skin tingles, muscles stretching and contracting as the shift overtakes me. Lightning cracks in the distance—low and rolling—just as my bones vanish into fur.

When the fog clears, I'm wolf again, and I run.

Because whatever this is between us—this fire, this fight, this line we seem to be daring each other to cross? It's only just getting started.

## CHAPTER 4

### KATE

My family's history is interwoven with Wild Hollow like moonshine in mason jars—unofficial, unfiltered, and just dangerous enough to be respected. We weren't the kind that held council seats or threw our weight around in meetings. We were the kind that got things done in the shadows, behind barns and under the cover of the mists or fog. Moonshiners, smugglers, poker cheats and charmers—we've been called worse. And most of it's true.

But not all of it.

Some of us wanted something more. Something different.

Like my brother, Luke.

Luke McKinley wasn't like the rest of the family. He questioned everything—the way the pack handled disputes, the old rituals no one could explain. Said rules without reason were just chains.



I remember once when we were kids, we found a wounded fox caught in a snare behind the east ridge. The rest of us wanted to put it down quick—clean, merciful. But Luke? He sat with it for hours, hands bloody, trying to free it without causing more pain. Said we owed it that much. That there was a difference between mercy and convenience. It was the first time I saw he thought differently—felt deeper. That he couldn't walk away from something broken, not without trying to fix it.

He was sharp, introspective, always thinking ten steps ahead.

He'd sit at the edge of the porch for hours, staring out at the tree line like it might offer answers none of us were ready to hear. Where most of us leaned into the McKinley legacy of moonshine and mischief, Luke wanted something more. He didn't just talk about change—he believed in it. Said Wild Hollow deserved better. Said we did, too.

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I didn't always understand him. But I trusted him.

And then he was gone.

He used to fix things. Radios. Trucks. People. Said it was all about understanding the pieces and how they fit. Said the pack didn't need more rules—it needed more repair. I still remember him crouched over an old CB radio in the store's back room, grease on his hands, saying, “Kate, if you fix the little things, the big ones won't fall apart.”

I didn't know then that he was already falling apart himself. That the fire in his voice when he talked about change was covering for the cracks beneath. That every late-night drive, every unanswered question, every time he stared out at the mountains for too long was a sign he was unraveling. He smiled less. Argued more. Started showing up late to family dinners, smelling like anxiety and whiskey. And I—I was too busy trying to keep the store afloat to notice he was slipping through our fingers like water. By the time I did, he was already gone.

My brother had a restless edge, a fire that didn't want to burn crooked like the rest of us. He talked about getting out, about going legit. Said the pack could be more than just whispers in the shadows and old grudges wrapped in fur.

The Hollow needed better, he said—needed people willing to stop pretending the old ways worked just because they were old.

He had ideas. Plans. Kept notebooks full of diagrams and half-formed strategies. Used to show them to me late at night when the store was quiet, and the moon was high. Sometimes he'd pace, too keyed up to sit, muttering about how we needed

structure, balance, a future that didn't look like the past in wolf's clothing.

But then he disappeared.

One day he was arguing with Waylon in the back lot; the next, he was gone.

They all said he left. Got tired of Wild Hollow and finally took off, but I never believed that. Not for a second.

"Stop digging, Kate," Waylon snaps, slamming a case of canned beans on the counter hard enough to make Hank honk and flutter up onto the register.

I narrow my eyes at him. "I'm not digging. I'm remembering."

"Same damn thing," he mutters, scrubbing a hand through his beard. "Luke's gone. You keep stirring that pot, you're gonna get someone burned."

"Maybe it's time some things caught fire." I shoot back, low and steady. It lands heavy between us, thick with defiance. "You two had it out the day before he vanished. What was that fight about, Waylon?"

He flinches, just a tick—barely enough to catch if you didn't know him. But I do. I've seen that look before—on faces trying not to lie. The way his jaw locks, the way his eyes dart just a little too quick to the left. It's a tell, sharp and fleeting. A crack in the armor I've spent my whole life learning to read.

It tells me there's something he doesn't want me digging into. Something dangerous. Something about Luke.

"Let it go," he says. "Luke made his choice."

“You mean the choice to disappear without a trace? Without saying goodbye to me? Not even a damn note. He left me staring at an empty chair at breakfast, pretending he was just late. I waited hours before I let myself call it what it was. And even then, I didn’t believe it. I still don’t.”

Waylon leans in, voice low. “You think the new sheriff’s gonna save you if you go poking into things best left buried?”

I blink and feel my pulse rise. Not fear—fury. The kind that starts low and burns hot, the kind that doesn’t back down. “This is about Hudson now?”

“You think we don’t remember the way you used to look at him? The way folks around town still say you do?”

Heat flares in my cheeks. “I look at everyone like they’re trouble.”

But even as I say it, the question burns in the back of my mind: how many people are watching me, really? And why? Is it just the McKinley name? My inability to rein in my smart mouth? Or is it something else—something tied to Luke, to the things he knew and the questions I keep asking?

What secrets was he close to? Who did he threaten without realizing it? Because the way Waylon said it, the way his eyes flicked just a little too knowingly—it wasn’t just about Hudson. It was about them. Whoever they are. And whatever they want, I’m starting to think it’s got nothing to do with me—and everything to do with what Luke left behind.

“Yeah, but you’re smiling when you talk about him.”

I scoff, turning away. “You’re full of shit, Waylon.”

He doesn't argue. Just slams the door on his way out, rattling the bell like it owes him money. The sound echoes too long in the silence he leaves behind, and I hate how it makes my skin itch. Hank honks once in disdain and settles back onto the counter, glaring at the door like he expects someone else to walk in behind Waylon.

I stare at the door a second longer, pulse skittering. How many people are watching me, really? And how long have they been doing it? Is it just the old guard, trying to keep the McKinleys in their box? Or are there more eyes in the dark now—curious ones, suspicious ones, waiting for me to step wrong? Whatever Waylon isn't saying... it's painting a target I can't quite see.

The McKinleys had always seen themselves as sovereign from the Rawlings pack. They hadn't answered to the Rawlings pack in years—not officially. Which really meant we played by our own rules and answered to no one.

"Don't give me that look," I mutter. "He's being cagey as hell."

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Hank lets out a quiet coo and flaps his wings, the sound low and almost sympathetic. He waddles a step closer on the counter, puffing up like he's ready to defend me from ghosts or gossip, whichever comes first. I scratch behind his head absently, grateful for the soft weight of his presence. He's not just a goose. He's family. One of the few I trust without question.

"Yeah," I murmur. "Me too."

I grab my coat and a basket of preserves and canned peaches for the widow Ridley. She's been alone since last spring, and the least I can do is help keep her shelves stocked. The trail there cuts near one of the old boundary lines—the kind etched more in memory and blood than on maps. The kind that used to mean something, back when there were rules about where humans, shifters, and secrets belonged—and when those who broke them knew what it cost. I used to wonder if those lines were about safety or power. Lately, I'm not so sure they weren't both.

The mist is heavier today. It clings low to the ground, thick enough to muffle footsteps and memory.

I adjust the weight of the basket in my arms, fingers tightening around the handle as I keep my eyes ahead. The trees look the same—bare branches reaching like ribs into the sky—but they feel different. Weighted. Expectant. The kind of quiet that isn't stillness but waiting. A hush too full to be empty.

Like the forest is listening.

I've walked this trail since I was a kid—chased fireflies along it, kissed boys I

shouldn't have behind the old shed off the bend. Every rock, every root should feel like part of my spine.

But today, it feels like the forest doesn't know me. Or worse, it remembers me differently—remembers my blood, my family, our missteps. Like it's watching to see what kind of McKinley I really am.

Something rustles in the underbrush—small, quick. I pause, listen. Hank isn't with me, but I can feel that same tension humming in my skin. Like I'm not alone. The woods don't look wrong. They just feel wrong.

Which is probably why I don't see the marker until I'm already a few steps past it—halfway through a thought, eyes on the fog, not the ground. By the time I catch the difference in terrain, the subtle shape of carved stone buried in moss, my boot has already brushed the edge. The air changes, heavier, charged like a storm waiting to break. And I know before I turn around that I've crossed a line I shouldn't have.

It's almost as if the forest is watching—at least that's what it feels like—a kind of waiting, calculating, curious.

I pause at the boundary line. Not over it this time. Not today. I remember too well the way it felt—the change in the air, the quiet that wasn't really quiet, the way every hair on my arms stood at attention like they'd been saluting something older and meaner than me.

But I don't turn back. Not yet. I kneel near the stone, not touching it, just... observing. The cold seeps through the worn knees of my jeans, grounding me in the dirt and dead leaves. I stir some of them absently, brushing away frost-laced moss to get a better look. The gouges are still fresh. Hudson wasn't wrong—whoever marked it did so with intent. Someone's testing the line, pressing at old boundaries.

And maybe I am too.

The scent is faint, but there. Someone who doesn't belong. Not Hudson—his scent is clean, electric, edged with pine and authority. Not family either. This one is muskier, tinged with oil and rust. Male. Not old enough to be one of the elders, not bold enough to be Waylon. A stranger. I try to place it, catalog the pieces—what they wore, how they moved, why they were here. And I come up blank. That's the part that bothers me most.

I breathe it in and hold it.

Then I rise, square my shoulders, and start back toward the ridge. The forest doesn't stop me, but it's still listening.

## CHAPTER 5

### HUDSON

The air still smells like her.

She hadn't been gone long when I shifted back—mist curling away from my fur like it knew better than to linger. I waited until the scent of her steps faded down the ridge, until the tension in my muscles quit screaming for a fight or a kiss. Then I ran.

The mountains have always cleared my head. But not this time. Not with the scent of her still in my lungs, the echo of her stare like fire behind my ribs. Kate McKinley's not just in my head—she's wired into my reflexes. Bold, reckless, stubborn. The kind of complication I came back to avoid, and exactly the kind I can't seem to stop chasing.

Even with the trail cold, I can pick out her scent in the forest—bright citrus and



something sweet and warm underneath. It cuts through pine and damp earth like a beacon, subtle but sharp, stirring things I haven't let myself feel in years. Kate McKinley smells like a dare, and my wolf—hell, even the man—likes that scent more than he should. It's grounding and dangerous all at once. Like the old porch back home after a storm—familiar, steady, but just one step from collapse if you trust it too much.

I run until my legs burn and the storm in my head eases off. Trees blur past, their shadows long and lean, the ground hard beneath my paws, but even the cold mountain air can't wash her from me. I want it to—want the speed, the cold, the forest to strip her from my thoughts. But it doesn't work.

The wind bites deep, chilling my skin, but it's not enough to quiet the part of me that still feels her—Kate McKinley, burned into my senses like wildfire, branded into the part of me that's supposed to stay cold and controlled. She's in my head, tangled up in every thought, regardless of whether or not I want to admit it, she's under my damn protection now.

I push harder, trying to outrun the thrum coursing through my veins, the tension in my gut that has nothing to do with the chase and everything to do with the way she looked at me. Like she saw past every wall I've spent years building, straight into the parts I keep locked down. Like she felt it too—this pull, this fire, this damn inconvenient bond clawing its way to the surface. And worse, like maybe she didn't want it either. Or maybe she did and hated that she did. Just like me.

The cold seeps into every fiber of my being, numbing what I don't want to feel, but it doesn't last. My wolf stirs and circles; my instincts scream for me to go back and find her. When I shift back behind a stand of pine, breath ragged and heart pounding, the mist clings for a moment before clearing.

I'm alone. Raw. And the heat she lit in me is still burning. Lower. Deeper. It coils in

my gut, a slow, smoldering ache that refuses to settle. Not just want—need. A bone-deep thrum that's more than lust, more than instinct. It's the edge of something older, something primal, clawing to the surface. My wolf paces just beneath my skin, restless and sharp, and I know exactly who he's circling for. The bond is awakening—unwelcome, undeniable—and no matter how much I try to shove it back down, it's there. Burning. Claiming. Her.

More dangerous.

That's the part that scares me most. Not just how badly I want her, but how fast it's turning into something deeper. Wilder. Something I can't control. The bond doesn't just stir lust—it demands. It roots down and rewires everything I thought I knew about instinct and discipline. And Kate? She's the kind of wildfire that doesn't care what it burns through.

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I get dressed fast, each movement sharp and efficient, like routine can cage what she's set loose inside me. My fingers tremble as I pull on my boots—damn near unforgivable. I breathe deep, trying to shake the heat she left behind.

The hike back to my truck is all cold air and snapping branches, but it doesn't calm the pulse pounding in my neck. It's not adrenaline from the run.

It's her. It's always her.

It's not just that she's in my blood now—she fits there as if she always belonged. Every step I take away from her only makes the pull stronger. It doesn't matter that it's inconvenient. It doesn't matter that it's dangerous. It doesn't even matter that I've spent years convincing myself I didn't need this—didn't need her.

The way she looked at me. Her scent. That stubborn tilt of her chin. The way she held her silence longer than most warriors I've interrogated. She doesn't flinch—she calculates.

She's not just bothering me—she's unraveling everything at my core.

Back at the station, the board's half-full of tacks and string. I wasn't sure if it was smuggling, surveillance, or something darker. But people were disappearing, and the McKinley name keeps showing up more often than coincidence should allow. On shipments. Old logs. Property lines. Witnesses who suddenly don't remember what they saw.

Nothing's conclusive. Nothing solid. Just a pattern of half-trails and old grudges. But

something was there. A buried link between the missing goods, the erased boundaries, the silence around Luke McKinley. What I'd seen earlier wasn't backwoods bootlegging. Someone was watching. Stalking. And Kate's name kept surfacing like a dropped match in dry grass. Whether she was bait or blind, I didn't know yet.

And now someone's carving up pack stones on their land—markers that haven't been touched in decades, defaced like they mean nothing. It's not just disrespect. It's a message. And whoever's sending it is smart enough to know exactly what those stones mean to us. Sacred ground. Boundaries drawn in blood. You don't scratch at old walls unless you want war.

Kate says she didn't mean to cross that line. I almost believe her.

But belief doesn't keep people alive.

I lean over the table, palms braced. My jaw's tight enough to crack, my wolf restless just beneath the surface. Not from anger. Not really.

From instinct.

She shouldn't have been out there. Not alone. Not now.

Kate's smart, capable, tough as the bones under this mountain—but this? This is something bigger. Someone's making moves in the dark. Quiet, deliberate ones. Her family name keeps turning up in whispers from old pack members, scrawled in ledgers that don't match up, and muttered in places where silence used to reign. And now it's showing up in places it shouldn't—on broken stones, in old boundaries, spoken by people who should know better. That name—McKinley—is right in the damn middle of it.

I need to find out who's behind it and how deep it goes. First step—track the names tied to those old sites. Second—figure out who benefits if the McKinleys take the fall. And third? Keep Kate out of the crossfire, even if it means dragging her out myself.

I don't know if she's tangled up in it by accident or if someone's using her family's name to stir old ghosts. Either way, the risk is rising.

So is my blood pressure.

“Morning, Sheriff.”

I look up. Deputy Morris stands in the doorway, coffee in one hand, folders in the other. The kid is earnest. Good instincts, green enough to still believe in rules.

He nods at the board. “You figure out anything new?”

“Depends. You find anything in those reports?”

He hands them over. “Couple of complaints from the hills. Someone poking around abandoned sites. Weird tire treads, too. Didn't match the usual ATVs.”

I scan the notes. The locations match old McKinley territory.

“Locals talking?”

“Some. But most clammed up the second I mentioned anything serious. Lot of old loyalty still wrapped around that name—fear, too. Like they're not just protecting a neighbor, but guarding something no one wants dragged into the light. Especially when the name McKinley comes up.”

I snort. “That figures. I guess I should take some small measure of comfort that some

things never change."

The front door creaks.

"Sheriff."

Elena Clark. Bookstore owner. Human. All-seeing oracle of small-town gossip, complete with her long dark hair pulled up in a messy bun, held in place with a pencil.

“Elena.”

She raises an eyebrow at the board. “That’s a whole lot of string and not a lot of answers.”

“Welcome to my mornings.”

She tilts her head. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks, Elena. You look lovely.”

She ignores me and continues on. “The whole town is whispering about you and Kate. I take it you look like that because of her.”

I don’t ask who. She knows.

Elena steps closer. “She’s her mother’s daughter. Heart of fire and mouth full of knives. Don’t think for a second she doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

I look away.

“She’s not the one I’m worried about,” I mutter.

“Then who is?”

That’s the question. One I don’t want to answer yet.

After Elena leaves, I drop the reports, grab my jacket, and hit the road. The tires crunch gravel as I head up the ridge. I haven't seen Grant McKinley since my father's funeral. Even then, we didn't speak. He sat in the back like he was watching something die twice—once when he saw my father's casket lowered into the ground, and then later when he spotted the badge on my chest that used to be on his brother's.

Grant's land sits nestled in the folds of the mountain. Not quite off the grid, but damn close. As I hike the last hundred yards, the trees get thicker, the silence deeper—so deep it presses on my ears. The scent of wood smoke curls faintly in the air, mixed with something sharp and metallic, like old iron or blood. Somewhere in the distance, a crow calls once and then falls quiet, like even the birds are holding their breath. Every step forward crunches dry leaves beneath my boots, loud in the hush. The air grows colder, tighter, like it's wrapping around me. It's the kind of quiet that warns you to tread carefully, like the woods themselves are watching.

When I reach the cabin, he's already on the porch, rifle across his knees.

"Sheriff."

"Grant."

"You come looking for trouble or truth?"

"Depends which one you've got more of."

He chuckles low. "Still got that Rawlings bite."

"And you've still got that McKinley smirk."

I hand him the map and a photo—one of the stone markers, slashed deep with gouges. The gouges aren't random; they're deliberate, angry, a message written in



damage. His face doesn't change, but his fingers curl tighter around the paper, like he wants to crush it—or the bastard who did it.

The silence stretches between us, thick and expectant.

He doesn't ask where it was taken. Doesn't need to. He knows those stones. Hell, he probably helped lay them when he was still walking with the old alpha. His grip says everything his mouth doesn't.

Then he folds the photo once, precisely, and sets it on the armrest beside him like it's too loaded to hold. His thumb taps against the rifle barrel, slow and deliberate, like he's keeping time with a clock only he can hear. The only sound between us is the faint creak of the rocking chair as he leans forward, just enough to show he's not taking this lightly.

“You think someone's using our land?”

“Maybe, but at the least, I think someone's using your name.”

His eyes meet mine. Hard. “You think it's Kate.”

“I think she's too close to whatever's coming.”

Grant leans back. “You ever think she's the only thing standing between you and a bigger storm?”

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I let that sit. He's not wrong, but he's not right, either. "She's fire, yeah. But fire makes light, and some of us forgot how to see in the dark." I let that sink in and continue. "I need your eyes on this, Grant. I need to know what you see that I don't."

He doesn't answer. He just pours two fingers of moonshine in a clean mason jar and pushes it my way.

He lifts his own jar. "To ghosts," he says.

I raise mine. "To the ones who stay."

The moonshine bites, but it's familiar. Like the mountain's answer to the ache I can't drink away.

As the sun begins to set behind the ridge, I keep imagining her standing by that stone, wind in her hair, eyes sharp as cut glass. She didn't flinch when I stepped out of the trees. Didn't cower when I shifted. She just stood there—defiant, unshaken, and more wolf than most who wear the skin full-time. That kind of strength? It's rare. Dangerous. And the part of me that should see it as a threat only sees something worth protecting. Worth claiming. Which makes her the biggest threat of all.

Because claiming her wouldn't just change my life—it could cost me everything I've built trying to outrun my past. And maybe the worst part is, I'm not sure I'd stop it even if I could.

I can't ignore the truth scratching at my bones: someone's waking up the past. And I can't shake the feeling they're not just using her—they're counting on her. As bait.

As leverage. Or worse, as a fuse.

A cold wind snakes through the trees, threading under my collar, and the hair on the back of my neck lifts. Somewhere in the distance, a branch snaps—too sharp, too clean. The forest holds its breath, and so do I.

## CHAPTER 6

KATE

The woods don't just breathe. They judge.

I feel it in the way the wind changes, brushing the back of my neck like a whisper meant for someone else. The basket of preserves digs into my hip as I readjust my grip around the handle and keep walking. The path toward the Ridley cabin isn't long, but it's steep enough to remind me why I usually send deliveries with someone less inclined to talk back to pine trees.

But I needed the quiet. Or I thought I did. Silence out here stretches like skin over bone—thin and uneasy. I thought maybe the wind would carry some trace of Luke, some ghost of an answer the others are too afraid to speak. But the only thing the stillness does is turn up the volume on everything I've been trying not to hear. Instead of peace, I've found the echo of my doubt.

Now, I'm not so sure.

The farther I walk, the louder the silence gets—like it's no longer absence but anticipation.

The kind of quiet that knows something's coming. My skin prickles, every instinct sharpening, as if the trees themselves are bracing for what they already know is

waiting ahead.

The air thickens with that uncanny weight again—the same sensation I felt near the carved marker. It's not just the hush, it's the pressure, like a hundred unseen eyes tracking every step. Like the trees aren't just holding their breath—they're waiting for judgment. Something ancient. Something older than pack law or blood feuds. Like the forest itself remembers what we've all tried to forget. And it's about to remind me.

A low growl cuts through the mist—guttural and deliberate, not a warning, but a promise. It snakes between the trees like smoke, cold and unmistakably directed at me. My breath catches, spine straightening. That sound doesn't come from a startled animal. It's territorial. Intentional. A claim before a challenge.

I stop. Feet planted, breath shallow, every part of me strung tight like a bow. Not out of fear. Out of instinct. Out of memory. Because I've been in this position before—cornered, assessed, underestimated. But not like this.

They're not trying to hide. That's the first insult. They want me to see them. To know I'm being watched. Confronted. Measured. Like prey—or worse, like a trespasser daring to pretend she belongs on their land. It's the kind of calculated show-of-force bullshit that comes with pack politics, sharpened by bias and soaked in tradition. And they expect me to fold.

Two wolves—both gray, bigger than me in human or wolf form—step out from the underbrush like they own the trail. Which, technically, their pack does. Blood and geography have always divided Wild Hollow, and this stretch has always belonged to the Rawlings.

I stiffen automatically, not with fear but with the kind of wariness that comes from experience. I know what it means to be outnumbered. I know what it means to be

underestimated. There's a hot knot of tension between my shoulder blades—not panic, but a kind of readiness, a challenge unspoken. I feel them sizing me up, as if I am something to dismiss or devour. And somewhere under the instinct to protect and defend, a sliver of anger rises. Not because they're here. But because they expect me to be less just because I'm red. Because I'm McKinley.

One shifts. The fog boils around him, lightning crackling at the edges, and when it clears, a man stands there—naked, unbothered by the cold or the exposure. A sneer cuts deep across his face; he crosses his arms over his broad chest, daring me to flinch at his presence or pride.

“Well,” he says. “If it isn't the red wolf herself.”

“Wow,” I reply. “A full sentence and only one slur—not very impressive. You should try to do better.”

The other remains in wolf form, pacing behind him—his massive paws silent on the damp earth, yellow eyes fixed on me like he's waiting for a command. Muscles bunch beneath his gray coat, every step radiating tension. He's a sentinel, a reminder that even in silence, I'm being hunted. And if things go sideways, he'll be the first to lunge.

“You're out of your territory,” the man says.

“I'm making a delivery,” I say, nudging the delivery basket into view. “Widow Ridley's running low on pear preserves.”

“You passed the line half-a-mile back.”

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“Lines get blurry when no one has the nerve to redraw them.”

He blinks, just once, like I caught him off-script. “We don’t need to redraw. We just enforce.”

“Then maybe enforce something useful.”

I cock my head, letting a slow smirk curl my lips.

“Like a decent sense of direction. Or manners.”

He doesn’t laugh. Not even a twitch of his mouth. Just stares, head tilted slightly, like he’s weighing whether sarcasm qualifies as disrespect or if I’m just another red wolf with a big mouth. Big surprise—humor’s wasted on a man who treats rank like religion and thinks dominance is a personality trait.

“What do you want?” I ask, sharper now.

“To remind you what side of the Hollow you’re on.”

“Thanks,” I say sweetly. “Consider me reminded. Now move.”

He doesn’t budge. The pacing wolf pauses mid-step, ears flicking toward his pack mate, then toward me. Their stillness is deliberate, calculated. A tactic. They’re holding the line—not with brute force, but with the tension of unspoken threat. It’s the kind of silence that makes a girl wonder how fast she’d have to move to survive the first lunge. And how many teeth she could leave bloodied if it came to that.

I move the basket to my left hand, the edge biting into my palm. My right hand stays loose at my side, fingers flexing once, twice—ready. Just in case I need to drop the basket and fight. Because these aren't just pack wolves posturing. They're waiting for an excuse. And I'm not about to give them the first move.

"I hear you and the alpha are getting close," he says, his tone oily. "Few in our pack are going to take kindly to that." He spits on the ground and mutters something that sounds like "McKinley trash."

My jaw tightens, but not from anger—more from surprise. I didn't think anyone had noticed, not when I can't even say how I feel about it myself. "Is that your business?"

"It's pack business. Rawlings land, Rawlings rules."

"Funny, I didn't see you at the general store when the roof caved in. Or at the last supply run. I got more help from humans and a few off-pack shifters than I ever did from the Rawlings. So don't pretend it's pack business now, since someone saw Hudson near me."

"You're a McKinley," he spits. "You don't belong here."

"Neither does your attitude, and yet, here we are."

He steps forward, slow and sure, like he expects me to shrink back. Like he's done this before and it always works.

I don't move. I won't. Not just because of pride—though there's plenty of that—but because giving ground now would be more than retreat. It'd be surrender. And I've spent my whole damn life proving I don't kneel to anyone.

His eyes narrow, then slide over me like I'm a thing to be evaluated. Possessed. He's

not just looking—he’s cataloging, like he’s already decided what I’m worth and what it’d take to break me. My pulse spikes. My fingers twitch. I calculate pressure points, leverage, timing—how fast I could move, how much damage I could do before the second wolf lunges.

And just when the air feels like it might snap under the tension, a low hiss echoes from the trees.

They hear it, too. Their posturing flickers.

I smile, slow and sharp, letting the corners of my mouth curl with satisfaction. I tilt my head just slightly, eyes locked on the wolves like I’m daring them to deny it. “You hear that?” I ask, voice low and threaded with iron. “That’s the forest, remembering who really built these trails.”

He opens his mouth to retort, lips curling into what I’m sure would’ve been something smug and stupid—but I’m done playing nice. The basket hits the ground with a thud, contents spilling, and I let the rage and instinct crack open inside me. I call forward my she-wolf without hesitation.

The mist explodes around me, thick and fast, laced with lightning and sound, a whirlwind pulled from the belly of the Hollow. It rises like breath from the earth, wrapping around me, cloaking me in color and power. It doesn’t hurt—it never has—but it burns in its own way, a wild unmaking that feels like truth.

And I revel in it.

The shift is freedom in its purest form—bone-deep and soul-sharp, like stepping back into something truer than skin. Every cell vibrates, every sense snaps into focus. I feel the dirt grind beneath my pads, the press of roots like veins beneath the surface. I taste the sharp bite of moss on the wind, hear the wings of a crow before it breaks from a



branch. There's no fear here. No hesitation. Just power—feral and right.

When the mist clears, I'm crouched low on four feet, claws biting into the dirt, fur bristling with heat and defiance. Muscles coiled, instincts sharp, I'm not just ready—I'm daring them to try me. I'm red. I'm wolf. I'm done pretending to be anything less.

The pacing wolf stops pacing. The man beside him turns his head, gives a subtle nod, and the mist swells around his bare feet. It coils upward, bright and sudden, swirling with that charged crackle only shifters know. His form collapses inward, bends, warps, and then he's gone—replaced by a wolf, silver-gray and broad-shouldered, with the same sneer now etched into fur.

He rejoins the first wolf at his side. Shoulder to shoulder. Silent. A show of unity. They don't need to speak—the message is clear: pack above all. And right now, I'm the trespasser.

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I growl once—low and full of promise, my voice riding the rumble of the wild still burning in my bones. It rolls through the clearing, sharp and sure, a sound that belongs to the Hollow itself. It carries teeth and history and warning. I want them to feel it in their marrow, to remember that red doesn't mean lesser—it means fire.

They hesitate, eyes locked on mine. Then the silver-gray wolf lowers his head slightly in acknowledgment—more of a warning than respect—and turns. His companion moves with him, both of them keeping their bodies low and their gazes sharp as they back away.

They don't run. They don't posture further. They simply fade into the underbrush with a silent efficiency that says they got what they came for—or at least enough to walk away for now.

But they retreat. They yield the path. And that, in this place and under these rules, means I won.

I don't chase. I don't flinch. I just hold their gaze until the forest takes them back. And in that silence, I stand taller. Not just red wolf—but threat. Warning. Answer.

The moment they disappear, I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. Relief crashes in behind the adrenaline, leaving my legs just a little shaky, my heartbeat thudding unevenly in my chest. I stood my ground, but it could've gone so differently. They could've lunged. I could've bled.

But they didn't. And I didn't... for today, that is enough.

I grab the basket meant for Widow Ridley in my jaws and run. The rest of the hike blurs—just scent and sound, heat and motion. Adrenaline drives me forward, the air thick with the taste of almost. Almost lost control. Almost let them see too much. My paws tear through the underbrush like I can outrun the moment, like speed alone could strip away the weight of what just happened.

When I reach Widow Ridley's porch, I drop the basket carefully in front of the door, nudge it into place, pull out my spare set of clothing, and then leap up to tug the frayed cord that rings her bell. It clangs once—low and familiar—and I step back, tail high and wagging, head level, waiting.

The door creaks open, and Widow Ridley peers out.

For a second, I'm twelve again, bringing jam jars and fresh biscuits to her doorstep under Mama's watchful eye, legs scraped from running through brush and hair wild with river water. Back when Luke was still just my older brother and not a shadow in the woods. Widow Ridley had been there through all of it—births, deaths, and backroom whiskey deals. Seeing her now, squinting through the mist at my four-legged form, feels like some strange, steady thread in the tangle of everything that's come undone. Peering past the screen and squinting through the haze. "Kate," she murmurs, not surprised in the least to see me on four feet. "Brought the preserves. And what's this?"

She crouches slowly and lifts the cloth napkin to reveal the fresh banana bread tucked on top, neatly wrapped in wax paper and still smelling faintly of banana, brown sugar and roasted walnuts.

"Well, aren't you full of kindness today," she says, smiling like she can still see the girl I used to be under the fur.

I huff once—soft, a sound close to a laugh—and dip my head.

Only when she closes the door and I hear the latch slide home, do I pick up my clothing bundle, turn and trot back into the woods.

I don't shift back until I'm tucked deep in the cover of trees near the cabin, heart still thundering in my chest, lungs heaving. I pause, taking one last moment in this form where everything feels cleaner, clearer, stripped of second-guessing.

Then I let the mist take me.

It rises from the ground like breath from the Hollow itself, thick and laced with light. It wraps around my body, drawing the wolf inward and peeling humanity back over my bones. The cold hits first—then the air, then the vulnerability. My skin prickles as the fur disappears, and I'm left panting, naked, raw in a way that has nothing to do with modesty.

I press a hand against a tree trunk to steady myself, the bark rough and grounding against my palm. My legs still feel loose, blood buzzing in a way that has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with the aftermath. I close my eyes, let my forehead rest against the trunk, and exhale a breath I didn't know I was holding.

The Hollow is quiet around me now—less judgmental, more watchful. Like it saw everything and decided, just this once, I passed. There are days when I feel like the woods are waiting for me to fail, to fall short of whatever legacy Luke left behind. But not today. Today, I feel like it held its breath with me. That it let me walk away not just because I earned it, but because, maybe, it wanted me to. Maybe this place doesn't just test you. Maybe it protects what it claims.

I breathe deeply while I pull on my clothes and boots quickly. No one's around, but I take the long way home just in case.

By the time I reach the edge of town, the weight of what just happened is settling in

my shoulders. I'm exhausted, but the quiet of the woods clings to me like mist.

When I finally reach the store, it's still and silent, like it's been waiting too. I head upstairs, strip out of my dirt-smeared clothes, and pull on a sweatshirt that smells like old pine and home. Hank flaps from his perch onto the floor and trails me to the kitchen.

"You'd have loved it," I tell him. "Big macho posturing. Real caveman shit."

He honks.

I lean against the counter, heartbeat finally slowing, and let my eyes drift toward the old shelf near the window—a corner of the store I know like the back of my hand. But something tugs at my attention, subtle but persistent. A photo frame is tilted—just barely. Not enough for a customer to notice. But I do. The kind of off-kilter that whispers rather than shouts, and suddenly, I'm not just looking—I'm bracing.

I walk over.

It's a picture of Luke and me, mid-laugh, muddy from one of our creek runs—my arm slung over his shoulders, his hair a wild mess of curls and leaves, both of us grinning like we didn't have a care in the world. The kind of moment that belonged to before. Before the silence. Before the fear. Before everything broke.

Behind it, a folded note.

I open it. Recognize the handwriting before I even read the first word.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

Kate,

If you found this, you're already in it. Don't trust the lines. They're lying to you. Just like they lied to me.

Luke

My knees almost buckle.

He's not gone, and suddenly, everything I thought I knew feels one inch from crumbling. My knees wobble and I have to grip the edge of the shelf to stay upright. My hands shake, fingers curling against the wood. My breath stutters, the air too thin, too sharp. Hope and fear collide in my chest, fierce and electric, and the weight of what this means nearly knocks me flat.. My mind reels, torn between the jagged pulse of hope and the cold bite of fear. If Luke's alive, then nothing—none of the lies, none of the silence—was by accident. And whatever he left behind, it's meant for me now. Which means I'm not just in it. I'm next.

## CHAPTER 7

### HUDSON

The Rawlings compound hasn't changed.

Built into the curve of the ridge like it grew there, the main house rises in layers—tiered log terraces stepping upward from the earth.

Each step in the earth is a reminder of old strength carved straight from the mountain. The house is all heavy timbers and dark stone, its steep-gabled roof pitched high against the sky, flanked by arched balconies and a wraparound porch that groans under its own history. Surrounded by various outbuildings and thick pines looming around it like sentinels, casting long shadows across the face of the building, their branches brushing the shingled eaves like whispers no one dares voice.

It's the kind of place that doesn't need to explain itself. Rooted too deep into the bones of the mountain, built on bloodline and legacy, it's more monument than home. I grew up here learning to be quiet, to be sharp, to listen more than I speak. And to lead when I'd rather disappear. The walls still echo with old voices, mine included, and sometimes I think the ghosts judge more than the elders ever did.

Technically, I hadn't accepted the title. I hadn't said the words, taken the formal vow, or claimed the role in the old way. But the elders still watched me as if they knew the mantle of leadership was mine and mine alone. Maybe because they knew—deep down—I was the only one who could lead the Rawlings pack.

After what happened in the woods—and what I saw in Kate's scent trail—my instincts hadn't stopped pacing. I'd doubled back twice on the ride here just to shake the edge off. But it wasn't working. I wasn't just riding adrenaline. I was riding the sharp burn of something territorial, something protective, after seeing where her tracks stopped and theirs began.

Two wolves. Heavier. Older. Their scent was all over the clearing, closing in on her from behind the trees, then retreating fast. Not driven off—forced. I saw where their paws had skidded in the dirt, where her position held steady before they turned tail and backed off. That kind of imprint doesn't lie.

And the worst part? They were ours... mine. My wolves. My pack. Rawlings blood. I recognized their scent immediately—one laced with old tobacco and arrogance, the

other always a bit too sharp, too close to rot. They've never liked the McKinleys, but I never gave them permission to act on it. From the way the tracks pulled back, dragging through the dirt as they backed away, I knew they hadn't just harassed her—they'd expected her to run. Instead, she'd held, and they'd had no choice but to retreat. I saw it in the half-moon gouges her claws left in the frozen dirt, the bark torn from a nearby sapling like she'd braced herself for impact. Something forced them to retreat—they didn't simply back down; the wild refused to accept the falsehood they attempted to create.

They think I've got to choose—Alpha or storm.

But they've forgotten the old truth: a real Alpha is both. The one who keeps the order and brings the reckoning. And today, they're about to get a reminder.

Maybe I'm both. Because being Alpha isn't just about order—it's about consequence. About drawing the line between control and chaos and making damn sure no one mistakes silence for weakness.

I can't afford to let this slide. Not when the pack's already looking for cracks. If they see hesitation, they'll fill it with their own rules. But if they see fire? If they feel it in their bones that I won't blink when it counts? That's how you lead. That's how you survive.

So yeah, maybe I'm both.

And maybe that's exactly what they need.

I shouldn't care this much. About her. About what it looked like. But the moment I caught the end of her trail near Ridley's cabin, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. The clearing had smelled wrong—too much fear laced into the pine, the kind of scent you only catch after a confrontation. Her paw prints had been shallow but fast,



like she'd left in a hurry.

Now those responsible will have to answer for it. Because no one touches what's mine. Not even my pack.

I pull my truck into the clearing, gravel crunching under tires, and kill the engine. The main house stands ahead, all weathered stone and heavy wood, stoic as ever. No one's outside, but I know they've been watching since I crested the last hill.

I've come and gone since taking up the sheriff's badge—doing the job, answering the calls—but I haven't really been here.

Not with the pack. Not where it counts.

Not in the way that matters. I kept the distance I thought we all needed—space from their expectations, their scrutiny. But after today, I know that silence bred more than suspicion.

It bred something bolder. It gave wolves like those two the space to act without fear of consequence. They mistook my absence for indifference—and that's a mistake I won't let stand again. It bred entitlement.

And that's on me. Time to stop pretending I can stand outside and still expect to be followed.

I step out of the truck. The air smells of pine, ash, and lingering tension. There's a snap of cold in the wind that cuts through my shirt and whispers old warnings down my spine. Every step toward that front door feels like walking into a courtroom with no verdict and too many witnesses. I roll my shoulders back and move with purpose, even though I know the weight waiting inside will try to drag me down. The scent of wolves is heavy here, layered with memory and dominance.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

When I push open the main doors, the scent of old whiskey and polished wood hits first, rich and thick with years of smoke, sweat, and power. The foyer stretches wide and open, floors worn smooth by generations of boots and claws. High beams crisscross overhead, dark with age and low enough to make you feel watched. The fire crackling in the hearth at the far end does little to warm the chill that lives in these walls.

And under it all—pack. The scent is everywhere. Familiar. Expectant. Heavy.

It pulls a memory out of me, sharp and sudden. I was seventeen the last time I sat in this room before I left for the military—before I'd earned my place as anything more than the Rawlings heir. I remember standing in front of the elders, fists clenched at my sides, refusing to bow. My father watched from the shadows, silent as always. He didn't stop them when they called me soft. Didn't stop them when they said a real Alpha wouldn't run off to serve a human chain of command. He just watched. And when I walked out that door, I swore I'd never come back unless I had something worth saying.

Now I'm back. And the silence still carries weight. But this time, it's mine to break.

Three of the elders are already waiting—Alaric, Bram, and Eddard. All gray wolves, all older than me, and none of them good at hiding their disapproval.

"You're late," Alaric says without looking up from the hearth.

I ignore that and walk to the bar instead. Pour a shot of smooth single malt. Down it. Then I turn.

"You called this meeting. You can wait until I've had a damn drink."

Alaric's jaw tightens, a twitch of annoyance barely hidden beneath his usual stoicism. Bram squirms in his seat like he's weighing whether it's worth the trouble to comment. Eddard's eyebrow lifts higher, a slow, deliberate expression that says he's amused—but only just. They're not used to being challenged. Not like this.

Eddard raises an eyebrow, but Bram just grunts.

"The McKinley girl's making trouble," Bram says. "Again."

"She delivered preserves and didn't flinch," I say. "That's not trouble. That's someone knowing her worth and refusing to bow."

"She trespassed," Alaric snaps. "And two of ours gave her what she deserved. A red—especially one with McKinley blood—doesn't get to strut through Rawlings land like she's earned the right. They did what needed doing. We should be rewarding them, not questioning their loyalty."

I set the glass down hard enough that it cracks.

"No, what makes us look weak is two wolves intimidating a woman on a delivery run like they're pack enforcers and not glorified bullies."

The silence that follows is thick.

"You planning to do something about it?" Eddard asks. "Because if you don't..."

"I do." I cut him off. "I will."

They expect me to make a show. Blood. Humiliation.

My hands flex at my sides, fists clenching and releasing. I pace once—sharp, deliberate—then plant my boots and stare them down. Their eyes are on me even when they pretend not to be. Waiting. Wanting proof, I'll play the same tired game.

But I didn't come back to echo the old way.

I came to rewrite it. And the first rule is this—no one mistakes restraint for weakness. Not anymore. I didn't come back here to flex muscle. I came back to lead. And sometimes leadership means knowing when not to bare your teeth.

I have another idea.

I leave without another word and head out behind the house, past the line of pine trees where light doesn't quite reach, and the air turns colder. The shed sits at the edge of the wild, leaning with age and memory. More claw marks than structure. It's where we've all changed for the run since we were old enough to stop crawling. I remember shifting here for the first time with my father watching. He didn't say a word then, either. He simply nodded once, as if I had done what was expected.

The run will start here. It always does.

I strip down, fold my clothes with automatic precision, and place them in the bin just inside the door. My boots hit the floor last.

Then I step out into the clearing and let it rise.

The mist coils up fast, lightning snapping in the dark edges of it, the air thick with the taste of copper and change. The earth exhales, and I go with it.

No pain. No fear. Just the wolf.

My paws hit the earth, solid and sure. My coat ripples silver in the moonlight that slips between the trees. The forest accepts me in a way the council never will.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

I run. Hard. Fast. Wind slicing past. Every stride burns out the heat and noise from the meeting. The forest becomes a blur, the rhythm of my paws pounding a steady cadence. My thoughts dissolve into instinct.

I leap over a downed log, weave between narrow trunks. There's a freedom here I don't get in human skin. No questions. No councils. Just the purity of the hunt and the weight of my purpose.

My nose to the ground.

And I catch it. Them.

Two distinct trails. Fresh.

They're not far. They never thought I'd come this fast.

I find them near the south ravine, pacing and spitting excuses to each other. When I break through the brush, they freeze.

One shifts mid-step, panic flickering across his face just before the mist takes him. I slow—not out of mercy, but instinct. The mist shields him, wrapping his body in color and sound. He's safe for now, wrapped in the mist's protection. But the second it clears... I lunge.

His paws haven't even steadied when my shoulder slams into his flank. He lets out a sharp, surprised yelp, skidding through the underbrush and crashing into a downed log. He scrambles up, fur bristling and eyes wide, but he doesn't come back at me. He

knows better now.

The other tries to shift too, mist curling up from the ground in a fast swell. I stop short again—just for a beat—because even fury has its boundaries, and the mist is sacred. Untouchable. I watch as it swallows him whole, shards of light rippling across his skin before he disappears inside it.

When the mist clears, he's crouched low, fur still settling, breath ragged.

I close the distance in a flash.

I snap my teeth just shy of his throat—close enough to feel the tremor in his pulse. The sound is sharp, final. A warning wrapped in promise.

I circle them, hackles raised, breath hot and heavy. One growl. Low. Warning. Absolute.

They roll over. Submissive. Exposed throats and bellies. One of them whines low, the kind of sound that scrapes from the back of the throat when pride meets fear. The other won't even look at me—his eyes flick between the dirt and the trees, searching for an escape that isn't coming.

I hold my stance, tail high, ears back, teeth bared, dominance pouring off me like heat. Let them squirm. Let them remember. My low growl makes one of them flinch; his hind leg twitches as he attempts a retreat I won't allow. The other locks his gaze on the dirt, refusing to meet mine—an old instinct that tells me he finally understands what he stepped into. I don't move. I don't have to. Every breath I take reminds them of who holds the ground here.

I'm not my father.

But I am Alpha now.

I don't bite. I don't need to.

But I make sure they know this isn't about red versus gray, about bloodline or who howls louder under the moon. It's about lines—crossed and uncrossed. It's about honor, discipline, and knowing your place, no matter what your rank or your name. They came after someone who did nothing to provoke them. They acted like rogues. That's what I made sure they felt, bone-deep and breath-held.

And they just learned that disrespect—toward me, toward the balance we hold—comes at a cost.

When I leave them there, shaking in the dirt, the wolf in me is calm. I pad into the woods, not rushing. Just absorbing the quiet. The tremble of leaves in the wind. The chill of the earth beneath my paws. They'll remember this moment. Not just because they feared me—but because I didn't rip them apart. Because mercy can cut deeper than claws when it comes from someone who could have destroyed you.

For the first time in days, there's stillness inside me. No gnawing edge, no constant hum of restraint about to snap. Instinct and action finally align, creating this quiet. My breath slows. My muscles loosen. The Hollow feels less like a battlefield and more like home.

But that peace doesn't last. Not when I circle back near town and catch her scent. Kate. Still fresh. Still electric.

The wind changes direction. My chest tightens, sharp and immediate, like my ribs are suddenly too tight for the lungs inside them. Her scent clings to the breeze—wildflowers and danger, sweat and soft things I don't deserve. It's a reminder, a warning, a promise.



This isn't over.

Not between us. Not when the pull runs this deep, and my wolf snarls every time I try to walk away.

Because the wolf isn't the only thing inside me that wants her.

The mist may shield us during the shift, but it doesn't protect me from this—the way her scent clings to the Hollow like it's claimed the ground itself. Every breath stokes the need. Every step toward the tree line pulls me closer to the edge of something I swore I'd never want. And yet, I do.

Even the Hollow feels it—watching, waiting, silent as ever. But I know the way it held its breath for her. And now, it holds it for me.

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Because whatever this is, whatever it becomes, it won't be quiet. It'll come with teeth.

The man does too. And maybe that's the most dangerous part... the part I don't know how to leash.

Not when every breath I take pulls her deeper into my blood. Not when my control frays the closer she gets.

Because one day soon, I'm going to stop trying to hold back—and when I do, the Hollow that raised me, shaped me, warned me to stay silent will bear witness to the one thing even it can't quiet—claiming what's mine. And when I do, nothing in this hollow or any other will stand in my way.

## CHAPTER 8

### KATE

The air outside is cooling fast, dusk pressing in on the windows like a warning. I lock the cash drawer, brew a cup of tea I don't drink, and sweep the same patch of floor for the fifth time. I've already tucked Hank the goose in for the night, thank God—because if Hudson is the storm, Hank is the lightning.

The bell above the store door rings. Of course it does—it's impossible for it not to. But something about the way it rings is different. Like it doesn't dare chime too loud. Like even it knows who's on the other side. And the second I hear it, I know it's him.

I glance up from behind the counter, heart already ticking faster. The lights are off. Closed sign hanging. But I unlocked the door twenty minutes ago, like I knew he'd come. Not hoped—knew. Which makes it worse. Because knowing meant I'd already surrendered to something I told myself, I wouldn't. It meant that despite everything—his silence, his distance, the way he made my blood heat and my guard rise—I still wanted him to come through that door. And that terrified me more than anything he might say once he did.

Hudson Rawlings fills the frame like a thunderstorm—tall, sharp-eyed, jaw set hard enough to cut through Appalachian stone. His shoulders stretch the worn leather of his jacket, jeans slung low on lean hips, every inch of him carved and coiled like danger in a man's skin. His scent hits me next—smoke and pine and male—and my stomach flips, low and hot. It's the same smell that clung to the old Rawlings' cabin I wasn't supposed to sneak near as a kid. Danger wrapped in temptation. A wild, feral thing that made me want to get closer, even when instinct screamed I shouldn't.

Now, it curls around me like a memory and a promise I haven't decided to believe. My breath stumbles, and my thighs tighten involuntarily. My body responds before I can think better of it, before I remember why this is a bad idea. My body remembers, even if my brain is trying really hard to forget. I move behind the counter, suddenly too aware of the thin cotton of my shirt, the way my breath catches at the base of my throat. His boots track mud across my freshly swept floor. Typical. But he stops short just inside the door like he feels the tension hanging in the air too, like he knows I'm watching every move he makes and feeling far too much.

"I'm closed." I don't raise my voice, but it slices anyway.

His gaze sweeps over the dark interior, slow and deliberate, like he's cataloging every shadow, every inch of the space that's mine—until it lands on me. And when it does, it's like being branded. His eyes drag over my face, down my frame, pausing just long enough to make heat bloom low in my belly.

“I know,” he says, voice low and rough, like gravel ground beneath his boots.

There’s a beat where we just stare at each other—too long to be polite. Long enough to crack the tension wide open, to let everything we haven’t said start humming between us. My breath stutters in my chest, and the space between us feels thick with things we might do and things we absolutely shouldn’t. I drag my eyes from his and turn toward the back, pulse drumming in my ears. I don’t tell him to follow.

But I leave the door open anyway. It’s not an invitation, not exactly—but it’s not a warning, either. Just space. Space he can fill or walk away from.

The silence stretches behind me, then comes the click of the door, the soft tread of boots across worn wood. My pulse jumps.

He follows.

I don’t offer coffee. Don’t need to. He hasn’t come for small talk or coffee.

“I heard about the delivery,” he says, voice low, controlled.

“Which one?” I toss over my shoulder. “The basket of preserves to Widow Ridley, where your wolves tried to muscle me off Hollow Ridge?”

I don’t have to see him to feel the change in the air. It rolls in slow and heavy, coiling between the walls and sliding over my skin like a warning. The hairs on my arms rise, gooseflesh chasing down my spine. It’s subtle—like the pressure changing before a storm, the kind that makes birds go quiet and leaves tremble without wind. The kind of change you feel in your bones before you even know why.

"I admire the way you handled it," he offers.

“Handled it?” I shoot him a look over my shoulder. “Do I get a medal or just a pat on the head?”

“Neither. I didn't mean to sound condescending.”

I turn then, arms crossed. “Too late.” Before he can respond, I continue, “Let me guess, you’re here to apologize. Offer me protection? Swear you didn’t know?”

His jaw clenches. “I didn’t. But that doesn’t change what happened.”

“No, it doesn’t.” I step closer. “And I don’t need your protection. I’m not some doe-eyed human who wandered too close to the woods.”

His eyes flash, the wolf flickering behind them. “I know exactly what you are.”

“Then stop treating me like I need saving.”

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Another beat. Longer this time. The air between us goes electric.

“You’re infuriating,” he growls.

“Right back at you, Sheriff.”

Then he’s on me.

My breath catches, a flicker of instinct laced with something hotter—need, defiance, maybe both. My body tenses, anticipation strung taut, but I don’t move. Not yet. Not when everything in me is sparking like dry pine, ready to catch fire.

One step. Two. He’s heat and muscle, looming and relentless—and then his hands are on my waist, big and rough and claiming. His mouth crashes into mine like he’s starving for it. For me. Like he’s been holding back, and he’s done waiting. His lips are bruising, his tongue greedy, and it sends a bolt of need through me so sharply, I gasp into the kiss, fisting the front of his shirt like I could pull him closer to me.

And the way he groans? Like I just gave him oxygen.

The first kiss is fire and fury—raw and untamed. All teeth and heat, mouths clashing, breath stolen like he’s trying to inhale me, consume me.

I push against him, defiant for a heartbeat, then pull him closer, needing more, needing him. My fingers curl into his shirt, then slip beneath it, seeking skin. Heat radiates off him like a live wire. Hard muscle flexes under my hands, the kind you earn from violence, from discipline, from survival.

My body arches into his, helpless to do anything but answer every demand he makes with one of my own.

He lifts me onto the counter in one smooth motion, like I weigh nothing, like the distance between restraint and possession never existed.

My legs wrap around his hips without hesitation, muscle to muscle, fire to fire. His body settles against mine with the kind of pressure that steals breath, the kind that makes you forget where you end and he begins. It's wild and consuming and terrifyingly right.

Like I've waited not just days—but lifetimes—to do this. And I'm done waiting.

And I'm not the only one. He's just as desperate, just as wrecked with want. Our hands are everywhere at once, grasping, fumbling, pulling. Clothes peel away fast—torn from skin like they're in the way of something inevitable. Fingers are frantic and greedy, clawing at buttons, zippers, whatever's keeping us apart. His jacket hits the floor with a thud, then my shirt, and his belt clatters a second later.

The air between us disappears with the last shred of fabric. Then everything else is gone too—just heat, skin, and the electric tension of a fuse burning too fast. It's the wildfire moment, the one that devours hesitation and leaves nothing but raw want in its wake. We are ash and spark, crashing together in the kind of hunger that could tear the roof off this place and still not be enough.

The sensation of him against me—of his solidity and power, sculpted like stone and barely contained by his own fervent desires—is almost too overpowering to endure. I can barely breathe as if the sheer force of him will crush me into pieces.

His form radiates heat and need, pressing in close enough to drown me in it. He's a storm front of sensation, searing every inch of skin he touches until I forget how to

breathe. His mouth explores every curve and hollow of my body with intent—lips igniting my skin, tongue tracing heat along every sensitive spot, teeth grazing just enough to send shivers down my spine. Each kiss lands like a brand, leaving fire in its wake. My world tilts under the weight of it, vision blurred by sensation as he consumes me with a fever that is both ruthless and reverent.

As he continues the fervent trail of kisses down my torso and spreads my legs, the heat of his breath on my inner thighs sends electric shivers of anticipation through my body. With a feverish touch, his lips meet my labia, leaving me trembling and desperate for more.

When the tip of his tongue expertly grazes my clit, a sharp, involuntary gasp escapes from my lips. Arousal drenches my body, and its potent scent seems to drive him into a frenzy, filling the air with an intoxicating allure.

He savors every tantalizing second, devouring me as if I were an irresistible feast laid out before him. His tongue delves deeper into my folds, exploring each sensitive crevice with relentless desire. Every stroke intensifies the sweet slickness that coats his tongue, leaving me writhing beneath him, consumed by the fiery passion of the moment.

I moan his name, a blend of fear and yearning. It slips from my lips with a shuddering breath and hangs thick in the air like both a bold challenge and a fervent plea for more, a declaration and a surrender. He steps closer and thrusts into me, the broad head of his cock almost splitting me in two.

As he begins to pound into me, he takes control, asserting a primal dominance over my trembling form in a way that is raw, urgent, and profoundly fulfilling. I am his prisoner and his willing captive, and I respond with a fervor that shocks me, meeting his demands with my own mounting need.



Every movement inside me is deliberate—a seamless fusion of intensity and precision. His strength is overwhelming, and I feel myself unraveling under his expert assault. He commands my entire being with each calculated penetration. I respond eagerly to this dance of passion, matching his rhythm as though we are two perfectly attuned lovers. My fingers dig into his broadshoulders, holding on to him as if I might be swallowed by the force of our shared desire. I urge him to delve even deeper as if nothing will satisfy this boundless craving.

The guttural groan that escapes him sends thrilling tremors down my spine as if he is ripping me apart with pleasure. His mouth descends upon mine in an all-consuming kiss as if he will devour me whole.

I lose track of where he ends, and I begin. There is nothing but this reckless abandon... and then I feel it—his teeth at the base of my throat. Right where an alpha would inflict and leave his mark, claiming his mate once and for all time.

And I freeze.

“Hudson—”

He doesn't stop. His mouth lingers near the hollow of my throat, breath burning, teeth too close to that sacred place. That claiming place.

Panic tears through the haze of heat and need, and I shove at his shoulders. He doesn't budge—too big, too strong, too caught in the edge of whatever he's about to do.

I twist and bring my knee up fast, catching him in the side hard enough to make him stumble back.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

He crashes into the shelves behind him, breath ragged, eyes wild.

I sit up, heart hammering. "Get out!"

"Kate..."

"No. You don't get to make that choice for me."

His eyes flash. "You think you have a choice? That I do? We are fated mates," he declares.

I slide off the counter, gather his clothes from the floor and throw them at him before moving behind the counter, placing it as a barrier between us.

"Everything's a choice, Hudson. Even giving in to instinct or fate."

He watches me. Not moving. Not speaking.

"You want to mark me? To claim me?" I say quietly. "Then earn it."

The words settle in the charged air between us, a challenge and a warning. He doesn't follow me when I disappear into the back room. I pause behind the curtain, chest heaving, hand braced against the doorframe. The adrenaline hasn't faded—not completely. My body still thrums with the aftershocks of want, anger, and something too complicated to name. Vulnerability, maybe. Or the terrifying hope that he might come after me.

"And be sure to lock the door behind you."

The words come out sharper than I mean, but I don't take them back. Not when my chest still heaves, not when the ache of what almost happened—what almost changed everything—still smolders deep inside. I wait for the sound of the door, the echo of his exit, but I don't turn around. Because I know if I see him now, I might not make him leave at all.

I flinch when the door slams shut, the sound too final, too sharp in the silence he left behind.

Of course he didn't lock it—there's no way to from the outside. I wrap my shirt around me with fingers that still tremble and cross to the front door. Pressing my forehead to the cool metal, I let the chill seep into my skin.

Then, with a steadying breath, I slide the deadbolt into place. A small, defiant sound in a world that's anything but certain.

In my pocket, the note from Luke crinkles as I curl my fingers around it.

A reminder that desire and danger walk too close in this town. I've worn down the edges from unfolding it so many times, rereading the half-scribbled warning, and searching it for hidden meaning.

I haven't told a soul—not even Waylon. Not yet. Because if what's in that note is true, then Hudson might be the least of my problems. And trusting the wrong person could cost me everything.

And just like that, the fire inside me fades to ash. The storm he brought in slipping back into the silence it came from. But the heat isn't gone. It simmers beneath the surface, like embers under scorched earth—waiting for one breath of wind to rise

again and burn everything down.

## CHAPTER 9

### HUDSON

I don't remember the drive back to the compound. Not the curves of the mountain roads. Not the cold air sneaking in through the cracked window. Not the trees, skeletal in the dark, standing like silent witnesses to how thoroughly I fucked that up.

I just remember the sound of Kate's voice. The way it cracked—not from weakness, but from fury barely contained. The razor edge of hurt threading through every word. It wasn't just anger. It was the sound of someone who had been burned too many times and refused to let it happen again. And it hit me like a punch to the gut—because I put that fire in her throat.

Her fury was righteous, her fear hard-earned. It hit like a lash across my chest, sharp and stinging, forcing me to face what I'd done. My throat tightened, jaw clenched, every instinct screaming to go back and fix it. But I knew better—this wasn't something a quick apology could erase. Not this time.

And her challenge? It was sharp as teeth, daring me to do better—or stay the hell away.

It echoes in my ears long after the tires crunch across the gravel drive, long after I slam the truck door so hard the frame shudders. The house is quiet—too quiet. One or two pack mates catch sight of me as I pass through the wide entryway, but the look on my face must warn them off. They step back into shadow, heads lowered, pretending not to see the wild threading through me.

I don't stop.

My body holds energy wound too tight, like a taut wire strung through muscle and bone. Every step forward is a silent snarl held in check, a promise of violence to anyone dumb enough to get in my way. I don't have the words, not yet. The burn of humiliation lingers, tangled with regret and something sharper: the awful clarity that I'd come too close to claiming what I hadn't earned—what I might never deserve.

I growl when a younger wolf rounds the corner into the hallway too fast, his scent sharp with curiosity. The kid stumbles back, eyes wide, body snapping to attention like prey cornered. I bare my teeth and keep moving.

No one follows.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

The hallway stretches behind me, quiet as a grave. I catch the scent of someone ducking behind the door to the den, the soft creak of a floorboard under a weight held still.

Even the walls feel like they're holding their breath.

Their silence isn't respect—it's fear. And maybe that's for the best. I'm not safe to be around right now. Frayed and furious, my instincts claw for release, stretching my skin too tight. I don't want company. I want control. And right now, I'm not sure I can trust myself with either.

The tension claws at my skin. My pulse hums with leftover rage, barely leashed. Every breath is too tight, every step too heavy. I don't remember feeling this out of control since I was a teenager, and even then, it didn't feel this close to rupture.

I strip down on the back porch, the old wood cold against my bare feet. The shift comes easy—rage makes it that way. The mist rises fast, curling up from the ground like it knows what I need. Lightning flashes through the fog, a crack of thunder splitting the night.

When it clears, the man is gone... and the wolf runs.

I tear through the woods like I'm chasing something—prey, purpose, clarity. My claws tear into the underbrush. My breath steams in the frozen air. But the only thing I'm really chasing is the scream I didn't let out back at the store. The guilt I didn't admit. The truth I didn't want to feel.

That I came too close to ruining the one thing I've ever wanted. Not just the woman. Not just the mate my wolf claws at me to claim. But the idea that maybe I could be more than the damage I came back with. That I could be hers. And that I might still be worthy of being wanted back.

Every scent I pass—the sap from broken branches, the faint tang of deer deeper in the hills, the bitter stink of old ash—feels like a taunt. None of it fills the hollow that opened when she pushed me away. None of it silences the echo of her voice, telling me I crossed a line.

The moon overhead is silver and unsympathetic. The wind carries no answers. My paws find every familiar path, but even the forest feels different tonight—less forgiving.

The mountain watches but does not welcome. The Hollow remembers. And now I understand just how deep that truth cuts.

When I return, the frost on my muzzle has melted. Mud cakes my paws. The cold bites deeper now, like it's trying to gnaw through my bones. I shift back and stalk through the rear door without care for who might be watching. I grab a pair of sweatpants from the stack by the mudroom bench, pulling them on. It doesn't matter that I'm still dripping mud and half-feral. Modesty's never mattered much in this house, but control does. And I need to look like I still have some left.

Eddard waits in the study.

He's got a fire going and a drink in his hand like he knew I'd come back this way. The room smells like aged oak and something sharper—gun oil, maybe, or the tang of bitter root. A log splits in the fire with a crack like a bone snapping, and the sound burrows deep inside me. It's too still, too staged. Like he's waiting to see if I'll explode or fold. The bastard always did enjoy playing the oracle.

The light from the fire casts him in half-shadow, etching the sharp lines of his face and the silver threading his beard in bronze and black. He's seated like a man holding court—legs spread wide, one hand wrapped around a tumbler of something amber, expensive, and mine. The other rests loose on the arm of the worn leather chair, fingers drumming faintly against the scuffed surface. Calm. Too calm.

He looks like he belongs here. Like he never left.

And that pisses me off more than it should.

“Make yourself at home,” I mutter, voice low and brittle.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't look at me.

Just takes a slow sip, swirls the glass like he's savoring it. “Didn't have to,” he says finally, eyes flicking up to mine. “I never stopped thinking of it that way.”

The gall of him. The arrogance. That lazy smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth, like he knows exactly what buttons he's pushing and is doing it for sport.

“You're in my chair,” I snap.

He leans back a fraction, stretches out even further. “Funny. Doesn't feel like yours.”

My knuckles go white around the glass I'm still holding. The fire behind me cracks, spitting sparks into the room. Rage simmers just under my skin, raw and restless, like it's looking for a place to land. He still hasn't blinked. Still hasn't moved. And the more still he stays, the more I want to shove him out of thatdamn chair and reclaim the space he stole by simply breathing in it.

I walk toward him, towering over him. “Move.”



Eddard looks up as if weighing the odds of taking me on. Realizing they aren't in his favor he gets up and moves to another seat.

“Good choice.”

This isn't just about the chair, and we both know it.

Under the anger, quieter and more dangerous, is regret—the same bitter note I felt in the woods when her scent faded from the air. It's not just about what I did or didn't do when I left to join the Navy, it's about what I almost became—and what I still might if I don't get this under control.

The flames crackle on. I sit there and take it in, hoping the heat will burn the worst of it away.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

I think about the way her eyes went dark when I leaned in. The way she gasped when I pressed too close. It wasn't just fear—it was betrayal. And I hate I put it there. I'm supposed to protect her, not back her into corners.

The next day, I head to the bookstore. Elena's there early, sorting supplies behind the counter. She looks up when I walk in, arching a brow.

"Morning, Sheriff."

"Elena."

"You look like someone chewed you up and spit you out."

I lean against the counter. "Something like that."

She finishes scribbling on a clipboard and glances up, the faint scent of aged paper and ink lingering in the air, mixing with the comforting bitterness of strong coffee brewing somewhere in the back. The early morning hush settles over the bookstore like a blanket, broken only by the distant rustle of pages and the soft creak of worn floorboards. "You here for a good book, a cup of coffee or emotional triage?"

"Neither. Just checking in. What do you know about Luke, Kate's brother? No one ever speaks of him."

Elena wasn't just a bookstore owner—she was the kind of woman who knew everyone's secrets five minutes before they did. If something stirred in the Hollow, odds were Elena already had it cataloged by scent, source, and shadow.

If Luke had been digging into anything strange, she'd have noticed. Hell, she probably knew more than the pack elders. And unlike them, she didn't posture. She watched. And remembered.

"Luke?" Her pen pauses mid-stroke. "Yeah, he sort of went missing. I spoke to him a few times. He was one of those souls who watched everything and said little. Quiet. Smart. Dug deep into things most folks wouldn't bother thinking about. Thought too much, maybe for his own good. But he was always kind. Always curious; perhaps too curious."

"You think something happened to him?" I ask.

She nodded. "The McKinleys keep mostly to themselves, but no one, including Kate, has talked about him in ages."

"Dead?"

"Most likely. Moonshining can be a lethal business. If he'd just gone, I don't think he'd have left Kate behind. They were close, and he was always protective of her."

"Then maybe it's time I started asking the questions."

Elena doesn't push. Just gives a slow nod like she knew this moment was coming. "Be careful Hudson. The other moonshiners won't be the only ones who don't take kindly to someone poking around. The McKinleys aren't going to like it either."

"That isn't going to stop me. I can handle the moonshiners, the McKinleys, and the fallout. Tell me what you know... what others don't."

She nods again.

"He used to come in with old books—real obscure stuff, half of it hand-bound. He'd ask questions about shifter lore and old pack territories that even the elders barely remember. Things others don't pay attention to, or pretend not to. I had the feeling he was looking for something specific, not just out of curiosity—like he was following a trail. Connecting dots no one else bothered to see."

"What kind of something?"

She shrugs. "Answers. Secrets. He had that look about him—the kind that doesn't end well around here."

When I returned to the truck, Elena's words continued to loop in my mind like a snare. I'm so wrapped up I nearly overlook the thing I've trained my eyes to catch—a flicker of wrong, the shimmer of a threat, but then I see it—it's hard to miss.

Someone scratched the message into the driver's side door, rough and deliberate.

## THE HOLLOW REMEMBERS.

The letters are jagged, carved down to the metal. Deliberate. Not just a warning—an accusation. A message etched with intent, with rage, maybe even grief. Whoever left it wanted me to feel it like a brand. And I do. It hums through me like a threat waiting to rise, just like it did when the mountain watched from the tree line and the Hollow held its breath. Like the land itself is keeping score, and I just made the list. The Hollow doesn't forget. And neither, apparently, do the ones who walk its shadows.

I stare at it a long time, long enough for the cold to seep into my bones and the sting of the words to sink deep and stay. My reflection warps in the scratched paint, distorted by the message and everything it implies. I take a breath—steady, sharp—and open the door. The hinges creak, the sound swallowed by the morning quiet. I climb in and let the silence sit heavy and thick around me, like fog curling

low over the forest floor. But I don't flinch.

But the wolf inside me is wide awake. And he will not rest until he drags the truth from the soil, until every secret rooted in this hollow is unearthed and exposed—claw by claw, lie by lie.

## CHAPTER 10

KATE

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The cold up here isn't the kind that pricks your skin—it burrows under it. Deep. It curls into your marrow and settles there, like it's laying claim. That clean, sharp air carries the kind of silence you can feel pressing on your bones.

Somewhere behind me, a branch creaks—just one small, dry groan—but it shatters the stillness like a gunshot. The wind doesn't follow. The silence swallows the sound again almost instantly, like the Hollow is pretending it never happened.

The trail up to the old still site is barely visible anymore, more memory than path, overgrown and forgotten by everyone who doesn't share my blood. Everyone except Luke.

Brambles claw at my jeans, and moss has eaten away the edges of the old stones we used to mark the route. The forest tries to erase what was ours—but some roots run too deep to pull free.

Luke knew every ridge and root of these hills. He used to wander out here before dawn, long before the rest of us were even thinking about coffee.

I remember one morning I found him already perched on that same ridge by the still, steam rising off his thermos and sketchbook balanced on one knee. He didn't look up right away—just tapped the spot beside him like he'd been waiting. That's the kind of presence he had out here, like the woods bent around him, made space. Like the Hollow wanted him close.

He said the morning mist held secrets. Said if you were quiet enough, the Hollow would whisper them to you. I thought it was just poetic nonsense back then. Kid stuff.

But now? Now I'm starting to think he was listening to something real.

He used to call it "the hollow within the Hollow." A pocket of silence tucked between ridgelines where the pack's rules never mattered much.

It was where he came to breathe. To think. To hide.

He said the air felt different here—older, heavier, like it remembered things we'd never know. Said it was the one place he could feel his thoughts settle without the constant pull of bloodlines and pack politics. I never understood what he meant until now, standing here with the wind still and the trees watching like sentries. It feels sacred. Haunted. And distinctly his.

I used to sneak up after him when I was little, always trying to keep up with his longer stride, always watching the way he seemed to melt into the woods. He'd ruffle my hair, tell me I was a pain in the ass, then let me sit beside him on the ledge while he sketched symbols into the dirt with a stick. It was quiet there. Sacred in a way even the chapel in town couldn't match.

The air is too still. No birds. No wind. Just the crunch of my boots over the frostbitten ground and the soft rasp of my breath. Each step echoes too loud, like I'm trespassing on something ancient and watching. The trees don't sway. The underbrush doesn't twitch. The entire Hollow thrums with silence, braced for whatever comes next. The weight of the silence settles between my shoulder blades, a pressure I can't ignore, and my wolf stirs uneasily just beneath the skin—alert, listening, tense.

The still is still there—barely. Half-collapsed. Rotting timber and rusted pipe, the copper gone green with age and exposure. The smell hits first—earthy rot and old smoke, ghost traces of mash and ferment lingering in the air like a memory you can't quite place. It's a graveyard for secrets, sure, but it's also a monument to what once was. A place that kept our bellies warm and our family fed when the rest of the world

turned its back.

I step over a shattered barrel, wood blackened and half-buried in a drift of damp leaves. The forest here feels older somehow, thicker—like it's growing over something it doesn't want found. The air changes the moment I duck beneath the roof of the old lean-to, the temperature dropping by degrees, the silence growing deeper, heavier. My breath slows. My instincts sharpen.

And then I see it. At first, it's just a sliver of something wrong—a line too straight in a world made of curves and decay. Not old. Not rotting. Shiny black metal where no black metal should be. Cold. Clean. Out-of-place like a knife laid across a grave.

Wires tucked low along the base of the ridge, almost invisible against the dark mulch and frostbitten undergrowth. A camouflaged lens peeks from beneath a spray of dead fern, its curve too precise to be natural, its presence far too intentional. And behind a tangle of brush, the faintest red blink pulses like a heartbeat—steady, watching, alive with purpose. It's not just surveillance—it's a trap, quiet and patient.

What the hell?

It's the kind of thing you see in movies or nightmares—too clean, too precise, too intentional to be anything but bad news. A spike of ice knifes down my spine, and every instinct screams that I shouldn't be here. That I shouldn't have seen this. But it's too late now. I've seen it. And I can't unsee it.

I crouch low, heart hammering, breath shallow like even that might draw attention. The gear is sleek, compact—suspiciously high end. Matte black casing, no brand markings, tucked with precision like someone who knew exactly what they were doing had installed it. Not something a moonshiner would use. Hell, not something anyone around here could afford unless they were being paid to watch. And whoever's paying? They're not local. This feels government. Or worse—private, well-



funded, and off the books.

I don't touch it. Just memorize. The angle of the lens. The direction it's facing. The way it's positioned to capture anyone coming in or out of the glade. It's too professional. Too deliberate. Military-grade? Maybe. Or federal? My gut twists.

"Luke," I whisper. "What the hell were you into?"

And just like that, I'm back there. Two winters ago. The attic smelled like cedar and dust, the floorboards groaning beneath every step Luke took. He was pacing like a caged thing, wild-eyed and sharp-tongued, his voice cracking under the weight of things he didn't know how to say. He ran his hands through his hair, his hands trembling; this childhood habit only appeared when he was truly rattled. The kind of fear in his eyes that night wasn't about getting caught—it was about being hunted.

"They're watching," he said, shoving the old trapdoor closed with more force than necessary. "Not just us. Not just the pack. Everybody."

"Luke—"

"No. Don't roll your eyes. I'm serious. I found a trail cam a mile out from the eastern ridge. And not one of ours. This one's smart. Buried into the bark. Wired into a relay. I don't know how long it's been there."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying this isn't about moonshine. Not anymore."

He didn't stay much longer after that. He stopped coming to Sunday dinner. Slipped away from town meetings. Vanished from poker night at the back of the store, where he always used to clean up. He became a ghost long before he disappeared for good.

And I never saw him pace like that again. Because one day he was just... gone. No note. No trace. Just silence and space where my brother used to be.

I remember the way he looked at me that last morning, eyes rimmed red from lack of sleep, like he hadn't rested in days and couldn't afford to. He hugged me longer than usual, tighter, like he knew it might be the last time. His voice was low when he said it, like someone might be listening even inside our own kitchen—said something about keeping the store running, keeping it out of certain hands. At the time, I thought he meant Waylon, the way we all did when something went sideways. But now? Now I'm not so sure. There was fear in his eyes that morning. And something else—resolve. Like he'd already decided to vanish.

I rise slowly, scanning the ridgeline. No one's there. But the back of my neck itches like I'm not alone. The kind of itch that comes from being watched—closely, silently, like a breath you can't hear until it's too close to dodge. Every instinct I have is on high alert, my wolf pacing behind my ribs.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

I wrap my fingers around the strap of my satchel and retrace my steps, faster now. Each snap of a twig underfoot sounds like a warning. My boots slip once on a patch of black ice, and I catch myself hard against the trunk of a pine. Bark scrapes my palm. I curse under my breath and push off, refusing to look back. Whatever—or whoever—is behind me can't know I'm rattled. Not yet.

Luke wasn't paranoid. He wasn't chasing shadows or spinning stories like I used to think. Something real, something big enough to make even a stubborn bastard like him walk away from everything he loved, had captured his attention. He was right. Dead-on right.

And maybe he wasn't just trying to disappear. Maybe he was trying to protect us... me. Shielding me from whatever he'd seen, whatever he'd gotten tangled in. Leaving behind the clues he could without drawing attention, trusting I'd be smart enough to find them and strong enough to follow the trail. That's the kind of brother he was—reckless, secretive, infuriating—but loyal. Always loyal.

There's a rustle to my left—just enough to make my wolf stir. I freeze mid-step, breath caught in my throat, eyes scanning the dense underbrush that crowds the edges of the trail. Nothing moves. No sound follows. But the hair on my arms is already standing up, my skin prickling with the unmistakable awareness of being watched. Not imagined. Not paranoia. Something—or someone—is out there. And it's close.

I don't run. Not yet. Running triggers pursuit—and I don't want to look like prey. But I do move quicker, weaving through the trees with more urgency now, every footfall calculated, quiet, deliberate. I count each step like a heartbeat, marking the distance with the rhythm of survival.

The forest feels like it's narrowing behind me, shadows folding inward. Every snap of a twig might be something following.

My breath comes fast now, misting in the cold air, as I break the tree line and finally spot the gravel edge of the fire road where I left my truck up ahead. Relief doesn't come, not really. But I let it in just enough to keep moving.

By the time I make it to the road, my legs are burning and my lungs hurt, the chill biting deeper with every breath, but I don't stop. Not for anything. My fingers fumble for the keys before I've even reached the door, nerves jangling, pulse a roar in my ears. I throw myself into the cab and slam the door shut, locking it with a punch of the button and a flick of my eyes to the mirrors. Nothing. Just trees.

But I'm not fooled. That quiet isn't empty—it's listening. Watching. And every instinct in me is screaming that this isn't over. That it never was.

I sit for a long second, breath fogging the windshield in frantic bursts, hands trembling against the steering wheel like they might let go of the fear clamped around my ribs. The engine turns over with a growl, but I don't put it into gear. Not yet. Not until I've caught my breath enough to make sure I'm not driving blind—because whatever that was back there, it's not finished with me. Not even close.

I glance at the glove box, where I keep a small pistol tucked inside a false bottom—a last resort, a line in the sand. I'd put it there after Hank chased off a drifter with grabby hands and wandering eyes last spring, when I realized even in a town like Wild Hollow, not every threat comes with claws or fur. I haven't needed it since. But the weight of its possibility has never felt heavier than it does now.

Because now, I feel it. That line between fear and knowing—the cold certainty that whatever this is, it's already inside the lines we drew to keep the world out. Just like Luke said it would be. Just like he warned me, pacing that attic like a man being

hunted, eyes wild with truths no one else wanted to hear. Whatever Luke was running from, it's not just close. It's here. And it knows I found it.

My phone buzzes on the seat beside me. Unknown number. One word...

RUN.

My heart skips a beat—suspended for one breathless second—before slamming into overdrive, pounding like it's trying to break free of my chest. Adrenaline surges fast and fierce, flooding my limbs with heat, and every nerve in my body sparks awake as if I've been plugged into a live wire.

The Hollow isn't just remembering... it remembers. This isn't just a message. It's a pattern. A signal. And if they were watching him... they're watching me now, too.

And it's getting bolder. Not content to linger in shadows or whisper threats in the dark. Now, it's making moves—deliberate, strategic. Whatever this game is, I'm in it. And the next move might already be coming for me.

## CHAPTER 11

### HUDSON

The call comes in at 6:17 a.m.

Blocked number. Garbled voice, thick with static and distortion software. Could be local. Could be four states over. And that's what makes it worse—nothing to trace, nothing to pin down. No scent. No slip. Not even a damn accent I can anchor to. Just static and vagueness and the sense I'm being led by a ghost. I hate this kind of game. No follow-up. No leverage. It's like someone dangling a thread above a fire and daring me to grab it before it burns away. And it's working—because I'm already

moving.

“Cabin. Bearclaw Ridge. West side. He was there.”

Then nothing... just dead air.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm tearing up the fire road, frost crunching beneath my truck's tires, steam rising from the hood in the frosty morning light. The woods are gray and brittle, the kind of quiet that makes your skin crawl. Even the birds are silent—no crows, no songbirds, not even the rustle of wings. It's the kind of unnatural stillness that makes your instincts flare, that prickles against the back of your neck like you're being watched. Like something's gone still, just waiting for you to step wrong. I don't need more intel. I don't need a second opinion. My gut's already convinced—this isn't some prank or wild goose chase.

This is bait. Or it's proof Luke is alive. Either way, I'm not leaving without answers.

And damn if it doesn't rankle me that I don't have more to go on. No license plate. No footprint. No residual heat signature, no traceable signal from the call. Every angle I'd normally chase is a dead end—cleaned, erased. Like they knew exactly what I'd look for and scrubbed it before I could blink. Someone is manipulating me with misleading clues, frustrating me because I was trained to avoid this.

It's a hell of a thing, being out-hunted in your own territory. It hits like a bruise to the pride—deep and dull and impossible to ignore. My training taught me to see patterns in chaos, to track enemies through bombed-out terrain halfway across the world, and now I'm stumbling through my own mountains as if I've forgotten how to hunt. That frustration curdles into something sharper—humiliation, maybe. A flash of failure from a mission I try not to think about—one where the trail went cold and people paid the price. I swore I'd never let that happen again.

Bearclaw Ridge is the kind of place you only end up if you're running from something—or hiding something you never want found. Abandoned hunting leases, rusted traps, the bones of moonshine cabins long since swallowed by moss and shadow. Even the locals keep their distance. Which makes it damn near perfect for anyone looking to go invisible. No cell reception. No traffic. No chance of a random hiker stumbling in.

I know every inch of this ridge and it still unsettles me—because even with all that familiarity, the place feels like it's trying to swallow anything that doesn't belong. And today, I don't belong. I'm not hunting. I'm searching.

And this place? It's not giving up its secrets easily. Every broken branch could be two days old or ten. Every footprint, if there were any, has long since faded into damp mulch and rot. It's like chasing a ghost through a graveyard. And that burns. Because I've chased ghosts before—and they almost always leave bodies behind.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

The cabin isn't much more than rot and old bones now—its porch collapsed in a sag of splintered wood, sagging like the ribs of a long-dead beast. One busted window gapes open, the glass jagged and dust-filmed, as if the house itself is squinting at the world with suspicion. Ivy coils up the siding in thick, choking ropes, wrapping around the frame like it's trying to drag the whole damn structure back into the dirt. The chimney leans, cracked down the middle like a snapped spine. Moss carpets the roof, and black mold blooms along the lower boards.

But it's the air that really gets me. Too sharp. Too still. As if every tree and shadow is watching, waiting for the misstep. The kind of silence that doesn't just fall—it presses. Watching. Weighing. Daring you to step closer.

I kill the engine, step out, and let the silence wrap around me. Then I catch it—a distinctive scent that is definitely male, definitely wolf, and vaguely familiar. Not one of my pack and not one I've smelled in a long, long time.

Luke.

And just like that, I'm hit with a memory so clear it slams through me like a live round.

We were sitting on the back porch of the McKinley place—summer night, poker chips clacking on the table, a jar of shine between us. Luke leaned back in his chair, cocky grin plastered across his face.

"One day you're gonna end up with my kid sister, you know that?"



I nearly choked on the sip I'd just taken. "Not a chance in hell."

He just laughed. "Yeah, keep telling yourself that, Rawlings. But I see the way you look at her. Like she's the only thing keeping the stars up in the damn sky."

My jaw clenched so hard my molars ached. I'd looked away, pretending to focus on reshuffling the deck, but my pulse was hammering in my throat. Just the idea of Kate—off-limits, too bright for someone like me—stirred something I didn't have a name for yet. Something dangerous. I remembered the heat of it then, how quickly I buried it under a scoff and a swig of shine.

I'd shut him down, told him he was drunk, delusional, and dead wrong.

But he wasn't.

And now, years later, standing here in the woods with Luke's scent still lingering in the air like a challenge, I wonder if he knew back then—if he felt it before I did. Before I ever let myself want what I shouldn't have.

I freeze mid-step, my breath catching as if someone punched me in the chest. The scent's faint but distinct—buried under layers of mold and pine, but it cuts through the cold like a brand to the senses. Still his. The kind of scent that shouldn't be here, not anymore. It's earthy and sharp, with that odd metallic undertone I remember from nights long past—back when Luke still showed up at poker games and made sure Kate got home safe.

A thousand details flood in at once: the way his scent always carried a trace of cedar smoke, the way his presence filled a room without noise. And now, all of that wrapped in decay, like the memory of him has been decomposing right alongside this damn cabin. I crouch, trying to isolate the direction, heartbeat thudding loud enough to drown out the trees. My wolf presses forward, ears straining, nose working

overtime. It's weak, scattered—but it's real. And it makes the hair rise along my neck. Luke McKinley has been here. Recently.

Which begs the question: why the hell hasn't he come home?

I recognize it because it's the same scent I picked up inside McKinley's Mercantile. Hidden in the corners of the place, the faint scent was easy to miss unless you were trained to find it. I thought it was old—a ghost scent, more memory than presence. Something clinging to the wooden shelves, the faded floorboards, maybe even the quilts Kate keeps stacked by the window. Something left behind by someone the building hadn't stopped waiting for. But even then, it felt too strong. Too intact. I told myself it meant nothing because believing otherwise opened doors I wasn't ready to walk through. Believing otherwise opened doors to pain, truth, and the idea that the past might not be as buried as we pretended. But it does mean something. It means he was close. Too close.

He was here, and it wasn't all that long ago. The scent had weight—recent enough that the pine needles hadn't reclaimed it, recent enough that my wolf hadn't dismissed it as imagination. There was a clarity to it, like the ghost of him had brushed past me, just out of reach. It makes the air feel thinner, makes the silence ring louder. Whoever Luke was with, they didn't linger. But he was here. And for a heartbeat, that means he's not just a rumor or a regret. He's real. Out there. Close.

I track it, slow and low, through frost-laced brush and over crumbling stone. The scent is a whisper, faint and elusive, threading between tree trunks and vanishing beneath patches of rotting leaves. I have to stop often, crouch low, recalibrate my direction as the trail loops and fades. Whoever Luke was with—or running from—knew what they were doing. They didn't just leave. They erased their path. Disrupted the flow. Turned the forest itself into camouflage.

But the ground still tells a story—it always does. Every step is a question—what

snapped this branch, what moved that stone? I move slowly, reading the forest like a map scrawled in damage and instinct. I've tracked insurgents through the desert, hunted shadows across bombed-out villages. I know what silence looks like when it's forced. This—this is practiced. Professional. The kind of trail designed to disappear the moment you find it.

Then, just behind a collapsed pine trunk, the trail breaks.

Gone.

The scent ends in an instant—cut clean, replaced by a chemical haze so sharp my wolf recoils like he's taken a blow to the face. I hiss a breath through my teeth. It's chemical masking—strong, high-grade stuff.

Not the kind you pick up at a supply store. Not the kind some local yokel moonshiner would think to use. This is the same kind of scent suppressor we used in tactical ops overseas, built to confuse trained wolves, dogs, drones—anything that hunts by air and instinct. It doesn't just blur a trail. It annihilates it. Rips the thread right out of the forest's weave.

I've seen this before—covert ops, black sites, and teams that never officially existed. Whoever did this didn't just want to cover their tracks. They wanted to make sure no one even knew a trail had ever been there.

That means Luke didn't just stumble into something—he was in it, deep. Either he got in over his head with people who move like shadows and clean their trails with military precision, or he's running scared, cutting ties so clean he vanished right out of his own life. That scent didn't linger by accident. It was a flare, faint and fading, as if he left it on purpose but couldn't stick around. And someone else came behind him to wipe it out. Deliberate. Efficient. Like he mattered enough to erase. Whoever they were, they wanted to make damn sure he stayed missing.

And that's the part that rattles me. This isn't desperate. It's not improvised. It's surgical. Intentional. The kind of operation that leaves no trace and expects no glory. Whoever Luke's gotten tangled up with doesn't make mistakes—they eliminate variables. Quietly. Thoroughly. They plan for contingencies, clean up loose ends, and scrub their footprints from the earth before the dirt even settles. This is ghost-level precision.

And if Luke's caught in the middle of that kind of silence, then he's either in deeper than I thought—or he's already too far gone to claw his way back out alone.

And if he's running? He's not just scared—he's being hunted.

The wind changes direction, but there's nothing else to smell. No food wrappers, no boot prints, no grease on the hinges, no trace of warmth left behind. Just the sharp tang of cold metal and mildew, the kind of rot that clings to old bones and forgotten places. Even the animals have stayed clear—no scat, no nests, not a single fresh track. It's too clean, too abandoned in a way that doesn't happen naturally. The space has been stripped of life and memory. The kind of empty that isn't just absence—it's intentional. And it leaves a weight behind, pressing into my chest like the forest itself is warning me to leave well enough alone.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:22 am*

I take photos of the site—wide shots of the exterior, close-ups of the door frame, the moss patterns, the disturbed soil near the back. Anything that might tell a story I can't yet see. I drop a GPS pin and scribble field notes into my phone like I'm back on assignment in hostile territory. Every detail might matter later. The angle of decay. The weather pattern. The absence of wildlife. I scan the perimeter one last time. This isn't just a cabin anymore—it's a question with no answer.

A crime scene without a body, and I don't know if I'm the investigator... or next on the list. A warning nailed into the bones of the mountain.

When I climb back into my truck, my radio crackles.

"Sheriff? You there?"

"Go," I answer, flipping the switch.

"It's Wade Morris," my deputy says. "We've got a situation at the compound."

My stomach knots.

"What kind of situation?"

A beat of hesitation. "The elders from your pack summoned Kate McKinley, and they weren't about to take no for an answer."

No. Hell no.

“Said it was urgent. They told me not to contact you.”

The steering wheel creaks under my grip. “I’m on my way.”

## CHAPTER 12

KATE

The sun’s barely cleared the ridge when Elder Shaw walks into my store like he owns the damn place—shoulders back, coat sharp, and voice smoother than a snake oil salesman. I was restocking the front window with a new shipment of inventory when he cleared his throat behind me.

"Miss McKinley," he says, tone calm but coated in authority. "The elders would like a word."

I straighten slowly, keeping my hands steady even as my pulse kicks up. "And if I say no?"

He gives me a smile that doesn’t quite meet his eyes. "That wouldn't be wise."

My wolf stirs beneath my skin, bristling at the command. I force a smile. "Sounds more like a summons than a request."

"It is what it needs to be," he says simply. "We expect you within the hour."

It’s a command dressed in civility, but it hits like a shot fired across a bow. My spine straightens a little more. I give nothing away, but inside, I file the tone for what it is—pressure. Thinly veiled and deliberately timed.

And just like that, I know—this will not be a conversation. It's going to be an

interrogation, if not an inquisition. It sure as hell isn't an invitation for tea and cookies.

I don't budge. I will not be intimidated in my own store. "I've got morning orders to unpack, invoices to reconcile, and I need to call someone to cover the shop. I'll be with you shortly."

Shaw's mouth tightens. "Miss McKinley, this is not a matter for delay."

I lift an eyebrow. "And I'm not leaving my store unlocked and unstaffed. If the Rawlings' pack elders want to talk with no notice, you'll get me as soon as I can get there. If that's a problem for you, we can wait and discuss it with Hudson.."

He blanches. Ah, so Hudson doesn't know about this. Good to know. Shaw doesn't like my response and the fact that I'm not cowed by him. I see it in the clench of his jaw and the flick of his eyes to the store around us like it's beneath him. But he gives a stiff nod.

"We'll expect you within twenty minutes."

"You'll get me when you get me. I'm sure even you can understand and appreciate someone who looks after her business. So it'll be more like thirty to forty-five, but easily within the hour... if you leave now," I say sweetly.

And just like that, I bought myself the time to show up on my terms—even if it means the rest of the day won't be mine to control.

The council chamber of the Rawlings compound smells like polished wood, dominance, and judgment. It's built like a courtroom and decorated like a hunting lodge—dark walls, heavy chairs, the kind of lighting that casts long shadows across faces you're supposed to respect. Or fear.

I do neither.

Eddard Rawlings sits at the head of the table like he's presiding over a royal inquisition. The seat beside him is empty—Hudson's not here yet. A flicker of disappointment tightens my throat, quick and sharp. I shove it down, lock it behind the mask I brought with me. I didn't need him to fight this battle—but I'd be lying if I said I didn't want him at my back when the knives came out. And that fact irritates me more than I want to admit. I hate I walked into this alone. Even more, I hate that part of me expected him to be at my side already.

"Miss McKinley," Eddard begins, folding his hands. "We appreciate your willingness to come."

Right. Like I had a choice.

"Let's skip the part where we pretend this is a friendly chat," I say, lifting my chin. My palms are sweating, but I keep my voice cool, firm. I meet each of their eyes, one by one. "You didn't call me up here for tea."

Eddard doesn't blink. "You've been asking questions. Stirring up old rumors. Trespassing in places better left forgotten."

"I was making deliveries. If I crossed a boundary or two, it wasn't intentional," I snap. "I'm not the one laying traps in the old woods or sending out thugs to try to intimidate people just going about their lives. Tell me, did Hudson know about that before or after the fact?"



The color drains out of all three men's faces. Score one for the red she-wolf. There's a twitch at the corner of Eddard's mouth. Not a smile—more like someone trying to hold his temper in place.

“You found surveillance gear,” one of the other elders says smoothly. “And you reported it to no one. That's a concern.”

I laugh, sharp and without humor. “You mean I didn't come running to a council that doesn't govern me or mine? Shocking. Besides, if I was trespassing, that would mean I was on territory you consider Rawlings. And as I realized it was your land, naturally, I assumed you already knew everything happening in it.”

“Your family,” Shaw continues, “has always walked the edge of what is right and wrong. The McKinleys have never made things easy for anyone in Wild Hollow and especially the members of this pack...”

"Not in my job description," I retort.

Eddard blushes angrily. "Your brother was known to consort with outlanders, ask dangerous questions..."

"Consort? Dangerous questions? Sounds to me like you've got a whole conspiracy theory going here." I raise my hand to wave off their objections. "But if by 'dangerous questions,' you mean smart questions—questions that made you uncomfortable because they poked holes in your carefully sanitized stories, I'm okay with that."

Hudson storms through the compound's front doors like a damn thunderhead.

I stand in the center of the room, arms crossed, legs braced wide, face carved from fury. I know exactly how I look—like a goddess of war in flannel and tight jeans—and I'm not giving any of them a single inch.

He scans the room. “You summoned her behind my back?” He bellows accusingly.

“She’s a potential threat,” Eddard says coolly. “Given her family history and who her brother was...”

“She’s mine,” growls Hudson.

The words drop like an earthquake, and the room goes still. I blink once, lips parting. There’s heat in my chest now—but it’s not anger. It’s something rawer. Something that scrapes at my ribs and makes my breath catch.

“She’s not marked,” Eddard says, smugly.

“She will be.” Hudson snaps. “You want to question someone, question me. You don’t lay a finger on her without coming through me first. You want to push someone, old wolf? Try me. I am alpha, and you will obey me.”

"You would think to banish me?" asks Eddard.

"No. I'd rip your throat out and mark my mate in the pool of your blood."

Well, that was pretty graphic, and I hate to admit how aroused his protective and brutal instincts make me.

Instead of telling him that, I pin him with a look. “You’re really going there?”

“Kate,” Hudson says, trying to rein in his temper and placate me.

I whip around, eyes blazing. “What? I’m not sure how, but I’m pretty damn sure this is more about you than about me and Luke. You dragged me into this. You can bloody well get me out of it.”

“I didn’t drag you anywhere,” he says, voice low, rough. “I’ve been trying to protect you.”

I stare at him. “Then do something because that asshole summoned me up here behind your back and he's been taking shots ever since I arrived.”

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Eddard's voice cuts in, deceptively calm. "We're only trying to determine if Kate McKinley's involvement with you or her interference in things that don't concern her compromises the safety of this pack."

"My pack, Eddard. Mine, unless, of course, you'd like to challenge me for leadership."

"No one wants to challenge you, Hudson," says one of the other elders, clearly trying to make peace.

"You know," I say, "I always thought this pack was so level-headed. I thought you'd lost your primal edge. Guess I was wrong."

"Not helping, Kate," rumbles Hudson.

"Not trying to," I retort. "We McKinleys are known for stirring up trouble. I'm just trying to uphold the family tradition."

Hudson growls, then searches my face and begins to chuckle. "You're enjoying yourself."

I shrug. "For what it's worth, so much more so since you arrived."

He shakes his head. "In case you missed it, gentlemen, this little tête-à-tête is over and will not be repeated. You will apologize to my mate and from this time forward will treat her with the respect she is due."

There is silence until Hudson growls low in his throat. It's a sexy sound that really ticks off all my boxes.

"Now, gentlemen."

Eddard studies him for a long moment. Then nods. "As you say, Alpha."

The three elders, including good ole Eddard, apologize and shuffle their way out.

Once they leave, he turns to me. "Want to explain why I wasn't the first phone call you made after you were summoned?"

"If it makes you feel better, the only phone call I made was Elena to ask her if she could cover my store." I glance at my watch. "I didn't think it would take them long to growl their threats, but I need to get back to town. Elena has her bookstore to run..."

As I move to walk past him, Hudson reaches out and grabs my upper arm. "Kate, wait."

"I'm busy."

He steps closer. "I'm only saying what I should've said days ago... what we both know."

"Damn right you should've." I don't let up. "At the very least, you should have said it to me first. But if you think you can just claim me like I'm a slice of pie at the diner..."

"You're not a slice of pie," he growls low. "You're the fire I can't put out. The instinct I can't override. You belong to yourself, to this pack, and to me. If you give

me the word, I'll burn down the world and anyone that tries to touch you. I meant what I said to Eddard."

"I know. Is it weird that I found it oddly arousing?"

Hudson chuckles. "Don't worry about the store. I had one of my people lock up for you. I wasn't sure what I was going to find when I got here."

"Did you expect to find me cowering?"

"Hardly," Hudson snorts. "I was just relieved I wasn't walking into a bloodbath of your creation."

"Again, oddly sexy."

Hudson's smiling even though he is radiating tension and protectiveness like a banked fire wrapped in skin. He doesn't say a word—just puts a hand on the small of my back and guides me out of the room.

We don't stop until we're outside, where the mountain air cuts sharp through the silence. The sun is much higher in the sky than I thought it would be, brushing everything in gold.

I exhale. "So... that was fun."

He doesn't smile. "They crossed a line."

"You think?"

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He runs a hand through his hair. “I walked in and saw you handling it. Holding your own. I didn’t want to step on that—not when you were already burning the room down. But if I’d gotten there a minute earlier, I might’ve ripped Eddard’s throat out on principle.”

I cross my arms. “And instead, I felt like I was standing trial for existing.”

Hudson steps closer. “You held your ground.”

“Damn right I did.”

There’s a beat. Then he says, “Come for a run with me.”

I blink. “What?”

“Run with me. Shift. Clear your head.”

I hesitate. We’ve never run together before, not like this. But the offer is sincere. And something inside me is aching—tight and restless, like my wolf wants out.

So I nod.

We head to the changing lodge tucked behind the compound—an old cedar-sided cabin built for moments like this. No one says a word as we step inside and undress in separate curtained corners, the space filled with the scent of pine, aged wood, and anticipation.

I fold my clothes carefully, feeling the hum of my wolf just beneath the surface, already itching to run. When I step outside, he's already there.

Hudson's wolf is massive. Dark. Powerful. His paws crunch softly over fallen leaves, each step deliberate, weighty. The scent of pine and damp earth clings to him, threaded with something uniquely his—warm musk and wild energy, grounding and magnetic all at once. He stands at the tree line, golden light catching in his coat, eyes locked on me. I nod once, letting the shift come—and everything changes.

We run.

We chase nothing and everything. The wind. The silence. The hunger between us. Our wolves streak through the underbrush like shadows made of muscle and intent, slipping between trees, kicking up pine needles and frost. I leap over a moss-slicked boulder and land beside him, our flanks brushing. He growls, playful but edged.

Our wolves brush and circle, not just playful—testing. The snaps of our jaws are near-silent flirtations. He darts left, and I follow, nipping his flank before veering off in a taunting curve. He catches up, pacing me stride for stride. It's not just movement. It's communication. Challenge. Trust.

His coat brushes mine again, this time staying close. I feel his energy ripple through my skin, an unspoken question in the cadence of his steps. And I match it, letting my wolf lean into his orbit, giving him my answer. We run not as two creatures, but one rhythm—wild, primal, bonded even before the bite.

At some point, we slow. Our bodies stay close.

We shift back at the base of an old ridge, breath hitching as bones morph and fur recedes. It's always a shock, that return to skin and silence. Our bodies steam in the cool air, slick with sweat and mist. A wooden bench sits under a nearby pine—one of



the supply spots the pack keeps stocked. A folded blanket. A clean set of clothes. Thoughtful... or maybe planned.

I grab the blanket and drape it around my shoulders, tossing Hudson a towel from the stash. He doesn't take his eyes off me, not once. He's still on one knee, breathing like a man who's run too far and found something worth collapsing for.

The woods are thick with shadows now, and he's looking at me like I'm the only thing keeping him tethered.

My breath hitches. "What happens now?"

Hudson steps in, slowly, deliberately. His voice is rough. "Now I give you one last chance to walk away."

I tilt my chin up. "I'm not going anywhere."

Something clicks into place as I say it—not defiance, not pride. Just clarity. I've spent so long bracing for fallout, expecting abandonment. But right now, with his eyes locked on mine and every muscle in my body humming like it's waiting for a storm, I know exactly what I want. And I'm done pretending otherwise.

The moment snaps.

His mouth crushes against mine—hot, hungry, unrelenting. I meet him with teeth and tongue, pulling him closer, clawing at his back as he presses me into the earth. Every inch of him is all muscle and command.

My teeth brush against his lower lip; my breath fans sharp against his skin.

"Show me this is more than a primal urge," I murmur.

“If we cross this line, there’s no undoing it. To claim and mark you as my mate is to change everything.”

“I know,” I whisper.

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A predatory grin spreads across his face, baring teeth in a slow, fierce arc, as if something ancient stirs just beneath his skin.

Our bodies collide, the heat between us erupting into raw, urgent need.

A gnawing, unquenchable hunger fuels every touch and kiss. Any coverings we have fly off in a frenzy, discarded like leaves ripped from branches in a gale. With a low growl, Hudson spins me around and presses me back onto the bench, the wood cool beneath my spine. His palms grip my thighs as he spreads me open beneath him, his body towering, taut with barely restrained need. I reach for him, breath catching, and he comes down over me—mouth claiming mine, weight pressing me into the grain of the wood until I feel like a part of it.

One hand braces beside my head, the other sliding under my knee to hitch my leg around his waist. I arch up, hungry for the heat of him, my body already slick and aching. And then I ride his hardness, a low moan vibrating through my core as our rhythm ignites into something primal and consuming.

His hands clamp around my thighs with fierce authority, guiding me up against him, his dominance making my breath hitch. I ache for that raw edge, that wild intensity.

“Still want proof?” he growls, voice rough as gravel.

“I want you,” I gasp, words soaked in longing.

He fills me in one powerful thrust and I cry out, fingers digging into his shoulders, nails scoring soft crescents into his flesh—secret marks of our union. Our rhythm

builds into a storm: each thrust branding me deeper, each movement a silent vow echoing through my bones. Sweat slicks our skin as we move in savage harmony, driven by pure, primeval urgency.

He trails kisses up my throat, across my collarbone, over my breasts, teeth skimming that delicious line between pleasure and pain. I clamp my jaws around his neck and he growls—a deep, rumbling purr vibrating in my chest.

“Mine,” he declares, voice unyielding.

“Prove it,” I challenge, fierce.

As I shatter into my climax, Hudson sinks his fangs into the curve of my neck, a savage bite that seals us together. His scent mingles with mine, an indelible mark of our bond. I cry out, my muscles clamping around him, a wave of white-hot sensation tearing through me until the world narrows to our fierce connection. The air around us hums with something wild—this is more than pleasure; it’s transformation.

Pleasure and pain crash through me in a single, shattering wave. I arch beneath him, my wolf howling in triumph, the bond flaring to life between us—bright, primal, permanent. His scent floods my senses. My blood sings. My body answers without hesitation, legs locking around his hips as I pull him deeper.

It’s not gentle. It’s not slow.

I shriek, every muscle clamping around him as ecstasy detonates inside me—nerves aflame, senses roiled by a white-hot tide. My vision blurs; each ragged breath feels stolen as the world narrows to our union. The air hums, electric and dense, alive with something primal. This is more than pleasure—it’s transformation, a crackling surge that leaves me clinging for fear of drifting away.

My legs give way, and I fold against him—trembling, frayed at the edges of feeling. My head lolls to one side as the last echoes of euphoria dissolve into a warm, foggy haze. Hudson catches me effortlessly, one arm securing my back, the other beneath my thighs, lifting me close. Skin gleams with sweat; a shallow gasp escapes me as mind and body fall out of sync. I murmur a few inaudible words, then stillness claims me—breath slowing, form slack. Not broken, not beaten—simply undone. Wholly, irrevocably his. He holds me like a treasure, jaw set, pulse drumming beneath my ear. I slip into the darkness in his arms, utterly claimed, forever changed.

It's everything we've been holding back.

He marks me again with his mouth everywhere—my collarbone, my ribs, the dip of my waist. Worship and possession tangled in every stroke. My name comes out of his mouth like a prayer and a promise all at once.

And when we finally still, tangled in each other beneath the stars, the silence isn't empty.

Somewhere in the woods behind us, a howl splits the night.

## CHAPTER 13

### HUDSON

The woods are quiet again, but not empty.

Kate's curled against me, her skin still warm from our mating and the claiming bite, her breath even but shallow.

I can still smell her pleasure in the air, her satisfaction clinging to my skin like a second scent. The bond between us is new, raw, electric—like lightning braided into

my spine. I've never felt so grounded and unmoored at the same time.

Not that I'd want to. The way she fits against me, soft where I'm hard, fire where I'm steel—it's more than comfort. It's right. Like a storm destined to break against the mountain. And as much as my instincts bristle at being still for too long, I could lie here another hour just listening to the rhythm of her breathing and pretending the world beyond the trees doesn't exist.

I let her rest as long as I can stand it, but the stillness is starting to itch. My wolf wants to move—not from moonlight or instinct, but from purpose. We need to go. Not because these woods are unsafe. But because what we are can't stay in the shadows anymore. Not from the pack. Not from the Hollow. Not from ourselves.

"Time to go, sweetheart," I murmur against her temple. Her eyes flutter open, dazed but sharp beneath the haze. She nods.

We shift again, fast and clean. The forest doesn't fight us. It welcomes us now. There's something different in the way the wind moves through the trees, like even the land recognizes the bond forged between us. Every leaf underfoot, every scent in the air—it all feels sharper. More vivid.

For the first time since I took the mantle of Alpha, the world doesn't just feel like something I protect. It feels like something that finally belongs to me. To us. One wolf gray with tawny points, my coat catching glints of bronze in the low light. And one wolf whose fur was once as golden red as fire, whose coat has become silvered with reddish streaks, bold and unmistakable.

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When we reach the outer buildings, we head for the pack's designated changing shelter, nestled in a grove by the training field. It's a simple wood structure with benches and hooks, spare clothes stored in chests marked by size. It smells of cedar and shifter musk and faint traces of detergent—functional, familiar.

We slip inside and shift back to human. There's no pain, no bones snapping, just that ripple of power, color and storm, the roar of thunder between worlds. As my feet hit the worn boards, I look over to Kate, breath catching.

Her eyes search mine, clear and steady now. "Are you sure about this?"

I hesitate—not in answer, but in the weight of the moment. There's no putting the genie back in the bottle after this. No undoing a public claim. Not without blood.

"They need to know who you are to me," I say, lifting her hand to my mouth and kissing her knuckles. "And they need to understand what that means. For you. For the pack. For anyone stupid enough to challenge it."

She nods once, but I don't move right away. I reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. Her cheek tilts into my hand, and her eyes search mine with that same clever heat I've come to crave. "You're not walking in there as a tagalong," I say. "You're walking in as mine. But more than that—you're walking in as you. And that scares the hell out of them."

Her mouth curves, wry and fierce. "Good. Let them sweat."

My lips twitch at her fire—sharp, fearless, completely hers. I shouldn't be surprised

anymore, but every time she counters my fury with her own, it hits me square in the chest. I didn't just choose a mate—I found my equal.

Only then do I open the door and lead her inside.

The main hall's full—every seat taken. Wolves lining the walls, silent but restless. Eddard's there, flanked by two of the elders. He doesn't speak. Not yet. Good.

I step forward, keeping Kate at my side. Not behind me. Beside me.

"Listen up," I say. No mic. No podium. Just voice, steel, and the echo of authority that runs deeper than bloodlines.

Every eye snaps to me.

"Kate McKinley is my mate. She carries my mark."

A ripple goes through the room—shock, tension, and something darker.

"From this moment forward," I continue, "she's not a guest. Not a stranger. She is your alpha's mate. She is mistress of the Rawlings pack."

Someone snorts from the back. I don't have to look to know who. Karl. One of the old guard. Loyal to Eddard.

"A McKinley? You expect us to just roll over and let her..."

I'm across the room before he finishes, hand wrapped around his throat, slamming him against the wall hard enough to rattle the windows.

"I expect nothing," I growl, low and lethal. "I command it."



He flashes his teeth in warning. I bare mine in response.

"Challenge me," I offer, voice like ice. "Right here. Right now."

Silence.

He looks away first.

I drop him.

"Anyone else have doubts?" I scan the room, eyes sharp. "Anyone else want to test how far I'll go to protect what's mine?"

No one answers.

But it's not unity I feel in the room—it's restraint. Barely. I see the stiffness in shoulders, the clenched jaws, the subtle scowls flickering between pack mates who grew up hearing McKinleys were barely above rogues. There are old wounds in this room. Old alliances. And not all of them include me.

Some of these wolves would rather tear the pack in half than see a red wolf mate with their alpha. Too bad. Too late.

And that means this declaration isn't the end of the fight... it's just the beginning.

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"Good," I say. I reach for Kate and pull her into the crook of my arm. "Because this isn't a debate. This is your alpha making a declaration. If you can't live with that, you know where the road out of the hollow starts."

There's a long beat. Some glance down, others away. I catch the attention of everyone who doesn't meet my eyes. I memorize them.

More silence.

"Respect her," I finish. "Because the next time someone doesn't, I won't be so polite."

Kate moves closer, calm but fierce. "Just for the record," she murmurs, "that was hot as hell."

I huff a laugh. "Glad you think so."

But I don't smile long. Because out of the corner of my eye, I catch it—a face halfway in shadow, posture too relaxed, like he's already thinking two moves ahead. It isn't fury or submission I see there.

It's a calculation. Cold. Clean. Patient.

It's calculating.

And I know that look. I've seen it overseas—in sand-swept outposts and smoky alleyways where betrayal lingered like smog. That face isn't angry we broke

tradition. He's measuring how to use it. How to turn it.

And that? That means we've got more than loyalty problems.

We've got at least one traitor, maybe more—now that I know, it's only a matter of time before I smoke them out.

We don't linger in the hall. After the declaration, with the room's tension so thick you could cut it with a knife, I lead Kate out the side door into the cool morning air.

She doesn't speak at first. Neither do I. The silence between us isn't awkward—it's weighty. Solid. Earned.

Finally, when we're far enough from prying ears, she exhales. "Well. That was subtle."

I turn toward her, eyebrows raised. "Did you want subtle?"

She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "No. Just... a heads-up might've been nice."

I step closer and place my hands on her hips. "You handled them better than half the wolves in that room. They'll either come around, or they'll get out of the way."

Kate leans into me, resting her forehead against my chest. "They're going to push back. You know that."

"Let them."

She glances up at me. "And what if they push you?"

"Then I push harder."

Her breath catches like she wants to say more, maybe even argue—but instead, she nods. That trust between us? It's still new. But it's real.

I wrap her in my arms and press a kiss to her temple. The day begins to press in around us, full of quiet threats and changing loyalties.

"I've got you, Kate," I murmur. "No one's taking that from me. Not now. Not ever."

Only then does she relax fully, the weight of what's gone before finally peeling off her shoulders.

Even as I hold her, my gaze cuts to the tree line, sharp and searching. There is no promise of peace here. Not when power refuses to yield. Not when bloodlines still divide.

She looks like a queen who just stepped out of a war as we make our way into the main house and up to the alpha's quarters.

The moment the door clicks shut behind us, something changes. Not in the room—in us. The pressure of the hall fades, replaced by something hotter, quieter, more dangerous. I feel it rolling off her in waves—relief, adrenaline, possession—and it's mirrored in me. All the restraint, the public composure, the politics—it burns off like mist under the sun.

She doesn't say a word as she walks into the room, shedding tension and her clothes with every step. Her shoulders square, her spine straightens, and when she glances back at me, it's not with doubt or fear. It's with hunger.

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Kate crawls up the bed—provocatively, sensually—and lies on her back, propped on her elbows, legs spread, watching me with curious, aroused eyes.

"So tell me about the alpha knot I've heard about..."

I grin. "A holdover from our most primal stage of life. In wolf-shifters, only the alpha male can form a knot and force it up into his beloved..."

I growl low in my throat, the sound vibrating against her skin, watching as her body responds and her arousal increases.

The knot. It was the manifestation of an alpha male, nature's way of claiming—of making sure no one else could ever have her. The knot would form at the base of my cock and then swell once it had been forced inside her, locking us together, sealing our bond in the most primal, intimate way. There'd be no pulling away, no escape, just raw, consuming connection.

It was feral. It was sacred, and it was the most pleasurable experience two individuals could experience. When it happened, it made her his.

"Just so we're clear... I'm the beloved in this story..."

I chuckle low and watch as it rolls over her body and makes her squirm in the most delicious way. I retreat across the room and sit to remove my clothing, my gaze never leaving Kate.

She starts to close her legs, modesty reasserting itself for just a second—but I stop her

with a low, commanding growl that vibrates through the air between us. "Don't hide from me, sweetheart. Keep them open. I want to see exactly how ready you are for me—how much you ache for what comes next."

Her eyes widen, and instantly the atmosphere between us changes. Her nipples harden, her skin flushes pink, and goosebumps rise visibly. The scent of her arousal fills the room—sweet, sharp, and impossible to ignore. It hits me like a potent drug. I stand and slowly strip off my clothes, letting her take in every inch of me.

Her breath catches as I finally remove the last layer. My cock is hard, already thick and throbbing, the knot swelling at the base. She doesn't move away but moves farther up the bed to make space. She purrs, hungry and open, and I can no longer pretend to have any patience left.

I climb onto the bed and position myself between her legs, kissing and tasting my way up her body. Her skin is fire under my mouth. I take my time with her nipples, sucking and teasing, switching between them while my hands keep her grounded and wanting more.

She arches into me, and I slide lower, keeping her legs over my shoulders. I nuzzle her clit, suck it into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it, then nip it just enough to make her gasp. I part her lips and slide my tongue through her folds, savoring everything she gives me.

She moans, hips rolling in rhythm, offering herself completely. I tongue her entrance, then spear her with it, burying my face in her as she cries out. Her thighs tremble against my back, and I know she's close—too close.

I pull back slow and deliberate. She wails, frustrated, and I grin. I want her to come again with me inside her. With my knot locking us together. Claimed in every way.

"Hudson, please," she cries.

I soothe her with gentle strokes. When she settles, I dive back in, giving her tongue and teeth, building her up again. She bucks under me, hands in my hair, tugging. Urging me up. Begging for more.

I follow her lead, kissing my way back to her clit and giving it another sharp nip. She yowls. I laugh, low and hungry, then dip back down and feast on her. Her hips move fast and eager now, chasing every stroke of my tongue. I slide a finger between her cheeks, grazing her tight entrance. She doesn't resist—just moans louder. Her body is saying yes in a dozen ways.

She's mine. Every inch of her.

I start crawling up her body, my cock aching for release. I want to savor this knot—our first. I settle between her legs and guide myself to her core, rubbing the head of my cock against her wet heat.

With one hand, I finger her entrance while my thumb circles her clit. She's trembling, breathing hard. I slip both hands under her and grip her ass, steadying her.

Her whole body tenses. "Relax, sweetheart," I murmur. "You're mine. You're safe."

Then I kiss her, deep and full, and thrust forward—hard. She screams into my mouth as I breach her. My knot forces its way inside, stretching her, locking us together. She pushes against me on instinct, overwhelmed by the intensity of it. I growl low, holding her still, kissing her until she melts back into me.

I don't move. I just hold her. My kisses soften. I stroke her back, her hips, her face—anything to ground her. Slowly, she kisses me back. Her legs wrap around my waist. Her pussy flutters around my knot, the pain giving way to something hotter,

deeper.

She's starting to understand. Her breathing evens out. I feel the knot swell, locking me inside her, ensuring not a drop of my seed escapes. I nuzzle her neck. She's still, but I can tell—she's wondering what comes next.

Kate clings to me more tightly. I stroke her damp hair, trail my fingers down her spine, grounding her as much as she grounds me. "You please me more than any mate has ever pleased her mate," I murmur against her temple. "In every lifetime I've lived—there's never been another. Only you."

Her eyes glisten as she whispers, "Hudson..."

I look at her and see it—trust. Surrender. Love. She pulls me into her arms, locking her legs around me, welcoming all of me. There's no hesitation now. No resistance.

I start to move. Slow, deep rolls of my hips, keeping the knot where it belongs. Her body grips me, tight and insistent with every motion. I groan into her neck. She cries out, clawing my back, begging for more. Her orgasm crashes over her, hard and wild. I keep rocking, keep driving her higher. Again. And again.

Wrapped around my knot as if it were made for her, she comes for the third time, her body shaking. Then I feel it—my own release building. My balls tighten and my cock surges. I come hard, pumping deep into her, filling her. She arches, trying to take even more of me. Her pussy clamps down, milking me, holding me right where she wants me.



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When I'm finally spent, I settle against her and kiss her slow and reverent. "You okay?" I whisper.

She laughs, breathless. "You should've just led with the knot. Way more effective than biting my neck."

I bark out a laugh, chest still heaving with the aftershocks of what we just shared. There's fire in her tone, but affection too—her sass never lets up. It grounds me. And damn if I don't love her for it.

I have food brought up to our quarters—something warm, earthy, and grounding. I'm not ready to share Kate yet. Not with the pack, not with the world. Tonight, the only world I want is the one we build between these four walls.

We eat curled together on the couch, still half-naked and tangled in the aftermath of something that feels as old as the earth. Between bites and quiet touches, we talk. We laugh. We tease. We lose track of time and then find it again wrapped in each other's arms.

We make love until the sheets are a mess, and our bodies are heavy with satisfaction. Then we sleep—fitful, deep, and wrapped around each other like we're afraid the dream might dissolve if we let go. Even so, I can't seem to get enough of her.

In the darkest hours before dawn, her voice finds me. Soft. Tentative. "I don't think Luke is dead. Not anymore."

I don't need to ask why. I feel it in my bones too.

"Neither do I," I say quietly. And that truth binds us even tighter.

As dawn rolls over the Eastern horizon, we rise and revel in each other before showering and dressing. She grabs my wrist before I open the door.

I may have claimed my mate, but someone's already planning how to steal her from me.

And I will burn down everything—this house, this hollow, even the pack itself—before I let that happen.

Kate's warmth is at my side, her trust pressed into my chest—but in the distance, something colder lingers. It's not just doubt or dissent. It's strategy. I can feel it—the slow coil of a plan taking root in the dark. Not a challenge for dominance. Something quieter. Sharper. Sabotage. Deceit. Someone isn't going to come at me head-on. They're going to aim where it hurts most—her.

## CHAPTER 14

### KATE

I've never hated silence so much.

It follows me all the way from the Rawlings compound—my new home, whether or not the rest of the pack likes it. Hudson had kissed me goodbye with a promise in his eyes and tension in his shoulders, and I'd slipped away before dawn cracked the horizon wide open.

Now, the truck hums beneath me as I steer toward the heart of Wild Hollow, but it's not engine noise that keeps my thoughts from spiraling—it's the memory of Hudson's hands on my skin, his breath against my neck, the way his voice went

hoarse when he said my name like a vow.

That should've anchored me.

Instead, all I feel is the unease clawing up the back of my throat. Because something's coming. And whether it's Luke's ghost or someone else's shadow, it's following me just as surely as day follows night.

The drive down the mountain is too quiet—unnaturally so, like the entire world is waiting for something to snap. The truck hums beneath me, the old engine comforting in its reliability. Pines blur past the window, and the mist curls low around the tires, refusing to burn off. My thoughts whirl faster than the wheels beneath me.

The closer I get to town, the tighter the knot in my gut pulls. There's a weight in the air that wasn't there yesterday—heavy and charged, like the pause before a storm breaks. Even the trees seem quieter, holding their breath. Something's wrong. I feel it in my skin, the way the hair on the back of my neck lifts, the unnatural stillness where birdsong should be. The roads don't just feel empty. They feel watched. Like something is lurking just past the edge of sight, waiting to see how close I'll come to the truth.

By the time I roll to a stop in front of the general store, the silence has teeth. The street is too still. The windows dark and shuttered. The usual comfort of Wild Hollow's sleepy charm has curdled into something tense and watchful.

I cut the engine and sit for a moment, hand still on the keys. I see my face, slightly distorted by morning mist and my breath, reflected in the windshield. I reach for the door handle but hesitate, scanning the storefront. Nothing looks broken. No signs of forced entry. But I feel it—that pull in the gut, low and crawling. Something's waiting for me inside, and it's not a warm welcome.

I exhale slowly, shove the door open, and step out. The cold air hits me first, crisp and sharp, like it's trying to slap me awake. Gravel crunches underfoot, exaggerated in the unnatural stillness, each step sounding like a warning shot. Even the breeze feels wrong—too still, too intentional. Every creak of the sign above the porch, every whisper of pine needles changing in the wind, buzzes against my skin like static.

The whole street is frozen in stillness, like even the wind is afraid to move—and I'm the one who dares to disturb it. The kind of silence that doesn't just wait—it judges. Watches. Dares you to step wrong. And I do, anyway, because whatever's waiting in there? I'm done letting it come to me. I'm coming for it now.

I square my shoulders and head to the entrance. The porch boards groan under my boots, that familiar sound usually like a hug from home—but today it lands hollow. There's no comfort in it. Just an eerie echo of what used to be safe, now stretched thin with unease. Each step feels heavier than the last, like I'm not just crossing a threshold—I'm stepping into whatever storm my brother left behind.

Whatever's waiting inside—it already knows I'm coming.

The door to the mercantile swings open with a soft chime, cheerful and oblivious to the tension coiled in my spine. I retreat to the truck and grab the shotgun in the rack. Ensuring it's loaded and ready to fire, I step inside, the familiar scent of wood polish and paper ink failing to calm me like it usually does. I pause in the entryway, hand still gripping the knob like a lifeline, and scan the space with narrowed eyes. My store—my sanctuary—remains intact. But someone has been here and disturbed it.

A place where Luke and I used to run barefoot between crates, laughing, our voices echoing off the shelves. I remember helping him restock the shelves late at night, the warm glow of the overhead lights making the world outside feel far away. This place was ours—safe, rooted, unshakable. Now? It feels hollow. Like someone pried open a door that was never meant to be breached. Like someone moved through the air itself

and left fingerprints behind. It's not destroyed. But it's not right either.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:23 am*

Someone knocked cans off the dry goods shelf. Paper goods crumpled. Drawers partially opened, then closed again like someone rifled through with a plan. It appears nothing is missing, but someone has handled the items. Prodded. Like someone wanted me to know they'd been here without taking a thing. The cash drawer's untouched. The register still hums, casting a low, familiar mechanical purr into the too-quiet room. The curtain to the back room is askew, twisted as if someone pulled and dropped it.

I step forward cautiously. "Hello?"

No answer.

I move through the space slowly, tracking it with more than my eyes. My wolf paces just beneath the surface, ears pricked, hackles half-lifted. There's a wrongness in the air, sharp and stale like old breath held too long. Every instinct tells me this wasn't just some aimless trespasser. Whoever did this knew what they were looking for. They moved with purpose. They weren't here to steal. They were here to uncover.

I follow the trail of subtle disruption to the storeroom and office tucked behind the counter. My desk is a mess. Not chaotic—purposeful. Like someone was on a clock, rifling through my notes, my ledgers, even my receipts with clinical precision. Then they tried to tidy it up just enough to leave doubt. But I know my patterns. The way I color-code, stack, and label. I know the sound each drawer makes when it's opened to the right depth—and one of them is off. Too far out. Too careful, like they thought I wouldn't notice. I always notice.

And something's off... like a single thread pulled wrong in a tapestry I know by heart.

There, nestled between a vendor invoice and the old inventory ledger Luke updated by hand—dog-eared, smudged with ink, and etched in his familiar chaos—is a slip of folded paper. Not yellowed by age, not random. Placed. Hidden, but not deep. Like he wanted me to find it, but only if I was paying attention. I stare at it like it might bite me—or vanish if I blink.

Then I reach. The paper is thin. Crisp. Inked in my brother's handwriting.

You're close. Keep going. Don't trust what bleeds easy.

My chest tightens. Not fear—focus. Cold, clear focus that slices through the static in my head like a knife. I'd known in my gut that Luke was alive, but now it's carved in ink—tangible, undeniable. My breath catches, sharp and shallow, and my hands tremble around the paper before I force them still. For a moment, the entire store blurs around the edges, like the weight of that truth has cracked something open in me I didn't know I'd been holding shut. He knew someone would come looking. That I would. Not Hudson. Not the pack. Me. Because he trusted I'd be the one to see it through, even when everyone else stopped looking.

I tuck the note into my jeans pocket and smooth the surrounding pages like nothing happened. No cameras in here—at least none I've ever installed. But someone else might've.

That's when I hear it. The sharp crunch of boots on gravel just outside, heavy and deliberate, it's not like a customer—more like a warning. My body stills. A heartbeat later, the door swings open with force, slamming back on its hinges. The bell above it doesn't just chime—it shrieks, jangling with all the subtlety of a gunshot. Whatever calm I had left snaps clean in two.

Waylon fills the doorway like a bad memory that forgot how to die—meaner with age and twice as hard to scrape off. For a split second, I flash to the last time I saw him on

this threshold, storming in with the same heat in his eyes, furious that I'd refused to back his bid for alpha after Luke went missing. Luke was next in line. He hadn't forgiven me then. Judging by the set of his jaw now, he still hasn't.

Broad shoulders strain against a threadbare plaid shirt, his narrowed eyes scanning the mess like he's taking inventory of my failures. Hard lines and old grudges form his carved granite scowl. He says nothing at first—just lets the silence stretch, lets me feel the weight of his presence like a storm creeping over the treetops. Then he sneers, slow and deliberate, like he's beensavoring this moment. It hits like a slap, sharp and personal, and my stomach flips with the familiar mix of fury and disgust only Waylon can draw out of me.

"Well, well. Looks like somebody pissed off the wrong people," he says.

"What do you want, Waylon?" I don't bother hiding the edge in my voice.

He steps further inside, slow and deliberate, his boots thudding against the worn floorboards with performative weight. His gaze drags over the shelves, not taking in inventory—taking the measure of me. "Just checking in," he says, voice oily and too casual. "Figured maybe you'd need a hand. Someone who actually understands how pack business should be handled. Someone with backbone."

His implication hangs in the air like sour smoke, thick and poisonous, daring me to rise to the bait. It curls between us, bitter with condescension and old pack politics, daring me to bare my teeth or bow my head. I do neither.

"You mean someone who only shows up to puff his chest? Hard pass."

His jaw ticks. "You've been playing house with Hudson Rawlings long enough to forget who your blood is."



"Funny. He hasn't once tried to sell me out or silence me. That's more than I can say for you."

He crosses his arms. "You think just because you're wearing Hudson's mark, you get to dig into things that should stay buried? Luke was trouble. Still is."

My temper flares. "Luke was smart. And loyal. Which makes him the opposite of you."

He moves in close—too close—but I hold my ground. "This isn't a game, Katie. If you keep poking, someone's going to push back. Hard."

"Let them. I don't scare easy. And I don't roll over for bullies in flannel."

He leans in, voice low and laced with warning. "You should know, not everyone in this town wants a red wolf bitch stirring up ghosts."

"Then they better get used to disappointment... besides which even you should be smart enough to know I am no longer a red wolf, I am a gray wolf."

We stare each other down. The heat between us isn't attraction—it's fury, old and festering. He's waiting for me to flinch, to shrink, to prove him right about everything he thinks I am. But I never do. My spine stays straight, my chin lifted. I meet his glare with something colder. Sharper. The kind of look that says: you might've known me once, but you don't know me now.

Finally, he scoffs and turns. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

The door slams behind him with the finality of a gavel. The bell chimes once—sharp and metallic—then silence crashes down like a lid snapping shut on a coffin. The room feels smaller in his wake, the air heavier, like his anger left behind a residue

that clings to the walls and settles into the floorboards. I exhale, slow and deliberate, forcing my fingers to unclench. But the stillness doesn't soothe—it seethes, electric with everything unspoken.

The bell chimes again. The sound cuts through the heavy quiet like a blade, and the air changes—just enough to make my wolf twitch. It's subtle, but sudden, the kind of alert that prickles the back of your neck before your brain catches up.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:23 am*

I whip around so fast the hem of my flannel flares, fists clenched tight enough to make my knuckles pop. Blood thrums hot in my veins, my wolf pushing hard against the surface, ears sharp, teeth bared. Whoever's coming through that door is either brave—or stupid.

"Whoa, killer. It's just me."

Elena stands in the doorway, eyes wide and a little wild, like she's seen a ghost—or nearly become one. Dust and what looks like ash smudge her gray sweater; her blonde braid, half unraveled, hangs over one shoulder in tangled defiance. There's a minor cut on her cheekbone, nothing deep, but fresh enough to catch the light. She looks shaken, yes—but also furious. The kind of fury that comes when something sacred has been touched. Violated.

"You okay?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "They hit my store, too. Nothing missing. Just torn apart. Like they were looking for something."

"They were."

Her gaze sharpens. "You found something."

I nod, then close the door behind her and pull the shade, shutting out the morning light and any prying eyes with it. The soft click of the lock feels final in a way I didn't expect. Elena turns slowly, her gaze pinning me with quiet intensity. The weight of her eyes is steady—not demanding, just ready. And for the first time, I let

her see what I'm really feeling: the fear I've been swallowing down since the first sign something was wrong, the bone-deep conviction that this trail leads somewhere darker than either of us imagined, and the flicker of hope I didn't dare name until I read my brother's words.

"Luke left me a note."

"He's alive?" I nod. "Sonofabitch," she murmurs softly.

She doesn't look surprised. If anything, she looks pissed. Her jaw flexes, eyes narrowing with a sharp edge I recognize from childhood—the one that surfaced only when something hit too close to the bone. Like she's known something was wrong all along and no one listened.

It stirs a memory I haven't touched in years: the summer after graduation, just before Luke really started to pull away. I was out hiking the ridge trail early one morning and came across them—Elena and Luke—standing on the old bridge above the falls. They didn't see me.

Luke had his hands braced on the rail, shoulders tense. Elena stood close, too close for casual. She touched his arm when she spoke, and something passed between them, quiet and sharp. I asked him about it later, tried to tease. He just rolled his eyes and said I'd imagined it. Scoffed like it was ridiculous. But now? Now I'm not so sure.

"Yeah. And now whoever's after him? They know I'm looking."

We sit on the floor between two aisles—somewhere familiar, somewhere not visible from the windows. The scent of pine soap and cinnamon from the display near the register lingers in the air, grounding us.

A delivery truck rumbles distantly outside, a mundane sound that feels out of place against the charge in the room. It all makes the silence between us feel louder, like the walls themselves are waiting for what we'll say next. The worn planks beneath us creak faintly with every change in movement, but it's a comforting sound, like the store itself is keeping our secrets.

I pull the note from my pocket, the paper still warm from my body heat, and hand it to her. She reads it once. Then again. Her eyes narrow, lips pressed into a hard line as she studies the handwriting like she could summon Luke with the force of her focus.

Finally, she folds the note along the same creases, her fingers steady and sure, like this moment is one she's been preparing for—even if she didn't know it until now.

"Don't trust what bleeds easy," she repeats.

"What the hell does that mean?"

She exhales. "Something old. Maybe pack politics. Maybe something... else."

"You think this goes beyond the packs?"

"I think whatever Luke was tracking, it's not just moonshine and bad blood."

I nod, heart thudding. I already knew it. But hearing Elena say it makes it feel sharper.

We sit in silence for a beat, both of us bracing for something we can't yet see.

"I have to tell Hudson," I say. "I should have called him earlier."

She nods. "Do it soon. Because we need to figure out who's behind whatever this is.

Is it Luke or someone else, and regardless of who... why? It seems like things are ramping up. I worry that whatever is coming is moving faster than we think."

## CHAPTER 15

### HUDSON

After Kate called me, I learn from my deputy that the mercantile isn't the only business that was broken into. What the hell is going on?

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:23 am*

The tension starts low and steady as I drive north, a slow coil winding tighter with every mile. Something's been itching at the back of my neck for days, a nagging feeling that won't let go. Not just the usual Rawlings pack noise, not just Waylon and the McKinley's constant undercurrent of resentment. No, this feels older. Sharper. Like the land itself is waiting—watching.

The air grows colder the farther I go; the trees pressing closer, and my breath fogs in front of me in short, visible bursts. My wolf prowls beneath my skin, restless and tense. A low growl rises in my throat, involuntary, echoing the unease rolling off the forest itself, the light filtering through the canopy thinner and more reluctant. Even the wolves—both purebred and shifter—stay away from this stretch lately.

The birds don't sing. The stillness has a texture to it—thick, like fog you can't see but feel in your lungs.

Something out here is wrong. Deep-rooted, hidden, wrong.

And today, I'm done circling shadows. No more hesitating. No more waiting. I'm done waiting for truth to come to me. I'm going to dig until I find it. Whatever's buried out here—secrets, lies, Luke—I'm going to drag it into the light, claw by claw if I have to.

I cut the engine at the edge of the woods and move on foot, silent and steady. The change in the air is immediate. It's colder, but not in the way that bites—it coils. Creeps under your collar and settles there. The kind of cold that warns.

Every step feels heavier the farther I go. The weight isn't just physical—it's

something older, pressing in from the trees and the soil, like the land is remembering too much. Pine needles crunch beneath my boots, their sound too sharp, too deliberate in the unnatural quiet. Even the wind avoids this stretch, as if nature itself knows not to stir. The forest holds still, not out of peace, but out of tension. Like it's bracing for a scream that hasn't come yet.

It's not just the altitude. It's the quiet. Not the peaceful kind—but the waiting kind. The kind that presses against your skin and sets your hackles up. That strained, listening kind of quiet. The kind that prickles your instincts, makes your wolf lift its head, ears forward, nostrils flared. The kind that whispers: you're not alone. And worse—you're being hunted.

I head toward the ridge where our territory edges the southern line. It's a stretch I know like the back of my hand—where the pine thins just enough for sightlines, where the ground drops steep enough to catch trespassers off guard. We've used it for scouting runs, late-night watches, and border challenges. But this morning, the shadows feel different. Heavier. Like they're hiding something instead of just stretching with the rising sun. My wolf prowls beneath my skin, ears pinned and hackles raised. Something's out here. Something that doesn't belong.

I drop to one knee near the base of a spruce tree, my hand steady despite the icy tension crawling up my spine. The frost-slick leaves move beneath my fingers with a soft crackle, releasing the damp scent of earth and pine. I brush them aside carefully, deliberately—half-expecting to find nothing, half-dreading what I might uncover. But there it is, glinting faintly in the dull morning light. Not a rock. Not debris. Something unnatural. Something left behind.

A metal glint. Something small, embedded deep in the roots like it was planted with precision. It doesn't catch the light so much as absorb it, sleek and dark, made to vanish in shadow. A predator's tool. My pulse kicks. This isn't careless litter—it's a goddamn message. A quiet, calculated intrusion. And it's been watching us for a



while.

I pull it loose and roll it in my palm, the weight of it small but significant. Surveillance gear. Sleek. Military-grade, maybe even experimental—this isn't off-the-shelf junk. New. High-end. Far beyond anything my pack could afford or would even think to use. The casing is matte, designed to avoid reflection, and the build is too clean, too deliberate. This was meant to stay hidden, meant to watch without being noticed. But it's here, buried in our land, and now it's in my hand.

I turn it over. No tags. No markings. But it's not anonymous—it's intentional. The way it's buried? Deep. Hidden like a landmine, not a mistake. The location? Pinpointed at the edge of where our patrols cycle, a blind spot only someone with knowledge of our routines would exploit. It's not just random. It's surgical. Strategic.

And then I catch it... that scent. It rides the edge of the wind, tucked beneath layers of pine and damp earth, almost buried—but not quite. It's faint. Fading. But I know it like I know my own blood. That blend of cedar smoke and iron, salt and something wilder. It hits me square in the chest and stops my breath. Luke. My gut clenches, memory slamming into instinct. He's been here. Recently.

Luke McKinley.

I straighten slowly, every muscle coiled like a wire pulled taut. My chest goes tight as the truth clicks into place. He was close enough to leave a trace, careful enough to hide it. And he didn't want to be seen. This isn't backwoods rigging or a moonshiner's paranoid setup. This is something else—something sophisticated. Bigger. Military, maybe. More likely private. Covert. Expensive, too. The kind of tech that doesn't get used unless someone really wants answers—or leverage. And Luke? He wasn't just sneaking around. He was studying something specific. Preparing for something. And I intend to find out what.

I pocket the gear and head back, my pace faster now. The Hollow isn't just remembering anymore... it's watching.

After the revelations of the day, I lose myself in Kate's arms. Later that night, Kate curls against me in our bed, her bare legs tangling with mine, the skin-on-skin heat making it impossible to tell where she ends and I begin. Her thigh brushes my hip with every breath she takes, a slow tease that keeps my nerves lit like kindling. Her skin is still warm and flushed, her pulse a steady rhythm echoing softly against my ribs like it knows the beat of my own heart.

Her hair spills across my shoulder like wild silk, and I tangle my fingers in it, breathing her in—earth and heat and something so purely, impossibly Kate that it grounds me deeper than anything else ever has. She moves just slightly, her lips brushing against my collarbone, not quite a kiss, but enough to send a low hum of need curling through my core.

Her head on my chest feels like it has always belonged there, her breath is slow and even now, but I can feel the tension humming low beneath her stillness. This closeness is everything, yet it isn't nearly enough. And I know exactly what she means.

Because it's the same way I feel.

Like this is the only place we were ever going to end up. And maybe it is. She belongs here—against me, with me, completely. She always has.

I press a kiss to her temple.

She hums. "You're thinking too loud."

"Caught something near the ridge," I say quietly.

She stiffens. Not all at once, but in that way I've come to recognize—the kind that starts in her spine and moves outward, her breath going still, her fingers tightening ever so slightly against my ribs. Her wolf feels it, too. I can tell. A subtle tension hums in her body, alert and coiled.

“Surveillance,” I continue. “Not ours. Buried deep. Hidden well. I wouldn't have caught it if I wasn't looking.”

She lifts her head slowly. “Did you find...?”

“His scent.”

Her breath hitches, sharp and silent, like the sound of a trap snapping shut. Her spine arches just slightly, as if every nerve in her body has gone taut. My hand tightens around her waist, grounding her as her lips part, but no sound escapes.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:23 am*

“Luke’s been there. Might still be watching.”

Silence stretches between us like a held breath.

It’s tense with everything we’re afraid to say aloud. The kind of silence that vibrates with unspoken truths and shared history, pressing close until it almost feels like a third presence in the room.

I hold her tighter, heart thudding beneath her cheek. I know what she’s about to say, and it still hits like a hammer.

Finally, she murmurs, “Then he knows we’re together.”

“Yeah.” I wrap my arms tighter around her.

She looks up, gaze fierce and wet and glowing in the low light. “What now?”

“Now?” I lean down and brush my lips across hers. “We make damn sure whatever’s coming knows we know about them and we’re watching, too.”

Her nails drag lightly down my chest. “You mean we’re going hunting?”

I grin, sharp and hungry. “Exactly.”

## CHAPTER 16

KATE

The morning light crawls across the bedroom wall, catching on the curve of Hudson's shoulder where he sleeps beside me. His scent still clings to my skin—pine, musk, something darker. Something... mine. I lie there, barely breathing, heart thudding loud enough to count. It should feel like peace. Like safety.

But all I can think about is Luke.

Last night, after Hudson turned out the light, I lay curled against him, pretending to sleep while my mind whirled. His breath was slow and steady at my back, one arm slung over my waist. I could tell he wasn't asleep either. His nearness should have comforted me. Instead, the darkness crept in around the edges of my calm.

"You keep thinking so loud I'm going to start charging rent," I murmured against Hudson's shoulder, trying to make light of the storm churning in my chest. My voice came out rougher than I intended.

He moved slightly, his arm tightening around my waist. "You're not wrong," he said. "But we both know he's still out there."

I nodded, the words sitting like stones in my throat. "Yeah. We do. So why hasn't he come to me?"

"Maybe because whatever he's into—he thinks it'd kill you."

That sat in my chest like ice. I rolled to face him, traced the stubble along his jaw. He caught my wrist, kissed the inside.

"I've got you now," he said. "We'll find him. You're not doing it alone. Not anymore."

He kissed me then—slow, deep, anchoring. And I let him. Let the heat between us

quiet everything else. But even as his hands roamed, even as his body pressed against mine like he was trying to erase the world for a little while, Luke's shadow lingered in the corners of the room.

I'd never said goodbye to Luke. Not properly, but then I hadn't known he was leaving. And now I was starting to wonder if I'd ever get the chance.

This morning, I wake to the ache of last night—the way Hudson held me like I was breakable and bulletproof all at once. The way his lips tried to soothe the fear he couldn't quite chase away. And the way, even in Hudson's arms, Luke's shadow still pressed against my ribs. I wake to the sting of questions unanswered and the knowing that peace, for me, is always temporary.

I turn onto my back, eyes tracing the sleek ceiling overhead—clean, well-kept, like everything else in the Rawlings compound. No cracks, no stains, no visible flaws. But it doesn't matter. I'm not looking for imperfections—I'm searching for distractions. That sealed surveillance device Hudson found—that Luke planted—shoved all the questions I'd tried to bury straight back into the center of my chest. And now they're sitting there like a stone I can't swallow.

Luke was watching us. Still is, maybe. And I can't figure out if that makes me angry or just heartbroken. What were you doing, Luke? What were you trying to protect me from?

I close my eyes, and the memory rushes in like it's been waiting. That day on the bridge. Luke standing just to the left of Hudson, the two of them younger, harder-edged. They'd fought—over me, of course. Hudson wanted something. Luke didn't trust him. Typical big brother move.

But it was the way Luke looked at me afterward. Like he knew. Like he saw something coming that none of us could stop. I was seventeen and furious and tired of

being treated like a baby. But he wasn't just being overprotective. He was worried. That memory—him standing rigid, fists balled, watching Hudson walk away—burns hotter now than it did then. Because maybe he wasn't just being a pain in the ass. Maybe he was already running. Already pulling at threads that were wrapping around his neck.

The shower hisses on in the attached bath. Hudson has managed to get up and move without my noticing while I'm musing to myself. I sit on the edge of the bed, my feet brushing the old floorboards. Then I stand, dress, and leave without a sound.

Elena's apartment over the bookstore smells like roasted coffee, worn leather, and lavender—like memory and comfort and something sharper underneath. She raises an eyebrow when she sees me, but says nothing. Just steps aside.

“I need answers,” I say.

“I figured.” She gestures toward the kettle on the stove. “Tea’s hot.”

“I’m not here for tea.”

“No, you’re here to shake the dust off ghosts.”

We sit. Or rather, I perch on the edge of her armchair, every muscle tight, my foot bouncing while Elena moves with the glacial patience of someone who’s holding more answers than she’s ready to give. She pours tea into two mismatched mugs—one chipped at the rim, the other stained at the bottom from too many refills. Her hands are steady, her face unreadable. I don’t touch mine. The scent of bergamot wafts up anyway, irritatingly calm in the face of everything twisting inside me.

“Elena,” I say carefully, “how deeply were you involved with Luke?”

She doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t look surprised. Just sets the kettle down with a quiet finality, clicks off the burner like she’s been waiting for this moment longer than I’ve known, and takes a long sip of her tea—buying time, maybe. Or bracing herself.

“I loved him,” she says finally.

The words hit hard, sharper than I expect. She’s never said it before—not to me, not to anyone, I’d bet. Her voice didn’t break, but something in her eyes flickered like it wanted to. For a second, I see past the sharp edges and steady hands. I see grief. I see love that never got the ending it deserved. And suddenly, I’m not just angry for me.



I'm angry for her, too.

"And he trusted you."

She nods. "He did."

"So where did he go?"

"That's not an answer I have."

"Elena." I lean forward. "Don't stall me. Not now."

She exhales, slow and ragged, like she's about to do something she promised herself she never would. Then she leans forward and reaches beneath the cushion of the chair, her hand disappearing into the shadows there. When her hand reappears, she holds a small, worn tin box, dented at the edges, as if it has spent too long in a pocket that weathered too many storms. She opens it with a quiet snap. Inside, nestled between old receipts, yellowed notes, and a photograph of Luke I didn't know she had, is a sealed USB drive.

She stares at it for a second, thumb brushing the metal, and I realize this isn't just a handoff. It's a confession. A release. A goodbye she never got to give.

"I went looking for answers after he disappeared. I found this. There was a note wrapped around it telling me not to open it unless things got... bad."

"Give me your definition of bad... because I'm thinking when he disappeared without a trace would qualify for bad."

She looks me dead in the eye. "I understand what you're saying, but he was gone, so I thought I should just hold on to it. But with how spooky everything seems right now,

now would be the time.”

I take the flash drive. It feels heavier than it should.

“Be careful with that, Kate. Whatever’s on it—he was afraid of it.”

At the store, I find Hank perched on the counter, one foot planted firmly in a half-crushed box of granola bars, his beady eyes sharp as ever. He glares at me, lets out a low, indignant honk, then resumes picking apart the wrapper with his beak. Determined, chaotic, and completely unfazed.

“Hey,” I say softly, crouching near the counter. “We’re moving.”

He tilts his head, blinks, and honks again—quieter this time. Then, with a flutter of wings, he hops down from the counter to the floor, webbed feet slapping softly against the tile. He waddles in a slow circle before pecking at my boot. I take it as understanding.

“To the compound. Safer there. Less chance of you getting mistaken for some rogue snack.”

In the backroom, I dig through a storage drawer until I find what I’m looking for—an old strip of red leather I’d been saving. I cut it, punch a few holes, and fasten a small buckle. Not because Hank is a pet, but because if anyone in the Rawlings pack sees a goose flapping through their woods without a mark, someone might decide he’s dinner.

He watches me with suspicious patience while I loop it around his long neck, craning his head in that sassy, jerky way only Hank can manage. The collar settles snug just above the base of his feathers. He honks once—sharp and offended—and hops backward a step. Then he fans his wings wide and flaps hard, sending a burst of wind

into my face, like he's making a point. A beat later, he gives me a side-eye glare, ruffles his feathers, and stands there like a smug little statue.

Still his own bird. Still ungovernable.

“I know,” I mutter, adjusting the fit. “You’re still free. You’re still a menace. Just... don’t get eaten, okay?”

He lets out a snort-honk that sounds like agreement. Or insult. Hard to tell with Hank.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:23 am*

Still, he doesn't shake the collar off.

We head towards the Rawlings' compound in the late afternoon, the truck rattling down the gravel lane with a low, familiar hum. The shadows stretch long across the dashboard as the sun slips behind the ridgeline in molten streaks of orange and gold. I roll the window halfway down, letting in the crisp air and the scent of pine and earth.

Hank snoozes in the passenger seat, beak tucked beneath his wing, his round body bobbing gently with every bump in the road. His soft, rhythmic honks are more like sleepy sighs now, barely audible under the low rumble of the engine. Every so often, he moves and adjusts his wings, rustling softly like leaves in the wind.

It should be peaceful. The kind of quiet that comes at the end of a long day. But it isn't. The silence presses too heavy against the windows, like the woods themselves are holding their breath.

When I hit the old fire road, the change in my surroundings is almost instant. The shadows stretch longer, deeper. The trees crowd closer to the road like they're trying to hide something—or trap me in. My pulse spikes, sharp and instinctive.

The hairs on my arms rise. Not from cold. From danger.

Something's wrong. Deep wrong. The kind that crawls up your spine and whispers run.

The air is too still—dead still. No wind to rustle the pines. No birdsong. Not even the scrape of branches against the truck. Just silence, thick and unnatural, like the woods

are waiting for something awful to happen.

Even Hank stirs, feathers puffing as he lifts his head, uneasy. His tail twitches once, twice.

I glance in the rearview mirror.

At first—nothing.

Then—there. A flicker. Movement.

A dark vehicle, hugging the curve of the road several car lengths back. Low profile. No lights. Windows blacked out like eyes that don't blink.

A predator's silhouette.

My grip tightens on the wheel until my knuckles ache. My pulse jumps, fast and shallow, like prey scent on the air.

“Wake up,” I whisper.

Hank lifts his head, feathers ruffling as he blinks groggily and lets out a low, confused honk. His eyes flick toward the windshield, head tilting in quick, sharp jerks like he's trying to lock onto something I can't see yet.

“We're being followed.”

The fire road narrows. Trees crowd close. No place to turn off.

Unless...

I slam the brakes so hard the tires scream, gravel spraying like shrapnel as the truck fishtails sideways. The wheel jerks under my grip, fighting me, but I don't let go. I wrench it hard, forcing the vehicle into a jarring skid toward the tree line. My heart hammers. Adrenaline screams in my veins.

Before the truck fully stops, I'm already moving. I throw the door open so hard it slams against its hinges, then hit the ground running, boots pounding dirt and instinct snapping into place like teeth around a throat.

"Fly, Hank!"

He launches skyward without a word.

I sprint toward the trees, heart in my throat and blood roaring in my ears. The shift comes not with pain, but with power—an eruption of sensation as the world explodes in a kaleidoscope of color. Shards of lightning crack through the air, a roll of thunder echoing low and deep in my chest.

Mist rises around me, curling over my skin like smoke with weight. My breath catches, not from fear, but from the rush of becoming wolf. One step I'm flesh and frantic energy—the next, I'm fur and focus, instinct honed to a razor's edge.

And then I'm the wolf.

But not the red wolf I grew up knowing—this is different. More muscle coils under my fur, power radiating through limbs built for crashing through brush and outrunning danger. Grayfur, streaked with the tawny marks that mark my lineage now, ripples with every stride.

I feel heavier. Stronger. Feral in a way the red never was.

When I used to run, it was for escape. Now, I run with teeth bared and shoulders braced for the fight. This body was made for war.

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I tear into the trees, heart pounding, paws digging into moss and dirt. The wind howls in my ears. Behind me, tires screech.

But they won't catch me.

Let them try.

I'll lead them straight into hell if I have to.

## CHAPTER 17

### HUDSON

The front porch of the compound is calm—eerily so. The kind of quiet that feels like it's holding its breath.

Inside, I'm elbow-deep in tech reports, analyzing cross-referenced satellite pings and motion-trigger logs with two of my most trusted pack analysts. Screens glow in the dim room, numbers ticking like heartbeats, but I'm not seeing anything useful yet. My jaw tightens as I lean back, rubbing the tension from my temples, pulse drumming low in my ears. Every dead-end scan sharpens my frustration until it scrapes and claws inside my brain. Frustration claws at the back of my neck.

Then it hits—sharp, high-pitched, and violent enough to send a bolt of awareness snapping through my spine. The sound knifes through the quiet like a warning shot—something alive and wild and absolutely not random. A sound born of panic and purpose.



Not just noise. A message.

Unmistakable.

A honk. Piercing. Followed by another. Closer. Louder.

Urgent.

I freeze. Because no ordinary goose makes a sound like that.

A second later, someone barrels down the hallway behind me, the frantic rhythm of their boots slamming the hardwood echoing off the walls like warning drums. My head snaps toward the sound, hackles rising before they even speak. Every instinct in me is already on edge, keyed to the kind of alarm that doesn't wait for an explanation—only action.

“Sir,” one of the younger wolves pants, out of breath, “something’s on the porch—fast, loud. Might be a bird, but it’s going wild.”

The change in his scent is subtle, but unmistakable. His elevated pulse and clipped breathing silently broadcast a warning that his words haven't yet caught up to. He doesn't just think it's a threat. He feels it in his bones. And that tells me all I need to know.

I'm already moving before he finishes the sentence. Something primal and electric roaring to life beneath my skin. My vision narrows, senses locking in like crosshairs. No hesitation, no second thoughts—just the raw, undeniable pull of purpose driving me forward, every nerve fired up like I've been lit from the inside.

A sharp honk. Then another. Aggressive. Urgent.

By the time I hit the wide front door and yank it open, a shot's already being lined up.

"Stand down!" I bark, stepping in front of the barrel.

The guy freezes, finger twitching just shy of the trigger.

A Canada goose stands on the porch, wings spread wide, feathers puffed, honking like it's calling down the gods. The sound echoes off the compound's front wall, sharp and jarring, rattling the windows and drawing startled gasps from anyone within earshot. It's wild, relentless—more alarm than animal. But it's the flash of red around its neck that locks everything into place.

It appears to be some kind of collar, and there's only one goose I know who would have a red collar—Hank.

My stomach drops.

"That's Hank. He's Kate's pet goose," I growl. "If anyone lays so much as a finger on him, they answer to me. You get me?"

The guy lowers the rifle, blinking. "A... goose, sir?"

"Not just a goose. Family."

Hank spots me. Lets out a screech-honk that rattles windows, then charges.

A knot tightens in my chest. That's not just Hank being dramatic. It's fear. Panic. Urgency. He's never acted like this before—and the flash of red around his neck only makes it worse. Dread coils low in my gut as I brace for impact, already knowing this isn't just a warning. It's a call for help.

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Wings flapping like war flags, he barrels straight toward me.

I brace instinctively, but the little bastard doesn't stop. He crashes into my shin, beak open, wings smacking my leg like he's scolding me for crimes against goosekind. What the hell?

"Something's wrong," I mutter. "Something's very wrong."

I crouch, look him in the eye. "Where is she?"

Hank honks again, flaps his wings, and launches.

He circles above the compound once, twice, then arcs back toward the woods with a series of wild, frantic cries.

I don't waste time.

Thunder booms through my ribs like it's echoing straight out of my chest, a deep, ancient drumbeat that calls something feral to the surface. Lightning forks behind my eyes, not just seen, but felt—streaking white-hot through my blood. The transformation hits not with pain, but with a surge of elemental force.

Mist coils up from the ground like summoned smoke, alive with shards of silver and violet, the air crackling with energy that lifts the hair on my arms. It wraps around me, swallowing human thought and skin, until all that's left is instinct and hunger and purpose. Everything soft and civilized rips away, leaving only power in its place.

And when the storm inside me clears, I am the wolf—every sinew primed, every instinct razor-sharp. I don't just see the world—I feel it. Every sound, every scent, every vibration through the dirt.

I crouch for a breath; the wind brushing against my muzzle, rich with pine and Kate and something darker on the edges. Then I explode forward, four paws pounding the earth, gray fur rippling over tight muscle, claws chewing into the trail like it's trying to hold me back—and failing.

Hank is a blur in the sky, banking hard left as we approach the tree line. My muscles coil and release like pistons, the wind slicing past my ears.

I catch the first trace of her scent at the edge of the woods—sharp, familiar, laced with adrenaline.

She's close.

My heart slams. My wolf howls inside my chest.

And then I see her.

She bursts through the trees like a shadow set loose, her new gray coat catching flecks of light between the branches—thicker, stronger, built for force over speed. There's more muscle in her frame now, more power in every stride. She's still stunning, but in a way that commands respect and sets every instinct inside me on fire. My breath catches in my throat—relief and awe slamming into my chest all at once. She's here. She's alive. And even after everything, my heart stutters like I'm seeing her for the first time. My mate. Her eyes catch mine for half a second, and that tether between us pulls taut.

I follow her without a sound, matching her stride for stride until we reach the back

trail to the house. She shifts mid-run, the swirl of mist catching the late afternoon sun and by the time she hits the porch, she's Kate again—naked, strong, radiant.

Hank lands beside her, panting, feathers ruffled, and rubs his head against her thigh like a dog.

I shift as I bound up after her, mist curling around me like a secret. When I step onto the porch, I'm a man again—bare feet, wild hair, and the bite of wind on my skin.

She turns.

One of our people hands her a robe, which she ties around herself. Another tosses me a pair of sweatpants.

"I'm okay," she says, tying the robe. Her voice shakes. "But that was too close."

I pull on the sweatpants and cross the space in a blink, take her face in my hands. "What happened?"

"I was being followed. Black SUV. No plates. I shifted to lose them."

I kiss her. Hard. Fierce.

Hank honks and flaps at our knees like he's telling us to take it inside already.

We do.

The shower is hot, and so is the arousal and feeling that flows between us.

We press against each other beneath the spray, mouths hungry, bodies slick and straining with need. But it's more than just heat—it's the desperate kind of closeness

that follows a scare you can't quite name. I need her, not just physically, but soul-deep, to know she's alive, here, safe in my arms. And she needs to feel it too—how tightly we're bound, how hard I'd fight to keep her with me.

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I feel the silkiness of her skin under my palms, and her body fits mine perfectly. The water washes away the grime of the day, but not the hunger—it only amplifies it. Her nails rake down my back, sharp and claiming, while I trail my mouth along her throat, my mark there throbbing faintly between kisses.

"Mine," I whisper into her skin, and she moans like it's the only truth that matters.

I grip her hips, lift her easily, and she wraps her legs around me with practiced ease, breath hitching when I press her against the slick tile. "You need me?" I murmur against her lips.

"Always," she breathes.

I thrust into her in one smooth, claiming stroke, and her cry is raw, reverent. She clings to me, forehead to mine, until we're moving in a rhythm that's less about lust and more about anchoring. Every motion, every gasp, every whisper between us sharpens the bond—makes it feel even more real, more permanent.

We fall together in a crescendo of motion and heat.

Her body shudders around mine as she comes apart. I bury my face in her neck, teeth grazing the mark I left there, not breaking skin this time—just reminding her, and myself, of what we are.

Bound. Claimed. Forever.

"I was frightened," she admits, her voice softer now. "But then I realized

something—I wasn't running like I used to. I was faster. Stronger. The gray wolf... she's got muscle and instinct the red never had."

She gasps as I press her harder into the tile, her tone changing from thoughtful to teasing in a heartbeat.

We tangle and twist, steam curling around our feet like the mist of the shift itself. She wraps her legs around my hips, pulls me deeper, harder, every breath a gasp, every movement a plea and a promise. Her body clenches around me, tight and wet and perfect, and I feel her shake.

Her moan rips through the air as she falls apart, nails digging into my back, thighs trembling against my hips. I hold her through it, driving into her with the kind of force that says she's mine—claimed, cherished, and never alone.

The second wave crashes over her, and she cries out my name again, ragged and breathless.

That's all it takes.

Pleasure tears through me, hot and primal. I bury myself in her one last time, groaning against her mouth as my release hits, hips jerking, heartbeat pounding through every nerve ending. I stay there, panting, pressed tight to her, forehead to hers, until the only sound is the hiss of water and our uneven breaths.

And for a while, the world disappears.

The water cools, but neither of us moves. She's draped over me, her head against my chest, our bodies still joined, still trembling. I trail my fingers down her spine, anchoring myself in the reality of her breath, the soft warmth of her skin, the steady pulse beneath her mark.



Eventually, I lift her with ease, and carry her from the shower. She doesn't protest, just sighs and curls closer. We dry off quickly, trading soft kisses and sated glances, and then I lay her down on the bed like she's something sacred.

We collapse into the sheets, tangled together, breathless and damp, still murmuring each other's names like prayers neither of us wants to end. I press a last kiss to her shoulder.

Then...

A knock.

Sharp. Urgent.

I'm out of bed in a second, pulling on sweats as adrenaline kicks back into gear. My body still hums with the echo of her, but the urgency in that knock slices through whatever warmth lingered. I crack the door, heart already locking into war mode.

One of my younger tech specialists, Eddie, stands there, eyes wide and breathing heavy like he ran the entire way. He's holding a laptop.

"We decrypted it," he says. "The USB. You need to see this."

Kate sits up in bed, the sheet falling to her waist. I toss a shirt to her, which she puts on, her eyebrows pinching together slightly, eyes narrowing with concern. "Is it about Luke?"

"Worse," Eddie says. "It's about everything."

The data sprawls across the screen like a blueprint for betrayal. Dozens of land records, some dating back decades. Names—pack members, human locals, and out-

of-towners with deep pockets and hidden agendas. GPS coordinates tagged with timestamps, some dangerously close to pack territory. And a financial trail littered with bribes—cleverly disguised as 'consulting fees' and 'debt relief payments.'

Layer upon layer of quiet manipulation. These weren't just property acquisitions—they were surgical strikes. Every document a move in a long game, one designed to bleed the Hollow dry without ever firing a shot.

A corporate syndicate operating under the name Sable Rock Group—backed by old money and even older grudges—has been quietly trying to buy up Hollow land. Using forgotten debts, forged signatures, shell companies. Pulling strings from the shadows.

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Including our pack land. They weren't just targeting old properties or fringe areas—they were creeping straight into Rawlings' territory. Some of the names tied to those land records belonged to families under our protection.

Lands that had been in our pack for generations were being stripped away under the guise of debt collection and backroom deals. This wasn't just greed—it was an invasion hiding behind paperwork.

“This is why Luke disappeared,” Kate says, eyes scanning the maps. “He found this. And they found out.”

My jaw clenches. “They got him to disappear once. They won't get that chance again.”

I scroll to a highlighted region—one of our southern border farms recently lost to 'bank default.' On the surface, it looked like a standard foreclosure. Missed payments, delinquent taxes, a local family forced off land they'd held for generations. But this data exposes what really happened: a fraudulent claim processed through a fake intermediary LLC, which then immediately transferred the title to a shell company tied to Sable Rock.

But the deeper we dig, the uglier it gets.

Buried in the metadata and cross-referenced transport logs, we find shipments—decades-old manifests that shouldn't exist anymore. The land had been used for more than farming. A secret private airstrip. Unregistered deliveries. Smuggling routes buried under barns and cornfields. Not just moonshine, but drugs.

Artifacts. Shifters, even. For decades, someone's been laundering danger through our Hollow, and no one saw it until now.

The plan was never for the land to hit the open market. Someone targeted, isolated, and snatched up the property before anyone knew what was happening. And they weren't just buying dirt. They were reclaiming access. Old supply lines. Ghost routes. Everything coming back online.

"This is their next target."

I look up. "It's time we remind them the Hollow remembers," I say, voice low, tight with promise, "and this time, it's going to fight back."

Eddie leans over my shoulder, eyes narrowed as more files scroll across the screen. "These aren't just relics. They've been reactivating the old routes. Look—infrared pings at three of the old drop zones, just this month."

Kate's brow furrows. "You're saying someone is using Wild Hollow again. Right under our noses."

"No." My voice is colder than I mean it to be. "I'm saying they never stopped."

A beat of silence drops into the room. Heavy. Final.

We always thought Luke was paranoid about what was moving through the Hollow. Turns out he was right. And the syndicate he tried to keep at bay? It's been biding time. Sable Rock didn't just infiltrate—they rooted themselves deep, hid behind false titles and burned ledgers, betting no one here would ever be bold or tech-savvy enough to dig them up. But now?

Now we know.

“They’ve reactivated the east tunnel,” Eddie mutters, pointing to another highlighted zone. “The one under McCray’s old mill.”

Kate stiffens beside me. “That’s less than two miles from the elementary school.”

My vision narrows.

They’re not just targeting land anymore. They’re circling the people. Cutting off our defenses. Surrounding the heart of the Hollow—and no one saw it coming.

Until now.

“Start cross-referencing personnel lists,” I order. “I want to know who’s been paid off, who’s disappeared, and who’s due for a visit. We’ve got one chance to cut the head off this thing before it digs in deeper.”

Kate doesn’t speak. She doesn’t have to. The fire in her eyes says enough. This is no longer about land. It’s about legacy, safety, survival.

## CHAPTER 18

### KATE

Morning in the Hollow doesn’t feel the same anymore. The air smells colder and sharper—as if something old has awakened. Even the birds seem quieter, their calls cautious, uncertain. There’s a tension beneath the frost, coiled and waiting.

I wake up warm, tangled in limbs and flannel and the scent of Hudson. For a moment, I stay still. Letting myself breathe him in, anchor to the quiet hum of his heart against my back. His arm is slung over my waist, heavy and protective, the bite mark on my shoulder warm where his lips pressed against it hours earlier. The sensation sends a

pulse through me—part comfort, part claim. It's a reminder of the way he touched me, the way he sees me. A mark that says I'm his, not out of possession, but protection. And damn if it doesn't make me feel steady when the world is anything but.

The quiet doesn't hold... because too much has changed.

The stillness hums with tension now, like a thread pulled too tight. I can feel it in the way Hudson's breathing deepens behind me, in the restless flicker of my heartbeat. That brief illusion of peace—of safety—is already dissolving at the edges. The morning light has turned brittle, too sharp against the frost-touched windowpane. Somewhere outside, a branch snaps—not loudly, but wrong somehow, off-tempo. My senses twitch. Even the silence feels unnatural, as if the world is bracing for something just out of sight. Last night we were tangled together. This morning, we're wrapped in something heavier: purpose, urgency, the weight of what comes next.

There's no going back—not for me. Not for him. Not for the Hollow. We've uncovered too many truths, crossed too many lines, and tested too many loyalties. Whatever innocence the Hollow once held is gone, burned away by secrets, blood, and the fire we lit last night when we chose each other—fully, finally, without fear. The only direction now is forward, teeth bared, head high.

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When I sit up, Hudson stirs behind me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I murmur. "Just thinking."

He props himself up on one elbow, eyes still hazy with sleep but focused on me like I'm the only thing that exists. "That's dangerous this early."

I smirk. "Only if you're not smart enough to keep up."

He grabs my wrist and pulls me back down into the sheets. "Try me."

We're kissing again before I remember we have a damn war to prepare for. For a second, I lose myself in it—the heat, the press of his chest, the way he groans low in his throat like he needs this more than air. The kiss feels different now—sharper, more urgent. Like we're trying to memorize each other before everything changes again.

But before it can go deeper, there's a knock at the door—sharp, deliberate. We both freeze. Hudson pulls back first, brows already furrowed.

"Yeah?" he calls, voice rough.

A voice muffled through the wood: "It's Eddie. We've got the information you wanted before you talked to the pack."

Hudson glances at me, the connection still electric between us, but I nod.

Duty doesn't wait. Not anymore.

Hudson calls the pack together in the great hall. They fill the place wall-to-wall, every inch of space charged with bristling energy. Murmurs ripple across the room, low and restless. Feet shuffle. Breathing is tight and uneven. It's the kind of charged silence that crackles right before a storm. The heavy scent of tension hangs in the air—sweat, pine, and raw nerves. Some wolves stand with arms crossed, jaws tight, suspicion etched into every line of their bodies. Some squirm restlessly, as if bracing for the sky to fall, while others display something akin to relief—perhaps grateful the truth has finally been revealed.

There are whispers, low and uncertain, threading through the pack like smoke—thin and insistent. When familiar names are mentioned, a few growls erupt, and each nod and murmured comment increases the tension. A name he recognizes causes a young wolf to my left to flinch, and a sharp, electric ripple moves through the crowd.

The unspoken question hangs between us all like a blade: what happens next? And who will survive it?

Hudson takes center stage, shoulders squared, eyes burning like he's already dared the enemy to try him. His voice carries, steady and fierce, threading through the crowd like a current. Heads turn. Conversations still. Even the skeptics shut up long enough to listen.

"There's a threat to our land," he says. "To our people. It's not just about territory—it's about control. About outsiders deciding what happens here. That ends today."

He lays it out clean—Sable Rock's play, the corrupted land claims, and what's coming next. He shows them documents, maps, names—evidence that the syndicate isn't just circling, they've already sunk claws in. Properties flipped through shell



companies. Families manipulated into debt they didn't owe. And worse—rumors that certain wolves may have taken bribes to look the other way. Gasps ripple through the room. A low snarl rises from the back. It's not just about land anymore—it's about betrayal from within.

“And while we're locking things down, no one walks alone. Pairs only. Extra guards on the borders. We protect each other. No exceptions.”

A few grumble under their breath, the indistinct murmur of dissent threading through the back of the hall. One or two older wolves exchange pointed looks, their expressions caught between doubt and deference. But no one steps forward. No one dares challenge him. Not with Hudson like this—shoulders squared, every word lined with command. He doesn't just wear the title of Alpha. He is Alpha, in every line of his body, every beat of silence that follows him.

I stand off to the side, arms crossed, heart racing. The energy rolling off Hudson hits me like heat from a forge—focused, searing, unshakable. I don't just see the power in him—I feel it vibrating in my bones, anchoring me even as it stokes something fierce in my chest. A spark of defiance. Of purpose. I may not carry the Rawlings' name, but this fight is mine, too. And I know exactly what I need to do.

I slip out the front door before the meeting ends, pulling out my phone and beginning to pace the length of the front porch. My fingers flex once at my sides before I start dialing, steadying my breath. Every call I make from here matters. Every name I reach out to could change the odds in our favor. There are people in this town who aren't Rawlings, who aren't McKinley—but who owe both families more than they'll ever admit. People who remember the way it was before the bloodlines started drawing lines in the dirt.

I start calling them—neutral shifters who've lived in the Hollow for years without ever swearing to a single Alpha. Independents who run farms on the outskirts, who

trade with both packs but belong to neither. A few humans, old-timers with long memories and longer grudges, who remember when the McKinleys and Rawlings stood side by side instead of across a line in the dirt.

Most don't ask questions. They just listen. And when I tell them what's coming, what we're up against, they say the same thing: just tell us when.

I get Elena involved, and she doesn't hesitate.

"You want a rebellion?" she asks. "Because I'm here for it."

"I want a coalition," I say. "Something smarter than brute force. If they're coming after our land with laws and money, we need more than just fangs and claws. We need records. Witnesses. Public eyes."

"I'll make calls," she says. "And Kate? You're doing good. Don't forget that."

I don't answer. I just stare at the screen for a beat, heart thudding like a warning drum in my chest. That lump in my throat doesn't go away—it thickens, sharp with memory and weight. I blink hard, then press the next number with fingers that don't shake, not anymore. I keep dialing, voice steady, determination settling in my bones like steel.

By mid-day, we have a network forming. People willing to stand up. Speak out. Dig up the kind of dirt that sticks—filthy truths that cling to reputations and rot legacies from the inside out.

Elena starts sorting through old civic records, while one of the McKinley cousins with a photographic memory recalls names that haven't come up in years. They retrieve zoning maps from the library's basement archives—maps annotated before the county lines were redrawn. Every call brings another piece of the puzzle. Every

conversation cracks open another secret.

It's messy. It's risky. And it's working.

When Hudson finally joins me on the porch, his boots hit the floorboards with slow, deliberate steps. He looks to the tree line like he expects it to blink first, like he's daring the forest to give him a target. His jaw is tight, shoulders wound with tension, the barely leashed kind that makes my wolf sit up and take notice. There's a quiet fury in him, the kind that simmers just beneath the surface. But when his eyes land on me—just me—something in him changes. The fire doesn't go out, but it banks, contained. For now.

"How many?" he asks.

"Enough to make noise," I say. "Enough to make them look twice."

His jaw ticks. "You shouldn't have to do this alone."

I step close, slide my hands under his shirt, fingers grazing the firm lines of his stomach, the steady thump of his heartbeat. His skin is warm, grounding. I flatten my palms against him, needing the contact, the solidity. The world might change around us, but this—this connection—is real. His breath hitches, and mine catches in response, like our bodies recognize what we're about to face and have already chosen their anchor.

"I'm not alone. But I'm not standing behind you, either. You need to get used to that."

His smile is slow and sharp. "Wasn't planning to put you behind me. I'm not stupid."

“I mean it, Hudson. If I’m going to be your mate and mistress of this pack, I’m going to be fighting at your side. I will not be the person people nod at because I sleep in your bed.”

“You are so much more than that,” he growls low. “Probably not the best time, but you should know—I love you, Kate.”

The words land like a warm hand around my spine—steady, anchoring. My breath hitches, throat tightening just a little, and I feel that old ache in my chest—Hudson sees me. Not as a duty, not as a title. As me. And something in me exhales for the first time in days.

"Maybe not, but I love you too."

“Don't worry sweetheart, if anyone forgets, I'll put them on their ass.”

He pulls me in and kisses me slow, fierce. His lips take their time, like he’s memorizing every curve, every breath. There’s no rush—just possession, promise, and heat curling low in my belly. His hand slides up my spine, anchoring me closer, as if he’s sealing the vow we just made. My fingers tangle in his shirt, tugging him deeper. Because if the world’s going to burn, I want to feel this fire first.

And when we break apart, the look in his eyes tells me everything I need to know. There's no hesitation, no shadow of doubt—just raw certainty and unwavering resolve. His gaze locks onto mine like a vow, fierce and unflinching, and I feel it settle deep in my bones. Whatever comes next, we’re already bound to meet it—shoulder to shoulder, teeth bared, hearts aligned.

The fight is coming. And we'll be ready.

## CHAPTER 19

## HUDSON

By the time the sun breaks over the ridge, I've already pulled together a small team—Kate at my side, Eddie with the tech, two enforcers I trust with my life, and a sniper stationed back on the ridge to keep watch over the trail. Having Kate at my side steadies the storm. I've led missions where trust could get you killed, and silence was safer than breath.

But her? She's not backup—she's the anchor. She cuts through the chaos like sunlight through fog, and that clarity changes everything. The air feels denser, charged not just with tension but with something deeper—her belief in me, in us. This isn't just a mission anymore. It's a line we walk together. I used to walk into danger with a plan. Now, I walk in with purpose—and someone to fight my way back to.

I have the coordinates from the USB burned into my memory: a clearing just north of the old state road, nestled between a pair of rock outcroppings and a stand of pines. The kind of place hunters might stumble over—close enough to feel like coincidence. Too close to be ignored. The memory of it scratches at the back of my mind like déjà vu dipped in gasoline, just waiting for a spark.

We move fast, and silent, honed instincts guiding every step. Our boots find the soft places between roots and rocks, barely rustling the forest floor. The pine-sweet air fills my lungs, cool and sharp, laced with Kate's scent and the coppery edge of anticipation. We're not just a team—we're predators on familiar ground, threading through the trees like a single pulse with shared breath and purpose. Each stride syncs with the rhythm of the forest, a quiet warning to anything watching: this is our territory, and we're coming.

Eddie's got his drone gear slung across his back, already prepping a launch. The two enforcers—Heath and Bo—are flanking us, eyes sharp, movements precise. Kate keeps low, her gaze scanning like she's part of the terrain. We're a unit built for

this—lean, lethal, and locked in. Heath moves like a silent shadow, tall and broad with scars that map his years of service. Bo is tighter, wiry and fast, eyes scanning every inch of the forest like he's memorizing it. Eddie's all nerves and tech-focused, fingers flying over his tablet as the drone whirs above. Kate, though—Kate is a vision of sharp intent and raw beauty, crouched low with muscles coiled, every movement a blend of instinct and precision. Together, we cut through the underbrush like a blade.

The air's still got that bite to it—crisp and sharp, like winter's waiting just beyond the horizon—but beneath it rides something darker. A sour rot, like mold on old meat or waterlogged wood, thick enough to catch in the back of my throat. It clings to the ground and curls up from the roots, a wrongness in the earth itself. The kind of rot that doesn't belong in these woods and has no business this deep in hollow territory.

Even the birds are holding back, like the forest itself knows to stay quiet. There's no sound but the crunch of boots on dry leaves, the rustle of brush against gear, and the mechanical whir of a drone lifting off from Eddie's gloved hands. Above us, the drone buzzes like a giant, angry hornet, its red lights pulsing against the canopy. Every step forward feels like trespassing in a place that's been waiting for us, watching. The team moves like ghosts—Kate crouched low, eyes scanning; Heath's broad frame a silent wall of power; Bo's lean form darting ahead with deadly precision; Eddie is all nerves and focus behind his screen. We are more than ready. We are already in it.

Kate crouches beside me at the treeline, her eyes scanning the clearing with practiced calm. Her fingers flex against the forest floor, grounding herself. There's no tremble, no hesitation—just a quiet storm beneath the surface. She's not just here to prove something. She's here because she belongs.

"You smell that?" she whispers.

I nod once. "Chemicals. Fuel. Something synthetic."

“It’s like something got burned,” she murmurs. “Or buried.”

Eddie flicks through images on his tablet. "I've got heat distortion about thirty feet due west. That's not ground temp. Something's under there—or was."



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:23 am*

I give a silent nod, and we fan out—low, fast, each movement measured and deliberate. The crunch of frost-crustured leaves underfoot is minimal, muffled by the layer of wet mulch and moss. We glide over the terrain like seasoned predators, our formation spreading in a loose arc as we sweep the clearing. Kate's footsteps are nearly soundless beside me, her focus laser-sharp. Heath's massive form blends into the brush like he belongs to it. Bo slips ahead, nimble and alert. We're not just moving—we're hunting. The air feels taut, wired with the promise of violence or revelation, and every instinct in me is on edge.

Eddie lags back, eyes on his tablet, while Heath and Bo flank either side with weapons at the ready, every sense tuned for ambush. Kate stays tight to my six, her body language alert and fluid, like she was born to track danger.

The scent trail is old, but it seems suspicious. Someone deliberately scoured some parts, making them too sterile and chemically sharp. Something, or someone, has muddied other parts of the trail with masking agents that sting the nose. This isn't just concealment. It's erasure. Someone went to lengths not to vanish, but to obliterate every trace they were ever here.

Which means we're exactly where we need to be. Not just physically—in this clearing with the cache beneath our boots—but in the heart of something bigger. A war that's been simmering under the surface, inching toward ignition. Every masked trail and scrubbed scent is a challenge. A warning. Or a dare.

We uncover the cache nestled beneath a dense blanket of leaf litter, cracked limbs, and the suffocating silence of long abandonment. The ground above it looks natural, untouched—almost too perfect in its chaos. It takes a trained eye to spot the

deliberate deception: the unnatural smoothness of the mound, the faint impression of something once disturbed and expertly concealed. My fingers brush the top layer aside, revealing the first glint of camo netting buried beneath the rot. The further we dig, the more obvious it becomes—someone wanted this hidden, not forgotten.

It's well-hidden—too well for amateurs. Plastic crates rest beneath a false floor of packed dirt and expertly woven camo netting, the fabric rough under my fingertips, gritty with embedded dust. As I lean closer, the faint tang of rust and mold wafts up—metal gone sour from long exposure, canvas that once breathed sweat and tension. Grease, solvent, and faint traces of pine resin layer, the smell, like a graveyard of preparation, soaked into every thread and surface. It's intimate in a way that makes my skin crawl, like I'm touching the echo of someone else's survival plan., the whole setup is nearly invisible to the casual eye.

When we peel it back and crack one open, I hear Kate's breath catch and feel her body stiffen beside mine, her shoulder brushing mine like a live wire. It's the physical manifestation of the data we uncovered.

Rifles. Ammo. Medical kits. Unmarked phones. Satellite equipment. The scent inside the crate hits like a punch—hot oil laced with ozone, the tang of cold metal, and something chemical-sharp, like solvent soaked into aged canvas. It catches in the back of my throat, foul and metallic, sending a jolt of adrenaline through my system. Each crate breathes the ghost of preparation—sweat, fear, and purpose etched into every surface.

The metal casings are slick with fine dust and old sweat, a grim echo of whoever packed them. Military grade, untraceable. Not the kind of gear that shows up by accident. Not for backwoods moonshiners.

“What the hell were they planning out here?” Kate whispers.

Eddie sifts through a secondary crate, muttering under his breath as his gloved hands brush aside foam packing and layers of old camo netting. "More encrypted comms gear," he says, pulling out a wrapped bundle. "Looks like redundant systems. Whoever set this up expected to be here awhile—and stay off-grid."

He digs deeper; the crate creaking faintly under his weight, then exhales sharply. "Solar charging banks. Emergency water filtration. A rolled schematic—part of a map, maybe. This wasn't a drop site. This was a base of operations. Temporary, mobile, but planned."

I take a step back, breathing deep, letting the forest fill my lungs.

That's when the scent finds me—not the sharp bite of gun oil or the acrid tang of old fuel, but something subtler. Feral. Familiar. Like a whisper from the past catching on the back of my throat.

It halts me cold, a jolt of memory dragging claws down my spine.

I can feel it even before I see him—wrongness slinking through the bushes like smoke under the door. The rest of the team's cataloging weapons and supplies, but one wolf is just... standing. Too still. Too relaxed. Eyes scanning, not observing.

Karl.

He is one of Eddard's hangers on. A loyalist, devious and quietly vocal. But always present. Always watching.

I move toward him, casual on the outside, heat building.

"You find anything?" I ask, jerking my chin toward the crates.

He doesn't flinch. "Nothing more than might be expected. I was surprised when they told me you wanted me here. I think this kind of work is beneath me."

I nod, folding my arms. "I don't doubt that, but then there's very little I think is beneath you. Maybe you can explain how Sable Rock always seemed to know when we were coming. Or how they got their hands on encrypted land registry data only three people had access to—including you as the elder in charge of technology oversight."

A beat. His lips twitch. Not in surprise... in calculation.

"You're making a mistake, Alpha," he says, calm as an undertaker. "Accusing an elder—a member of your own pack—without proof."

"I don't need proof," I growl, stepping closer, "I need instinct. And mine is screaming."

"You're paranoid."

I smile—cold—and shake my head. "No, but I am done being merciful."

Before he can bolt, I lunge, pinning him to a tree by the throat. He snarls, his wolf flashing in his eyes. His may be older, but mine is meaner and stronger.

"Was it you?" I hiss. "Did you give them our positions? Were you the one who told them where Luke was last seen?"

He spits blood and something uglier. "That idiot brought it on himself. He was snooping where he didn't belong."

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“You don’t get to talk about him,” I snarl, pressing harder. “You don’t get to stand here like you didn’t betray your own.”

“He wasn’t one of us,” Karl rasps. “Neither is she.”

I knock him down. Hard. The ground cracks beneath him. He gasps but doesn’t get back up.

“You sold out your pack for what?” I snarl. “Money? Power? A promise from people who leave bodies in their wake?”

He laughs, and it’s the sound of rot—wet, guttural, and wrong. It bubbles up from his chest like bile, like the bones of every lie he told are breaking free to choke him.

“I did it because you forgot who and what the Rawlings pack is supposed to be.”

I bare my teeth. “No. I remembered exactly who we’re supposed to be. And now we’re cleaning house.”

Eddie steps forward behind me. “Want me to take him back, Alpha?”

I nod once, eyes still locked on Karl. “I need you here. Have one of the others take him and put him in isolation. Ensure the others hear what he did.”

Karl glares up at me, bloody and beaten. Good. Let them all see the cost of betrayal.

I watch Karl being hauled away. A trace of something hits me like static—barely

there, but sharp and humming with danger. It smells of leather worn thin, wood smoke caught in fabric, and the dry, ozone tang of an old storm. My hackles rise before my mind catches up, instincts snarling as recognition brushes the edge of memory.

My heart stutters, and something primal stirs beneath my skin—my wolf prowling forward, alert and hungry.

It's like brushing up against a ghost I never laid to rest.

But it's there. Familiar. Feral. Threaded through the air like a memory.

Luke... again.

My pulse kicks hard, thudding against my ribs like a warning drum. I pivot, muscles coiled, hunting the source. The scent twists and drifts—elusive, threaded with solvent and decay—but underneath it clings like static.

Him.

Not old blood, not grief—not yet. Just a trace. A footprint in the dark.

My breath shortens. My wolf stirs beneath the surface, a low growl echoing through my chest, hackles rising with recognition. He doesn't pace—he anchors a sentinel locked on the scent like it's a target he's been waiting to strike.

I kneel, fingers sinking into the damp earth as I part the tangle of undergrowth. The brush gives way slowly, stubborn against my touch—then the fabric emerges, half-buried, dirt-clung and torn, its edges fluttering faintly in the breeze like a signal waiting to be found. There it is.

A scrap of cloth. Green and gray. Torn along the seam. My breath catches—just for a second. My heart kicks, and my wolf rises, ears pricked, recognizing the lingering scent clinging to the threads. Luke. The scent is faint, almost lost in the noise of fuel and decay, but it's there, raw and real. My fist clenches around it, rage and hope coiling tight in my chest. It's frayed, but unmistakable.

The same jacket he always wore when he came into the store—the one with the frayed left cuff where he used to tug at the seam when he was nervous. I remember how it smelled faintly of cedar and motor oil, how he'd lean over the counter and tease Kate while thumbing through the old coin jar. That scrap of fabric in my hand isn't just proof—the one he never took off—it's a memory made flesh, and it makes the air around me feel heavier, more charged.

Kate crouches beside me, reaching for it with trembling fingers. She doesn't cry. Doesn't even blink. But her breath hitches—just once—and her spine straightens like she's bracing against a blow.

Her jaw tightens, lips pressed into a line that dares the world to push her one inch further. Her fingers curl into fists at her sides, a tremor betraying the storm she's holding back. It's not fear. It's rage threaded with grief—controlled, but coiled tight, waiting for the right moment to strike. Every inch of her screams restraint, but her hand trembles harder now, defiance and grief warring just beneath the surface.

"He was here," I say. "Maybe recently."

Kate nods slowly. "He left it for us to find."

A chill crawls up my spine. Not just because of the message, but the implications. Every instinct I have prickles awake, the kind of warning that coils low in the gut and refuses to be reasoned with.

The forest is hushed, every branch and leaf frozen, like the whole place is bracing for what comes next. Something about this reeks of setup, of danger close enough to taste.

“He’s still alive.”

Kate looks up at me, eyes hard. “Or he was. Until they realized he got too close.”



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I clench the fabric in my fist. “If he’s alive, we bring him back.”

“And if he’s not?” she asks.

My voice drops low, lethal. “Then we finish what he started. We tear through every lie, every name on that list, and we burn Sable Rock to the ground—brick by brick, bone by bone. For Luke. For everyone they tried to silence. For what’s ours.”

Behind us, Eddie’s drone hums sharply, splitting the stillness with a metallic whir—less like a wasp, more like a blade spun too tight. It cuts a tight arc overhead, red lights flashing with surgical rhythm as it loops back, scouring the treetops with cold, calculating sweeps.

The drone swoops down in a calculated arc, its red lights pulsing like the heartbeat of something not quite alive. The hum of its rotors slices through the silence, not frantic, but precise—too aware, too focused, like it’s ferrying more than data. It hovers a beat longer than expected, then descends with eerie grace, blades whining like a blade drawn across steel.

Eddie snatches it out of the air with practiced ease, his jaw set tight. He doesn’t speak right away, just studies the incoming feed with narrowing eyes. His breath catches as the data loads, and the air seems to compress around us. The surrounding woods lean in, hushed and loaded with anticipation, every rustle and creak swallowed by the weight of whatever revelation is about to break.

He holds up his tablet. “There’s another site. A mile out. Heat signs, maybe bodies. We’ll need backup.”

I stand slowly, the worn scrap draped across my palm like a relic. Time has softened the edges, but the scent woven into it stops me cold. Cedar soap and leather oil—Luke. The smell yanks me backward to the porch steps of his cabin, to cold beer bottles clinking, to laughter in the dark. To the brother of the woman I love. To the guy who once sucker-punched me for kissing Kate behind the barn and then laughed so hard we both ended up in the dirt. A man I might never see again.

I slide the scrap into my pocket like it's a promise, not just evidence. A vow I won't let fade.

Kate meets my gaze, her eyes fierce, jaw tight. "Then let's raise hell."

For a beat, neither of us moves. The memory of Luke's jacket still burns between us, grounding everything in something raw and personal. I reach for her hand—just a brush of fingers—but it's enough. A shared pulse. A promise made without words.

I nod, wolf stirring. "This ends now. We go in, take control, and make sure they don't crawl away from what they've done."

The Hollow holds more than memories—it seethes with fury, with every tree and stone waiting to bear witness to retribution.

And we're about to give it something to unleash.

## CHAPTER 20

### KATE

The sky above churns with thick, acrid smoke, its tendrils coiling like a foreboding serpent above what was once a lush, green forest, now reduced to blackened stumps and smoldering ash. The ground bears silent witness to the violence that unfolded,

scorched and shredded by the relentless assault of claws and heavy boots, slick with the dark sheen of blood and littered with singed debris. Sable Rock didn't go down without a fight. The battle surged in relentless waves—howls slicing through the air like primal war cries, bodies colliding in bone-jarring clashes, chaos erupting in every conceivable direction.

I'll never forget the visceral rush of charging through their ranks, teeth bared in a feral snarl, flanked by wolves whose once-lustrous coats were streaked with blood and soot—marked as warriors by the brutality of the fight. The battle is raw and unforgiving. Shifters and humans stand united, fighting side by side. Some shifters retain their human form, their clenched fists and determined gazes a testament to their resolve, while others have embraced their animal nature—claws ripping through flesh, bodies colliding with bone-jarring force, teeth sinking deep into adversaries with a fierce bite. The air is a deafening symphony of snarls and screams, the metallic scent of blood mingling with the acrid odor of scorched earth.

My face is a mask of grim determination, as I thrust a sharpened blade into a syndicate guard. My muscles are taut with purpose, my movements precise and unyielding. Nearby, Hudson tears through another foe, his eyes blazing with feral intensity, each movement a lethal dance of precision and power. He maneuvers with deliberate intent—one moment crouched behind the jagged cover of debris, the next sweeping in from the flank with lethal grace. His strikes are a blend of instinct and honed skill, a deadly dance of precision and fury. This is not merely a fight—it's a desperate struggle for survival, a collision of blood and indomitable will.

The command center lies in ruins now, flames hungrily licking at its skeletal remains, casting eerie, flickering shadows that dance like specters. We dismantled their communications, scattering their leadership like ash in the wind. The traitors who supported them? We round them up wherever possible, dragging them from their hiding spots. Those we miss vanish into the tree line, shadows slipping into deeper shadows, hunted but not yet extinguished.

Hudson stands across the field, blood-streaked and shirtless, a thunderstorm of need and fury barely reined in behind his eyes. For a heartbeat, I forget the smoke, the ash, the way the world still smolders. Seeing him like that—fierce, alive—it lights something wild inside me. Relief and hunger tangle in my chest. Shallow wounds and ash mark his skin. The moment our eyes meet, it's like the rest of the world fades to static. My legs move before I can think. When I reach him, he doesn't speak. He doesn't need to. His arms wrap around me, grounding us both. My fingers clutch his shoulders, digging into the dirt and heat of his skin. We're whole. We're safe.

"You're okay," I whisper into his neck, breath catching. "You're okay."

He leans down, pressing his forehead to mine. "You kept us steady. You brought them together."

We stand in the field long enough for the sounds of victory to settle into something quieter—torn shouts fading into murmurs, the low drone of generators kicking in, and the rustle of movement as wolves prowl through the smoking remnants of battle. The sharp scent of ozone clings to the air, braided with blood and scorched metal. Every inhale scrapes against the back of my throat.

Triage stations buzz with quiet urgency, medics moving like ghosts in the haze, voices low and clipped. Wolves with soot-darkened coats and eyes like slivers of moonlight pace the perimeter, every sense sharpened, braced for an ambush that never comes. A breeze stirs ash into small spirals across the dirt, and somewhere, a child cries, the sound abruptly cut off by a comforting voice. In the stillness that follows, we hold on to each other and breathe.

I find myself drawn to one of the scorched outbuildings the Syndicate had been using as a temporary headquarters. The roof has partially collapsed, but inside the smoldering ruin, something calls to me. My boot scuffs against metal as I kick aside the ash, revealing a rusted lockbox hidden beneath a floor panel. The scent hits me

before I open it—cedar, ash, old ink. Familiar. Luke.

My heart flips, breath hitching as my fingers brush the rough lid of the lockbox. I drop to my knees, ash rising in soft clouds around me, and pry it open with trembling hands. Nestled inside is a thick, leather-bound journal—edges scuffed, corners bent, the surface mottled with scorch marks and darkened fingerprints. The scent of cedar, ink, and something faintly metallic curls up from the pages, wrapping around my memorylike smoke. The front cover has a single phrase written in Luke’s sharp, unmistakable scrawl:

Don’t look for me. Not yet. It’s not over.

I press my palm over the words, as if I can absorb them through skin and bone. Tears burn behind my eyes, but they don’t fall. Not this time. I’ve already lost him once. I won’t let go again. Not without a fight. The scrawl on the page etches itself into my bones—both a warning and a vow. My breath hitches as memory flickers: Luke grinning across the campfire, handing me the last marshmallow like it’s a treasure. That boy isn’t gone. He’s just stepped into the shadows. And now? I’ll walk through the fire to bring him back.

Hudson finds me there not long after, crouching beside me. His hand is warm and steady against my back, anchoring me to the moment. I feel the weight of him settle beside me, silent at first, like he understands the quiet grief threading through my bones.

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"He left it for you," he says softly. "He trusted you to hold on to it."

"He shouldn't have to do it alone."

Hudson brushes soot from my cheek and kisses me—not gentle, not sweet, but full of heat and promise. "He won't. But he needs time. And we... we need to live the life he fought to protect."

It isn't just a journal. It's a breadcrumb trail, leading deeper into the shadows Luke has vanished into. Tucked between its pages are hand-drawn maps marked with coded routes, names I don't recognize—some crossed out, others underlined in red—and strange symbols I've seen carved into trees along the Hollow's outer border. They mean nothing to me yet, but I can feel their weight. And I will learn. We will. Together.

In Wild Hollow, revitalization begins again. It's more than wood and nails. The town begins to breathe again, not in one great sigh, but in small, steady bursts: laughter on front steps, the measured rhythm of hammers ringing out down Main Street, music drifting from porches where silence once settled like dust.

The air carries the scent of sawdust and smoke, mingling with cider simmering on stoves and bread rising in warm ovens. Children race through doorways, their shouts echoing like promises. Windows flicker with lamplight and life. Slowly, steadily, Wild Hollow stitches itself back together—one wall, one smile, one softened heart at a time.

I reopen the general mercantile three days later. Hank waddles from the counter to the

front of the store, taking up his usual post beside the door like a feathered sentinel, hissing at anyone who dares track in the dirt. His eyes follow everyone, daring them to test him.

Hudson moves through the aisles, stocking shelves with calm efficiency, sleeves rolled up and muscles flexing beneath the faded gray of his shirt. Every woman who passes the window pauses, pretending not to look, but looking all the same. I can't blame them—not with the way he grins over his shoulder at me, mischief in his eyes and flour dusting his jaw like he stepped out of some fantasy bakery calendar.

Elena wanders in a few days later, her boots scuffing across the floor and leaving faint prints in the layer of dust we haven't quite chased out yet. Her jeans are snug, her sweater is baggy and she has a scarf wrapped around her neck to ward off the chill.

Her shoulders are tight, jaw set, but there's something flickering in her eyes—something restless, unresolved. She doesn't speak right away, just sets her satchel on the counter and unzips it with fingers that tremble ever so slightly. She tosses a small envelope onto the counter and says, "This was propped up against my coffeemaker. It was addressed to me."

My brow rises. "Luke?"

She nods, expression unreadable. I leave her while I help a customer find the right lantern oil. When I come back, Elena is holding the letter with both hands, eyes distant.

"What did he say?" I ask gently.

She gives me a soft, stunned smile. "Nothing but the letter. It says this was never just about Wild Hollow. He says there's more."

"You mean he's gone?"

She nods. "He was there one night, and the next morning, he was gone."

We stand there in silence, both of us clutching remnants of someone who refuses to vanish. The envelope in Elena's hands, the journal in mine—they pulse with the weight of unanswered questions. Of loyalties unspoken. Of a connection that refuses to die. Whatever Luke is involved in hasn't ended here. And something deep in my gut tells me—it's only just beginning.

That night, Hudson and I curl together in bed. The cracked windows let the sharp scent of pine and ash drift through, remnants of the battle lingering in the air. The sheets tangle around us, warm from our bodies and the heat of something deeper—relief, yes, but also the kind of closeness forged by fire and fear. My hand rests over his chest, rising and falling in a steady rhythm, syncing with mine. For a while, we don't speak. We don't need to. It's enough to just be. Safe. Whole. Home.

"Think he's watching us?" I whisper.

"Probably."

I try to laugh, but the sound comes out more like a mix of ache and anger. "He should've come to me. I deserve better than this and so does Elena. We both deserve better than loving and mourning a ghost."

Hudson's arm tightens around me, steady and warm. "He's trying to protect you both. But yeah... he should've known better."

"Whatever comes next, Hudson... we face it together. No more secrets. No more hiding."



I turn to face him, brushing his jaw with my fingers. "You stood with me when I needed it most. I'll stand with you until the end."

Our lips meet, slow and sure. A promise sealed in heat and devotion. The war is over—for now. But the danger still lingers in the shadows. And somewhere out there, Luke walks alone with secrets yet to be told.

Which means our story?

It's far from over.

## CHAPTER 21

### LUKE

Because in this moment, I feel everything I've tried to bury clawing its way to the surface—need, guilt, hunger, hope. Because I can't. Not when her nails dig into my shoulders like she's anchoring herself. Not when her legs tighten around my waist, hips arching, desperate to draw me in deeper.

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Her voice breaks on a moan. My name. Just my name, and it nearly undoes me.

I kiss her hard and possessively, claiming every inch of her mouth like I'll never taste it again. And maybe I won't. But right now? Right now, she's mine. Her body arches for me, her skin damp with sweat and want, and my instincts coil tight and savage in my chest as I sweep her off her feet and carry her to her bed. We rid each other of our clothes and I lay her down with the reverence she deserves and a passion I can barely restrain.

I cover her body with my own. Her breath hitches warm and fast against my throat, as I press her deeper into the mattress. For a split second, it hits me—how close this is to everything I wanted but told myself I couldn't have. The way her body yields to mine, the way she gasps my name—it costs something. More than just the ache in my chest. It's a debt I may never get to repay.

Elena tastes like heat and home—like everything I told myself I didn't deserve.

But I take it anyway.

Elena slides her hand between us, wrapping her fingers around my cock. I inhale sharply—she's warm, deliberate, soft. Her grip tightens in a slow stroke that makes my jaw clench. A rumble escapes me, half growl, half groan. I can't hold it back.

"I've missed you so," she moans.

Guilt tries to creep in, but I push and shove it down even though every muscle in my body is taut with need. I'm throbbing, barely keeping the knot at bay—one wrong

move and instinct will take over.

Her eyes widen, lips part, and I claim her mouth with a fierce kiss. My hand moves from her breast—rolling her nipple between my fingers—then drifts lower to her clit, teasing until she moans and arches. I lift my head, savoring the sound.

“Luke, please—” she whispers, soft and aching. I chuckle. I know exactly how ready she is, how desperately she wants me inside. But I’m not done tasting her.

I trail kisses down her body, slow and deliberate. When I reach her breasts again, I suckle each until she begs for more. She trembles under me, helpless with need. I lower myself between her thighs—she parts them willingly—and I groan at her wetness. I circle her clit with my tongue; she cries out, thrusting against my mouth as she comes hard.

I don’t stop. I keep her climbing higher, plunging my tongue deep until her body writhes and she moans my name like a prayer. “God, Luke.” I lift my head to watch her tremble.

I rise, positioning my thick length at her entrance. “Open your eyes, Elena. Look at me when I take you.” She meets my gaze, wide and willing.

“I see you,” she murmurs, arms winding around my shoulders.

I push forward slowly, sliding deep into her. She gasps, overwhelmed, but I growl, “Keep your eyes on me.” She obeys, and the moment I breach her fully, she shudders and comes again. I thrust deep and steady, wrapping her in my arms as her body clenches around me.

Her eyes never leave mine. My canines ache—lengthening with each thrust as the animal within surfaces. Her scent, her surrender, fuel my need. I may be able to

suppress the knot, but it seems my primal instincts to mark and claim what is mine are too strong.

My lips find the spot on her neck, just right of the hollow of her throat and my fangs pierce the skin. She gasps, pain flickering, but she doesn't pull away. I sink my teeth in, biting harder, tearing into the spot that will mark her as mine forever.

She cries out—pleasure, pain, surprise—all tangled into one sharp sound. I feel her clench around me, feel her come undone with a tremble that drags me over the edge with her. My release crashes through me like a wildfire, scorching everything I thought I could control.

She shudders, her pussy convulsing around me as I drive deep. I hold her tight, thrusting hard, marking her completely. She cries out again, her orgasm washing over both of us.

I draw back and kiss the wound, nuzzling her softly, whispering in the ancient tongue that carries our bond. She may not understand the words, but she feels their truth.

I thrust into her again, slower this time, grinding deep as her breath catches and her head falls back, throat bared in perfect surrender.

That's when it happens.

The moment sharpens—narrows to heat and instinct and the wolf clawing under my skin. A growl rips free of my throat, guttural and raw. Her eyes open, wide and dark and knowing.

“Luke,” she gasps, and she knows—somewhere in her bones, she knows.

When I pull back, my mouth is slick with her taste and the faint copper of blood. The

mark I've left behind pulses with heat.

Her chest rises and falls beneath me, her body still wrapped around mine like she can keep me from disappearing. I want to believe that's true.

But it isn't.

Not for me.

Not for the man the world's made me become.

By morning, she sleeps curled in the sheets, bare and soft and glowing in the pale light. My mark rests bold and red on her shoulder. The wild part of me howls at the sight of it—wants to crawl back into bed, bury myself in her scent, and never leave.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:23 am*

But I have to.

If I stay, I drag her and Kate into the fire still chasing me.

So I do what I swore I wouldn't.

I leave.

Quietly, I press a kiss to her temple. She stirs but doesn't wake. My fingers linger a beat too long on the curve of her hip before I pull away.

The note I've written sits on the counter, sealed and weighted with one of the smooth stones from her windowsill—the pale gray one with the amber streak she once told me she found during a storm. Said it reminded her of the way the sky cracked open when something big was coming. I always thought it looked like it was holding lightning inside. Just like her.

I love you, but I can't stay.

They would use you and Kate against me.

This was never just about Wild Hollow.

It was about you.

I step out into the dawn; the sky is streaked with fire and gold. The air bites at my skin, but I don't flinch. I strip down slowly, folding my clothes and stuffing them in

the backpack slung over my shoulder.

One last look back at the place that could've been mine.

Then I drop to all fours, let the thunder roll through me, and dissolve into fur and muscle and speed. No bones cracking. No pain. Just a shimmer of lightning and shards of color exploding into motion.

I run into the sunrise, the icy wind slicing across my fur, eyes locked on the horizon. My lungs burn with every breath, but I don't slow. The pull of instinct drives me forward—faster, harder, farther—like if I run fast enough, far enough, I can outrun the ache I left behind.

And I don't look back.