



Heart of a Wolf

Author: *Natalie Brunswick*

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Description: After living with a faulty heart her entire life and finally getting the surgery she needs, Jo expects a long recovery. Instead, she experiences almost no pain, has a heightened sense of smell, and more energy than she knows what to do with.

Of course, getting back to a normal life would be a lot easier without the ears and tail.

Thrown into a world she knows nothing about, Jo will have to prove herself to the other wolves as well as Fallen, the woman who makes her heart race the most.

For Fallen, teaching the newly-turned wolf how to hunt and control her shifts is bad enough without their feelings getting involved. Loyal to the Alpha, there isn't anything Fallen wouldn't do for her or the pack she leads. She'd even give up her own life if it ever came down to it, but what about her heart?

Would she give that up as well?

With Jo struggling to find her place within the pack and Fallen doing whatever she can not to give in to her wolf's lust, can these two women find common ground, or is their bond doomed from the start?

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Chapter One

“Are you sure you don’t want to give it another week?”

Valarie closed the refrigerator door with her hip and deposited an apple into a brown paper bag.

“I’m fine,” I said, lacing up my shoe as I sat in the living room. “The doctors said I’m good to go. It’s been three months, Val.” More like three months, six days, and twenty-two hours, but I wasn’t counting. Not really.

As much as I adored Val, there was only so much I could do to keep myself from going insane. I’d honestly worn out my welcome ages ago.

“You just like having me around because I do your laundry,” I teased, pushing off the sofa so I could join her in the kitchen. She closed the paper bag and set it aside before I could see what was in it. “Please tell me there’s some kind of meat in there.”

“Turkey,” she said, handing the bag over to me. Something resembling a growl passed through my lips and she bopped me on the nose. “Is that how you thank your amazing sister?”

“You’re right,” I said, kissing her on the cheek, “I should do way worse than that.”

“Oh? How so?” She smiled sweetly in my direction, giving me the same look Mom used on me whenever she caught my bluff.

I shrugged, then rummaged in the living room closet for my coat. “I’ll think of something.”

“It’d better be good,” she called after me. “I don’t want to get my hopes up for nothing.” Her smile only lasted so long.

Deep creases marred her forehead, her eyes full of concern.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I said, leaving my bagged lunch on the end table so I could put on my coat.

I zipped it all the way up and offered Val a half-smile. She really was too good for me. Not just after the surgery but my entire life. We had the same blood type, so whenever I needed

a transfusion or something else to help me along, she was right there in the bed beside my own. It was a terrible life for a kid, but Val never complained.

And now, after decades of doctors, hospitals, and surgeries, it was finally over. I had a heart that actually worked and had more energy than I knew what to do with. In fact, Val had to slow me down a few times because all I wanted to do was run.

Run, jump, climb, swim, you name it and I wanted to do it.

Instead, she made me relax at home and promise to keep my mind on shows or video games.

“No excessive exercise, remember?” she’d said not so long ago when she caught me using the weight room in the lower level of her apartment complex.

Back then, she’d used her usual excuse about doctors’

orders, but seeing as they'd cleared me to go back to work...

"Everything will be fine," I assured her, taking Val's hands in mine when she dropped her gaze. Her long brown hair slipped over her shoulder, hiding her face from view. "You know I take my health as seriously as you do. I've never felt this good, so forgive me if I'm a little excited."

Her puppy-dog eyes were almost enough to break my heart. Fortunately, my heart was brand-spanking new, so the chances of it breaking were rather slim.

"I need to work late tonight," she said, managing to meet my gaze, her hazel eyes glazed over with tears. "Call me as soon as you get in, okay?" That time the tears made it into her voice. She really was my little worrier.

Closing the distance between us, I pressed her forehead to mine, forcing back tears of my own. "After today, all of this worrying will have been for nothing. We'll both come home, crash on the couch, and watch cheesy movies while eating those veggie chips you like."

That got a smile out of her! Once we separated, I fixed my coat and scrubs, then headed back toward the door.

"You'll call me if you need anything, right?" It was the one stipulation she'd put into place the moment the doctors cleared

me to go back to work.

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I released an exasperated sigh and glanced back over my shoulder at her. Val stood with her arms folded in front of her chest. “Yes, Mom,” I said, drawing out the last word. “But I’m telling you you’re worried about nothing. I’ll be fine.”

“Jeremy will tell me if you’re lying,” she warned, joining me just inside the door so she could hold it open for me once I was ready to go.

“A spy on the inside. Great.” Just what I need, another babysitter.

To be fair, I loved Jerry almost as much as I loved Val.

We’d met after Westgrove hired me as one of their orthopedic surgeons and had been friends ever since. Unlike everyone else inside the hospital, he didn’t coddle me. Well, he did to a point, but it wasn’t anything like how my parents had treated me along with the rest of the world. He and Val knew just how hard I could push myself before it was too much. Of course, I could do without all the fretting and looks of concern coming from Val.

“You’ll do as he says,” Val said, oblivious to my thoughts.

I half-expected her to bop me on the nose again. Instead, she touched my arm as though I might break. “Please. You know I worry.”

“You always do.” I smiled and kissed her forehead, hovering a moment more when she stiffened from my touch.

“I’ll call you as soon as I get in and then again at lunch.

Okay?”

“Worrying is my job,” she said, taking me in her arms. At this rate, I was going to be late for my first day back at work.

I let her do it anyway.

“I’m not broken, Val.” Not anymore.

She pulled back enough to meet my gaze. “If I don’t look after you, who will?”

The few dates I’d had never ended well. Everyone treated me like glass, and as soon as my folks heard I was getting too

energetic, they put an end to that as well. College came soon after that.

I was so busy with my studies and doctor appointments, I didn’t have time for much else. My parents begged me to stay home and avoid school altogether, but Val had my back. She helped me through it and even joined me in a handful of classes before going off and studying to be a veterinarian instead.

I smiled at the memory and took her hands in mine. “You know I love you, but you need to let it go. The surgery went well, I’m fully healed, and I feel great.”

“But your body still has some catching up to do,” she reminded me.

“You want me to sprint up and down the steps?”

“No, but I know you do. Just pace you

rsself, okay?”

“If I go any slower, I’m going to be late for work.”

She sighed, pulled me into her arms for one last hug, then saw me out. I was halfway down the hall when the apartment door clicked. A second later, she opened it and rushed after me, the keys on her belt loop slapping against her leg.

“Wait.” She rushed down the hallway, then handed me the same brown paper bag I’d left on the end table. “Don’t forget your lunch.”

“I wouldn’t say I forgot—”

“They know your diet, Jo. No red meats.”

I offered her a partial shrug and did my best to keep from wrinkling my nose. “It was worth a shot.”

She glared at me and folded her arms in front of her chest.

“Have a great day.”

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“You too.” I turned on my heels to go. “Oh, and please don’t come home smelling like cat pee again. It’s disgusting.”

“It comes with the territory. Besides, it wasn’t that bad, was it?”

“If you call taking a bath in it not bad, then yeah. Sure.” I glanced back over my shoulder at her and smiled when she sniffed her freshly laundered clothes.

“I’ll do my best.”

“And now I’m really going to be late. Love you!”

“Love you t—”

The elevator door closed behind me, cutting her off. The moment it did, my heart sank. She may have been younger than me, but she’d always been there when I needed her most.

From doctors appointments to needle pricks and bad dates, she was always there.

She sat with me and held my hand through the worst of it and shared a box of crayons and her coloring books during the best. I couldn’t imagine my life without her. Our age gap of a few years didn’t matter as she’d always been around. She was my confidant, my shoulder to cry on, the arms I fell asleep in, and the laughter I longed to hear after a long day of work.

Unfortunately, she was so invested in my life that she’d never lived one of her own.

Now that everything was over, I hoped that much would change. She'd wanted to date and had a handful of flings in the past, but none of them ever stuck because I had to call her home due to some medical emergency. It wasn't fair.

But it's over now, I assured myself as the elevator reached the lower level of the building.

After twenty-eight years, we finally had a chance to live.

Chapter Two

Jeremy was waiting for me with a stupid smile on his face as soon as I walked through the double glass doors. The smell of bleach and ammonia hit me like a truck, practically knocking me over as I steadied myself against the door frame.

"You okay?" he asked with a hint of laughter in his voice.

"Someone went a little crazy with the bleach this morning," I told him, walking over to the reception area to take a look at the charts. Jeremy stopped me before I could read the one stacked on top. "What? I can look."

"Orthopedics can wait," he told me, taking the chart right out of my hand before putting it back where I'd found it. He then pulled me aside so an elderly couple could get by. "It's your first day back, Jo. No jumping in with both feet. We need to find you an easy, lighter activity. You know, just to get your toes wet."

Like I said before, I love Jerry to pieces, but like Val, he could be a little overprotective at times. Like right now.

He hadn't said as much but I could see this morning was on the busier side. Considering the mussed hair on top of his head and his glasses already sliding down

his nose, it looked as though he could use whatever help he could get.

“I’m going to tell you the same thing I told Val,” I said, flattening his brown curls the best I could. “I’m not glass. I’m not going to break. Please, Jer, I need this. I’ve been out of my mind sitting at home. Give me something I can really sink my teeth into.”

“Boredom won’t kill you,” he said, adjusting his glasses before walking me toward our office. “Besides, it’s just for a few days. Consider it a probationary period just to make sure your mind is as fit as the rest of you.”

I released a sigh of frustration. “How much is my sister paying you to keep me on a leash?”

“Nothing. Doctor’s orders.” He gave me a pointed look, his icy blue eyes narrowing in my direction.

“Meaning you.”

He smiled and pulled on a pair of invisible suspenders.

“You know how it is. A patient walks in after weeks of recovery claiming they’re ready to go back out on the field, but you never let them, do you?”

I let my arms drop to my sides. “You’re going to recite procedures to me?”

“It’s more of a guideline, but as a surgeon, I thought you’d agree.”

He ushered me inside the office and quickly removed the films off the screen before I could get my hands on them.

Man, he’d thought of everything! No charts. No x-rays.

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Nothing for me to do but stare at my desk, the stack of sticky notes, and my now-empty pen holder.

“Where are my pens?” I asked, picking up the cup so I had something to do.

Jeremy leaned against my desk. “No heavy work means no dictation or writing in charts.”

Okay, now he really was babying me.

Once I put the pen holder back where I found it, I sat down in my chair and closed my eyes. “Is there anything I’m allowed to do today, or am I supposed to just sit here twiddling my thumbs while you run up and down the hall like a maniac?”

“The clinic.”

“You think a bunch of people with a case of the sniffles is better for me than working on broken bones?”

“Less time on your feet means you’ll have more time to rest.”

He had me there. Surgery could take hours at best or more than a full workload on some of the more difficult ones. With the clinic, I’d have patients rolling in and out. If I needed a

break (which I wouldn’t), I could easily step out and ask someone to take over for me.

It was definitely an easier way to get back into the swing of things, but my hands itched at the thought of fixing a major break. The long surgeries were always my favorite. Once I reached my flow state, I could work for hours without even realizing it.

Having a new heart shouldn't change that, right?

"Anyway," Jerry said, pulling me from my thoughts, "I need to get back. I have something in about ten minutes, but I'll be out of surgery in three hours or so. Grab one of the nurses if you need help. I mean it, Jo. No funny business."

"I'll be in the clinic," I said with a sigh. "How hard could it be?"

Man, my nose must've been on the fritz because the clinic didn't smell any better. It actually had that sick flu smell. You know the one when you've been in bed with a fever for far too long? That smell hung in the air, turning my stomach the longer I looked at patients.

As far as the patients were concerned, most of them had a cold, a UTI, or something not nearly as sinister as the flu, but there was no mistaking the smell. As the morning wore on, the smell got even worse. It wasn't until I was on my last patient before lunch when I realized a strange ticking in my ears. It sounded almost identical to that of a heartbeat, but that wasn't possible without a stethoscope.

Maybe Val was right. Maybe I should've stayed home for another more week. I was so used to the clean smells at home and the quiet that everything in the clinic was magnified. It wasn't just the sounds and smells, either. I could taste things stronger than I ever could before. The bleach solution we used to wipe down the reception desks and counters hung in the back of my throat, making me cough.

And when I finally took a moment to grab a cup of tea, it's flavor was too strong as

well.

Frowning, I glanced at my paper cup, then checked the back of the tea box. Green tea. It was the same kind I always had on my break. I didn't add any sugar or milk, so there was no reason for it to taste so overwhelming.

I didn't steep it that long, did I? I hon

estly wasn't sure, and after taking one more sip just to be sure, I dumped the contents of my cup down the drain. It wouldn't have been the first time I let a tea bag sit for too long, though I couldn't remember it tasting as bad as this.

Which was a real shame too. Especially when I tried to return to the clinic. My stomach rolled and nausea climbed up the back of my throat. Whatever folks had come down with, I couldn't stand being around it for very long. So once I found someone to relieve me and called Val to check in, I went to find Jerry.

He took one look at me and urged me into an empty exam room. His brows creased with concern, and when he suggested he take my temperature, I almost laughed.

"I'm serious, Jo. You're pale and your skin's clammy to the touch. You don't feel that?"

Feel what? Aside from the disgusting smells in the hospital, I felt perfectly fine. "You're overreacting," I told him, clenching my teeth when he blocked the exit to the room.

"Seriously? Can you guys stop treating me like I'm a child?"

My words came out in a growl, the edge in my voice surprising even me.

“Go home,” Jerry said, matching my tone the best he could. “You’re unwell and aren’t fit to see patients today.”

“The hell I’m not.” When I went to leave the room again, he stepped in front of me, jutting out his chin as he did.

“Go home,” he said again, emphasizing his words. “You won’t let me take your temperature, but I can see you have a fever. You aren’t ready to be here. Not yet. You also just snapped at me, and you never snap at me.”

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He was right, but going home meant Val would have another reason to keep me there.

“I was so close to being back,” I told him, my words heavy and thick.

“I know, and you will be. Just... not today.” He released a long breath and met my gaze with one that wasn’t nearly as hard as my own. “You know I don’t want to do this, but I need to have you removed from the hospital. You’re unfit to work.

Your heart and body might be fine, but your head’s not in the game. Go home, get some rest, and we’ll start fresh next week.”

“Next week?” I seethed, resisting the urge to clench my hands at my sides. What’s wrong with me? I never got short with Jerry. I was as mellow as they came.

“Do I need to make it a month?” he asked, his brows lifting above his eyes. “I might not call the shots around here, but all I have to do is set up a meeting with—”

“Fine,” I bit out. “I’m going. But next week, I’ll be back.”

And I’ll be back to my usual self as well.

I was sure of it.

The walk to my car didn’t go any better. With the hospital far behind me, the fresh air should’ve helped. Instead, every gust of wind brought another smell along with it. There were the extra potent marigolds someone had planted out front, followed by the heavy smell of exhaust and gasoline from those driving in the city.

The once delicious smell of caramelized onions wafting over from central was enough to make me sick.

Okay, maybe I really was coming down with something, but what? No cold—no matter how strong—hit this hard or this fast after exposure. They took time to incubate. It should've taken a day or more for me to feel the way I did.

Besides, most colds started with a cough, the sniffles, or an

itchy throat. Not a heightened sense of smell, hearing, and taste. That was definitely new.

The more I focused on it, the harder it was for me to ignore. Breathing through my mouth only caused my salivation glands to go into overdrive, and every single sound grated on my nerves. The bees buzzing around the flowers sounded more like they were flying right next to my ears.

“Just get home,” I told myself, ducking into the parking garage to get my car.

Gravel shifted under my shoes, echoing inside walls of concrete the deeper in I went.

By the time I reached my car, I had a migraine the size of Mount Vesuvius and could barely stand without losing my breath. My muscles ached like those belonging to an eighty-year-old. When I tried to get in my car, pain rolled up the length of my back, forcing the air from my lungs.

Now I knew it wasn't the flu. Muscle aches, sure, but this?

The flu shouldn't have left me doubled-over in pain.

Panicked, I looked back on my schooling and tried to pinpoint where the pain was

coming from. There were a lot of illnesses we didn't deal with on a regular basis, but if someone brought a contagion into the country, I wasn't the only one at risk.

Sadly, the blood pooling and throbbing behind my ears put a quick end to that. Knowing Val would never let me out of the house ever again, I fished my cell out of my back pocket, cursing under my breath as it clattered to the ground.

When I went to pick it up, my fingers tensed and locked into place.

"Breathe, Jo. Remember to breathe." All pain, no matter how strong, would eventually pass. My body was just having a panic attack. If I waited long enough and counted my breaths, it would pass.

Deep breath in.

And out.

Every breath I took was harder than the one before it. An invisible hand pressed down on my chest, forcing the air out of my lungs until I couldn't breathe at all. My heart pounded, crashing against my ribcage as my fight or flight instincts finally kicked in.

"H-hello?" I choked out, hoping someone was close enough to hear me. Lunch had already come and gone, but folks left the hospital all the time. "Help!" I squeaked out. "I...

I need help."

I tried to pound against the side of my car but my arm refused to move. I thought about it, envisioned it, and still nothing. My heart seized, my muscles locked up, and the only thing I could do was look at my phone which was inches away.

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In the parking garage, there was no sound, no taste, and no smell. The longer I focused on my phone, the harder it was for me to see.

Deprived of oxygen, black specks crowded my vision. The pain in my body shifted, my joints crackling with fatigue. Of all the things to notice right before death, this had to be the worst.

I'm so sorry, Val. Tears bit at the backs of my eyes. I should've listened to you. She was right. I wasn't ready for work. I should've stayed home. She would've been there with me. She would've called for help. She would've—

Someone's here.

The thought wasn't mine. I mean, it obviously came from my panicked subconscious, but I couldn't sense anything.

Whatever sounds reached my ears were severely muffled. It was as though I was underwater and the person approaching me miles away.

The click of heels on concrete was unmistakable, but considering where I was, would she even see me?

My voice refused to work, and the bit of air I managed to pull into my lungs burned as much going out as it did going in.

“Over here,” a woman said with a sense of urgency in her voice.

The click of heels was faster now until another woman joined the first. With my back turned in their direction, the best I could do was listen to their words and fight back the fear now crowding my mind.

“Get her in the car before she has a chance to run,” the second woman said, her voice calmer than the first. “We can’t risk her being seen.”

“And then what do you propose we do? She’s human. Just leave her here and let her die. We don’t need one of them snooping around.” The first woman’s words came out in a terrifying growl.

“She’s one of us now, and unless you want a rogue wolf running around the city, we need to get her back to the compound.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

Alpha? Wolf? Confusion flooded my mind as I tried to speak. My mouth opened but no words came out. A moment later, gentle hands touched my skin but I never had a chance to look at her face, the one called Alpha. Her words were kinder and far more gentle, but there was a touch of sadness to them as well.

As much as I wanted to help, as much as I ached to meet her gaze, my body still wouldn’t move. At least I can breathe, I thought as fresh air filled my lungs. My body still ached and there was a sweet smell I couldn’t place, but I was alive.

I’m still alive.

Chapter Three

My eyes fluttered open hours, possibly days later. In that time, the throbbing against my temples hadn’t improved.

Whoever these people were, someone really needed to show them how to treat their guests because a concrete cell with thick iron bars wasn't it. Not that I was expecting The Ritz or anything, but a plush bed with warm blankets would've been nice. Especially considering how dark and cold it was down here. Wherever here is.

I lost consciousness before they could get me inside their car. I had no idea what they drove, what they had planned for me, or if we were even in the city anymore. But one thing kept playing in the back of my mind.

Wolves.

They'd mentioned wolves, an Alpha, and... me running through the city? It was a ridiculous idea considering the pain I'd been in, pain that was surprisingly gone. It was a distant memory, or the memory of a dream, but I still couldn't figure out where I was.

After a bad dream, one usually wakes up in their own bed, not here. Possibly a hospital room if something really did happen, but not in a dark cell.

The area I woke up in was large enough to hold a single person and completely empty. There was no bed to speak of and no toilet I could use. It was a caged in square of space with everything sitting outside the bars, far out of reach.

On the other side of the bars was another, larger room made out of concrete. Light filtered in through a very small window to my right. Whether the light came from the sun or the moon, I couldn't be sure.

The wall opposite of me resembled one belonging of a barn, the planks of wood built close together to drown out any other light that may have made its way in from outside.

Straining my ears, I couldn't hear any birds, cars, sirens, or even wolves. I'd know if there were wolves. They had some of

the most beautiful and haunting sounds around.

A surge of panic ran through me as I looked back on the last

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thing I could remember. Pain. Insurmountable pain. And then... nothing.

Kindness. Warmth. Safety. That was what I remembered most, the gentle calm that found me before darkness stole me away. I honestly should've been out of my mind and screaming at the top of my lungs. Instead, I was more concerned with whatever waited for me outside the confines of my cell.

In here, I felt safe.

It was dark save for the bit of light that made its way through the window and very quiet. It was the perfect place for someone suffering from a migraine, except for the lack of bedding, of course.

Turning my attention back to where they'd left me, I frowned when I spotted claw marks on the far wall along with the floor around my feet. That's when I realized I wasn't wearing what I'd had on earlier. A loose gown hung from my shoulders, the fabric mimicking my movements and feeling more like a second skin than anything else.

It wasn't anything like a hospital gown. The material was woven into place and a lot softer than the ones we had in our exam rooms. The fact someone disrobed me didn't worry me nearly as much as it probably should.

Whenever I sensed my fears building up in the back of my mind, something stopped them, fighting them back.

Deep in thought, I almost didn't hear the door open to my left. Bright light flooded

the room, causing me to shield my eyes until the newcomer closed the door behind them. I hadn't noticed the door before as it sat in one of the darkest corners of the room, but as far as I could tell, it was the only way in and out of the building.

The sound of claws clicking on concrete found me first, followed by the hazy silhouette of a very large dog. No, not a dog, I corrected myself. A wolf.

Icy panic coiled around the base of my spine as I scrambled away from the bars, running into the wall not too far behind me. "Hello?" I called out. "Is anyone there?"

The wolf made a deep guttural noise and canted its head to one side, promptly sitting down on the floor in front of me.

With more light hitting its fur, I was able to make out a few minor details between looking at it and the door it'd walked through. Dark chocolate fur covered most of its body, its dark irises circled with a ring of gold that shone in the dark.

The wolf was rather beautiful if not for the open muzzle pointed in my direction.

"Where am I?" I asked, honestly not expecting a response.

"Where's your master?" I craned my neck, but whoever let the wolf in didn't accompany it.

The wolf was obviously trained. No wolf would've set foot inside a human settlement. Not wild ones, anyway. But one raised alongside humans since it was a pup? I'd heard of it being done before.

"Where's your owner?" I asked when it didn't move.

"Where did you come from?"

No response. The chocolate wolf just stared, its tail barely moving an inch when it finally lay in front of me.

“Oh, so they sent you in here to look after me, huh?” I asked with a laugh, hugging my arms around myself to keep them from shaking. “What’re they afraid of? That I might get out?” I scoffed, then walked over to the bars and pulled on them just to prove my getting out of the cell without a key wasn’t an option.

My demonstration didn’t impress the wolf. It released a huff of breath, then set its chin on top of its paws, its eyes never leaving mine.

“You know, you’re very serious for a wolf,” I said, taking a few steps back before getting down on the wolf’s level.

I wasn’t sure what the proper etiquette was when it came to wolves, but I did remember something about not holding eye contact. So, as much as I hated to look away, I did just that,

averting my gaze so I could study the deep marks in the floor instead.

They didn’t match any claws I’d ever seen, the grooves being far too large to fit the wolf in front of me. Perhaps they didn’t come from a wolf at all but something else entirely.

Perhaps whoever owned the property (not to mention the chocolate wolf) had used the cell on someone before, someone who managed to bring in a knife along with them.

Studying the parallel lines, that made as much sense as them coming from a wolf. No one, no matter how skilled, could carve lines like that.

The door opened again a few minutes later, filling the room with light before drowning it out again. The click of heels on concrete was my only clue before the woman from the garage spoke again.

“Oh good, you’re up,” she said, her tone hard to read. “You also survived the night which... well, we’ll get into that later,”

she said, releasing a long breath as she approached my cell. “I see you’ve met Fallen. You’ll have to forgive her unusual approach. She doesn’t trust newcomers the way I do. You’ll find that’s pretty common around here until they get used to you.”

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They? As in multiple wolves?

I looked from the woman who hid in the shadows to the wolf I'd tried conversing with earlier. "She's beautiful," I said, not moving from where I was. "Is she wild?"

The woman laughed, finally stepping into the light enough for me to see her face. Her pale skin surprised me. I'm not sure why, but I envisioned someone with a tan from too much sun.

Instead, she was as pale as I was with an angular face and hair that reached her shoulders. Given the limited light she was in, I couldn't tell if her hair was jet black or if it just seemed that way because of where we were.

"I suppose we're all wild at some point in our lives, but that would also depend on what side of the fence you're on as well." When I frowned, she corrected herself. "You'll have to

forgive me for talking in riddles. You can never be too careful." Then, kneeling beside the wolf, she took its chin in her hand and kissed it on the nose. "You are relieved. I'll meet you at the nursery later."

The wolf, Fallen if I remembered correctly, didn't move, her eyes fixed on me.

"It'll be fine," the woman assured her, stroking the thick fur along her neck. "Besides, she's just a pup. What harm could she possibly do?"

Fallen wasn't convinced, sitting up but going no further.

And who was she calling a pup anyway? As far as I could tell, Fallen was full-grown, and considering there was no one else around...

No, it isn't possible. There'd been a handful of lycanthropy cases in the past, but they took place decades before I was born. There was no way that I...

No, I thought, shaking my head. I don't believe it. I refused to believe it.

The strange sickness. The aches and pains. The concrete cell...

My heart dropped as the color drained from my face.

The woman spoke before I had a chance to do the same. "It is a harsh reality," she said, kneeling in front of my cell so she could meet my gaze. Hazel eyes stared back at me, their irises circled with a ring which shimmered from silver to gold the longer I looked at them. "I'm sorry for the cold introductions and poor sleeping conditions, but a wolf can be rather unpredictable during its first shift."

I heard the words and read the sadness in her voice, but she honestly wasn't trying to tell me that I was—

"You're a wolf, Joanna. More importantly, you're the first human to shift in over a hundred years."

Chapter Four

I didn't move. I barely breathed. My heart stopped ages ago, and the woman kept staring. Every muscle in my body tensed as my mind reeled out of control. They always say when you lose something it's best to retrace your steps, but no amount of backtracking could help me make sense out of all of this.

When I went to say something, my voice caught in the back of my throat. Unable to speak and with a million questions bombarding my mind, all I could do was study the woman on the other side of the bars and hope she could read my mind.

Much like the chocolate wolf at her side, she was hauntingly beautiful. The few bits of sunlight that made their way into the room cascaded around her, basking her in an early morning haze. H

er eyes held my interest, making it close to impossible to look at anything else. The rings around her irises clearly had to do with her being a wolf, same with Fallen, but did that mean my eyes had the same ring as well?

My heart skipped at that. I'm not a wolf. I'm not a wolf.

I'm—

“I wasn't bitten,” I told her when my mind finally decided to catch up with me, showing her my bare arms and legs to prove it.

She rose to her feet and offered me a partial smile before sending Fallen away.

The wolf hesitated, but after an intense staring contest, Fallen dipped her head and slowly padded out the door.

“You'll have to forgive her,” the woman said, rummaging in her pocket for a key which she then used on my cell. “She's terribly protective of me. You'll find the others are as well.

And no, you weren't bitten.” Her words were quieter than before and had the same sadness to them that I'd sensed on her before. When she spoke, she didn't look at me. “I know you have a lot of questions, and I promise to answer them later.”

“But now?” I urged, chewing my bottom lip as I couldn’t bring myself to look at her. I wanted to, but a part of me felt like I needed to give her the respect she deserved. Which is funny considering she and her wolf friend just kidnapped me from inside a parking garage.

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She opened the cell door, smiling in apology when the sound grated on my nerves. “It’ll be some time before you fully adjust to your heightened senses,” she told me. “During this time, you’ll have to take it slow.”

Heightened senses? Was that what I was feeling back at the hospital? And just how long was she expecting me to wait?

She didn’t honestly expect me to stay here, did she?

Oblivious to my thoughts, she placed a hand on my arm and nodded in the direction of the door leading outside. “Come with me. There’s something I want to show you.”

The air outside didn’t help. Instead of clearing my head like I’d wanted it to, it made matters even worse. The barn I thought I’d been in was nothing more than an oversized shed with acres of open land surrounding it. There were no flowers, no trees aside from a far-off forest, and no wildlife.

The lack of life, however, didn’t bother the woman beside me, her eyes fixed on something I couldn’t see.

“How do you know my name?” I asked, finally able to speak without my voice getting stuck in the back of my throat.

“As Alpha, it’s my job to know everything about my wolves. including you.” She paused mid-step and looked right at me, her eyes flickering from silver to gold, then back to silver again.

“Why do you keep doing that?” I asked, gesturing at her eyes. Forget the fact she kept insisting I was a wolf. I’d never seen anyone’s eyes act that way before.

She laughed, and a moment later, she removed a compact from her back pocket. “Here. Look for yourself.”

Taking the small mirror from her, I opened it and took a deep breath. No amount of breathing could prepare me for what I saw. My usually blue eyes were hazel and gold. The rings around my irises shimmered, but if they changed color, I couldn’t see it.

Frowning, I gave the mirror back, then hugged my arms around myself to fight off the chill. “What is it?”

“The gold flashes?” she asked, nodding a second later. “It’s your wolf, same as mine. You might not be able to feel her just yet, but you will in time. Your eyes are still gold because you just came off a powerful shift. It’ll be a while until your eyes go back to normal.”

“But they’ll always have the same ring around them?”

There was no way I’d be able to keep Val from noticing something like that. She worried if I so much as looked at her the wrong way, but if she saw me like this? She’d lose her mind for sure.

“The ring will come and go,” the Alpha replied, jutting her chin toward a thick tree line in front of us. “The ring will appear shortly before a shift and remain until days later. We’re used to it and shift regardless of the mark, but I can understand the alarm this might cause.”

Thinking back to my time in the clinic, I wondered if my eyes showed any signs of

my being a wolf before everything went to hell in the parking garage. “You found me right before my shift,” I said, studying the forest full of pine in front of us.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say the trees went the entire way around the property.

“I did,” she agreed, shoving her hands in her pockets.

“There are no outward signs before your first shift,” she explained, practically reading my thoughts. “Lycanthropy comes on much like the flu, but at a much faster rate.”

“But I wasn’t bitten,” I said again, unable to hide the annoyance in my voice.

“No, you weren’t.” She paused just outside the tree line and looked right at me, her face falling once she did. “Tell me,

how much do you know about the most recent treaties.”

“Between humans and wolves?” I shrugged. I honestly wasn’t keeping track. Sure, we may have patched up a few wolves every now and then, but seeing as I didn’t deal with organ transplants, the more recent developments weren’t my concern.

“But in your line of work, you are aware of the new laws, correct?” she asked, deep creases forming above her eyes.

“I have to be. It comes with the territory,” I said, dropping my gaze a moment later.

Westgrove had been one of the first hospitals in the country to offer care to humans and wolves. Once the new treaty went into place, wolves were able to donate for other wolves as well. We ended up splitting the hospital right down the middle, so wolf care was given to wolves only. Same with humans.

But if the two got mixed up...

“Oh god.” My legs buckled, throwing me to the ground as the world spun around me. My heart seized, starting up moments later as I gasped for breath. The half-frozen ground bit at my fingertips when I tried to claw my way through it, my entire body tingling with nerves.

“Joanna, I need you to listen very carefully,” the Alpha said, her tone harder than before. She knelt beside me, dipping her head so she could see my face. “You’re in no condition to go through your second shift. Fight it back.”

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My second one? “You want me to fight it back?” I bit out, glaring in her direction. How the hell was I supposed to do that? “That’s like asking someone not to throw up.”

“If you do this, if you give in, you won’t survive. Your body and mind haven’t had enough time to heal. Fight her back.” The Alpha’s words came out in a growl, her eyes flashing gold as she clearly fought back a shift of her own.

“Her?” I choked out, arching my back as every muscle in my body screamed in pain.

“You and your wolf may share the same body but not the same mind. Push her back until you only feel the slight tingle in the back of your head. Put her in her place. Control the shift.”

She made it sound so simple, but every time I tried to push the pressure on my mind back to the edge of my subconscious, fear ripped through my body, causing my muscles to tense and shake.

“She’s going to fight you inch for inch. Keep going.”

I was really starting to hate this woman. Not only did she know more about me than I did, but she hadn’t even bothered to tell me her name. If I was going to be stuck here for god-knows-how-long, the least she could do was tell me her name.

“Who are you?” I growled, clenching my jaw as a new surge of pain bubbled up my chest.

“Most of the pack calls me Alpha because that’s what I am,” she said, her voice sounding terribly far away.

“Not your standing,” I growled, clawing at the ground.

“Your name.”

“Ash,” she said, gently rubbing my arched back. “You can call me Ash.”

Ash. I released a shaky breath, holding on to that single word as the world tipped sideways. I’m not sure if it was because of something she’d said or because of the heightened senses she claimed I had, but there was no mistaking the tremors coursing through the ground beneath me. Faint at first, they grew in strength until someone joined us on the very edge of the property.

“I’m sorry, Joanna, but I need to sedate you.”

Her words were the last thing I heard before darkness found me again.

When I finally woke, I was right back where I started. The only difference now was that the woman from before sat on the other side of the barred door. Her brows pinched above her eyes, giving her forehead the same worrylines I’d seen on Val so many times before.

Oh no! “Val!” I sat straight up, immediately wishing I hadn’t. Blood rushed to my head as the room spun in wide circles around us.

Ash was beside me in a second, throwing open the door before kneeling beside me. Supporting me with her weight, she held one hand on my back while the other pressed a cool cloth to my forehead.

“Easy,” she soothed, rubbing circles into my back. “I know your lungs burn but you need to take deep breaths. That’s it.

Do it again.” Then, with a nervous laugh, she said, “You gave us quite the scare.”

“I could tell,” I said, pointing at the deep creases above her eyes. “My sister gets the same look all the time.”

Ash offered me a partial smile, then handed me the cool cloth once I was able to sit upright on my own. “Val?” she asked, canting her head to one side.

Nodding, I set the cloth in my lap and looked right at her.

“She’s probably worried sick. She’s always taken care of me, and if I don’t get back to her soon—”

“That isn’t possible,” she said apologetically. “Not yet. If you leave the territory now, you won’t be able to control your shift. It’ll take some time before you can fight your wolf back on your own.”

“Will I always have to fight?” I asked, dreading the thought of having to go through that pain again. If I had to fight inside my own mind all the time just to see my sister...

“You never should’ve brought me here.”

“You’re only saying that because of the road ahead. You need to be patient. Your body’s been through a great deal these last forty-eight hours.”

“Forty-ei

ght... no. You don't understand. I need to get back to her." I'd never gone more than a day without talking to my sister and considering how I left things with Jerry, I could've been just about anywhere.

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Jerry probably called my sister as soon as I left the building. What did she do when I didn't show? If we waited too long...

"She'll file a missing person's report," I told Ash without giving it a second thought.

"And good luck to anyone who tries to find their way here." Ash's face was hard to read, her eyes flickering the slightest bit when her wolf tried to make a short appearance.

But like a master, she managed to push her wolf back until only the golden ring around her iris remained. "You can always call her if you think it might help, but you probably shouldn't tell her about this. You can't expect her to come to terms with it when you haven't done so yourself."

"Are you kidding me?" I said with a tight laugh. "She wouldn't believe me even if I did."

"Come with me. You can use the phone in my office."

Once she helped me to my feet, I carefully followed her back outside the shed, hoping more than anything else I wouldn't wind up inside it again.

"Will I ever be able to walk out here on my own?" I asked, glancing back over my shoulder at the building we'd just walked out of.

"Until you get your shifts under control, that shed will be your home. While you might be a wolf, it will be some time before the one in your mind recognizes those

within the compound as its family instead of wolves from another pack.”

Great. Not only was I a danger to my sister but the other wolves as well. That explained why Ash had someone sedate me when she did. Well, that and something about me possibly not surviving another shift.

Yeah... I honestly wasn't looking forward to the days ahead. Especially not my upcoming phone call.

“What am I supposed to tell her?” I asked Ash as we neared a large building in the middle of the property.

“As little as possible,” Ash said, pausing outside the three-story building so another wolf could walk by. “We can figure out your family reunion later. Just...”

“Not now. I know.” I released a long breath and pointed at the large wooden doors in front of us. “Lead the way.”

Chapter Five

Ash stopped inside the foyer and removed her shoes, continuing up a set of stairs which spilled into what appeared to be a very large living room. To our right, a pair of sofas circled around a warm hearth. Candles of all shapes and sizes sat on the mantle above it.

A long stairwell sat opposite of it and connected to a series of balconies with waist-high railings. Scanning the few rooms I could see from my place in the living room, it was easy to see each of the rooms belonged to someone in the pack. That much became painfully obvious the moment we stepped through those double doors.

Wolves stood to either side of the doorway, their eyes fixed on me as we walked by.

Hyper aware of their hard gaze, I did my best to keep my eyes on the woman walking three feet in front of me.

She never stopped. She never slowed down. And as we neared her office on the lower level of the compound, I noted the chocolate wolf sitting outside.

“I thought I sent you to the nursery,” Ash said, her voice lighter than expected as she regarded the wolf.

“Cass can handle things down there, but someone should be with you.” Fallen glared in my direction, but her words were directed at the Alpha. “She shouldn’t be in here.”

“She needs to use the phone,” Ash said, running her hand over the fur between Fallen’s ears. She didn’t reprimand the wolf for speaking out of line, and her tone never changed.

“She has a family—”

“Which aren’t our concern,” Fallen cut in, rising to her paws before looking in Ash’s direction. “Alpha, please. Dani’s heart may beat in her breast but—”

“Not another word,” Ash said, her words clipped. “You’re not to speak—”

“Then when?” Fallen challenged, shifting into her human form so she and Ash could see eye to eye.

My heart skipped at the naked woman in front of me.

Toned muscle covered most of her body, her hair the same color as her wolf. Her complexion wasn’t nearly as pale as the Ash was, but she had the same exact ring around her eyes. A ring that quickly shifted from gold to silver, making me envious

of the control she clearly had over her other form.

Fallen went on when Ash didn't say anything, jutting out her chin as she spoke. "You've mourned long enough. The pack needs its leader and yet here you are tending to this...

this stray.”

My stomach churned at the word as much as the way she said it. She acted like I was some sort of pest, but I didn’t come here. They brought me with them.

“You want me to leave?” I asked, my voice not nearly as confident as I’d hoped. “Just show me the way out and I’ll go.”

“No,” Ash said, placing a hand on my shoulder and halting my retreat. “I stand by what I said. Fallen’s just a sample of what you’ll face as a new wolf,” she explained, turning to meet my gaze. “They do this to all new wolves, once-human or otherwise. It’s a rite of passage and one you’ll see through to the end.”

She sounded so sure of herself, but according to her, I was the first human to shift in over a century.

“Go on,” she said, stepping around Fallen to get the door.

“The phone’s on my desk. I’ll be out here when you’re through.” Her words were gentle, her eyes set on Fallen. “A word, Commander?”

Fallen startled at the title, then with a nod, she stepped out of my line of sight so Ash could close the door.

Alone, and without Fallen breathing down my neck, I walked over to Ash’s desk and picked up the phone. For a brief moment, I rehearsed what I wanted to say once my sister

picked up. In the end, I put the phone down and browsed the shelves around Ash's office instead.

A small tree sat outside Ash's window. It was much too small to see from the other side of the yard and way too young to have been there for very long. A handful of ribbons hung from its branches, their bows loose to the point of falling off.

My heart skipped a beat as soon as I realized what the was for. It's so they can remember her. I knew nothing about the woman Fallen mentioned outside, but if I had her heart, then she'd only been gone a handful of months.

The solitary tree with all of its ribbons and bows was proof of that.

Returning my attention to the inside of the office didn't make me feel any better. The books lining the shelves on either side were worn, their spines completely bare. Much like back in the living room, there was very little furniture to speak of aside from Ash's desk and a set of chairs. I wondered then if she even spent that much time in this room or if it was all for show.

Before my curiosity could get the better of me, Fallen's raised voice caught my attention. As she spoke, an uneasiness stirred under my skin. It was almost like I wanted to run, as though I was being chased. Instead, I stood there and listened as I tried to get up the nerve to call home.

"A wise wolf once told me an Alpha is only ever as strong as her pack."

"That wolf was delusional." Ash's words were muffled behind the closed doors.

"Forgive me for saying this, Alpha, but that wolf was you,"

came Fallen's reply.

“Delusional,” Ash said again, the bitterness in her voice enough to put my teeth on edge.

“How long do you plan to do this?”

“Do what, Commander?”

“Hold us at arm’s length. We’re all in pain, but that hasn’t stopped us from doing what we must.”

“Remember your place, else I need to remind you.”

“You might have to,” Fallen scoffed. “But I’m not the only one who seems to have forgotten her place. It’s been over three mont—”

Something slammed against t

he wall outside the door, sending my mind into a full-fledged panic. Outside, all was quiet, Fallen’s protests put to an end by whatever Ash had done.

With my hands shaking and silence falling down around me, I slowly made my way back over to the desk so I could finish my call.

I never got the chance.

“You,” Ash said, her tone harder than before. “Come with me.”

“But I—”

“Now.”

Something clicked in the back of my mind as the pieces slowly fell into place. She was an Alpha, and apparently my Alpha, as even her words held more force than her touch ever could. I wanted to ask her what happened. I wanted to ask about Dani, the one whose heart beat in my chest. But as she turned away from me, I knew it wasn't my place, so I put my head down and kept walking.

Fallen sat outside the office, her full weight pressed into the wall as she rubbed the side of her neck. I offered her a look of apology, but she never said a word. She met my eyes, then averted her gaze again. The strong woman I saw outside Ash's office was no more, replaced with a reflection of myself, silent and broken.

For a moment, I paused beside Fallen. My heart went out to her, a lump forming in my throat when she refused to look in my direction. In that moment, I knew there was nothing I

could do to take away the pain she so clearly felt in front of me. She was hurting, same as Ash, and now I knew why.

Steeling myself for what was to come, I followed Ash deeper into the manor. The hallway went on forever, a number of doors to either side of it. One lead to a clinic, glass windows overlooking what was probably an operating area. Across from that was a nursery, a handful of pack members holding children in their laps as they drifted off to sleep.

“Fallen was out of line,” Ash said once we were out of earshot of anyone else. “But she isn’t wrong.”

“I didn’t—”

“Of course you did. Any sane wolf inside a new territory would investigate their surroundings, including anything someone else might’ve said.” She paused outside another set of wooden doors, elegant markings carved into the hard fibers.

“She and the rest of the pack can’t match the feelings I have.

When Dani...” She shook her head, dismissing the topic altogether. “You’ll learn all about her in time, but for now, I thought you might be hungry.”

She pushed open one of the doors and smiled, gesturing for me to walk in front of her.

After a bit of hesitation and realizing it wasn’t my place to ask about the one she lost, I walked into one of the most amazing kitchens I’d ever seen. Fresh fruit sat out on a table, followed by an array of breads and pastas which laid out on the counter beside the sink.

“Everything here is for the pack. No wolf has claim over a single thing. If you want to have something special delivered, you can leave your list with me and I’ll see what I can do.”

“What about food allergies?” I asked, running my hand along the counter before rummaging in one of the cabinets for some tea.

“We don’t have them, and if you did, they’ll soon be a distant memory. You’ll find your new appetite is far greater than it used to be. Listen to your body and feed as

often as possible. You'll need your strength."

"For the next shift?" I asked, glancing back over my shoulder at her.

"And to recover. There will come a time when you won't need an escort in our home, but until that time comes—"

"I get it. I'm to report back to my cell."

"I've arranged to have some amenities added to it. In the meantime, you can come and go as you please so long as you stay on the property. You might not be able to shift at will or run with the pack, but you can use the trails. Running is the best way to heal for a wolf, even a new one."

I honestly didn't feel like running but nodded anyway.

"What about at night?"

"We have an evening gathering behind the house if you wish to attend. If not, there are books in my study you might like to use. They go over our ancestry and may answer some of the questions you have."

"And you're trusting me with this knowledge?"

"It's common knowledge as far as humans are concerned.

Anything of importance is kept elsewhere. The curfew is at ten. This is to make sure we're heavily guarded as others sleep. You won't have to worry about it now, but eventually, you'll sleep with the others in shifts. For now, sleep and eat when you need to and run when you can. It truly helps."

“And the others? Is there a reason they don’t act like you?”

She wet her lips and dropped her gaze. When she spoke again, her voice was so low I barely heard her. “It’s my job to look after all of the wolves regardless of rank or history. The others have no tie to you and won’t see you as a sister until you’ve come into your wolf. It’ll happen, but you’ll have to give them some time.”

Time. She kept saying that, but I didn’t really have that much time to give.

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“And my sister?” I asked. Would I ever be able to tell her the truth? Would she ever be welcome within the pack?

“We’ll get to that in time.” She paused, offering me an apologetic smile. “You didn’t call her.”

“No.” I couldn’t. “I didn’t know what to say.”

Ash nodded at that, then gestured back the way we came.

“That’s probably for the best. It’s better for her to mourn now rather than when she learns you’re a wolf. That way, when you finally cross paths with her, it’ll be easier for her to accept it since you’ll still be alive.”

“You obviously don’t know my sister. If the pack doesn’t kill me, she most definitely will.”

She laughed at that. “When that time comes, you’ll have the pack to turn to for support.”

For all our sakes, I hoped she was right. Even as we headed down the hall toward the front of the house, I couldn’t ignore the hushed murmurings of the other wolves or their fierce eyes directed at my back.

Just get through today. I had no idea how long the distrust from the other wolves would last, but tomorrow had to be better.

It just had to be.

Chapter Six

By the end of my first week, I was still sleeping in the shed and thought about my sister on a daily basis. Was she out there looking for me? Had the authorities given up? Did they even know where to look?

I'd tried confronting Ash about my release, but whenever I did, she shot me down. Something about new wolves not knowing what was best. And here I thought she was on the nicer side. Unfortunately, aside from a bed in my cell and being able to come and go as I pleased so long as I stayed within pack territory, Ash's kindness from before was completely gone.

She no longer checked on me, often sending Fallen in her place. I could see my being here pained the others, and I had a feeling they weren't the only ones. As for Fallen, she tolerated me but just barely. When she walked, she did it in such a way that I had to run to keep up.

She didn't give me any advice, passing down instructions and orders on what to do when entering the house after a hunt instead. Not that I'd actually been on one.

According to her, it was something I had to do in order to find my place within the pack, but since I didn't have control over my shifts, it seemed as though I'd be stuck here longer than I'd originally thought. This news was as upsetting to me as it was to Fallen. The hunt, whenever it happened, would come at a great cost.

I'd have to make my first kill alone.

All my life, I've had to prove myself. I had to convince my parents I was strong enough to go to public school, strong enough to play light sports, and strong enough

to date. The dating didn't last long, but I fought my way through everything else.

Now, after years of living with a crappy heart, I had one that was stronger than ever before.

And yet, I still had to prove myself. Wasn't my being here enough?

I struggled to stay in my place, keeping my mouth shut as Fallen went over the itinerary for the day, none of it enjoyable.

If they could only understand how worried my sister was, maybe they'd let me go.

"What?" Fallen asked, pausing beside me in wolf form as I looked far beyond the tree line. "Did you see something?"

We were supposed to be scouting the perimeter for threats.

So far, the only things I saw were a handful of birds and a squirrel that had enough balls to walk up to us.

"No," I finally said, stepping in line beside her when she picked up the pace again.

"I'm as fond of your current condition as you are, but let's get one thing straight. You're here because, somehow, you survived. I'm here on Alpha's orders, but if you give me an inch of doubt, I'll have your neck in my maw so quick—"

"You want me to behave. I get it." I released a long breath and hugged my arms around myself for warmth. The cold never bothered her.

"I want you to know your place and respect it," she corrected me.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked, pausing at the crest of a hill that overlooked a large chunk of the pack’s territory.

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“Not really, no.” A sly smirk spread across Fallen’s face, and as she continued down the other side of the hill, I took my time.

Her goal was to walk the edge of the property line before going back inside. We’d already made three laps around the territory and still nothing. Nothing for her to hunt and no signs of danger, just birds, trees, and an unsettling silence between us. Scouting the edge of their territory was incredibly boring.

So I stood on top of the hill and watched.

Dozens of acres surrounded the manor, the grass cut low to give the pack a clear line of sight if they were ever attacked.

The trees crowding around the territory, however, were close together. It was hard to see much of anything from outside the woven branches, and I’d gotten lost beneath them while following one of Ash’s dirt trails.

If I ever hoped to leave the territory, I wouldn’t be able to do so without some help. It was so easy to get turned arou

nd in there that I’d stopped trying.

It wasn’t like I wanted to stay, but running in circles didn’t excite me, either.

“You coming?” Fallen called up from the bottom of the hill, her ears pinned back in annoyance.

“Yeah,” I said, giving the manor a final glance before finally making my way down the other side of the hill. “I’m right behind you.”

The only time I got to see Ash was in the evening hours after dinner. Every night, the pack gathered behind the manor around a large bonfire. Every single one of them shifted into their wolf pelts, their coats just as sleek and beautiful as Ash was herself. Oddly enough, She never took on her wolf form, not even as the rest of the pack joined in a chorus howl.

It was strange, I thought, to see an Alpha isolating herself amongst those she loved most. At first, I thought she did it so I wouldn’t feel so left out. However, with Ash constantly distancing herself from me, it was hard to tell.

The itch to shift came and went, but ever since that second time along the trees when Ash had to sedate me, I hadn’t experienced the pain I’d faced before.

It felt like I wanted change forms, but for whatever reason, I never got very far. Starting with a tingle at the back of my neck, it was as though I was anticipating something. Funny thing was, as soon as I acknowledged it, the feeling of my wolf passed.

It was more active at night as the rest of the pack gathered in front of me, but it was more like a sneeze that never actually happened. There was the buildup, the preparation, and then...

nothing. The feelings simply slipped away.

Considering how Ash had to sedate me, I was pretty sure that had a lot more to do with it than me finally gaining control over my wolf. I couldn’t sense things the way I did at the hospital, and whenever Fallen asked me to smell for something, the target scent was lost to me.

She was pushing me, they both were, but I wasn't ready yet.

The other wolves, however, flaunted their sleek bodies and beautiful coats in front of me as they formed a semi-circle around the bonfire. Orange embers lifted into the night sky, joining the millions of stars that were clearly visible so far away from the city.

The bit of light from the manor was nothing compared to what I was used to back home. It was also deathly quiet once everyone else went off to bed. Aside from the crickets, the night slept the same as everyone else.

My sister would've done anything to experience something like this. Maybe not the turning into a wolf part, but being surrounded by nature was definitely something Val would've enjoyed.

"Pay attention," Fallen growled under her breath, nudging me when I didn't respond to something Ash had said. "This is important."

"Sorry."

The chocolate wolf huffed, then went back to her place inside the semi-circle. The other wolves looked in my direction before turning their gaze back to their Alpha.

Ash stood in front of the fire wearing a light evening gown with her dark tresses pulled up away from her neck. Warm firelight surrounded her in an ethereal glow, and as she spoke, that strange tingling hummed in the back of my head.

"As you know, the turn of the moon will soon be upon us.

This is a time when the pack runs as one, new wolves included." She gave me a pointed look, then continued when the other wolves nodded in agreement. "It has

been an age since a human has run with us and longer still since one has joined the pack. Jo, come up here please.”

My heart skipped at the mention of my name, and when everyone looked back at me, it felt as though I was in school all over again. I was never good at giving presentations and now was no different. I envisioned myself moving to the space beside Ash, but that was as far as I got.

My muscles tensed and my jaw locked in place as I fought my nerves back.

“Jo,” Ash said again, her voice just as warm and understanding as before. “Come here.”

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Swallowing around the hard lump in my throat, I shook the nerves out of my hands and started toward her. The other wolves never broke rank. They didn't even make a path for me, forcing me to walk around them in order to reach Ash's side. If she was displeased, she didn't show it.

Instead, she turned to me and took my hands in hers. Her next words were spoken low enough so only I would hear. As a human, anyway. I wasn't sure if the wolves could overhear us or not, but I appreciated the illusion of privacy anyway.

"How are you getting along?" she asked, tilting her head to the side and squeezing my hands when I tried to look at anything else but her.

"It's complicated," I said, dropping my gaze when the tingling sensation under my skin intensified.

"I can feel your wolf responding to my touch. Does that worry you?"

It wasn't just her touch it was responding to. It was the entire thing. The firelight. The other wolves. Even Fallen.

"A little," I admitted, wincing when my voice cracked.

"It's more noticeable than it was before, and I can feel something, but—"

"You never shift." She passed me a knowing smile, then placed a hand on my cheek.

I wasn't sure if it was something she did with the rest of the pack or not, but I leaned

into her touch anyway. After being isolated from the rest of the pack, it was nice to feel another's skin on mine, no matter how temporary.

Fallen growled from her place in the semi-circle, letting out a bark when Ash didn't respond.

Made aware of her actions, Ash shook her head and slowly pulled away, probably more for my benefit than her own.

There was no mistaking the deep color on her face, and that's when I knew her actions toward me weren't normal.

Embarrassed and stuck in front of the rest of the pack, I waited for her to speak. When she did, her words weren't as smooth as before. There was an edge to her voice, and even though she was Alpha, she could barely meet my gaze.

"Tonight, you're going to shift," she said, her voice uneasy.

"We cannot let you shift and run with us at the turn of the moon unless you can control it. No wolf should ever be locked up on a full moon. It might give her the wrong idea." Meaning the cell I'd spent most of my time in.

"I'm not ready," I told her, the uncertainty in my voice matching her own.

"You haven't even tried," she said, giving me a pointed look. "The pain you fear won't be nearly as overwhelming as it was during your first shift. If you breathe through it and take it slow, it will happen."

"Here?" I squeaked, glancing at the rest of the pack that had already grown bored of me, talking amongst themselves now that their Alpha wasn't touching my face. "Now?"

“Yes, now.”

“But they’ll see me...” They’d see me naked. They’d see the scars on my chest. “I can’t.”

“You can,” Ash began, turning me so I was facing the flames, “and you will. Forget about everyone else. Stare into

the fire and let your mind drift. Take in its warmth, hold it close to your chest, and close your eyes. What do you see?”

Was that why they sat around the fire every night? Did it make the shift easier for them?

My mind filled with questions as I stared into the orange flames. My thoughts went back to the one camping trip my folks actually let me go on and the very quick retreat we made home once it started to rain. They’d been so protective of me that any good memory I might’ve had of my childhood had been ruined by my faulty heart.

But not anymore. I could feel the new heart beating hard and fast in my chest, its rhythmic beat hitting the inside of my ribcage. It was strong. I was strong. With nothing left to hold me back, I gave in to the sensation at the edge of my subconscious, the one that told me what to do.

My heart fluttered when fear dug its icy fingers into my spine, but as quickly it came, it was gone, chased away by Ash’s hand on my back. If Fallen protested this time, I didn’t hear her. All that existed was the flame, my wolf, and the woman g

ently rubbing circles into my back.

The rest of the world fell away, taking my fears along with it.

“Good,” Ash said, her voice muffled as my mind started to drift. “Follow the call. Don’t listen to or think of anything else.”

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My body trembled from her words, a fire burning in my stomach as I crouched close to the ground. Again, fear gripped my heart, squeezing the breath from my lungs until I could barely breathe.

Ash was right there beside me, never hindering me and never letting go.

Sensing her at my side, I borrowed her strength, taking in the little I'd learned from her and Fallen to finally take on my first shift. My first controlled shift.

It was slow and tried my patience, but as promised, there was no pain. Pressure built in my arms, the odd pop and snap

of joints sounding worse than it actually felt. Bit by bit, I removed my articles of clothing, my body becoming too hot for me to wear them any longer.

Perhaps it was because of the fire. Perhaps it was the shift.

Regardless of the reason, I no longer cared about my clothes, my body, or the scars the pack would most assuredly see. All I felt, all I wanted was to shift.

And it was in that moment when I knew I was ready.

In that moment, I knew I was a wolf.

Chapter Seven

A building heat blurred my vision, the ground beneath me feeling softer than before.

I'm not sure when it happened but I'd closed my eyes, shutting them tight as I drown out the rest of the world.

Ash was still there, but her fingers were wrapped in long strands of fur instead of pressed against my back. My heart skipped at the thought of what I might see once I opened my eyes, a fear of what I'd become.

I did it. With Ash's guidance, I'd shifted without pain. It was something I never thought possible considering how well my first shift had gone. I had a feeling my second shift would've been much of the same if Ash hadn't intervened.

But this one? The shift I'd just gone through? It didn't hurt at all, and as I slowly opened my eyes, I got the first glimpse of my wolf.

Dark gray fur covered my paws, going as far back as the tip of my tail. Without a mirror to see by, it was hard to say how far the dark patch went. However, if I had to guess, I'd say it covered most of my back.

Pleased with my progress, Ash dropped to her knees and threw her arms around my neck. "There's our wolf," she said with pride. "How do you feel?"

"Good. Better than that, actually."

"You want to run, don't you?" she asked with a laugh.

I wanted to run more than I'd ever wanted to run in my entire life. "Yes."

"Go," she ordered, stepping away from me as she gestured toward the tree line. "I need to stay here with the rest of the pack, but Fallen will accompany you."

"Fallen?" I hoped the disappointment I felt didn't make it into my voice. Of course

the Alpha wouldn't run with me. I was just one wolf, and yet...

No, I chided myself. The touch she offered me and her kind words were to help me shift, nothing more. I was looking for something that wasn't there, something that shouldn't have been there in the first place.

"Well?" Fallen asked, her voice being one I couldn't read.

"Are you coming?"

The chocolate wolf stood a few feet in front of me, her ears pinned back as I paused beside Ash.

"Thank you," I said, ignoring Fallen's intense glare until something nudged at the back of my mind.

"Your wolf is eager," Ash said. "Go. We'll be here when you both come back."

Her smile was all the encouragement I needed, and as soon as I started to run, Fallen kept her place beside me. I could sense her displeasure, a bitter smell filling my nose as she glanced back at the fire. She'd never given me an ounce of trust, and while she may have known these woods better than I did, I wasn't about to stop and ask her for directions.

As soon as we ducked under the trees, I was off, running as fast as my paws could carry me. I didn't care where I ended up so long as I could feel my heart thundering in my chest. Out here and as a wolf, everything was magnified.

The smells, the sounds, and even my own body felt completely different. Not just because I was a wolf, either. The energy my wolf form provided felt as though I could run for days, only stopping to get a drink at the stream which was close by.

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No wonder the other wolves stayed in their pelts as often as they did. It was intoxicating and a jolt to my senses. I could hear better, see better, and breathe the fresh air without any of it getting stuck in my lungs.

I was running. I was alive.

I was free.

We ran for hours. I must've circled the pack gathering a dozen times before finally feeling the tug of exhaustion at the back of my mind. My muscles burned with fatigue, my lungs coursing with fire whenever I breathed in or out. But it had been worth it. Not only to leave my human form behind but to finally do what other people had done their entire lives.

Val wasn't around to reprimand me when I went too fast.

She wasn't there to tell me to test the water before taking a drink. She wasn't around at all, and as I neared the very border of our territory, my human thoughts finally caught up to me.

As much as I loved running as a wolf, I wished I could be with my sister even more. She must've been worried sick.

Either that or planning my funeral.

I should've called. Back on that first day with the pack, I should've called her like I said I would. Then again, a part of me agreed with Ash. It was better if she thought I

was dead instead of... this. A wolf. An unrecognizable form.

With a sigh, I ducked under the boughs of pine and fir, taking my first look at the city ever since this all began. Soft lights reached up to meet the velvet sky above. The stars were less visible out here, the air thicker and hard to breathe.

Lost in my own thoughts, I didn't hear Fallen come up behind me until it was too late. In less than a second, she wrapped her maw around my scruff and pulled me back. Back under the branches, back into the darkness, and back into pack territory.

I could smell the bitterness of her words before they left her lips.

"Have you lost your freaking mind?" Fallen asked, her shoulders bunched over as she struggled for breath. "That way will only bring death. You're high right now, I get it, but go that way in your wolf pelt and..." Her voice broke. When she spoke again, the anger of her words wasn't directed at me.

"You know what, go if you want. You've only brought pain with you and no matter how much care and affection our Alpha may show toward you, you aren't her."

"The Alpha?" I asked, canting my head to one side as I sat beside her.

"When you look at her you see our Alpha, but when she looks at you... forget it." Fallen shook her head and sat back on her haunches, curling her tail around her paws as she did.

And that's when it hit. Dani, the one they lost, the one whose heart beat in my chest, wasn't a sister. She wasn't just any part of their pack. She was...

"Ash's mate." It wasn't a question, and when Fallen's body tensed, I knew I had my answer. "What happened?"

“That’s none of your concern,” Fallen said, casting a warning glance in my direction.

Her scent had changed from the bitterness I’d smelled earlier. It was sweet, almost like an oncoming storm, but not nearly as sweet as Ash had smelled back at the gathering. This was something different.

She’s sad, I realized, sensing the buzz of emotion thanks to my wolf.

“The Alpha hasn’t shifted since,” Fallen murmured, filling the silence between us. “She won’t run with us and refuses to be with us outside our evening gatherings. The pain haunts her, it haunts us all, or it did until you came along.” There was an edge to her voice.

“You came and found me, remember?”

“But she sensed you. That’s the only reason you’re alive. If not for her timing—”

“I’d be dead,” I finished for her. “Look, I had no part in any of this. I know you don’t believe me, but I swear that surgery was supposed to be with a human heart. If I’d known someone messed up—”

“You would’ve given a healthy heart back?” Fallen let out a short laugh, then got to her paws before walking away from me.

I stood behind her but didn’t move. As much as I hated to admit it, she was right. Giving back a healthy organ wasn’t

something I or anyone else would’ve ever done. Of course, if I got Dani’s heart, did that mean the rest of her healthy tissue went to humans as well?

As though she could read my mind, Fallen said, “You were the only case, so you

must've had something to do with it.”

I opened my mouth to say something but thought better of it. No matter what I said, she'd never believe me, so I didn't even try. Instead, I took one last look at the faraway city and its bright lights before turning back toward our territory. As badly as I wanted to find my sister, my wolf wanted to run even more. So I ran. I ran into the woods, past the stream, past Fallen and everyone else.

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I ran until I couldn't run anymore, until my muscles burned with fatigue and my paws bled from the sharp rocks along the side of the mountains.

I ran away from my past, from Fallen's judgment, and the rest of the pack.

I ran until I collapsed.

The sound of moving water woke me first, soon followed by the feel of the hard ground beneath me and what must've been a large root digging into my side. Fallen lay beside me in wolf form, leaving a few feet between us. I wasn't so lucky, waking in my human skin instead.

"You're still here," I said, my voice heavy with sleep as I tried to move with little success.

Fallen's ear swiveled in my direction but she didn't move.

"Trust me, I would've left you here to freeze if I could."

"Why didn't you?" I asked, sitting up. My muscles screamed in pain, protesting whenever I tried to take a deep breath. "Ugh, remind me never to

run like that ever again."

She made a sound of approval, then continued. "Like it or not, you're my charge. This means until the Alpha says otherwise, you're my responsibility."

“Great,” I said, slowly pulling my knees close to my chest.

“Another babysitter.”

“Then we’re in agreement.” She kept her back to me, either out of disgust or respect for my privacy I wasn’t sure.

“Can you shift?”

I searched my subconscious for the tingling I’d experienced the night before, but no, my wolf or my drive to turn into a wolf wasn’t there. “I don’t think so.”

“Then you’ll have to walk.”

“Like this?” I asked, covering myself the best I could.

“Well, it isn’t like I’m going to carry you on my back like some kind of horse. Besides, if you’d listened to me last night and headed back for the manor, we wouldn’t be in this mess.

But you just had to keep running, didn’t you? Your wolf isn’t something you can use until the edge of exhaustion. You need to respect its limits as well as your own or else this happens.”

“So I’m stuck in human form?” I shouldn’t have been as disappointed as I felt. Being stuck in human form meant I could leave the territory. It meant I could go home. “For how long?” Did I have enough time to see Val before coming back?

“Only you can answer that,” Fallen said, stepping away from me.

“Wait, you can’t just leave me here. How am I supposed to find my way back?”

Without my wolf's heightened senses, the woods were a labyrinth of raised tree roots and gnarled branches.

"You made it this far," Fallen said, not looking at me.

"Consider it a test. If you aren't back by lunch, I'll come and get you. For the time being, enjoy the walk."

With that, Fallen was gone, though she didn't go far. If what she said was true, she'd stay close by to watch after me.

That is until she got bored or hungry. After that, it was anyone's guess.

She could've left me something to eat, I thought with a huff, hugging my arms around myself as I carefully navigated

the mountainside. I was starved, my stomach growling at the thought of eating something warm. The cool tingle at the back of my mind returned, but only for a moment. I suppose you're hungry as well, I thought, wondering if there was any way to talk to my wolf.

I'd seen it in books and studies where wolves, those of the werewolf variety, could somehow communicate with their subconscious. If it was true, it wasn't something a new wolf like me could do. When I tried to reach out to my other form again, she didn't respond. There was no tingling. No buzz in my ears. Nothing.

I'd have to strengthen my link with her. Not that I know how, I thought with a frustrated sigh. There was also the issue of me hunting on my own and making a kill. I didn't mind the idea as much as I'd originally thought, but it still worried me.

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All evening, I ran, and not once had I come across a deer or larger prey.

I hadn't gone up the mountain by the manor, but I had to wonder if there was any large game at all. Surely a wolf's first hunt wasn't considered a success if she brought back a bird.

I'd have to ask Fallen once I got back. As much as she pretended to hate me, I could tell a small part of her felt sorry for what I'd been through. She'd never say it to my face, but I was pretty sure the tough-guy act was exactly that. As second in command and Ash's friend, she had to show strength and loyalty toward the Alpha. If she ever let either one of those things slip, her place within the pack would be compromised.

At least that was something I could understand. I'd seen more than a few wolf documentaries to know she had to reassert herself on a daily basis, either by roughing up the other wolves like she'd done to me last night, or by turning her back on someone when they needed her help the most.

Just like she's doing right now.

Like it or not, she had to prove herself to the rest of the pack, same as me. And that's when I realized we weren't as different as I thought.

Chapter Eight

The entire way back to the manor, my thoughts revolved around Fallen. She didn't abandon me, she was simply testing my strength. It was the same thing Ash had done the night before.

Against the cold, my hunger, and aching feet, I'd somehow found my way back. As soon as I broke through the trees, Ash was waiting for me.

"There you are," Ash said with a smile in her voice. "I was starting to wonder if you'd run off."

"I did," I said, "and then I got lost."

Garbed in a pale yellow gown, she circled me, running her fingertips on my skin before gently pulling a strand of hair from in front of my eyes. Compared to her, I was covered in scrapes and bruises, and there was half of a tree stuck in my hair.

Embarrassed, I slowly removed a leaf from my hair, followed by another, and another. If it bothered Ash, she didn't say anything. She simply stood there and waited until I was done. Once I was through, she circled me much like she'd done before.

She's inspecting me, I realized, lifting my arms above my head when she asked me to do so.

Likely sensing my discomfort, she gave me a nod of approval, then turned on her heels to give me some privacy.

"There are clean clothes waiting for you inside," she said, making her way back toward the manor. When I headed for the shed, she laughed. "Not in there, silly. Inside the house."

In there? The last time I'd been inside the manor, there were wolves everywhere. As much as I appreciated her inviting me inside their home, I honestly would've preferred getting my things from the shed.

“Others may challenge you,” she warned, continuing up the front steps, “but you’ve earned your place by finding your

way back here. Fallen told me where you went last night,” she said, pausing outside the large wooden doors. “You could’ve run home and brought us a great deal of trouble, but you stayed.”

“That’s because she—”

“You were never going to leave,” Ash said with a knowing smile, holding the door handle. “A wolf’s first run is always a test, made even more difficult if that wolf happens to be human. Inside the pack, our new wolves live beside us from the moment they’re born. They never have to prove themselves because, for us, they’re family.”

“And me?” I hedged, wincing when my voice refused to work.

“As far as I’m concerned, you’ve done exactly as any wolf should. You were right at the edge of our territory, standing with one foot in the past and another in the future. You could’ve tipped either way, but you found your way back here.

I will no longer question your right to be here, but the others might take some time. As for your upcoming hunt, think of it as a formality.”

Considering the way Fallen left me, I wasn’t so sure.

“Where’s Fallen?” I asked, having not seen her since earlier this morning.

“Nearby,” Ash assured me, placing a hand on my back as we made our way into the foyer.

My skin crawled as we stepped between a pair of guards, their eyes averted and their heads bowed as Ash walked by. It didn't take long for me to feel the heat of their eyes on my neck, my muscles tensing from their silent challenge even as we stepped out of view.

"Is everything okay?" Ash asked, likely already knowing the answer.

"The guards—"

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“Forget them,” she said, stopping once we reached the bottom of the stairs. “They don’t remember what it was like to be a new wolf because their experiences weren’t the same as

yours. Yes, you’ll have to prove yourself, and yes, it might be hard, but you have a place within this pack, same as everyone else.” She paused, smiling when Fallen joined us in wolf form.

“Ah, you’re just in time. Please show Jo to her room and make sure all her needs are met. Once you do, come and see me so that we may speak some more.”

&n

bsp; Fallen bowed her head in response, watching Ash go before finally turning her attention to me. “Glad to see you made it back.” Surprisingly, it almost sounded like she meant it.

“No you’re not,” I said, my eyes fixed on Ash until she stepped out of my line of sight. “You’d sooner let me starve out there than see me in here.”

“True,” she agreed with a nod, “but not for the reasons you believe. Anyway, if you’d failed to return, it would’ve been my hide on the chopping block, not yours.”

“Still playing the part of a babysitter, huh?” I teased, placing my hand on the railing as I slowly made my way up the wooden stairs.

Fallen paused in front of me, her fur bristling as she spoke.

“Look, the only reason you’re even here is because she feels sorry for you. You’re a charity case, nothing more,” Fallen said with a growl, keeping to her wolf form as she walked beside me. “The rest of us have no alliance to you and would rather keep our fold safe.” She didn’t sound so sure of herself.

“You think I want to be here?” I said, keeping my voice low as we passed a group of wolves at the top of the steps. “I have a life outside of here, one I would’ve loved to get back to until this happened.”

“Someone screwed up,” Fallen said, not looking at me.

“Boy is that an understatement.”

She stepped to our right and onto one of the balconies overlooking the room below.

“So you really had no idea?

None at all?”

I shook my head. “No. I have nothing against wolves or their right to live, but if I knew there’d been a mix-up during

my surgery, I would’ve—”

“Given it back, right?” she huffed. “There’s no fixing this now.” It wasn’t a question. Like me, Fallen probably knew how long it took for my body to heal, and seeing as I already went through my first shift...

“I’d take it back if I could,” I told her, frowning when something tingled at the back of my neck.

“What?” Fallen asked, looking up at me. “What is it?”

“I... I don’t know.” I rubbed the back of my neck, but the chill or whatever it was was still there. “There’s tingling like before, but it’s different somehow. Stronger.”

She released a long breath and sat back on her haunches. “I forgot how alarming everything is to you new pups. It’s just your wolf talking, and it sounds like she isn’t pleased. Do our accommodations upset her?”

She’d know better than me. “The tingling is because of her?” How come I hadn’t felt it inside the manor before? Why now?

“Think of it as your wolf’s fur bristling, only it happens under the skin.” Fallen lowered her voice and took a few steps toward me. “That’s usually when we shift because it comes on right before an attack.”

“But you seem fine,” I said, noting her perked ears and confident posture.

“Sure, but that’s because I don’t see you as a threat,” she said, turning her back to me with a wag of her tail. “Your wolf, on the other hand, sees us as the enemy.

Think about it for a second. Out in the woods, you were free to run wherever you pleased. In here, there are a dozen wolves at any given time. Your wolf feels trapped, plain and simple, and you’re only feeling it now because you’ve finally learned to listen to her instincts alongside your own. That doesn’t mean she’s right, of course, but it’s still good to hear.”

“Ash warned me about this, about the way my wolf might react.”

“And it’s your job to steer your wolf in the right direction.

If you feel another shift coming on, you need to tell me. I can sense it but not nearly as fast as the Alpha can. She can sense every single one of us, no matter how far

away we are. She can feel us breathe and hear our hearts beat in her ears.”

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“That sounds terrible.” How did she get any sleep?

“She’s the lifeblood of this pack and what holds us together. Regardless of the progress you’ve made, if you ever do anything to hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

“Noted,” I said with a growl that wasn’t my own.

“Keep her in check,” Fallen said without looking at me.

“She needs to learn respect. If she can’t handle a little banter, then maybe our Alpha was wrong. Maybe you aren’t ready to sleep in the house after all.”

“And go back to the shed again?” No thanks. Anything was better than that.

“Glad we’re in agreement.” She continued down the balcony until she reached a door at the far end of the hall.

“This one is yours. It doesn’t have much, but we find it’s best until you stop peeing on the furniture.”

“You’re joking, right?” It had to be a joke because there was no way...

She didn’t smile. “You’ll shift at random times, especially when your wolf’s senses are on alert. Marking your territory will show her displeasure to the Alpha. That tends to go on for a while. Once you’ve finished throwing a temper tantrum, we can go from there.” She sneezed, then shook her head. “Also, try and wash up before you do anything else. Shower’s three doors down on the left.”

In pure Fallen fashion, she only stayed long enough to give me my orders, then she was gone, probably to see Ash about whatever it was the two of them had to talk about.

With her gone and my bedroom door closed, I finally had a chance to breathe.

As promised, I could smell wolves all over the place. Their scents were in the bedsheets, the curtains, and stuck in the fibers of my clothes. Logically, I knew this was because someone had tended to the room and attire before my arrival.

My wolf, on the other hand, did not.

Nevermind the fact I'd walked past a handful of wolves on my way up here, having their scents inside my room was something my wolf wasn't willing to accept.

Bracing myself for the shift that was sure to come, I pressed my palms into the dresser and took a handful of deep breaths. When that didn't work, I counted in sets of four, remembering the silly mindfulness sessions my sister insisted I have.

And when that didn't work, I did my best to push my wolf-side back, wincing around the pain in my temples it most caused. The tingling at the nape of my neck returned, my wolf's fur bristling under my skin as I did everything I could to fight her back.

Being so close to my last shift, I was in no condition to run. Just the thought of walking back down the stairs was enough to keep me holed up in my room for the rest of the afternoon. This displeased my wolf greatly as she wanted out of the house even more.

She didn't say as much, of course, but I felt it. It was similar to a child's fear of the dark, running to the safety of their bed only to throw the covers up over their head. That's exactly what it was like, and much like a child running from the dark, there

was very little I could do to console my wolf unless I left the manor completely.

Back in the shed, I'd only been mildly agitated, but that was also before last night, before the first shift I could actually control, and before my starlit run and all of the sensations I'd had to endure. No doubt the shed wouldn't have felt any better.

That was probably why Ash let me inside the house in the first place. If my wolf knew we were allowed inside with the rest of the pack, then maybe it would be enough to calm her down.

So as she continued to send adrenaline all throughout my body, I did my best to reassure her. If you've ever had an argument with yourself, fighting with my inner beast was ten times worse. Already exhausted from the night before, I found it close to impossible to fend off my wolf's attacks. Her fear was my own because, like it or not, I knew very little about the wolves around me.

Ash was guarded but kind. Fallen was a jerk much of the time, but at this point, I knew it was just for show. As for the rest of the wolves? They didn't trust me at all. No wonder my wolf was throwing a fit. She didn't belong here, and to be honest, neither did I.

No matter how long I stayed or how much I improved, they'd only see me as one thing. An imposture. A human turned and not a born wolf like the rest of them.

I shouldn't be here, I thought, pulling on the clothes another wolf had left for me. I never should've come back at all.

The pack would never accept me, and with that realization clinging to the back of my mind, I made my way back out of the room and through the front doors.

The city wasn't far.

Chapter Nine

As soon as I left the manor, my wolf breathed a little easier. By the time I reached the treeline, her panicked thoughts were no more, replaced with a willingness to run and take on my other form.

But I was too tired. Whenever I thought of shifting, something blocked me. It wasn't fear like it had been before but the inability to do what was necessary to actually take on my wolf pelt. Of course, that didn't mean I couldn't walk. So with the manor at my back and most of the pack safely tucked inside, I did exactly that, going deeper into the woods until the manor was no more.

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The sweet scent of pine enveloped me as I went deeper into the woods, soothing me once I finally had a chance to slow down. The bristling under my skin calmed, quickly replaced by a warmth that reminded me of a hot flash more than anything else. Only it wasn't a flash, and as I walked, it kept happening.

Flames danced across my skin, warding off the cool breeze blowing in from the east. If I walked against it, I'd reach the mountainside I'd slept under the night before. But if I go west...

I glanced in the other direction, at the deep woods I'd have to walk through if I ever hoped to reach the edge of pack territory.

There were no roads here, just a near-invisible path cut through the trees. That made me wonder how Ash got me here in the first place. They'd obviously pulled me into a car, but I'd never seen a vehicle of any kind within the boundary, which meant they must've ditched it somewhere else.

Somewhere close by.

If I could find the car and get it up and running, I wouldn't have to worry about taking on my wolf form to reach the city at all.

My wolf didn't agree, sharing its displeasure by slowly pulling at the back of my mind. If I thought I had it bad at the manor, driving a car with Ash and Fallen's scents all over the place probably was

n't a good idea.

“So much for that,” I said with a sigh, looking back the way I came.

Trees surrounded me, their branches barely letting in any light as birdsongs filled the air. It really was beautiful back here, and if there was one thing I wasn’t looking forward to once I reached the city, it was the noise. The traffic, the emergency vehicles, the screams of road rage... those were things I could do without, especially considering how sensitive my hearing had become.

My wolf may have been calm for the time being but that didn’t mean I wasn’t on high alert. Her thoughts were my own, and right now, the only thing she was interested in was the hunt.

“We’ll eat later,” I promised, grimacing when my stomach growled loud enough for the nearby wildlife to hear.

I probably should’ve grabbed something to eat on my way out, but it was too late now. As soon as I headed back, I knew I’d have to deal with my wolf’s upsets all over again.

So I kept walking.

The handful of berries I managed to find were more of a tease than anything else. They were also terribly out of season and extremely bitter. By the second handful, I got over my hunger and focused on the journey ahead.

Finding my way to the western edge of pack territory would take time, time I didn’t have according to my wolf. The longer I stayed inside the woods, the higher my chances of being seen by one of Ash’s scouts. No doubt Fallen had already gone back to my room to check on me. It was only a matter of time until she found me out here again.

Knowing that, I pressed on, walking faster than before.

The sky darkened, the air heavy with the promise of rain.

The handful of clothes I'd managed to put on before leaving the manor would do very little against a storm, and unless I could find shelter, I'd be stuck in the elements and vulnerable to any wolf that happened to walk by.

The fear of getting found, and more importantly, taken back to the manor, spurred me on. Running now, I followed my instincts, listening to my wolf the best I could as I made my way to the border of Ash's territory.

With the help of my wolf, I reached a break in the trees a lot sooner than expected. More than that, I was finally starting to understand her. The tingling I'd felt at the back of my neck was her way of warning me or sharing displeasure, but when something swelled in my chest, it was because of her excitement and pride.

Using those feelings as a compass, we played a silent game of hot and cold until I finally saw the golden glow of city lights along the horizon.

There, on the edge of pack territory, I looked on. As much as I wanted to see Val, something held me back. It wasn't my wolf because I could feel her tension in my chest. It was something else. Someone else.

It was as though someone took my hand and tugged on it, doing their best to pull me back. But that wasn't right, was it?

Looking around, the only one out here was me. Considering the fact my wolf was ready to go, it wasn't her, either.

So who was left? More importantly, where were they?

Scanning the tree line, the only thing I saw were the woven branches and needles of pine. There were no shadows moving within the forest and no sounds. No one followed me here, and as I turned my attention back to the city, I realized it was fear that took my hand. Fear held me back.

Val hadn't seen me since the morning of my first shift. She had no idea where I was or that I was still alive. How was I supposed to tell her where I'd been when I continued to struggle with the truth?

I may have shifted with Ash's help and gone on the best run of my life, but it felt more like a dream, like the kind that picks up as soon as you close your eyes.

It was a beautiful dream. It was also one I could ever share.

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Ash told me I was the first human to shift in over one hundred years. Waking up to my new reality was something I'd had a hard time with ever since I'd arrived. I could never put Val through that much less ask her to share a fate such as my own.

But that didn't mean she couldn't be in my life. She was still my sister, after all, and no matter how scary it was to confront her and explain my absence, the thought of never seeing her again was worse.

Against my wolf's instincts and the fear that continued to pull me back, I steeled myself for what was to come and went in search of Val. Close to dusk, there was only one place I knew she'd go.

Home.

The scent of raw sewage and the urine from homeless drunks were enough to make my stomach turn. The deeper into the city I went, the stronger my senses became. Car exhaust filled the air, burning at my eyes and lungs as I tried to breathe as little as possible.

The spark of electricity through wires was louder than ever before and practically unnoticeable under the rumble of cars.

Even the ground beneath my feet felt different, not because of the asphalt but because of the vibrations running through it.

My pulse raced, then stopped, starting up again moments later when a very sweet, familiar scent reached my nose.

Val. My mind swam at the thought of finally being able to see her and comfort her again.

Rounding the corner of a brick building, I spotted her silhouette under one of the street lamps in front of her

apartment complex. Her shoulders bunched with tension, a twinge of bitterness filling the air, one I could easily identify as hers beneath all of the other smells in the city.

Oh Val, what have I done to you? I should've called her the first chance I got. Instead, I let her go through this hell alone.

She might've yelled at me, she might've fought me over the phone, but anything would've been better than this.

She looked older somehow. Her hair was pulled back in a ragged mess, her clothes hanging loosely around her more feminine form. I'd never seen someone go through a drastic change after the loss of a loved one, not even after our folks passed away. But here? Now?

Val looked like a completely different person.

And just wait until she gets a load of me. I laughed at that, a small laugh that was equal parts anxious and excited.

My wolf wasn't interested, bristling under my skin as I slowly closed the distance between us.

What is she doing? I wondered, eying my sister as she continued to stand out on the sidewalk. Did she know I was here? Could she sense me the same way I'd sense her?

My heart skipped when she looked my way, at the shadows around me. She met my gaze, but if she recognized me, I couldn't be sure.

Taking another step, I moved into the light, my mouth open even though no words came out. I wanted to call her name. I wanted to run to her and take her in my arms.

Instead, a guttural growl made its way up my throat, an oncoming shift throwing me down onto my hands and knees before I could do anything else.

“Jo?” Val asked, a sense of uncertainty in her voice. “Is...

is that you?” She stepped off the sidewalk, making her way toward me.

Fighting back the shift, I retreated behind a parked car sitting in the lot across from her. If I didn't respond, maybe she'd go away. A part of me insisted it was safe and that

everything was fine, but the aggression I sensed coming from my wolf made me think otherwise.

So I hid in the shadows, covering my mouth with a hand when another growl slowly made its way up my throat.

She's a friend, I tried to tell my wolf. Family. If my wolf could only see who Val was, then maybe...

“No,” I chided myself.

Ash was right. I wasn't ready. I never should've come here.

“Jo?” Tears made their way into Val's voice, pulling at my instinct to take her in my

arms and comfort her the way she'd done for me so many times before.

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Clawing at the asphalt, I gritted my teeth and squeezed my eyes as tight as they would go. “I’m sorry,” I bit out, fending off my wolf long enough to speak. “I just had to see you.”

“But I thought... they said—”

“I?

??m sorry,” I said again, gasping when something sharp hit my heart. “I have to go.”

I didn’t wait for an answer, running as fast as I could back to the boundary of the city. I only made it so far.

My muscles burned, my eyes blurred, and when I tried to breathe, no air reached my lungs. This was it. I was going to die in front of my sister, far from her arms. It wasn’t how I expected my night to end, but at least now she’d know the truth. At least now she’d know—

“No,” I said, fighting my wolf back. “Not now.” Please, not now.

Still exhausted from the night before, my wolf only saw Val as a threat, throwing me into a shift as the sounds of footsteps approached me.

I tried to fight her back. I tried to ease her mind, but no amount of promises could stop her from taking full control. I was a passenger in my wolf’s mind, watching through her eyes with no way to stop what followed.

“Jo?” Val called again, the same uncertainty in her voice as I’d heard before. “Please don’t run. I’m not angry. I just... I need to see you. I need to know you’re okay.”

She was looking for me in the wrong spot, searching the back of a building on the edge of the city as my wolf silently prowled in the shadows not far from her.

“I know I’m overprotective,” she said when I didn’t say anything, “and I’m sorry for all of the handholding, but if this is what you want, if you want me to leave, I...” A sob stole her words away, the bitter scent from outside her apartment complex stronger than before. “Please. I just... please.”

Don’t do this, I begged my wolf, her eyes never leaving Val. She isn’t here to hurt us. If you’d just let me talk to her—

Pain hit my temples, causing my wolf to whimper a response. Not knowing if her reaction was because of me or something else, I continued to send her my thoughts, doing whatever I could to calm her down.

The other wolves will never forgive us, I warned. They’ll track us down. Of that I was sure. The amount of discomfort Fallen and Ash both showed when it came to humans was hard to miss and yet easy to understand. They might not have said as much but their time in the city was mainly limited to emergencies, ones they never hoped to have.

My wolf growled back at me, mentally barring her teeth in my direction.

That time Val heard her, turning to face the wolf that was slowly hunting her down.

Val gasped, holding a hand to her mouth even though the scream I sensed in her chest never made it through her lips.

You don't have to do this, I told my wolf. Just run to the woods. All will be forgiven if we leave now.

I actually had no idea how Ash would react, but leaving a human alive was a lot better than the humans finding one of their own dead from an attack.

One of their own. It was the first time I'd actually referred to myself as a wolf, as part of a pack. Not human.

My heart dipped into the pit of my stomach, but the pain I felt for the loss of my own humanity never reached my wolf.

Hungry from our journey and intoxicated with the hunt, she pushed me to the furthest recesses of her mind until I was no more than an afterthought. It was something Fallen suggested I do back in the manor, but I clearly wasn't as skilled as my wolf.

Trapped in my wolf's subconscious, time ceased to exist.

As soon as her instincts kicked in, I cried for my sister, her safety, and the life I'd never be able to share with Val ever again.

Chapter Ten

Panic gripped me as soon as my wolf lunged away from the ground. Powerful legs carried her, trapping Val against the building. My wolf's deep growls vibrated through the ground, her fur bristling as the smell of fear filled her nose.

Again, I begged my wolf to reconsider, but any thoughts I might've had ceased as soon as another smell reached my mind. This one was sweet like Val but belonged to the pack.

Before I could warn my wolf and hold her back, it was too late.

The taste of iron filled my wolf's maw, the shift of muscle and bone responding to her powerful jaws. She had less than a second to react to her own attacker, letting out a surprised yelp when someone bit hard against the back of her neck. Her skin didn't break.

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Alarmed by the new threat, my wolf's vision faded in and out. Darkness clouded my own vision as she slowly retreated to my subconscious.

By the time my pelt fell away, blood covered the ground and two bodies lay at my feet.

Val dropped to the ground the moment my wolf tried to strike. The dark wolf in front of me, however, wasn't so lucky.

A soft breeze wove its fingers through her still fur as blood pooled under her neck.

Ash...

My heart dropped as soon as I recognized her scent. She'd shifted to stop my wolf. She'd shifted to save Val, and to save me.

And now...

"Is she—"

"Dead?" Fallen growled, mantling over Ash when a pair of wolves ran over to join us. "No, but that's no longer your concern. What did I say? What was the first thing our Alpha told you?" She dropped her gaze as soon as the other wolves

took their place between us, gently nosing Ash under her chin.

"Do you have any idea how much damage you've done?"

When I went to approach Fallen, the other wolves stopped me. Their dark coats shimmered under the bit of light that happened to make its way behind the building. There was no mistaking why they were here, their fur bristling when I so much as looked in their direction.

“If you want me to leave, at least let me take my sister with me,” I said, averting my gaze before my emotions could get the better of me.

“And let your wolf run wild?” Fallen scoffed, looking past the other wolves until I finally met her gaze. Her eyes were the same gold I remembered, but the tone of her voice didn’t match the sadness I saw there. “You cannot leave. None of us can.”

“Fallen.” Ash’s voice was weak and barely audible over the crackle of fire still coursing through my veins.

Startled, Fallen returned her attention to the Alpha curled up underneath of her.

“Alpha—”

“Please don’t argue. Not tonight,” Ash said, a small whimper escaping her maw. “I need rest, and we could all use some sleep.”

“Ash, I am so sorr—”

“Get away from her,” Fallen growled, pushing past the guards before nudging me back. “And never use that name again. You aren’t hers. You aren’t pack.”

“Then why—”

“Because if I leave you here, your wolf will hunt someone else. As much as I want to drive my fangs into your neck, I can’t have the humans poking around, either. If the

Alpha says you come, so be it, but you're going right back to the shed without her." She glared in Val's direction, her fur bristling as she spoke.

"Val," I said, not moving from where I was. "She's my sister."

"Then you've sentenced your own family to death."

"Enough," Ash breathed, slowly rising to her paws before leaning against one of the guards for support. "Go get the car."

We leave together."

"But..." Fallen released a long breath. "Of course, Alpha."

To the guards, she said, "Feel free to nip her legs if she tries to run. I'll be right back."

Fallen gave me a final warning glance before turning on her paws to go back the way they came. Once she was gone, I got to my feet and immediately wished I hadn't. The world swung around us in wide circles, and my head throbbed from the blood pooling behind my temples.

The wolves guarding Ash stepped forward, growling in response.

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“Move away, pup,” one of them said, his voice deeper than I’d expected. “She’s of no concern to you.”

“But she’s the Alpha. I just want to see if she’s—”

“Fine,” the other said, stepping forward until I took a few steps back. “And she isn’t your Alpha. We’re all here because of you. There’s no way she’ll let you stay now.” He sneered in my direction, light shining on his sharp fangs.

“Please,” I begged, fighting back my tears as they threatened to make their way up my throat. “I can’t stomach the thought of harming her.” I’d seen where my wolf bit her. It may have been for only a split second, but surely the mark wasn’t fatal, right?

Werewolves fought over territory all the time. They healed faster than any human ever could.

She’ll be okay, I thought with a shaky breath. Everything will be okay.

Ash was the only one who could decide my fate now. The only reason Fallen didn’t do even more damage and actually

kept me around was because I was still her responsibility. But if something happened to Ash, then...

No, I refused to believe it. Fallen put up a strong front, but there must’ve been a small part of her that actually liked me.

She'd never admit it, but I'd sensed her pride during my first run and again when I made it back to the manor on my own.

Granted, that was before tonight. What my wolf did was unacceptable, and I only had myself to blame for it.

The smell of exhaust and the sound of an old engine pulled me from my thoughts. A pair of headlights turned in our direction, momentarily blinding me once Fallen got out of the van.

"Put them in the back," Fallen ordered the guards, pushing me aside when I tried to help with my sister. "No, not with your wolf stirring under your skin. If you so much as touch her, we'll go right back to where we started. You'll join the others so they can keep an eye on you."

"What about Ash?" With the guards out of the way, I finally got my first look at Ash.

She lay motionless on the asphalt, the fur along her neck glistening with fresh blood.

"She'll survive," Fallen said with relief, "but I can't say the same for you. Until she wakes, until the Alpha's well, you'll remain in your original quarters." Her tone wasn't as hard as before, and as soon as the other wolves were out of earshot, she continued. "I understand how hard it must've been for you to hold back your wolf. Any newborn would've struggled just as much. However, that doesn't offer much comfort when I need to ask two of my pack to carr

y their Alpha into the back of our van."

"I understand," I said, dropping my gaze. "I'll do whatever you ask of me just so long as they keep my sister safe."

“They will,” Fallen promised, making her way back toward the van. “She may be an enemy, but we value all life.

What happens to her will be decided by the Alpha once she’s well.”

Not if Ash got well but when. I had no idea how long it would take or what fate awaited me back at the manor, but so long as Ash survived, I knew everything would be okay.

Somehow.

The ride back to the manor was the longest ride of my life.

I had no idea how far the manor actually was, but considering I’d made it to the city on foot, it couldn’t have been very far.

The guards sitting on the bench across from me never said a word. Val sat propped up between them, their nakedness not troubling me as much as it once did. They were pack, and after responding to what my wolf had done, they had little time for clothes or changing out of them before taking on their pelts.

Silently, I thanked them for the part they’d played tonight, while a smaller part of me hated them for keeping me away from my sister. What if she woke up? What if she saw me naked and thought they were kidnappers instead?

Suddenly feeling trapped inside the back of their van, I pounded on the wall between us and where Fallen and Ash were sitting up front. “Why is it taking so long?” We should’ve been there by now.

“There are patrols all over the roads tonight,” Fallen replied, her words muffled by the divider.

“We should’ve gone to the hospital. They could’ve helped her there,” I said, gritting my teeth when Fallen opened the small window between us. “It would’ve been closer.”

“And risk you turning again?” she asked as she met my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Humans did this to us and only wolves can fix it.”

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“But we have pack surgeons on staff,” I reminded her.

“Who probably messed everything up in the first place.

Not all wolves are pack. You hire strays.”

I opened my mouth to say something but thought better of it when one of the guards gently placed a hand on my shoulder

and shook his head. Challenging Fallen now would only make matters worse, so after closing the divider between us, I sat back on my bench and did everything I could to calm myself down.

My heart rate was on this side of normal by the time we turned up the hill toward the manor. I knew we’d arrived as soon as the smooth drive on asphalt turned bumpy. I still had no idea where they’d originally parked, but there was obviously a path through the woods all the way up to the back door.

As soon as the guards opened up the back of the van, Fallen was there to see me out. “Trevor, take her to her quarters and keep watch. You, come with me and bring that human with you.”

“Wait,” I said, reaching out to touch one of the guard’s arms. “Where are you taking her? I know she can’t stay with me, but—”

“She’ll be safe,” Fallen cut in, not looking at me. “We’ll update you once she wakes.”

“If she wakes up and I’m not there—”

“At least she’ll be alive,” Fallen finished for me, heading back to the front of the van so she could get Ash.

“Come with me,” Trevor said, his eyes focused on something I couldn’t see. “We should have word on her condition in the morning.”

He didn’t say anything to me after that, keeping watch just as Fallen had asked.

Locked in my cell and with no way of knowing the whereabouts of my sister, I sat back in the corner of my cage and wept. The tears I’d been fighting back ever since we left the city slowly rolled down my cheeks. I cried for my sister, for letting her see my wolf, and for putting her life at risk. I also wept for Ash, who was once my Alpha but might never be again.

And then I wept for the pack, for the family that I was slowly winning over only to take two steps back.

Even if Ash woke up, even if she forgave me, my standing within the pack would never change.

They’d always see me as an outsider, a lone wolf taken in by their Alpha and nothing more.

As much as it hurt for me to realize that, I’d happily accept it so long as both Ash and my sister survived.

Please let them be okay.

Chapter Eleven

I woke to the sound of the shed door opening, a bright light filtering in behind whoever decided to join us. The guard, Trevor if I remembered his name correctly, stayed with me the entire night. He never said a word. He also never left his post, not to eat or otherwise.

Like me, he must've been starved and out of his mind.

Sitting in my cell might've been okay for the first handful of hours, but the longer I had to wait, the more anxious I became.

At least I'd had some clothes waiting for me that I could change into. Trevor wasn't so lucky, changing from human to wolf once the shed got too cold.

"You may go," the newcomer said, her eyes directed at Trevor who lay with his chin on his paws. "Go get something to eat and rest. I can take the next shift."

Rising to his paws, Trevor bowed his head in understanding, then walked out the door before Fallen let it close behind him again.

"You're a welcomed sight," I said with relief. "He isn't much of a talker, and when no one came last night to tell us—"

"I'm not here to talk," Fallen said, cutting me off. Her words were hard, but looking at her worried gaze, I could see she didn't mean it.

Glancing past her at the now-closed door, I lowered my voice so only she would hear. "You need to know I never meant to harm her."

"I know, but the other wolves won't see it that way."

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There's also a complication." Her voice shook at the end. "Our healer can't find his way around her injuries. She'll survive, but without an hours-long surgery that requires an entire team, her movement might be impaired. She was already struggling with her place in the pack, but if she lost her mobility as well..." Fallen shook her head and left it at that.

"Val," I said, standing up before approaching the bars between us.

"I'm talking about Ash and you have the audacity to ask about your sister? Unbelievable."

"Val's a veterinarian," I told her. "I know it isn't exactly what you need, but seeing as the pack would never let me in to help..."

"An extra set of hands would be most appreciated," Fallen agreed. "However, considering she's still in shock about last night, it's unwise."

"Let me talk to her. Please. It'll only take a moment."

"Need I remind you your wolf tried to kill Val less than twelve hours ago? No. I'm not going to let you anywhere near her or the rest of the pack." She paused a moment, then said,

"Though I suppose I could bring her here. It'd have to be quick, and you'll let me know if you feel your wolf starting to surface again, right?"

"Yes. Just let me help. Let me undo the damage I've done."

“With your sister’s hands?” Fallen asked, offering me a sideways glance.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’ll go and see if she’d be willing to help.”

Without saying another word, Fallen turned away, leaving me in the shed by myself and with no one else around to guard me.

She returned ten minutes later with my sister following close behind her. Val’s hopeful voice reached me moments before they walked through the shed door. The relief I hoped to see on her face wasn’t there. Her skin was pale, and her eyes widened as soon as she spotted me inside the cell.

“What is this?” she fumed, glaring back at Fallen who’d calmly entered the shed behind her.

“It’s for your safety,” I answered for her, wrapping my hands around the bars. “Look, I don’t have time to explain

right now. All you need to know is that I’m safe and well.”

“

Then it wasn’t a dream,” Val said, placing a hand over her mouth before staggering back into Fallen. “Are you really...

one of them?” Her voice was lower than before, cautious.

“She can still hear you,” I said with a small laugh, “but yes. Unfortunately, that isn’t why you’re here. I need you... I need a favor, one of the biggest ones you’ve ever

done.”

“You were gone for a week,” she said with a shake of her head. “Why didn’t you call?” She didn’t look at me then, but there was no mistaking the pain in her voice.

“I... I tried, but I had no idea what to say.”

“How did this even happen?” she asked, continuing toward my cell until Fallen placed a hand on her shoulder. “What?”

You won’t even let me hug my sister? What kind of place is this?”

“Here is close enough,” Fallen said, stepping away to give her some space.

I patted the air between us. “Listen, I can explain everything later, but Ash, the pack Alpha, was injured when she... when...”

“She saved your life,” Fallen cut in, her voice eerily calm.

Val’s face paled. “You mean your wolf—”

“I couldn’t control her,” I explained, fighting back the nausea in my throat. “I still can’t, which is why I’m in here.” I gestured at the space inside my cell.

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“But this Alpha saved me?” Val asked again, this time directing her attention to Fallen.

“Yes. We would’ve done more if we could, but our Alpha was injured in the process. We have a healer, but her injuries are ones meant for a full staff instead of a single man.”

Val looked at her with disbelief. “And where’s the rest of your staff?”

“Lost.” Fallen bowed her head and left it at that.

Alarmed, my sister looked back at me and said, “And this is really for your own good?”

“Yes. With my wolf still uneasy around everyone else, I can’t risk operating on her. I don’t know when I’ll turn again.

Until I can get a hold on my wolf, I need to stay here.”

Val took an uneasy breath, reached out to touch my hand, then drew back before we made contact. “I’ll do my best. I owe her my life, and if I can offer her a second chance, I will.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s all we ask,” Fallen said, approaching my sister again. “The infirmary’s this way.”

No one came to check on me after that. No one took up the post inside the shed and no one came by to deliver my dinner.

Not that I would've been able to eat anything, anyway. My stomach was in knots, and whenever I thought of food, the nausea from earlier returned.

So there I sat, watching the shed door in hopes of hearing some good news before the night was through.

Fallen didn't explain the injuries, but looking back on what I remembered about the attack, one thing was sure. If Val failed, if she and the healer couldn't repair the damage I'd done along with Ash's own rapid healing, then there was a good chance she'd never walk again.

Wolves worked differently than humans. The anatomy might've been the same in their human forms, but their rapid healing complicated things even more. If the healing repaired the damage in such a way that it fused bone in the wrong position...

"Oh god."

I ran to the corner of my cell and lost whatever was left in my stomach. It wasn't much, and as the dry heaves continued to roll up my chest, I did everything I could to fight my panic back.

I'd asked my sister to do something impossible. Something she'd never have to do to another animal.

I'd asked her to duplicate Ash's injuries.

All through school, we were told to do no harm, but wolves are different and not something we were taught about until recently. Their rapid healing made it so a break

would heal within a week. Blood vessels would mend within a day, and muscles healed the fastest of all. By asking Val to follow the injuries and cut through muscle and bone the same way my wolf had done, I'd put her through a great deal of stress.

Needless to say, when Fallen finally dropped by a few hours later, Ash's condition and my sister's well-being were the first things that came to mind.

"How are they? How's Ash and my sister?" Did she do okay? Did they save Ash?

Fallen turned to me, her expression being one I couldn't read. However, as soon as she spoke, a small smile played on her lips. "Your sister is a very skilled healer."

"Oh thank god." Head in my hands, I took the first breath in what felt like forever as I knelt close to the ground.

"The Alpha should make a full recovery within a few weeks." This time I could hear the smile in her voice, something I'd never heard on her before. As I did, she walked over to my cell and unlocked the door, stepping aside once it was open.

"Wait. What's happening?" She didn't honestly want me to see the Alpha now, did she?

"I've been pacing those halls all day and you've been trapped in here for just as long. I don't know about you but I could really use a run to get rid of some of this tension, and seeing as you're still my responsibility, I thought you might like to join me."

Was Fallen actually asking me to go on a run with her? The stern, bullheaded wolf who wouldn't even look at me the first day I arrived?

"Well?" Fallen urged, holding the cell door open as I continued to stare in her direction. "Are you coming with me or not?"

“As my wolf?” My hands shook as I slowly closed the distance between us. How could she trust me when I couldn’t trust myself?

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“The longer you keep away from your shift out of fear, the more powerful your wolf’s control will become. It’s a hard lesson and one I hoped you wouldn’t have to learn so soon.”

“Which is your way of telling me that it’s for my own good.”

She offered me a curt nod but didn’t move from where she was. I’d only seen Fallen in her human form a handful of times, but in the short time I’d known her, she’d never looked at me like that, as though I had a purpose. As though I had a place within the pack.

Tilting her head to the side, she reminded me of her wolf, the same inquisitiveness shown on her face the longer I stood in front of her.

Dark hair framed her face, her long tresses reaching the middle of her back. I’d never thought about it before, but I couldn’t help wondering if she and Ash were related. They definitely looked alike and it would explain why Fallen acted the way she did.

Granted, everyone in the pack acted in a similar fashion, but with Fallen it was different. She was the most protective one of all.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Fallen mistook my silence for hesitation. “I’ll be right beside you the entire time,” she said gently. “I’ll be able to sense your aggression seconds before you do and promise to put a stop to any attacks before they even begin. This is why it’s so important for you to stay here until you’ve grown into your wolf. The pack can keep an eye on you.”

There was something about Fallen I couldn't explain. All this time, I'd thought of her as the one wolf standing in my

way when it came to the pack's acceptance. However, looking at her now, I realized she'd been watching after me the entire time. For her benefit or my own, I couldn't be sure.

Her eyes met mine, and as they did, a warmth grew deep inside of me. It reminded me of the warmth I felt at the bonfire before my first controlled shift, and again whenever Ash was near.

Fallen explained how in tune Ash was with the rest of the pack and how she could ease their minds, so was that what I'd felt before? If it was, why did I feel the same way now?

Thinking back on what Fallen had said earlier, I finally understood why I was here. They could've left me in the parking garage to writhe in pain. They could've dumped me on the side of the road. Instead, they brought me here. The care they shared for their wolves was hard to ignore, and while Fallen may have kept her distance at first, she stayed with me when I passed out in the woods.

It wasn't just because Ash had left me in her care but because it was what they would've done for anyone else inside the pack.

They were protecting me.

"Okay," I finally said after giving Fallen's earlier invitation some thought. "I'll go on one condition," I continued, following her as she made her way through the shed door.

"Oh, and what's that?"

“Can we get something to eat first? I’m starved.”

Fallen laughed at that, then shifted into her wolf form, looking back over her shoulder until I did the same. “Wolves don’t eat at the table,” she said matter-of-factly. “We hunt. You might not be ready, but I think it’s time for you to learn how to hunt on your own. Come on. I know just the place.”

Chapter Twelve

Soft soil graced my paws, sending a thrill up my spine as Fallen ran beside me. It was the first time she’d ever kept her pace with me, never falling behind or running ahead. A part of me wondered what changed, but in the end, I knew. We were on a hunt. She had to be there to make sure my wolf senses didn’t miss something she’d picked up.

That’s what I kept telling myself, anyway.

Truth be told, everything about her had changed. Her voice was lighter, her movements more fluid, and the bitter scent I was so used to smelling on her was no longer there. Instead, a smell much like honeysuckle filled the air around her.

Considering it wasn’t spring yet, the smell must’ve been coming from her. It was the only logical explanation, and as Fallen continued to run with me, I took a moment to breathe it all in.

“What do you smell?” she asked, her voice low as she slowed her pace.

Stopping now, I lifted my nose to the air and closed my eyes, but all I smelled was her. Had she scented something I’d missed?

“Honeysuckle,” I said after a long moment, unable to pick up anything else aside from the trees surrounding us. “That’s strange, right?” I asked, finally mee

ting her gaze.

“That would depend on where it’s coming from,” she said with a hint of amusement in her voice.

“It’s...” I bowed my head, embarrassed, “It’s coming from you.”

She released a soft huff of air. Was she actually laughing at me? “And that scent is probably connected to a good memory, right?”

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“Yeah. How did you know?”

She offered me a wolfish grin and casually sat back on her haunches. “Because every wolf experiences it. For you, it’s

honeysuckle. For someone else, it might be oranges or vanilla.

It’s basically your wolf’s way of telling you she feels comforted or safe.”

“I’ve experienced sweet smells around Ash before,” I said after giving it some thought, “but never from you.”

Fallen didn’t miss a beat. She had an answer for that as well. “When your wolf feels threatened, our scents are different. Bitter is usually the first thing that comes to mind, but that scent can also appear when someone’s sad or upset.”

“Makes sense so far.” But why was I suddenly smelling honeysuckles on her?

As though she could read my mind, Fallen said, “Your wolf’s no longer threatened by me. This is good news because once she accepts the rest of the pack, you can come and go whenever you please. Your wolf’s calming down.”

“So soon after freaking out?”

Aside from the slight tingle running down my neck, all of my wolf’s senses were calm. I could feel my heartbeat, but it wasn’t fast or hammering in my chest. It was as though time itself had slowed enough for me to feel every part of my other form.

From my dirt-covered paws to the tips of my ears and tail, I could feel it all.

The way the wind wove its fingers through my fur, and how the air tingled right in front of my nose, teasing me with new, delicious scents. Everything was heightened, and for the first time, I was able to decipher it.

“It happens,” Fallen said, tilting her head to the side when I scented the air again. “Now what do you smell?” There was that silly smile again, and this time, the warmth coming from her made it all the way to my stomach.

“Food.”

I’m not sure how I knew, but everything about the sooty, still scent told me it was food. As luck would have it, I couldn’t scent the other animal’s fear, which meant it hadn’t spotted us yet.

“Can you tell me what it is?” Fallen asked, lowering close to the ground until her stomach was practically touching the loose pine needles at our feet.

Following her example, I tucked my tail between my legs to keep it still. “I’m not sure, but I can tell you where it went.”

“It’s a start,” Fallen said, her gentle praise washing over me. “Where?”

“This way.”

I didn’t wait for a response, taking the lead as we wove between the trees. As soon as we took off, the scent I’d picked up before changed. A bitter smell hit my nose, one strong enough to make me sneeze. Our prey knew we were there, and as soon as it bolted for safety, we were right behind it, closing in on it.

While I was hoping for something big like a glorious buck, a simple rabbit would have to do.

It's white tail bobbed and flashed, disorienting me as I made chase. Fallen waited behind, cutting off the rabbit's escape when it tried to run the other way.

Through my human eyes, it would've been over in an instant. Through my wolf eyes, however, I got to see it in vivid detail. The way our paws kicked up the dirt, how the rabbit danced between the loose pine needles and the raised tree roots, and how even my breath carried on the wind. I saw it all, and as soon as my mouth closed around the rabbit's neck, I knew I wanted more.

Not just to hunt and eat but to experience everything there was to being a wolf.

"Very good," Fallen said when she joined me again. "But I expected no less. Once you've had more practice, you can go after the bigger game."

I dropped the rabbit between us and took my first full breath ever since we started the hunt. "I've never seen anything bigger than a groundhog," I admitted, thinking back on the short time I'd been with the pack.

"That's because you don't know where to look. Now that you're starting to recognize different scents, it will be easier to identify one creature from another."

"And the pack?" I asked, going back to what we'd talked about earlier.

"We can test my theory once we've had a chance to eat. Do you remember the stream you woke up beside before?"

How could I forget? "The one where you stayed with me the entire night?" I teased.

“You were under my care,” she explained, dropping her gaze a moment later.

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“Just like I am now, right?” I shook my head at that. “You can deny it all you want, but I know that scent is yours.”

“The honeysuckles?” She laughed, then took the rabbit in her maw before slowly making her way toward the stream.

“Unlikely.”

That time a twinge of bitterness returned. The smell was definitely coming from her, and it wasn't because my wolf had accepted the pack, either. It was because of her. It'd always been her.

The warmth I felt around Ash, the soothing scent... Fallen was always in the background, watching over us. Guarding us.

I'd tried to ignore it, I'd tried to explain it away as some kind of fluke, but even as we neared the stream, the only thing I could think about was her. Her beautiful chocolate wolf was the first thing I saw when I woke, and her voice was the last thing I heard back in the parking garage.

She was always there, leaving my side only to return hours later.

When they found me in the city, Fallen could've injured me the same way I'd hurt Ash. Instead, she stilled her hand and forced me to the ground without ever breaking the skin. It didn't make sense before, but now I knew...

Fallen was my one. Fallen was my mate.

The realization should've excited me. Instead, all it did was make me sick to the stomach. By the time we reached the stream, I struggled to fight my nausea back. Fallen, on the other hand, was more than happy to split the rabbit with me.

I winced at the crunch of bone and the visualization it caused in the back of my mind, turning away from Fallen in case it offended her.

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked, padding up beside me before gently pressing her shoulder against mine.

"Not really," I lied, ignoring the growl in my stomach as the disgusting sound of bone echoed in my ears. "It's all yours."

"You'll get used to it," she said, dropping the rabbit beside the stream before standing in front of me. "Your wolf's need to hunt has passed, so now your human senses are starting to return. It can take some time before a wolf can successfully eat what they hunt. It's perfectly normal."

I released a sigh of relief and bowed my head, doing my best not to wag my tail when she gently pressed her head against mine. It's a wolf thing, I told myself, having seen the other members of the pack do it whenever they gathered around the bonfire.

My heart didn't agree. The longer Fallen sat close to me, the more confused I became. My wolf told me it was normal, that it was something wolves do, while my human heart said something else entirely. Any form of affection came across as just that. Fallen wasn't an elder, she wasn't a parental guardian.

She was a pack mate, a superior, and one of the most beautiful wolves I'd ever seen. She was the only wolf in the pack with her dark chocolate fur. She stood out against everyone else and it wasn't just because of how she looked, either. It was because...

No, I chided myself. You barely know one another. That's not how these things work.

Maybe not in the human world, but as a wolf? I honestly wasn't sure.

A part of me willed my legs to move, to back away before I did something I'd regret.

I didn't move, and as Fallen slowly exhaled in front of me, I lifted my gaze and gently licked her on the cheek. Fear gripped m

e as soon as I realized what I'd done.

Drawing away from her, I searched the surrounding trees for a place to hide, but no place would be able to mask my scent from her. She'd simply track me down and then what?

Scold me? Attack me? Ban me from the pack?

To my surprise, Fallen didn't do any of those things, and as a soft rumble rolled up her chest, I met her gaze. Her eyes had the same golden hue as before, but this time the hint of fire sparked behind them.

In the next instant, she pushed me, forcing me to the ground beneath her before rapidly licking the sides of my muzzle along with the tip of my nose.

Not knowing if her aggression was because I'd overstepped or because she felt the same way, I did what any wolf would do. I rolled on my back, exposing my white belly to her. What happened next was completely up to her, and much like our hunt with the rabbit, time slowed.

Her scent grew, enveloping me until I was practically swimming in it. Her breaths were even and slow, her licks on my muzzle attentive and calculated. When she

lowered her head to groom my neck, I thought I was through.

“Ease your mind,” she soothed between licks, nuzzling the side of my neck before finally laying beside me with her head propped up on my chest. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, touching noses with her. “I thought you’d be upset.”

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“No. I was simply waiting to see how your wolf would react to me.”

“Then why act so rude toward me?” Why push me away?

“It’s how I treat everyone. You need to understand this wasn’t my intent, and if I knew your wolf would accept me just like she’s done right now, I would’ve acted differently.”

I swallowed hard and rolled on my side so I could playfully nip her ear. “When did you know?”

“The first night you turned.” She sat up and nuzzled me again. “I knew as soon as we got you in the car. I was almost certain of it, and the moment you took on your pelt, my wolf confirmed it. I insisted Ash let me look after you, but because you were so new and the pack so against you being here, I had to be careful. The other wolves would’ve disrespected me as well as my place within the pack, and Ash already has so much to look after that—”

“What happens now?” I would’ve blamed her for not saying anything sooner but I probably wouldn’t have believed her anyway.

“We play it by ear. We’ll keep doing what we’ve been doing, but when we hunt, we hunt together. It’ll reinforce our bond and keep your wolf close to me. In time, the rest of the pack will accept it.”

“Does Ash know?”

Fallen looked away from me and bowed her head. “I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure. I don’t like getting my hopes up. Then again, my instincts are never wrong. Not yet, at least.”

When she looked at me again, there was a light shine to her eyes. “You have no idea how hard it was for me to watch you sit inside that cell in pain. That first night, your wolf looked at me as her enemy, and as badly as I wanted to comfort her, any movement on my part would’ve pushed her away.”

Her voice broke, and as it did, I lost my hold on my wolf, throwing my arms around her moments later as I buried my head in her fur. It didn’t take long for me to feel her shift, her fur receding until her skin gently pressed against mine.

She sunk in my embrace, her warm tears falling onto my skin. “I am so sorry.”

“You did what you thought was best,” I assured her, holding her as tight as I could. “And you were right. My wolf wasn’t very fond of it. Her fur bristled all the time.”

She nodded at that. “I know. I could sense it. The others probably have an idea since the bitterness you smelled wasn’t coming from me. You never smelled it on Ash, did you?”

When I shook my head, she continued. “That’s because your wolf saw her as an Alpha and respected her place. As for everyone else, well—”

“You were the enemy,” I finished for her.

“I’m sure your wolf may have seen me as a mentor at some point, but it wasn’t until I let you out of that cell to run with me when she fully accepted me.”

“And this bond... could it ever... could she—”

“Take it back?” Fallen released a soft laugh and ran the backs of her fingertips against my cheek. “Never. She’s a part of me just as she’s a part of you. It’ll take some time before you can experience our full bond, but I promise you, a mating bond isn’t something anyone can take back.”

“Not even the Alpha?” I asked, immediately wishing I hadn’t.

Fallen’s face paled. “No, though I suppose that was part of the confusion. Because your heart used to belong to Dani, Ash felt an instant connection to you. But it’s only your heart she feels close to, not your wolf. The night you shifted at the bonfire, she’d hoped the bond might strengthen, that her love could somehow be reborn.

When that didn’t happen, she distanced herself instead. She recognized it, same as me, but she hated the thought of pushing you away even more. So you stayed and she sent me in her place.”

“Will she fault you for bonding with my wolf?” For some reason, it felt as though I was cheating on her even though I’d never felt as close to Ash as I did to Fallen just then.

“Perhaps, but she knows just as well as anyone else that it isn’t something we can control. It’s a primal need our wolves

have. To ignore that is to accept a life best-lived alone. And I don’t want to be alone. Not anymore.”

I leaned into her caress and closed my eyes, taking in the scents and sounds around us so I could always look back on this very moment.

“We shouldn’t linger,” Fallen said, her voice full of regret.

“The others will wonder where we’ve gone. It’s only a matter of time until they come looking for us.”

“But we can hunt again tomorrow?” I asked hopefully, getting to my feet with her help.

“Yes. So long as I’m not needed elsewhere, I’d love to go on a hunt with you.”

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I took on my wolf form the same moment she did, and once she was a few feet in front of me, I followed after her, making sure to keep my distance just enough to keep any suspicion at bay. Hiding in the shadows wouldn't work for very long, but once Fallen talked to Ash, I knew we'd be able to share our bond with the pack.

Until then, I was more than willing to keep it between us.

Chapter Thirteen

The morning sun greeted me as soon as I crested the hill outside the manor. A thick mist lay close to the ground, distorting my surroundings as I made my way toward the trees.

As promised, Fallen visited whenever she could, which wasn't nearly as often as my wolf would've liked. I could feel her pacing in the back of my mind, impatiently waiting to run with Fallen again. Restless and not wanting to bring more attention to myself, I slipped out of the shed and decided to take a long run before stopping by the manor to check on Ash and my sister.

The other wolves kept a wary eye, always watching me from afar and never willing to get close enough to ask me about my day.

In the days following my wolf's attack, Ash reinstated my place within the pack. She even invited me inside the house as well, but I quickly declined. Considering how restless my wolf was staying on the same property as Fallen, I had a good idea what she'd do if Fallen and I ever happened to walk into the same room together.

The thought of sharing the same living space with her sent a thrill down my spine, one of which had my wolf howling for joy even though it wasn't our reality.

Not yet, but soon, I could almost hear my wolf say, her claws digging at the back of my mind until I finally let her out.

Away from the other wolves, I could come and go as I pleased. No one would ask why I was on my fifth run of the morning, and I'm sure no one would care. Still, the less suspicion I caused, the better. So I ran.

I ran as though my life depended on it, every beat of my heart mimicking my paws as soon as they hit the ground.

Under the trees and out of their line of sight, the other wolves back at the manor became a distant memory. Surrounded by pine and the smell of rain, I let my mind wander, returning to the time I'd spent with Fallen days prior.

A sadness tightened in my chest, a deep longing for the one wolf I wanted at my side but may never have. She'd never say as much, but considering her standing within the pack, getting her alone now that I'd made my first kill was more difficult than ever before.

Aside from the rest of the pack and their uneasy glares, I didn't need a mentor anymore. No guards stood by to accompany me and no one watched my cell. Ash's word was law, so once she invited me back inside the house, the other wolves didn't challenge me. At this point, I wasn't even sure if they ever did.

Fallen did. She tested me along with my feelings toward her, and as much as I knew the admission pleased her, she hadn't spoken a word of it since. I rarely saw her, and when I did, it was in passing with no more than a gentle nod thrown in my direction.

Knowing she had to keep appearances, I assured myself it was just until things quieted down. However, as the days went on, even I was starting to question it.

Even thoughts of my sister and her own place within the pack couldn't compare to Fallen's whereabouts or whatever challenges were still ahead. According to her, Ash's kindness toward me wasn't just because she was Alpha but because of the heart beating in my chest. It was a borrowed heart, and one I could never return.

If Fallen were any other wolf, I might've asked her to run with me and leave the pack behind. However, knowing how close she and Ash were, our time away from the pack would only cause her more pain.

So I waited. I ran and hoped against hope that someday we'd get to share our bond with everyone else. Especially Ash.

It didn't matter where my heart came from, but deep down, a part of me wanted to thank her. I wanted to thank her for letting me in, for watching over me during my first shift and again with my second one.

I wanted to thank her for her trust, and most importantly, for allowing me to stay after everything I'd put her through.

What I'm still putting her through.

At the edge of the stream, I stopped to catch

my breath.

Ash was walking, albeit more carefully than usual, but she was walking. The rest of the pack didn't challenge her, but considering what Fallen had said, it was only a matter of time until her right to lead came into question.

All because I had to go back into the city to see my sister.

“You’re chasing your tail again,” I chided myself.

It was the same thing I did day in and day out. I loved having my sister inside the boundary, but at some point, she’d have to go back to the city. The boundary was no place for her, and it honestly didn’t feel right for me, either.

The ranks and jobs within the pack were complicated at best, but then I suppose they wouldn’t be too confusing to a pureblood wolf. Wolves entered and left the manor at all hours of the day. Some of them went into the city, but most of them found their work here, serving the rest of the pack by keeping them safe.

After hearing how short-staffed they were in a medical ward, I hoped Ash might give that job to me, one where I could do some good and really support the pack I’d slowly become a part of.

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Not knowing if or when such an opportunity would come, I started to entertain the idea of going back into the city to do my old job. The thought didn't last long, chased away by a fear shared by me and my wolf. The last thing I wanted to do was to put someone in danger all over again.

As much as I wanted to get to the bottom of the surgical mix-up, my loyalty to the pack was far more important.

Until Ash said otherwise, I'd remain within the boundary along with everyone else.

Someday though... Someday I'd go back to right the wrong someone else had done.

"I've been looking for you all morning," Val said as soon as I broke through the trees. There was a huge smile on her face, her white gown dancing in the soft breeze. "They kept telling me to check the shed, but whenever I did, you were gone."

"Sorry," I apologize, licking the palm of her hand as she knelt down to greet me, "restless paws."

She offered me a sideways glance, then combed her fingers through my fur. "You know, I'm starting to get used to you like this. I mean, you're cool as a human and all, but this? This suits you even more."

"Dirty and out of breath?" I teased, walking with her as she made her way toward the trees.

"Happy," she corrected me, gently placing a hand on my back as we walked side by

side. “It’s still hard to believe. No one’s really told me what happened except that you weren’t turned.” She stopped then, her hold on my fur tighter than before. “What happened, Jo? Jeremy called me and said you might be sick, but when you weren’t at home, I—”

“It’s okay,” I said, nuzzling her as the scent of fear slowly made its way up her chest. “I wanted to tell you when I woke up,” I said, pausing on the other side of the manor, away from the pack and far out of earshot.

“Why didn’t you?” She followed my example, sitting in the grass as she absently combed through my fur.

“I had the phone right in my hand, but I just couldn’t do it.

I had no idea what to say or how to tell you I wasn’t coming home.”

“I can’t say I blame you, it’s just that I... I thought you were gone.” She choked back her tears and started again. “I planned your funeral. We supposed to bury an empty casket this past Tuesday.”

A small whimper made it past my lips, my heart dropping into the pit of my stomach. “If there’d been any way for me to tell you, to explain why—”

“Tell me now,” she said, wiping her eyes before looking at me again. “I’m free for the rest of the morning, so talk.”

I tried to think up an excuse. I tried to find a way to hide the truth. Nothing came to mind.

Val had already seen far worse within the pack without me hiding the origin of my condition from her. Granted, out of all the times I’d thought it through, I never

expected it to be as hard to talk about as it was now.

“Someone screwed up,” I said without looking at her.

“When I went into surgery that day, I was supposed to get a human heart. It’s why we have separate staff for humans and wolves. It’s so that—”

“Nothing like this happens?” she asked, taking my chin in her hand. “We can’t run things perfectly all the time.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure you can tell the difference between a human heart and that of a wolf.”

“I can,” she agreed, “but we both know wolves who shift are far more complicated than that.”

“But there are blood tests, markers, and—”

“It’s still something that can get mixed up if someone’s in a rush.”

“Yeah? Tell that to the rest of the pack. They don’t want anything to do with me.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be here.” This time it was Fallen who spoke, her chocolate wolf padding up the hill to join us.

Any other time, I would’ve been thrilled to see her.

Instead, my wolf’s fur bristled at the interruption, insisting I protect my sister even though Val seemed to be handling Fallen’s appearance just fine.

Val noticed my discomfort, gently smoothing down the fur along my neck. “It’s okay.

She can join us.” Then, lowering her voice even though Fallen would most assuredly overhear, she said, “I’m usually the one playing the big sister.”

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I released a soft breath of air, then nuzzled under her chin.

“I’m the big sister,” I said, “and you’ll let me protect you however I want.”

Val shook her head at me and smiled. “Yes, Mom. ” She met Fallen’s gaze and pointed in my direction. “You see what I’ve had to live with my entire life?”

“Doesn’t sound so bad to me,” Fallen said with a wolfish grin. “At least she didn’t pull your tail.”

Val and I both winced at that.

“You have any siblings, Fallen?” Val asked before I had the chance to do the same.

“No, though there were times I wished I had. It isn’t any fun when you don’t have someone else to tattle on.”

“You? A snitch?” I couldn’t believe it. “You don’t seem the type.”

“That’s because I’m not, but as a pup?” She shook her head. “I was quite the handful.”

“You and her both,” Val cut in, laughing when I lightly growled in her direction.

“So you and Ash aren’t related?” I asked, happy for the change in conversation.

“We certainly look alike, but no. I’ve known her for most of my life, though. I was

raised right beside her and was there when she took her place as Alpha.”

“She didn’t have to fight for it?”

“Thankfully, no. The position was handed down to her when her mother lived out her rank. A wolf who cannot lead, hunt, or run with the pack is usually asked to step down, which was the case with her mother.”

“You said something like that before,” I said, looking away as it honestly wasn’t my place.

“I can tell this is getting a little too serious for me,” Val said as she slowly got to her feet, “but I’ll be back at the manor once you’re done if you want to... you know, talk some

more.” She didn’t smile then, and as she turned to go, there was no mistaking the pain I saw in her eyes. She wanted to know the truth, but a part of her feared it almost as much as I did.

As Fallen and I watched her go, an uncomfortable silence fell between us. It made my wolf anxious and caused my skin to itch. Without my sister to back me up, the words slipped out of my mouth before I could take them back.

“The first time Ash brought me inside the manor to use the phone, I overheard you talking to her outside,” I said, deciding it was best to keep my feelings to myself until we had more than a few minutes together.

“I thought as much,” Fallen said with a nod.

“You said she was only as good as the pack she leads.”

“This is true.” She sat back on her haunches and released a sigh. “The thing the rest of the

pack can’t understand is how hard our losses are on her. Not just Dani but every wolf we’ve lost ever since she took her place as Alpha. Every wolf needs time to mourn, and Ash takes longer than most.”

“And the pack faults her for that?” That didn’t sound right to me.

“They’re impatient,” Fallen corrected me. “They’re allowed to shift whenever they please, but it’s their wolves that need that connection, one of which Ash hasn’t been willing to give in a very long time.”

“But she shifted when you came to find me in the city.”

Fallen nodded at that, then padded up to me before sitting down again. “That was an exception. Ash and Dani both used to sit with the pack. They used to bask in the sun with us and lay beside us much like I’m doing with you now. Tell me, does my closeness to you make your wolf feel any different? Not just because of the other day, but before as well.”

I didn’t think so, but the warmth filling my chest said otherwise. “Yes.”

“That’s because we require a connection. We need the same closeness humans do. Wolves are incredibly loyal and communicate through sound and touch. The touch of our Alpha is the most important of all. She keeps us balanced and calms us when our minds go astray.”

“And so the struggles the pack has faced are because Ash keeps secluding herself?”

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“Yes.” Fallen didn’t even try to hide her sadness that time, bowing her head until it was so low her nose nearly touched the ground. “I try to comfort the others when I can, but my compassion isn’t as strong as hers. She has the ability to feel every single wolf and their temperament all at the same time.

Her presence alone can calm most wolves so long as she shifts and runs with us from time to time.”

“But because it’s been several months?” I hedged, already knowing the answer.

“The other wolves have started to go over possible replacements.”

My heart dropped at that. “From where? The only other person in the pack who takes their role as seriously as Ash is you.”

“And it’s a position I’d never take away from her,” Fallen added quickly. “As much as I care for the pack, that’s no life for me. The health of the pack is always in the back of an Alpha’s mind, the needs of one wolf far outweighed by everyone else. I think that’s why Dani distanced herself before she... before...”

“It’s okay,” I soothed, leaning into Fallen when her voice broke. “I understand.”

“It’s hard for the mate of any Alpha to understand the burden she carries. The mating bond makes it so Dani craved her attention even more. Their bond strengthened Ash in ways you could never imagine, but dividing her time between Dani and the rest of us wasn’t something she’d expected to do.

While she did her best to see to everyone's needs, Dani's desire to be with her mate was ignored."

I swallowed hard. "Does this apply to all wolves?"

"No. Those who take on the mating bond within the pack are given far more freedom to run with their mate and be present with them. But because of Ash's responsibilities to the pack, any bit of intimacy she and Dani might've had was interrupted by pack matters or some other task she couldn't ignore."

"Is that why you haven't spoken to me in a few days?" I asked, immediately wishing I could take the words back. "I'm sorry. That sounded selfish. It's just—"

"For you, everything is new," she said, pressing her shoulder against mine. "Think of it like your first run. I warned you to pull back but you couldn't help yourself. In time, the attention your wolf craves will become tolerable."

"Until this bond happens." If it happens. I kept the last bit to myself.

A part of me felt as though she was trying to push me away. It wasn't like anyone would hear us all the way out here, so was it regret that held her back or was it because of Ash?

"It will be different for us," Fallen said, pulling me from my thoughts, "but new love is always complicated."

"Then why say it at all?" I asked, getting to my feet as my paws begged me to run again. "The other day, you could've reprimanded me, you could've said I was wrong."

"But you weren't," she said, her voice level.

“Then why string me along like this? Why tell me at all?”

“Because as much as you want to run right now, that’s how desperate I was to tell you. The urge will calm down, but only so much. Listen, I know I haven’t been present these last few days, but that’s what needs to be done. Ash’s place within the pack depends on it.”

“How?” I bit out. “How could our bond ever have anything to do with her?”

“It could break her. Yes, you are your own wolf, but you still carry Dani’s heart in your chest. Ash realizes you aren’t

one and the same, but there’s still some part of her that’s drawn to you. Until we can find a way to tell her without an upset, I think it might be best—”

I couldn’t take her excuses anymore. “Fine. Do whatever you want. It’s for the Alpha, right? So I need to do it anyway.”

I was letting my temper get the better of me, but I didn’t care.

I understood where she was coming from, but if she knew this was all going to be an issue, she never should’ve said anything in the first place.

“I think I would’ve preferred unrequited love to this. At least I’d know where I stand.” I turned away from her before I could say something I’d regret.

“Jo, I—”

“Forget it. I’m going for a run.” Alone. The words never left my lips, and as I walked away, a small part of me thought she might join me. In the end, she sat at the edge of the trees long enough to watch me go before retreating into the manor again.

Deep down, I knew she was right. In time, my desire to be with her at all hours of the day would pass. Until then, I'd have to keep my distance.

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Because the next time we crossed paths, Fallen's secrecy wouldn't be so lucky.

Chapter Fourteen

By the time night fell, my wolf's anger was mirrored by my own. It was foolish to think I'd find love all the way out here. It didn't matter how much I enjoyed the feel of the wind through my fur, it wasn't home. It wasn't even close.

There were no plush couches, no warm fire to sit beside, and it lacked the safe homey feel from my childhood. Sooner or later, Val would have to return to the city. Once she did, it'd be close to impossible for me not to go wit her.

Val was my lifeline and my constant in a world full of change. Having a new heart would never change that.

And that's when I realized the loyalty Fallen felt toward Ash was much of the same. While our hearts said one thing, our minds said something else entirely. Val and I had a life back in the city, one of which I hoped to go back to once I was well enough to do so. Granted, I'd have to report my transformation to the board, but surely they'd keep me around.

If not for the humans, then for the wolves that happened to walk through our doors.

It wasn't like I'd planned to stay out here anyway. I'd never made that promise, and yet something continued to hold me back. If I was restless, all I had to do was walk outside, shift, and run until I couldn't do it anymore. Back in the city, I'd be limited to my human form, running at a much slower pace while caging my wolf in the back

of my mind. I already knew how much she hated that, and I honestly couldn't blame her.

Wolves may have lived side-by-side with humans for as long as I could remember, but seeing a wolf walking the streets in their pelt was still incredibly rare. It just wasn't done, and until it became the norm, my place would remain here, with the pack.

Restless, I changed forms, taking comfort from my wolf as I lay in the shed. In the short time since our return, my wolf's agitation whenever I took on my human form had calmed. I

could easily walk around with my sister if I wanted to without fearing my wolf's aggression toward her.

Perhaps it was because we weren't in the city anymore.

Maybe it was because there were no loud cars and no exhaust to cloud my senses. Whatever the reason, I was thankful when my wolf hummed in the back of my mind, calming my nerves long enough for me to get to sleep.

It was strange to think she and I were one and the same.

Even in my pelt, I could feel her standing guard in the back of my mind, her confidence far outweighing my own. The fact I'd been a wolf for under a month didn't bother her. Neither did my being human in the first place.

She didn't judge me, and as time passed, I knew I'd do the same. What brought me here didn't matter. What I decided to do with my new life, however, did.

Fallen and Val. Stay or go. In that moment, they both weighed heavily on my mind.

Sooner or later, I'd have to make a choice.

Do I go back to my old life or do I stick with the one I was given?

It's hard to say when I finally drifted off to sleep, but when my wolf nudged me awake, it wasn't because she wanted to run. It was because she sensed someone standing outside. I didn't hear them so much as smell them, their scent cautious but familiar.

Panic coiled around the base of my spine, quickly replaced by the same calm I felt whenever Fallen was around. Her scent, however, wasn't one I recognized. The bitterness from before along with the honeysuckles were completely absent when I sniffed her way. But it was her. I was almost sure of it.

As to what brought her out here in the first place was yet to be determined. She should've been inside the manor with Ash.

She should've been looking after the Alpha, but for whatever reason, she was out here with me, guarding me instead.

Not knowing what brought her out in the dead of night, I got to my paws and made my way to the door, hesitating a moment more before finally joining her outside.

Above us, the sky was clear, an almost-full moon hanging overhead. Stepping under its light, my nerves tingled, my need to run growing stronger than ever before.

"Fallen?" I hedged, slipping

behind the shed where we couldn't be seen. "What're you doing out here?"

She looked at me with a start, the golden glow of her eyes flashing with fire before

going dormant again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It was my wolf,” I lied, knowing Fallen was the reason my wolf pushed me awake in the first place. “Shouldn’t you be with Ash?”

The only other time Fallen had left Ash’s side so late at night was during my first run and again when Ash had just gone through surgery.

So if she was out here...

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“I wanted to wait until morning,” she began, not looking at me. “I’d hoped to have everything figured out by then.”

Figured out? What was she talking about?

“I was wrong to push you away or to make your feelings sound less valid than my own,” she said when I didn’t reply. “I can’t risk the other wolves overhearing, but my feelings for you are as strong as yours are for me. It isn’t something I can turn off, and it was wrong of me to suggest otherwise. For that, I apologize.”

“But that isn’t why you came out here.”

As much as I needed to hear it and as much as I wanted to run with her then, there was something else she hadn’t told me. Something important. I could hear it in the tightness of her voice and see it whenever she refused to meet my gaze.

“No,” she agreed, releasing a long breath. “The moon is nearly full. I can already feel its tug on my fur. As much as we hate to admit it, the phases of the moon play a strong part in

how we feel. Some wolves get more restless around the full moon. Others more agitated.”

“And which one are you?” I asked, glancing up at the sky before looking at her again.

“A little bit of both. I wanted to run, but there’s only one wolf I want to run with. Of course, this only complicates things further as it isn’t something I can hide.”

“So don’t,” I said, padding over to her so I could nuzzle under her chin.

She shrunk away from my touch, her ears lowered. “You don’t understand.”

“No, I do. But Ash needs to realize that this heart isn’t hers to have. It hasn’t been hers in months, and I can’t be blamed for something like that.”

“It isn’t that. I mean, it is, but that isn’t what brought me out here.” She released a frustrated sigh and tried again, this time with a little more success. “My biggest fear right now is that once the moon wanes, my feelings for you will change.”

“But you felt this way about me before the moon was even full.” According to her, she’d felt this way about me nearly a month before. After the last full moon.

“Yes, but not as strongly as I do now. The moon can play tricks.”

“So you’re pushing me away again.”

She nipped my fur and tugged on my ear when I went to turn away. “No. I’ve gotten used to ignoring the needs of my heart and fighting off the pull of the moon, but it isn’t something I can fight back any longer. I shouldn’t have to.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Run with me.” Her voice shook at the end, but when I met her gaze, I knew her invitation came from her and not just her wolf. “I’m tired of hiding. I’m tired of putting my needs aside for someone else. My heart aches at the thought of hurting Ash, but that pain cannot compare to the hurt I put you through earlier. Please, let me do this for you. For us.”

My heart swelled at the invitation, but I didn’t move. “I was going to leave,” I told

her. “Once I’m well enough to do so, I was going to return to the city.”

“But your place is here,” she said without looking at me.

“With the pack.”

“I have a life there,” I explained. “A job.”

“One you can easily do out here.” She paused then, closing her eyes as she spoke.

“Were you really going to leave?”

“This is no place for Val,” I said, my voice breaking at the end. “She’s done everything for me. She’s the reason I survived for so long. If I ever lost her—”

“You won’t,” Fallen said quickly. “She could stay here with you.”

I laughed at that. “You can’t say that. Only the Alpha can.”

“I know.” When she looked at me then, her expression was one I couldn’t read. “Ash has already voiced the possibility of Val becoming a permanent part of our staff. Because of your sister’s work, we got our Alpha back. The rest of the pack has already welcomed her. A human.” She shook her head, clearly amused. “It’s amazing, really.”

“But they haven’t accepted me,” I reminded her.

She nudged me under my chin, then licked my cheek fur.

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“They will in time. If you won’t run with me tonight, will you join me tomorrow? They’ll be a great bonfire, and I—”

“I’d love to.” At least by then, I’d have my feet placed firmly on the ground.

“Tomorrow then,” she said, turning away from me but not before nuzzling me one last time.

Tomorrow.

Chapter Fifteen

The smell of woodfire filled the air as glowing embers rose toward the night sky. Gathered with the rest of the pack and Val at my side, I couldn’t have asked for a better evening. Val had a way with the pack that I couldn’t understand. The wolves bowed their heads in thanks whenever she walked by.

She’d done them a great service, one they wouldn’t have needed if I didn’t run off in the first place.

“Calm your mind,” Fallen said, slowly approaching me from our left. “I can sense your distress from here.”

No doubt Ash could as well. As the lifeblood of the pack, it was her job to tend to every wolf, not just whoever stood at her side. Fallen had started to explain the hardships of one mated to the Alpha, but she never got to finish.

As if on cue, the Alpha looked my way, her eyes full of concern as she waited for the clamor of voices to quiet down.

I'd only ever seen her shift once, and according to Fallen, Ash had fought the pull of the moon to avoid doing so. Did that mean she'd refuse its call tonight as well?

The longer she looked in my direction, the more unsettled I became. Beside me, Val ran a hand through my fur, gripping it ever so slightly when a tremor ran up my spine enough for her to feel it.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a low whisper, leaning into me as she spoke.

I shook my head. "Nervous." It was only half-true, but it wasn't like I could talk to her about Ash and Dani all the way out here where the rest of the pack could overhear us. "I haven't run with the pack before..." I explained. "All of them, I mean."

Val offered me a reassuring smile. "You were never good at group activities."

"Only because Mom wouldn't let me play." But this wasn't a game, and as soon as I took my place beside Fallen, the pack would know. They'd know everything.

"Ease your mind," Fallen said again, using the same gentle tone as before. "You're going to make my wolf more restless than she already is."

"That's hard to believe," I said with a hint of amusement in my voice.

Nodding in agreement, she turned her attention to Ash who continued to look our way. I wasn't sure if it was because of the way Fallen regarded me or because of how new Val and I were, but whatever the reason, Ash refused to look away from us.

Before my nerves could get the better of me, I took a deep breath, smiling when

Fallen's sweet scent intermingled with that of the fire. Other scents joined in as well, some of them bitter, but not nearly as offensive as when I first arrived.

Knowing Fallen wouldn't leave my side, and wanting to protect my sister more than anything else, I quieted my mind, watching Ash as she finally took her place in front of the fire.

Unlike the rest of the pack who took on their pelts, she had on the same dress she'd worn before. The glow of the fire made the pale fabric brighter than it already was.

Something stirred in my stomach, mirroring the unease I'd felt at my first b

onfire. But Ash wasn't calling me up there this time. She wasn't going to ask me to shift in front of everyone else because I already had.

Still, it was my first full moon, and like me so many weeks ago, it was Val's first bonfire as well. With her hand still in my fur, I smiled at her familiar scent, the sweet smell growing in intensity as she scanned those present around the fire.

The pack must've noticed it as well, their eyes turning to her all at the same time.

"Why are they staring?" Val asked, her tone being one I couldn't read. The slight bitterness under her scent, however, told me all I needed to know.

"They can smell you. Your scent," I explained.

"Like how you could smell me after I finished work?"

I crinkled my nose at the memory. "No. Your emotions.

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They're just curious," I assured her, nosing Val's palm when she let her hand fall to her side. "It isn't every day they get to see a human at one of their gatherings."

"This is true," Fallen agreed, offering my sister a wolfish grin.

It was a good look on her, to see Fallen comfortable enough to let her guard down. It didn't happen terribly often, and this was the first time I'd seen it happen around the other wolves. Perhaps it was because of the moon, or maybe it was because she wanted to give my sister the best welcome she could. Whatever the reason, I silently thanked her for it as Ash finally started to make her way around the semi-circle.

Confused, I looked to Fallen for guidance. The assurance I expected to see on her wasn't there. Whatever Ash was doing, she'd never done it before.

One by one, she touched each of the wolves, running her hand through their fur until each one leaned into her touch.

The wolves took comfort in her touch the same way I'd done the moment Fallen took her place at my side.

Wolves need that connection, I remembered Fallen saying not so long ago. The warm contact we needed as humans was something our wolves needed as well. Especially from the Alpha.

Recognizing the behavior as that of an Alpha, the other wolves anxiously waited for their turn. Everyone except Fallen.

Without touching her, I could sense her wolf reaching out.

Not to the Alpha, but to me. Fallen's eyes, however, were locked on Ash, her ears lowered in a way I couldn't understand. She wasn't threatened, but something about Ash's actions upset her. That much became painfully obvious when Ash reached out to touch her and only got a growl in response.

Surprised, Ash kept her hand close to Fallen a moment more. "Is this not acceptable to you?" she asked, her words full of challenge.

"Apologies, Alpha, but a human's touch isn't one I'm willing to accept."

Something flickered in Ash's eyes, but as soon as it appeared, it was gone. Without saying another word, she offered her hand to me. For a brief moment, I considered pulling away just as Fallen had done. But this was my first full moon, and more than anything else, my wolf wanted to obey.

So I did.

Bowing my head, I let her run her hands through my fur, taking in her warmth the same way I'd done the night of my first controlled shift. She didn't throw her arms around me or hug me this time, but it felt the exact same way, filling me with excitement and a willingness to run until I couldn't hold my wolf back any longer.

She begged me to run and howl into the night sky. I managed a small whimper, averting my gaze when Ash spoke again.

"Welcome to the pack," Ash said, slowly pulling away as she looked at me and my sister. "We're lucky to have you."

My wolf nudged me again, harder this time. Panting, I stayed at Val's side, seeking

her warm the moment she put her hand on my back.

“Is it always like this?” Val asked once Ash was gone.

So full of tension? I could almost hear her say.

“A bit,” I admitted, nuzzling her neck to ease some of the confusion Ash’s actions might’ve caused. “It’s a long story and one I hope to share with you someday.”

“I’d like that.”

“But not now,” I said, rising to my paws. “Now we run.”

Fallen made a sound of approval, taking her place at my side as Val stood opposite of her.

One by one, those of the pack got up and turned in the direction of the mountains. The needs of my wolf were starting

to cloud my judgment, taking control as the pack, the Alpha, and even the moon pulled in the same direction.

“Run?” Val asked, the unease in her voice pulling me out of my haze long enough to realize it wasn’t something she could do. “Run where?”

I didn’t have an answer for her. The destination didn’t matter so long as the earth beat under my paws and the wind combed through my fur.

“With the pack,” Fallen explained, sounding way more coherent than I felt just then. “It’s tradition, and one your sister’s lucky to take part in.”

“Come with me,” I said, looking at Val. “Please.”

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“But I can’t shift,” she reminded me with a half-smile.

“I’m not a wolf.”

“But you’re part of my pack,” I told her. “And I won’t leave you here as the rest of us run. Come with me.”

Val looked around for guidance, but all of the other wolves had started to move away.

As the other wolves ran for the woods, I held back, pushing my wolf to the deepest recesses of my mind long enough to nose Val’s hand.

“Get on,” I said, ignoring the bristling of my wolf as she fought against the invitation.

“On your back?” Val asked, her words shaking at the end.

“Your wolf won’t mind?”

“It isn’t her choice to make. Either you come with me, or I stay here with you.” My wolf didn’t like that idea, either. She itched at the back of my mind, begging me to run and join the pack. I won’t go unless she comes with us. She’s pack. My pack.

At least that was something my wolf could understand. So after some internal bickering, my wolf backed down, letting me do as I pleased.

“We’re good,” I assured Val, adjusting my stance as she carefully climbed on.

Thankfully, my wolf's strength held her up, Val's weight barely noticeable as I started to walk around.

Somewhat amused, Fallen watched from the sidelines, tilting her head whenever I turned in her direction. My actions weren't lost on Ash, either.

Standing beside the bonfire, she'd watched the other wolves go, somewhat confused when I didn't do the same.

Val leaned against my back, her lips close to my ear. "What about her?" she asked, referring to Ash. "Isn't she going to join us?"

"She can't shift," I said simply, my heart skipping when Fallen made her way toward the Alpha. Surely she wasn't going to confront Ash now. We had a run to take part in, one of which she'd begged me to do.

Or the gathering part, anyway.

In front of the fire, Ash regarded Fallen the same way she'd done so many times before. Her eyes were darker now, the golden ring hidden by the bright light of the fire.

"Come with us," Fallen said, her voice barely audible to even me. "If Val can ride on Jo's back, then you can ride on mine."

Ash scoffed. "After what you said just then? You won't accept my touch in human form, but you'll let me ride you?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm better off sitting this one out."

"You can't keep doing this."

“Doing what?”

“Distancing yourself. I miss the way you used to be. I want our Alpha back. I want my friend back. Please, come with us.”

Ash looked at me, then back at Fallen again. “I can’t.”

“Because she isn’t Dani.” Fallen bowed her head. “But she is family, and it’s been so long since we’ve been able to run with a new wolf. The pups in the nursery won’t be of age for a

few more years, and by then...” Fallen trailed off, her voice hoarse. “This might be our last chance.”

“To run with a new wolf,” Ash agreed, “but I will always be with my wolves.”

“It isn’t enough.” The words slipped out before I could pull them back.

“Jo, what are you doing?” Val whispered in my ear, her hands gripping my fur so tight that I actually winced at the momentary pain. “You wanted to run, so let’s run.”

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“The heart I got,” I said, “it belonged to her late mate.”

Val’s eyes widened, her hold on me tighter than before.

“Oh god.”

“And that heart calls out to me,” Ash cut in, making her way toward us.

Fallen took her place in front of me, guarding me as the Alpha slowly made her approach.

“Stand aside,” Ash ordered.

“You aren’t thinking clearly,” Fallen told her, not moving from where she was. “She doesn’t even smell like Dani.”

“But her heart—”

“Belongs to me,” I said, taking a cautious step back.

“Jo, please,” my sister pleaded, hugging her arms around my neck. “Let’s just go.”

This time I didn’t argue, my willingness to defend Fallen lost under my need to protect my sister. Ash clearly wasn’t willing to listen to anything Fallen had to say, so it wasn’t like I’d do any better.

Without waiting for a response, I turned for the mountains and ran as fast I could with

my sister hugged close to me. Her weight shifted on my back with every step, the comfort of her embrace soon shadowed by my fear for Fallen's safety.

She's a wolf and can handle herself, I insisted, pushing forward when my heart begged me to turn back. It was my

wolf that guided me then, taking me away from danger instead of running right toward it.

A mournful howl broke through the night sky as we neared the boundary. A moment later, the rest of the pack howled back, myself included. It was a sad, chilling howl that sent a shiver down my spine and made Val do the same.

The howl belonged to Ash.

Chapter Sixteen

I should've been happy for her. Thrilled. Instead, a surge of panic rolled thro

ugh me, sending me as far away from the manor as I could go without running into the city. At the edge of a bluff, I paused under the trees, my wolf fighting me back whenever I tried to step outside the boundary.

"The city," Val said in awe, slipping off my back once I'd stopped running. "It looks so different out here."

I nodded in agreement, admiring the orange glow as it slowly bled into the night. Surrounded by forests on either side, it was a long drive on I-81 to reach the next human settlement. That was the fortunate part when it came to living so close to the mountains. There was more than enough room for the wolves to run, which also explained why so many packs called the northern mountains their home.

Hardly anyone built out here, the winding roads delaying most shipments the city actually received. Having lived here my whole life, it annoyed me whenever I couldn't find my favorite thing on one of the grocery shelves. However, as a wolf, I appreciated the solitude even more.

"Where do we go from here?" Val asked when I didn't say anything. "Is it safe for you to go home?" Her eyes were fixed on the city below.

"I'd like to," I admitted, "but it isn't that simple." Just because I wanted to go didn't mean it was a good idea.

"Because you might shift and hurt someone else." The twinge of fear I sensed on her made me whimper in response.

"And because of Fallen," I added, not entirely sure how to explain the mating bond to her.

"You worry about her." Val forced a small smile when she looked at me again.

"I do."

"Because of your heart?"

"My wolf as well." God, why is it so hard to talk to you?

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My sister was the first person I turned to for good news and advice. Now shouldn't have been any different.

Instead of taking comfort in sharing the news with her, the nerves in my stomach wound tighter and tighter.

"Does that mean you'll stay here?" she asked when I didn't say anything.

"I'd like to go with you."

"But you aren't sure." Her voice shook then, her eyes shining with fresh tears. "Well, at least I know you aren't dead."

I winced at that. "I'm really sorry it took me so long to find you."

"And your wolf still flipped out."

"She did, but I don't think it was because of you." Maybe having her too close forced my wolf into a corner, but Val wasn't what made my wolf so uncomfortable.

It was the city. The smells, the sounds, all of it. Even here at the edge of pack territory, my skin rippled under her layer of fur, the beginnings of a shift rolling through me until I forced it back.

"She doesn't feel safe," Val said for me, "and who can blame her? As welcoming as your pack may have been, there was always this uncertainty at the back of my mind. I don't belong there."

And that's what hurt most of all, to know my sister would never feel as comfortable as I did around the pack. Not that I felt at home, but with Fallen there to guide me, it was only a matter of time until that changed as well.

"You could always visit," I hedged, my voice sounding terribly hoarse as I looked from Val to the city behind her.

"And there's no way you can come with me?"

I hadn't planned to say goodbye to her so soon. As much as I wanted her to stay with the pack, there was no telling what

Ash might do once I returned.

"My wolf isn't ready," I finally said, nosing under her chin as I spoke. "But I promise to let you know once she is."

"If that ever happens," she corrected me, throwing her arms around my neck as she slowly broke down.

"It will," I promised.

"And if I need to get in touch with you?" she asked, pulling away from me long enough to see my eyes. "Is there a number I can use?"

I wasn't sure. "I'll watch you walk home every night," I said, "and I'll howl to you once you get inside. If you ever need to talk to me, just come to the forest, and I'll find you."

"I'd offer to do the same, but it's impossible to find my way back to the manor from here."

I laughed at that, taking on my human form as I did. “Tell me about it. The only way I can find my way back is as a wolf.”

Startled by my sudden shift, Val recovered long enough to take me in her arms, holding me tight as she spoke. “You’ll always have a place with me. Never forget that.”

“I won’t.” My voice cracked. As it did, a hard lump formed in the back of my throat.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“See you soon?” she asked, pushing a tendril of hair away from my eyes.

“Every night,” I said again, hugging her one last time before shifting back into my wolf so I could watch her go.

Seeing as she didn’t have much with her when she first arrived at the manor, there was no reason for her to turn back.

She did it anyway, those same loving eyes full of tears.

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Unable to show my sadness in wolf form, I released a long howl in response, wagging my tail when she waved back in

my direction. She got as far as the sidewalk outside her apartment before turning to me again. Her eyes searched the trees, but I knew she couldn't see me there.

A minute went by, followed by another, and another. And still, she hesitated.

“What're you waiting for?” I whispered under my breath.

“Go inside and get warm.”

If our roles were reversed, I probably would've done the same thing. She'd never expected to see me again, and while I could never go back to the life we shared since we were kids, I knew we'd find a way to make this separation work.

It wasn't long until my sister finally turned to go inside, glancing my way one last time before running up the front steps and into the building. I waited until her apartment light turned on. Once it did, I let out a loud howl before slowly making my way back to the manor on my own.

Chapter Seventeen

By the time I reached the mountain behind the manor, it was almost one in the morning. As much as my wolf wanted to run to get rid of some of the added tension, I took my time, veering off my usual trail to avoid being seen in case Ash was still around. I had no idea how she'd react once I got back inside, but if her words at the

bonfire were any indication, the bit I'd said probably hurt her a lot more.

I'd never meant to hurt her, and if I could take it back, I would. But seeing as that isn't possible...

I paused under the trees, the hint of movement to my left causing my wolf to bristle in response. Hidden under the trees, the small group of wolves hadn't seen me yet, but even from where I was standing, I knew they weren't pack.

Their scents were unfamiliar, their pelts completely unknown to me. Not knowing where Ash's territory ended and another began, I was pretty sure the stream below the mountain was ours. Fallen never corrected me when I came this way, and seeing as it's where we shared our first kiss, it couldn't have belonged to them.

Uncomfortable with the situation and not wanting to bring any attention to myself, I moved at a faster clip toward the manor. Fallen met me under the trees, panting and out of breath.

"Fallen," I said with a start, "What're you doing out here?"

"I'm out here looking for you." She gave me a pointed look, her eyes darting to the empty space above my back.

"Where's Val?"

"Home," I said, my chest tightening at the look she gave me just then. "Before you reprimand me, I never left the forest. I only stayed there long enough to make sure she got inside."

Fallen released a sigh, stepping close to me before gently nuzzling my neck. "I know it's hard, but it was the right thing to do."

Nodding, I glanced back the way I came. Unable to smell the wolves, I wasn't sure if Fallen knew of their location or not. "There are other wolves out there," I said, grimacing when my voice shook. "Their scents are ones I don't recognize."

Fallen let out a huff. "It's probably Coren and his crew.

We've fought them before."

Fought? My heart lodged itself into the back of my throat, making it hard to breathe.

"Where are they?" Fallen asked a moment later, her eyes focused on the darkening woods.

"Near the stream, under the trees."

"Okay. I'm going to check on them, but I need you to get back to the manor."

"So you can face a pack on your own?"

She made what sounded like a laugh, her maw opening in a wolfish grin. "I'd hardly call his band of wolves a pack.

They're probably just drunk on the full moon and made their way down here by mistake. They usually stay to the other side of the mountain."

"But you just said you've fought them before."

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She offered me a nod. “The night Dani died.”

My heart seized. “You don’t think—”

“They had anything to do with it? It’s hard to say, but they came rushing in at us to catch Ash off guard. We were ready, and with your help, now will be no different. Now, I’ll ask you again. Go to the manor. Let Ash and the other wolves know that we might be getting some company.”

“What about you?” The idea of her going against any wolves, no matter how few, made me sick to the stomach.

“I’m going to track them. If they leave the territory, I’ll report back.”

“And if they don’t?” I hedged, not really wanting to know the answer.

“Ash will know where to find me.”

Confused, I nuzzled her one last time before making my way back to the manor. All the while, I could feel her eyes on my back, watching and making sure I was safe.

A part of me hated to leave her, but I also had my sister to think about. She just got me back. If I ever put her through that pain again, I’d never forgive myself.

I didn’t stop until I reached the front door, pausing until someone finally let me in.

“Ash has asked you to remain in the shed until further notice,” one of the guards said,

his eyes narrowing in my direction.

“Okay, fine, but we have a bigger problem. I was just out by the stream and there’s a band of wolves out there.”

“Ours?”

“I think I’d know if they were pack.”

The guard didn’t offer a response, he simply stood in front of me and stared.

Knowing Ash was close by, I raised my voice and hoped she was in a listening mood. “Fallen’s out there with another pack of wolves. Caden? Coren. Somebody. She’s tracking them, but the ones I saw tonight—”

“You saw them?” Ash cut me off, slowly making her way out of her study.

I peered around the guard so I could meet her gaze. “On my way back from the edge of the boundary. I had to take Val back to the city. It’s where we… it’s where she belongs.”

Ash gave me a nod of approval, then asked the guard to step aside. “How many were there?”

I shook my head as I honestly hadn’t thought to count.

“Six? Possibly more. I only knew they weren’t pack and started to make my way here. Fallen met me under the trees and is out there right now doing whatever she can to protect you.”

Ash nodded her understanding, then beckoned a pair of wolves. “Get the others

ready.”

“What about you?” one of the guards asked, his eyes never leaving mine. “Are you sure we can trust her?”

“She’s one of ours. While her earlier outburst may have been out of line, she also wasn’t wrong.” To me, she said,

“We’ll go out there together. I’d like to see what Coren’s group is up to. It’s also been quite some time since I’ve gone on a chase. It’ll be good for me and my wolf.”

She shifted as she spoke, her skin rippling until only her pelt remained. She made it look so fluid. Effortless. A small part of me envied her for it, but then she had been shifting a lot longer than me. Her pelt was chocolate, much like Fallen’s, but not nearly as dark.

“Ready?” she asked, shaking her fur until everything fell into place.

“Lead the way.”

Knowing she had more experience when it came to the hunt, I followed after her, veering in and out of the trees until finally picking up Fallen’s trail. Her scent faded in and out, always changing but definitely belonging to her. The bitterness I scented in the air made my wolf anxious, the heat in my chest almost too strong for me to stand. With so many other scents floating around, it was hard to tell which way she went.

There were scents belonging to the pack and the new wolves as well.

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Whenever they were going, it wasn't anywhere close to the manor.

"They're going around," I realized, pausing beside Ash when she stopped to scent the air again. "Why?" According to Fallen, Coren and his lot lived on the other side of the mountains, which was on the other side of pack territory. So if they came all the way out here, they were either lost or something else was going on.

Ash shook her head, looking back the way we came. "I'd say I'm surprised but they've been reckless before."

"The night you lost Dani," I said softly. "About what I said earlier..."

"Let's focus on saving the wolves that are still alive." Her words were short and quick, and when I went to say something else, a low growl made its way up her chest.

"Right. Let's go."

Over the next several minutes, we walked in silence, staying downwind from those we tracked. Bit by bit, I started to recognize one wolf from another, counting their individual scents until I found Fallen's again.

"This way," I said, heading to our right.

"Clever as always," Ash said with admiration.

"How do you mean?" Had we gotten turned around? With so many smells in the air, it was hard to tell.

“She’s walking them right into Rosewood territory. They can be nice when they want and we call them our allies more than anything else, but they don’t take kindly to strangers, especially those who decide to trespass on their property.”

“And Fallen?”

“Is smart,” Ash assured me, pausing once we crested the top of a hill overlooking yet another forest. “She has a way of hiding herself when she doesn’t want to be found,” Ash said, calmly sitting back on her haunches.

“Back at the manor, it looked as though you weren’t going to help,” I said.

“I wasn’t,” she admitted with a long breath, “but losing a lifelong friend is far worse than going through the loss of a mate. I loved Dani and miss her every single day, but Fallen was the one who got me through. If I lost her...” Ash trailed off, averting her gaze before I could say anything else.

“I’m sorry for everything I said.”

“I know. It’s just so hard to let things go because you smell like her.”

I nodded gently, my eyes focused on the trees far below.

“What now?”

“What did Fallen tell you before you came to see me?”

Thinking back, there was one thing she’d said that I couldn’t understand. “She said you’d know where to find her.”

Ash grinned at that, her ears pointed forward as though the threat of an attack didn’t

bother her at all. “She’s circling back.

She probably chased them until they lost sight of her, and now they’re trying to find a shadow.”

“She can just disappear like that?”

“She slips in and out of existence all the time,” Ash explained, “or have you not noticed that?” There was a hint of amusement in her voice.

“I have,” I admitted, “but I could always sense her.” I couldn’t sense her now, her scent and even her presence gone from my mind.

“She’ll show up soon enough,” Ash promised, rising to her paws as more of the pack appeared under the trees. “They’ve headed south,” she said to the other wolves. “We needn’t worry about an attack tonight.” She sounded so sure of herself I almost believed her.

“You aren’t going to go after them?”

“After their pack, no. Besides, they’ve already left our territory. If we go after them now, we’ll be trespassing, and the pack below us isn’t nearly as inviting or as understanding as ours. The fight over territory is rare these days, but it can still happen. That said, I’d rather not invite another, larger pack into my territory if I can help it.”

“And you’re sure Fallen isn’t down there?”

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“Positive. She’s as careful as they come. She probably got them as close as the border before hiding her scent until they picked up on someone else.”

I wanted to believe her, but something didn’t feel right.

“With the humans encroaching on our lands, we have worse things to worry about,” Ash said when I didn’t say anything. “Like I said, fights between packs are rare, and we’re in relatively good standing with the pack to the south of us.”

“But they’d still react if we went down there?”

“While following a band of rogues? Yes. Any large congregation of wolves must be met with hostility, even ones we used to call friends. It’s complicated and messy, but so far, we’ve avoided a fight.”

“Fallen mentioned you fought this crew of wolves the night of Dani’s death.”

“We did,” Ash said with a nod.

“You think they knew?”

“I think a lot more than that, but we’ve never been able to prove the fault behind her death because we never had a chance to recover her body.”

“I might be able to help with that,” I said without giving it another thought.

“I thought as much, but not tonight. Not until your wolf can control herself in the

city. For the time being, you'll remain here. I'll do whatever I can to keep my wolf in line.

I'm happy for you, for both of you, it'll just take my wolf some time to understand that your heart isn't mine to claim."

"I never said—"

"You didn't have to," she said warmly. "Neither did Fallen.

I see how you look at one another, but it took you standing up for yourself for me to accept it."

"Then I'll try not to get on your wolf's bad side."

"That's all we can hope for. Come. Fallen's probably back at the manor waiting for us."

Sure enough, Fallen was sitting on the front steps as soon as we rounded the corner. It took her a moment to spot us, but once she did, she practically ran toward me. She corrected herself the moment Ash met her gaze. As much as it pleased Fallen to see I was safe, a part of her would always be loyal to the pack and its Alpha.

"Ash," Fallen said with surprise. "You've shifted twice in one night. That must be a new record."

Ash let out a low snort. "It may have been a few months since I've sparred, but these bones still know how to work."

Sparred?

“Don’t look so surprised, pup,” Ash said, looking at me.

“You can’t expect to fight as a wolf if you’ve never learned how.”

“But I have, haven’t I?” I’d made my first kill, albeit a small one, and I’d injured someone else. Not that I meant to do that, either, but still...

“What you did in the city was because your wolf was backed into a corner,” Ash explained. “That isn’t fighting, that’s defending. Sparring is something Fallen and I used to do all the time, isn’t that right?” She looked at Fallen who already had a huge grin on her face.

“Some of my best scraps were because of her.”

“And you’re proud of that?” I asked with disbelief.

“Considering how strong of an opponent she is? Yes.”

Fallen raised her head with pride, meeting Ash’s gaze who continued to stand at my side. “Now, if you two are done worrying over me, I’m dying for a hot shower, a warm meal, and a soft bed to fall into.”

“Yours or—”

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Fallen nipped Ash on the neck. Ash couldn't accept this, of course, and nipped back. In the next moment, the two of them were rolling on the front lawn like a pair of pups. It was kind of cute if I'm being honest with myself, and it was all the

reassurance I'd need when it came to Fallen and her friendship to Ash.

After tumbling a few more times, the two of them separated long enough for the dust to clear. Laughing, Ash pressed her head against Fallen's, licking the side of her maw before finally turning to leave.

"You sure you guys don't need the room?" I teased them both, ducking before Fallen had the chance to bap me on the head. "Because I'm totally fine if—"

"Get out of here," Ash groaned, rolling her eyes once she took on her human form. "I'll see you both in the morning."

With that, Ash gathered the rest of the pack and headed inside.

Fallen waited a moment more before finally rushing over to greet me, nuzzling my neck as she spoke. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"I know."

"And I never meant to get you into trouble with Ash."

"You didn't. At first, I thought she wasn't going to help, but then she shifted right in front of me, ready to go."

“It’s nice seeing her in her pelt again, and not just because of a new wolf losing her way.” She nuzzled me again when I averted my gaze. “It’s okay, really. She’s safe. You’re safe.

Even Val’s safe. Tonight is a good night.”

“You don’t think they’ll circle back?” I asked, making my way toward the shed where we could be alone.

“Twice in one night?” She shook her head and walked beside me. “That’d be a new level of stupidity. We’ll keep an eye out, though. Ash might not look it, but she’s taking this threat as seriously as anything else.”

“Because of what happened with Dani?” I hedged, pausing outside the shed door so I could sit under the moonlight a while longer.

“And others.” Fallen licked me then, paying close attention to the side of my muzzle until I did the same in return. “Trust me, she’ll have guards positioned all over the boundary before we even fall asleep.”

“And you?” Would Fallen be among them?

“The only place I want to be right now is with my mate.

Besides, if anyone comes this way, we’ll be the first to know.”

“Guard duty and trying to protect me all at the same time?

I don’t know if I should be honored or hurt,” I teased.

“Pleased,” she said, adding a choice of her own. “Unless you don’t want me to join

you.” She kept a straight face long enough to get my attention. Once she did, she passed me a knowing smile.

“Like you even have to ask.”

Fallen opened her maw in a wide grin, shifting so she could get the door. After looking at the moon one last time, I followed her into the shed I’d started to call home.

Chapter Eighteen

“Jo, wake up.”

Half-asleep, I was vaguely aware of someone compressing the other side of the bed. When I didn’t respond, she leaned in and nuzzled my neck.

Smiling, I opened my arms until Fallen fell into my embrace.

After our first two nights together in the shed, Fallen convinced me to move into the manor with her. Now, weeks later, it had become commonplace to wake up to her burrowing under the covers after a long night of running the perimeter around our territory. Today, however, I had her all to myself.

“I know you’re awake,” Fallen said, sounding slightly amused.

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I held her tight, refusing to open my eyes. “What time is it?”

“Almost four,” she said, kissing the side of my neck until a shiver raced up my spine.

Ugh. I let out a groan, then immediately pulled the covers over our heads. “Too early.”

“Come on.” This time, she sat up, taking half the blankets with her.

“Is there a fire?” It didn’t smell like a fire, and I was almost certain she’d let me know if there was.

“No, why would there—”

I cracked open an eye, searching for her through the darkness. “A pack drill perhaps?”

That time she laughed. “No?”

“Then go back to sleep. The sun won’t be up for another hour.”

“Which is why we need to go now,” she said, scooting over to the edge of the bed so she could get ready.

“Go where?” I asked with an exasperated sigh. “What on earth is so important that we need to leave the house now?”

“Our hunt,” she said matter-of-factly, pulling on the covers again when I tried to curl up underneath of them. “Come on, Jo. You promised. It’s been weeks since you took Val to the city, and you still haven’t joined me on a hunt.”

“We got that rabbit,” I reminded her. “Besides, why would you want to go all the way out there when you can stay in here with me?” I rolled onto my back and opened my eyes, smiling at the woman staring back at me from the other side of the bed.

“As tempting as that is, my wolf needs this as much as yours does. You’ve been cooped up inside for days.”

“I can’t help it if Quinn likes to talk.”

Even when the infirmary was slow, it was almost impossible to get him to shut up. He was a wealth of knowledge and a total airbag, but he definitely knew his stuff.

He never complained when I had a question or when I asked him to repeat himself again. He just took it in stride, teaching me everything he could about wolves and the anatomy they never bothered to teach us in school.

Once Ash was sure I could keep my wolf under control, she invited me to shadow Quinn in the infirmary. Needless to say, between my lessons and our differing schedules because of Fallen’s work under Ash, we had to take whatever time together that we could get. Which includes sleep.

“We just got to sleep three hours ago,” I said, holding out my hands for her so I could pull her close again. “Three hours isn’t nearly enough for this wolf.”

“You can sleep later,” she said, taking on her wolf form before tugging on the sheets all over again.

“Careful,” I warned. “I don’t think Ash would appreciate us ruining your sheets.”

She gave me a wry grin, waiting long enough for me to sit up before promptly flopping in my lap.

“Has anyone ever told you how much of a puppy you are?”

It was so adorable, in fact, that I couldn’t help running my hand through her fur.

“You bring out the best in me.” She licked my cheek, then backed up so I could join her. “Which is the same thing I’m trying to do for you. Your wolf needs to run, and the fresh air will do both of us some good. Come on. If it takes longer than an hour to pick up the game’s scent, we’ll come straight home.”

“Promise?”

“I did say I have the entire day off, didn’t I?”

“Last night.” A lot could change in a few hours.

“And it’s still the case. Ash has Trevor with her today. She knows how important our time is together, so I doubt we’ll be disturbed.”

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“Which is why I suggest we stay here. We could get something from the kitchen, take a hot shower... nap. Napping sounds good.”

“Later,” she said again, pulling on the covers until they fell to the floor.

Knowing I’d never hear the end of it and lose even more sleep if I refused, I let out a long huff, then took on my wolf form before groggily making my way down the stairs.

Outside, a heavy mist covered the ground, the cooler air tingling in my nose but not enough to bother my wolf.

“So why do we need to go out this early anyway?” I asked, filling the silence between us.

“It’s when the prey is awake and out of their homes. Dawn and dusk are the best times to catch them off guard.”

“But it’s just the two of us.” Whenever she and Ash mentioned my going on a hunt, they made it sound like some

grand event. I always thought it’d require the entire pack, not just us, and certainly not at four in the morning.

“Come on. I know exactly where we can find them.”

From the manor, we headed west along the mountains until we were able to climb up

the side. Usually one to speak up when things got uncomfortable, the discomfort I experienced left as soon as it began. Either because of my wolf or Fallen's company, I wasn't sure.

"Shouldn't we watch out for other packs?" I asked, crouching low to the ground as we slowly made our way up an overgrown trail.

"Up here? No. Coren and his ilk may have walked these trails, but they don't own them. No one owns the mountains as it's where most of us go to hunt. There's an agreement for all packs to have access to it. We might not need the food as humans, but our wolves still need the experience."

"At four in the morning."

"Exactly."

Resisting the urge to groan yet again, I let her take the lead, borrowing strength from my wolf who was more than happy to be out in the morning fog.

The trail we followed wasn't far from the ledge sitting above our stream, the sheer drop on the other side a constant reminder of just how high up we actually were. The height, however, didn't bother Fallen. She simply walked with her nose to the ground, pausing to scent the air every now and again until she picked up something she recognized.

"Tell me what you smell," she said, waiting until I was at her side.

Still not used to all of the different smells my wolf could pick up, I did as she asked, taking a deep breath until something new reached my nose. It wasn't the cool water from the brook that likely fed into our stream. It wasn't the trees to our south or the berry bushes along the trail that the birds had picked clean. No, this was something

new, something I'd never smell before.

At first, I thought the scent might belong to a wolf. It definitely felt as heavy as one, but seeing as Fallen wasn't crouched close to the ground, that clearly wasn't it, either.

Not knowing what she'd picked up, I said the first thing that came to mind. "A deer?"

"Good guess," Fallen said, casting me a sideways glance.

"Now, can you tell me why?"

Looking around, there was more than enough vegetation to feed it along with a series of smaller streams the further north we decided to go. The brush up here was close together, offering the cover it'd need from predators like us.

"The vantage point," I finally realized, able to see for miles in all directions.

"Yes, but can you tell me what makes this scent so different from the others you've picked up in the past?"

"It's heavier somehow. I'm not exactly sure how to explain it. It's also musky, but some wolves smell like that as well."

"Both are true, but what makes this a buck, and a young one at that, are the tracks you didn't even notice to your left."

Following her example, I tilted my head and looked under the brush. Sure enough, the telltale markings of a deer were there.

"But how do you know what it is?"

“You learn to differentiate them over time, much like you’ve done with the wolves in our pack. We all smelled the same to you until you got to know us better. In time, the same will be true for the creatures you hunt. Unfortunately, that only happens with experience.”

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“Which is why you brought me out here this morning.”

“Yes.” She sat back on her haunches and nuzzled under my chin. “See? It’s not so bad. You can try and deny it all you want, but part of you is enjoying this.”

“I have to admit I’m still getting used to my freedom. I’ve spent most of my life in a protective box my parents tried to

push me into. I wasn’t going to break, but anything that could upset my heart was something they weren’t willing to let me try. Sports, running at the gym, even dating was off the table with them.”

“But you did date.” She gave me a pointed look.

“Not really. Not enough to have half the experiences I’ve had with you.” Thankful for my layer of fur, I looked away from her, the heat dancing on my skin impossible to ignore.

Fallen leaned into me, nosing my chin as she spoke. “If you keep this up, you’re going to scare away the prey. Your scent’s a tad overwhelming right now.”

“Sorry,” I apologized, taking a breath to calm my nerves.

“And for the record, I’ll never try to keep you inside a box.

I might protect you. I might even tell you to leave my side if I feel we’re in danger, but I’ll never tell you no if you want to come out and run like this.”

“Thank you,” I said, gently nipping her ear as she got to her feet.

“What for?”

“For trusting me.”

“Are you kidding? There’s no other wolf I’d rather have at my side. New or not, you’ve already proved yourself to me, which is all that matters. Anything after the fact is just icing on the cake.”

Smiling at her, I scented the air again, picking up the same scent she’d pointed out to me before. “Is it... is it moving?”

Maybe it was because of the wind, but I could’ve sworn the scent wasn’t nearly as strong as it was now.

“It is,” Fallen said with pride, “and it’s headed right for us.”

“So how do we take it down?” I asked, my breath catching in the back of my throat as my human consciousness got the better of me.

“We flush it out. Get it in the open so we don’t get snagged on anything. Now, the ideal situation would be to press it against a wall, but seeing as that isn’t possible unless we lead it down the mountain, getting it in the open will have to do.”

“And what if we chase it into another territory?” She didn’t honestly plan to go in after it, did she?

“That’s why there are two of us,” she explained. “You run at it, and I’ll be waiting on the other side.”

“Making it turn around,” I said with a nod.

“Yes. If we’re lucky, it’ll fall into our territory where we can control it even more. I hope you’re up for this. It’s going to be quite the run.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Fallen made a sound of approval, then slipped into the brush with her belly low to the ground. Once she was out of my line of sight, I followed her scent, mentally tracking her as she got into position. The buck hadn’t picked up our scents yet, and if it had, it had no idea where to go. I honestly hated to think what it might be like if we went after one that as full grown.

I’d seen bucks with eight points or more in documentaries and other television shows. The thought of getting one of those things rammed into my side was enough to send me into another shift.

With my pelt still firmly in place and Fallen in position, I pushed the last vestiges of panic from my mind before rushing at the buck. Branches and leaves hit my face, causing me to close my eyes for only a moment as I blindly chased the elk.

In my mind’s eyes, I envisioned a trail of blue veering in and out of the vegetation. That trail was soon joined by another, a yellow one belonging to Fallen.

The buck startled, rearing up at Fallen before turning my way again.

“Let him go,” Fallen said once she caught up to me. “If we keep going like this, we’ll tire before he does. We have to be smart about this.”

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“So track and chase?”

“Pretty much. Get him into our territory where we can corner him without risking it going into someone else’s territory. Once we do, then we act.”

Nodding, I followed her down the mountainside, always mindful of the drop to our left-hand side. The deer had already made a run for it, bounding down the cliffs until it got itself turned around in the trees. The woods were a knot of trails and trees grown close together. I had a hard time navigating them until I could finally take on my pelt. No doubt the buck was facing the same problem, running one way only to get turned in another.

“He’s tiring,” Fallen said, somewhat out of breath.

“Looks like he isn’t the only one,” I teased, feeling more awake than I did when we first left the manor.

“Just out of breath is all. I’ll get up to him soon enough.”

She stopped under the trees surrounding the stream. For a brief moment, I thought she might run after the buck. When she didn’t move, I knew something was wrong.

“What is it?” I asked, watching the way the buck had gone before giving her my full attention.

She laughed. Of all the things I expec

ted her to do, laughing wasn't it. "That buck's smarter than he looks. I was so focused on him, I didn't see the wolfsbane growing up there."

"You mean everything about the plant is true?"

"Hardly. It won't kill a wolf, but it does take some of our energy. I just need a moment to rest, then we can go after it again."

"After a buck that ran through the stuff?" I asked with disbelief. "I think it's okay for us to let this one go."

She nodded in agreement, leaning into my side when I sat beside her. "You're probably right. Then again, it is heading right for the manor, so..."

"I'll take care of it," I assured her, "but you're sure you're okay?"

"It's a rookie mistake and one I won't make again. I just wanted to give you a flawless hunt."

"Maybe some other time," I said, licking the side of her maw. "Give me a minute to warn the others, then I'll come right back. I'll bring a picnic basket and everything."

Noting where we were, she smiled. "I'd love that."

Chapter Nineteen

After giving the rest of the pack a heads up about the buck and Fallen's condition, I gathered a handful of items from the pantry, put them in a basket, then carried it the entire way to the stream. The moment I broke through the trees, she stood to meet me.

Not looking nearly as bad as when I left, I could still hear the exhaustion in her words. “Ash should’ve made you a scout instead. You move fast when you really want to.”

“I had my reasons,” I said, shifting into my human form so I could remove the foodstuffs from the basket. “I wasn’t sure what you’d want, so I brought a little bit of everything.”

One by one, I removed the bread, meat, cheese, and a box of crackers from the basket, placing them between us. The only thing I didn’t bring with me were drinks, but seeing as the stream was right there, I knew Fallen wouldn’t mind.

“And what about the buck?” Fallen asked, shifting beside me.

“The others are aware. I think Trevor was planning to go out there and shoot it before it reaches Rosewood territory.”

“That would be wise, though I’m sure Ash has already put in a call to them as well.”

“So, I wanted to ask you something, but it’s kind of stupid.

Ash said you haven’t really fought over territory in years.

She’s also mentioned having an understanding with the southern pack.”

“We do, but I wouldn’t call it a friendship. It’s more of a

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‘you stay out of my way and I’ll stay out of yours’ kind of situation.”

“I figured as much, but how did it all begin? Surely some packs were against the agreement.”

She nodded at that, breaking into the bread and meat as she spoke. “Those who were against it broke away from their packs, making what we now know as Coren’s band. They’re a

bunch of misfits stuck in the old ways when we didn’t have the humans to worry about. But with the world completely aware of us and where we live, it just isn’t realistic for us to fight amongst ourselves like we once did.”

“Do all the packs live up here?” Of all the times I’d read about wolves around the country, almost all of the news articles took place in the northeast.

“Most, but not all. You can still find some of them far to the south and west, but it’s extremely rare. Our wolves prefer the cold as well as the seclusion from man. Until recently, that is.” She forced a smile. “With the mountains being how they are, it isn’t like someone’s going to drive out here to make a mega mall or some other outfit like that. Out here, our territories are safe. Out here, we can still take on our pelts without scaring someone else.”

“Do you think humans and wolves will ever be able to live in the city together?” I didn’t look at her then, my mind fixed on the work I used to do at the hospital along with my sister.

Fallen placed a hand on my shoulder, offering me a kind smile when I finally met her gaze. “There are exceptions,” she said, not sounding convinced, “and there’s still a chance of you going back.”

“But not to stay.” I winced when the words left my mouth.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, I love it out here, and I love you, but—”

“You miss your sister,” Fallen said gently, “and any other wolf would feel the same way. But it’s more complicated than that. Away from the pack, there’s no telling what your wolf might do.”

“So come with me,” I said, taking her hand in mine. “I’m going to see her again tonight, so why not go with me?”

“Jo, I don’t think that—”

“I’m constantly hiding under the trees, and she doesn’t come out to meet me. She’s afraid of bringing attention to ourselves, but if you’re there, then I should be able to keep to my human form long enough to touch her face. To hug her and

tell her I’m okay.” My voice broke at the end, and when Fallen ran her thumb across my cheek, that’s all it took for me to break down.

“I’m so sorry this pains you so. I didn’t realize—”

“Could you ever spend as long as I have away from Ash if our roles were reversed?”

Her eyes widened at that.

“I didn’t think so. I know it’s been under two months since I first turned, but I am

getting better. You said so yourself. I recognize each wolf as an individual now, their scents different from everyone else.”

“But in the city, your wolf’s senses will be clouded. You could get hurt.”

“Which is why I’m asking you to go with me. I would’ve done it before but this is the first night we have off together.

Please, Fallen, it’d mean the world to me. Besides, we need to tell my sister.”

“She doesn’t know about us?” Fallen asked, tilting her head to the side.

“She does, or she had an idea before I left her in the city, but she doesn’t know how serious things are. She’s always been my biggest cheerleader. Not telling her feels wrong.”

Fallen looked as though she was about to say something but thought better of it. Instead, she took me in her arms and kissed me on the lips.

“If this is what will make you happy, then yes, I’ll go with you.”

“Shit.”

Ash slammed the phone on the receiver the moment Fallen and I walked into her office. Whoever she’d been talking to, the news wasn’t good. Without saying a word, she walked past Fallen, ignoring her completely.

“That was Brandon from the Rosewood Pack,” she said loud enough for the entire lower level of the house to hear.

“Apparently, Coren’s been making his rounds, spreading rumors along the way.”

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“What kind of rumors?” Fallen asked, letting my hand drop to my side.

“That we willingly turned a human,” Ash spit out, looking my way with more hatred than was probably necessary.

“Where would he get such an idea?”

Ash shook her head. “I don’t know. He must’ve sensed Jo and got the wrong idea. As long as she’s been in the pack, that part of herself will never change.”

“The human part,” I said. “Why does it matter if I was turned or not? We all know the truth.”

“We do,” Ash agreed, “but the other packs don’t. The reason we haven’t seen a human shift in over a century is because the act of turning a human was made illegal. We all agreed our packs were large enough on their own. If we continued to turn humans the way we once did, we would’ve run out of room a long time ago.”

“So what does this mean, exactly?”

“A pack turning humans into wolves could be seen as a threat,” Fallen explained, taking her hand in mine again before giving it a squeeze. “They could see it as a pack trying to gather more recruits for an attack.”

My heart skipped a beat. “But we aren’t like that.”

“We know that but they don’t,” Ash said, the bitterness in her scent directed at Coren

more than anyone else.

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bsp; “What do you need us to do?” Fallen asked, not leaving my side.

“Get ready for some company, and if all fails, an attack.”

Chapter Twenty

Fallen paced beside me, her hackles raised whenever the wind blew. Seeing her so unnerved was worrisome. She always seemed to have everything together, so for her to be as anxious as I was was unexpected.

Aside from a few scouts Ash had sent out to offer an early warning, everyone else had gathered in the front of the manor.

From the living room to the balconies above, we all gathered around Ash awaiting her orders.

She didn't speak, I doubt she even breathed, her ears perked forward as she strained to hear anyone outside.

Fallen said Ash could sense everyone in the pack at all times, so when she paused and her ears went back, I knew something was wrong.

“They're coming from the east,” she said in a hushed tone, her ears swiveling back and forth as she concentrated on the scout whose senses must've alerted her.

“Rosewood?” Fallen asked, her voice so low I barely heard her.

Ash shook her head, and when she spoke again, a touch of panic made it into her voice. “It’s all of them. Coren must’ve gathered as many wolves as he could.”

“But it’s a lie,” I cut in, looking at them both. “If we just explain everything—”

Ash was already shaking her head before I could finish.

“We may have made partial alliances throughout the years and called one another friend, but this accusation is as serious as they come. It’s worse than a wolf going into the human city in wolf form and far worse than killing one by accident. The act of turning and claiming more wolves is to be taken seriously no matter the cause.”

“But you had no part in this.”

“No, but until we can prove it, there isn’t much we can do.”

“But now we’re the ones who are outnumbered,” Fallen said, pausing long enough to nuzzle my cheek.

“We are,” Ash agreed, “but that doesn’t mean we’re about to run from our home. We’ll wait until they arrive, then we’ll see what they have to say.”

Ash tried to remain calm, I could hear it in her voice, but the way she held herself then with her tail tucked under her, I knew it was more for my benefit than anyone else.

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I appreciated it, but I also wished there was something I could do. Running to the city now was out of the question with the other packs being so near, but if they were willing to listen...

“Let me look into the files,” I said after a long moment.

“You can’t,” Fallen said with surprise. “It isn’t safe.”

“And your wolf can’t take being in the city for more than a few minutes,” Ash added. “It takes years to settle those primal nerves.”

“Which is time we don’t have.” Turning to Fallen, I said,

“You agreed to go with me to see my sister tonight. Why is this any different?”

“You did?” Ash growled. “Are you really that lovestruck that you’d risk your life and that of your mate’s?”

“It was only going to be to the border,” Fallen explained.

“I’d never agree to take her into the city alone.”

Meaning she’d have to take Ash with us. At this point, I didn’t care. So long as it got the other packs off our case, I’d take whatever wolves with me that I could.

“So we’ll all go,” I said, breaking the uneasy silence between them. “If the packs out there are willing to listen, I suggest we go into the city and get the files from my

surgery along with the one from Dani's autopsy. They have to be around there somewhere."

"But without knowing where to look—"

"I have my ways, trust me."

Jeremy knew his way around the hospital a lot better than I did. If someone could help me round up those files, it was him.

I was about to ask to use the phone so I could call Val and let her know I wouldn't be able to drop by when a low growl made its way up Fallen's chest. Her growl was joined by many others, causing my own wolf to bristle in response.

They aren't angry at us, I assured my wolf, pushing back the panic that had started to crowd my mind.

"Stay here," Ash ordered, her eyes on me. "You stay with her."

Fallen opened her mouth to protest, but after looking at me, she thought better of it. With a nod, she sat to my right, her ears pinned back as Ash shifted into her human form.

Without another word, Ash opened the door and quickly slipped outside, leaving the rest of the pack behind until she needed us.

"Shouldn't we go with her?" I asked, wincing when my panic made its way into my voice.

"Ash believes going out on her own will be far more welcoming to the other packs than taking all of us with her.

With only one wolf to face, they'll have no choice but to focus on her."

I guess that made sense, but it also didn't make me feel any better. In some strange way, I felt as though this was my fault.

The one time I finally get far enough on a list for a heart and I end up with one from a wolf.

Which was still something I couldn't understand. Even those of us who didn't study about wolf anatomy knew about the differences between the blood and organs of a human and a wolf. I wouldn't have noticed as the patient because no one ever told me. Whatever complications that may have happened after surgery due to a poor match would've been masked by my wolf's ability to heal. Even before I took on my first shift, that heart was doing its job by keeping me alive until I got here.

Until Ash and Fallen found me.

They could've left me in that parking garage as my wolf tore me apart from the inside out. They could've let me die.

Instead, they brought me here, and because of that, I'd endangered their entire family.

My family.

My heart seized at that, at the realization that this pack was family. We were brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and friends.

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Each of us had a place in the pack, including me. As much as I missed my life in the city, my place was here with them.

If they let me stay.

With so many wolves gathered outside, there was no telling what Ash might do.

Minutes passed, and still no sign of Ash. The noise on the other side of the doors was hard to read, the scents of more wolves sending me into a tailspin. It started with just the three, but then they were joined by four others.

As their scents continued to grow, I stepped closer to the door, straining to hear whatever Ash said on the other side.

“You need to trust her,” Fallen said, keeping her voice low as she stood beside me. “She’d never put you in any real danger.”

“I know.” Which was what worried me. “But what about her?”

“Regardless of what an Alpha may have done, no pack will attack them when they’re alone. Not unless they want to face the same judgment from the other packs in the area.”

“But I thought they were all here.”

“Some of them, yes. However, those to the north are absent. I haven’t been able to pick up any of their scents.”

The front door opened just then, causing me to jump in response. If wolves could go pale, that's exactly what Ash would've done.

Her ears were low, her tail down, and when she walked, it was with more effort than usual.

When her eyes met mine, the ring around her iris flickered.

"They'll speak to you now," she said, her voice hoarse. "No matter what happens, just tell them what you told me." When Fallen tried to join me, Ash stopped her. "Only Jo," she said, her words full of regret. "They have no idea about your relationship with Jo and I'd like to keep it that way. At least until this is all over. The last thing we need on top of everything else is for the other packs to think you turned Jo because you fell in love with a human."

"Man, talk about being insecure," I said, pausing just inside the door.

Ash made a sound resembling a laugh. "If you've been in a pack as long as I have, you start to recognize the words that no one else dares to speak. They haven't mentioned it yet, but if Coren brought their attention to us, then he must've seen you and Fallen on one of your runs."

"But wolves run together all the time," I argued.

"They do."

She waited a moment more before stepping back outside with me walking close behind her. Outside the manor, the air was colder than I remembered. More than a dozen wolves gathered on the front lawn, their pelts ranging from timber, brown, and even white. The white one was the first to step forward, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Zander, this is Jo, our newest wolf. Jo, this is Zander. He leads the Thornpeak Pack.”

Stepping forward, I bowed my head, keeping my eyes on the ground. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“I wish I could say the same.” His words were sharp, but the bitterness I expected to sense on him wasn’t there.

“This is the one that was turned?” he asked, his eyes locked on Ash.

“It’s complicated,” she said, struggling for words. “This is a very unique case as we’ve never heard about it happening before.”

“Explain.”

“Jo recently had a heart transplant and actually worked in the city. The hospital she worked at is one of the first to offer care to humans and wolves.”

“And you want me to believe that a human could survive from such a mistake?”

“We can’t believe it, either,” I said, taking a cautious step in his direction.

A low growl stopped me from taking another step.

“I mean no disrespect,” I said, doing my best to meet his gaze. “I simply want to explain. I have no idea how this happened. In all intents and purposes, it shouldn’t have ever been a thing. Humans and wolves have different markers, blood types, and a transplant such as this should never stick.”

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“But it did,” Zander said, giving me a pointed look.

“Yes. Listen, I can prove this isn’t Ash or anyone else’s fault if I can just go into the city.”

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sp; “Jo,” Ash scolded.

“The longer we wait on this, the more suspicion will rise.”

“She’s right,” Zander agreed, “and as much as I hate the idea of a new wolf going into such a populated area, it would appear this is your only choice.”

Ash released a sigh of defeat. “Could her scars be the proof that you need?”

As much as I hated the idea of showing them off, they were the one thing my wolf could never seem to heal. They were a constant mark, one of which Fallen told me was a sign of strength and the journey taken just to get here.

Unfortunately, whenever I looked at them, all I could do was cringe.

“Jo, you don’t have—”

“If it can keep me from going into the city, I will.”

Zander looked to the other wolves that had slowly made their way from under the

trees, including Coren.

“Those scars could’ve been from a completely unrelated event,” Coren snarled. “She could’ve had it before she was turned.”

Zander looked at me with a sigh. “As much as I’d hate to admit it, Coren’s right. The scars will only prove that you had the transplant, not where the heart was from.”

“And medical records can be altered,” Coren cut in. “They can be changed and rewritten.”

“Enough.” Zander glared in his direction. “Remember, you’re only here as a guest.”

Defeated, Coren slowly fell back into rank, his eyes never leaving me.

It seemed as though no matter what we did, there’d always be an argument against it. Knowing that, I said the only thing that came to mind.

“There are two mysteries here,” I said to Zander as well as the other wolves now standing behind him. “One regarding my first shift and the other regarding the death of a previous wolf.”

“Jo, please,” Ash begged.

“I’m sorry, Alpha.” Stepping forward, I walked with Zander toward the other wolves. “Months ago, Dani passed away. Her body was brought to my hospital where I was having my own surgery. I have no idea how or why I ended up with her heart, but I survived. Ash was never informed of Dani’s passing until it was too late.” Ash might not have said as much, but the fact I ended up with Dani’s heart without her knowing until much later was explanation enough.

“No one called her next-of-kin,” I went on when they didn’t say anything. “They just acted. I can’t explain why it happened, and I can’t say what killed Dani in the first place.

However, if I go to the hospital and look into our medical records, I might find an answer for both. Please, before you

judge this pack, let me do this. If you still aren’t convinced or if I fail, you can do whatever you want with me.”

“You are a very brave and wise wolf,” Zander said gently.

“You could’ve made a wonderful Alpha if you’d been born among the pack.”

I smiled my thanks, then looked back at Ash. “Our pack could never follow a better wolf.”

Zander nodded in agreement. “You never meant to come across as a threat. However, accusations like this must be taken seriously and with haste.”

“I understand. So, will you let me do this?” I asked, looking from him to Ash. “Will you join me in the city?”

“We both will,” Zander said, his eyes on Ash once she joined me again. “The other packs won’t believe the truth if it comes from your pack, but if it comes from me, they’ll have no choice.”

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“I’m sorry if this sounds rude, but who are you?” I asked.

What made him so special that he could get the confidence of every pack around us.

“I’m a descendant of the elder wolves. My line goes all the way back to the first wolf we’ve ever known. Because of this, I’m partly responsible for the actions of every pack.”

“Because we border your territory?”

“Essentially, yes. We have connections in every pack, unions if you will. Some of my own wolves have joined other packs by finding mates of their own, which is what connects us all. So while Coren may have gathered all of the packs in the region, my word is the only one you’ll ever need.”

“Being a wolf is complicated.”

He laughed at that. “So are humans. Think of it as our form of government.”

“Is that why your pelt is white?”

“That’s purely a coincidence.”

“Will you join us for our gathering?” Ash asked, speaking up before I could do the same.

“As much as I adore the invitation, I think it might be best for us to get this over with,

don't you?"

Ash looked at me with worry in her eyes. "Are you sure you can do this?"

"We don't have a choice," I said.

"Your Alpha should be able to calm your wolf," Zander said, "and if not, I'll help where I can."

Nodding, I thanked him for his help, then turned for the house.

"She's going to run," Coren called out.

"I'm getting my things," I corrected him. "I can't walk into the city looking like this, now can I?"

"She's got you there," Zander laughed.

"And that's true for all of us," Ash agreed. "Zander, come with me. I should have something in your size."

"I appreciate it."

With Zander accompanying us, the other wolves dispersed, keeping to the trees until he called on them again.

Fallen was waiting for us as soon as we walked through the doors. "Zander," she said with surprise, immediately bowing her head. "It's an honor."

"It's been a long time, Fallen. I hope you're well."

“I am.”

“Keeping out of trouble?” he teased, noting the exchanged glances between us. “I see. Well, don’t let Coren get wind of that. I’m all for happy wolves, but not until after this is cleared up.”

“Thank you,” we said in unison, watching him go as Ash guided him toward her office.

“What now?” Fallen asked. “I barely heard a word.”

“I’m going to the city.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The stench of ammonia and bleach hit me before we reached the front doors, causing my wolf to bristle in response.

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Fallen's hand was on my arm in an instant, calming my wolf before she could throw me into a shift.

Fallen wasn't supposed to come us, but when she refused to stay behind, Zander agreed to take her in the guise of Ash's escort.

Considering how well Fallen's standing apparently was, the reason for her going with us was never questioned.

So as we neared the hospital, she stayed close to me, keeping my wolf in check with Ash's help.

"It isn't quite like you remember, is it?" Ash asked with a knowing smile.

"It certainly smells how I remember on the day of my first shift. My sense of smell changed first, followed by some strange fever I couldn't explain."

"That was your body reacting," Zander explained, stopping just outside the doors.

"But why did it take three months for me to shift? That was two full moons where, according to Fallen, my wolf should've been out of her mind."

"The shift doesn't always happen immediately, though three months is a long time," Zander admitted. "Tell me, were you put on any suppressors?" When I frowned, he explained.

"Any medications that may have been masked for what they truly were?"

“Not that I know of.”

“But you were on medications, weren’t you?”

“I was, but they looked exactly as you’d expect. They weren’t pills I couldn’t recognize.”

“Yes, but if this trickery goes as deep as I fear, then the reason your shift took so long to occur is because someone

else put you on suppressors without you realizing it. You wouldn’t have needed any heart medication after a surgery such as this due to the healing we wolves have.”

“Which wasn’t noticeable, either.”

“Because y

ou hadn’t shifted yet,” he added. “If my theory is correct, someone inside this hospital did an illegal surgery, then personally changed your medication to cover it up.”

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach. “But this kind of surgery requires a huge team. Someone would’ve known.”

“And considering how in debt most of them are, there’s always a price to shut them up.”

He had me there.

“You said you have a friend in here?” Ash asked.

“Jeremy. He works in ortho, same as me, but he also helps with other surgeries from time to time.”

“Then we’ll start with him and go from there.”

Nodding, I opened the front doors, thankful when Fallen’s presence kept my wolf under control. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything she could do about the nerves swirling in my stomach.

As luck would have it, Jeremy walked out of surgery a minute later. He didn’t see me at first, doing a double-take before meeting me at the reception desk.

“Jo! No one told me you were coming here. How have you been? I keep calling Val, but she won’t pick up. Is everything okay?” He paused, then looked at those behind me. “Those your folks? I thought you said they passed away.”

“They’re family,” I said, gesturing at one of the private waiting rooms where we could talk. “You have a moment?”

Looking from Ash and Fallen to me again, he offered our small group a nod, closing the door once everyone was inside.

“What’s going on? You snap at me, leave without a trace, then

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completely disappear for months at a time. Val thought you were dead.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I never meant to worry anyone. It’s just... you might want to sit down for this.”

Fallen gripped my arm. “Jo, are you sure about—”

“We can trust him,” I assured her, waiting for Jeremy to lower into his chair. “Okay, so you know how we have two different sides of the hospital?”

“One for humans and one for wolves. What about it?”

Jeremy asked, his face pale. His whole body tensed, his hands gripping the armrests of his chair. “Wait... no. This is a joke, right? You’re trying to get me back for those fake spiders I left in your desk drawer.”

Smiling, I pried his hand open and took it in mine. “I wish it were. I don’t know how it happened or how it’s stayed quiet for this long, but someone on my surgical team gave me the heart of a wolf.”

Jeremy burst out laughing. “Yeah, right. And I’m king Alpha.”

“That would be me, actually,” Zander said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Jeremy looked between us, his eyes as wide as they could go. “You’re serious.”

“Yes,” I said. “But we can go over the details later. This whole thing has put us in the

middle of some pack politics. In order to clear it up, I need my medical records along with Dani..." I looked at Ash for guidance.

"Daniella Winthorp," she said, her voice shaking at the end.

"We need her autopsy report," I explained once Fallen pulled Ash aside. "The day I left, the one where I was sick... I turned into a wolf. If those two weren't there, I probably would've died. And now, they're in danger because surrounding packs think I was bitten and turned illegally. I

need to clear their name, Jeremy, and I need your help in order to do it."

He looked as though he was about to say something but thought better of it. Instead, he offered me a small smile and said, "Because you no longer have access to those records."

"And because I'd have to report my transition to the board, which would make this an even bigger mess than it already is."

"Okay, I'll help, but you need to stay here. I can't risk any of the staff asking for information you aren't willing to repeat."

"I could always—"

"Lie?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at me as he stood from his chair. "You're a terrible liar."

That much was true. "Okay, but make it quick."

"I'll come back as soon as I can."

The room fell into silence as soon as Jeremy left. A moment later, Ash broke down, falling into Fallen's arms as she gently guided the Alpha to one of the nearby chairs. I never wanted them to come here for this very reason. It was too painful, their loss too fresh.

They came anyway in order to keep my wolf under control.

Ash hadn't said as much, but if she didn't come, I would've returned to the pack with most of their questions unanswered. Ash deserved to know what happened to Dani just like I had the right to know how something like this happened in the first place.

So we waited, and as we did, my nerves wound even tighter.

Zander, in all of his glory, simply stood and stared out at the reception area, his eyes flickering whenever a wolf walked by.

"So you really help them?" he asked, not looking at me.

"We do our best," I said, following his line of sight. "But we never operate on them personally. That's left up to the wolves working on the other side of the hospital. It isn't because we wouldn't like to or that we enjoy turning them away but because we wouldn't be able to serve them as well as their own kind could." Like I can now. I kept the last bit to myself, knowing now wasn't the time or the place to discuss my possible return to the city.

Zander nodded gently, clasping his hands behind his back.

"When the time comes for your wolf to settle, will you work here?"

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Surprised, I shook my head as I honestly didn't have an answer for him. "I've thought about it, but that possibility's a lifetime away. I'd honestly settle for getting to visit my sister. I can still do some good back at the manor."

"Ash got lucky with you. I've heard stories about humans being turned before our time that I dare not repeat. Essentially, those who were turned would take revenge on the pack that claimed them."

I could understand that. "If someone knowing did this to me, I'd feel differently about the pack."

"But someone did do this to you," he reminded me.

"And they'll have to answer for their actions once we figure out who they are."

"And because it's under your jurisdiction, we'll never get the closure we seek," Ash cut in, joining us moments later.

"Not for my transplant, no. As for Dani's death, it's still possible that was caused by a wolf," I said.

"Yes." She nodded gently, placing a hand on her chest.

"Is there something I should know?" Zander asked, looking at her again.

"Not yet," she assured him. "Not until I have my proof."

“Fair enough, but we’ll speak about this later regardless of what we find now.”

“Of course, Alpha,” Ash said, bowing her head in respect.

It didn’t take long for Jeremy to return with a huge pile of papers in his hands.

“Well?” I urged, stepping between him and the other wolves. “Did you find anything?”

“Not at first, no,” he said with an exasperated sigh, but whoever tried to cover this up did a terrible job deleting the original files from the system. Here. Take a look for yourself.”

Jeremy handed me two sets of paperwork, one that was falsified and the other that he had to dig around in order to find.

The false reports went on to explain a complicated surgery where I almost died on the table. There were complications after the fact, which was why they kept me under as long as they did.

Complications happen on a regular basis, and since I didn’t pass away, it was never questioned.

The other report was more complex, detailing the surgeon’s work almost like it was intended for a medical article.

Again, complications were mentioned in the text, but the reason the heart transplant was changed was because the human heart didn’t take. If the surgeon waited any longer or closed me up, I might not have survived. So he made a call, taking a healthy heart from the other side of the hospital even though it’d never been done before. There was no way to determine the outcome.

“Doug?” I asked with disbelief. “He was the one who did the surgery? What happened to Carter?”

“He was called away at the last minute,” Jeremy offered,

“but he said he oversaw the entire thing.”

I doubted that. “Jeremy...”

“You died on the table, Jo. What were they supposed to do?”

“I died?” The reports didn’t say anything like that.

“I was in the gallery when you coded. Your heart was in shreds and the other one didn’t take.”

Oh my god. “You asked them to do it, didn’t you?” I couldn’t believe it. I refused to believe it. Not Jeremy. Not my sweet, amazing Jeremy.

Jeremy turned away from me and ran his hands through his hair. “They came to me about the new heart and I agreed without thinking. God, I’m such an idiot.” He looked back at me, his eyes full of tears. “You need to believe me. I had nothing to do with this. I saw you code. I was getting ready to tell your sister when they pulled me aside and mentioned another donor in the hospital. I didn’t think to ask where it was coming from because... I am so sorry, Jo.”

Zander snarled in response. “That was meant for another wolf.”

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I took my place between them. “Jeremy, explain.”

Jeremy let out a long sigh. “If we’d realized just how weak your heart was...”

“They never would’ve operated in the first place,” I finished for him.

“So when Doug told me a new heart had just come in and that the family had already agreed to give it up, we decided to give it a try. Val never knew about the complications because it all happened so fast.” He took a deep breath, his hard exhale shaking as he spoke. “If I’d known where the heart had come from, I would’ve stopped them from operating.”

“And let me die,” I said, swallowing around the lump that had formed in the back of my throat.

“I...” He let out a long breath. “I don’t know.”

“What about Dani?” I asked, having yet to look over her paperwork.

“According to her file, the wolf who brought her in claimed to be her brother. He had the ID to prove it. Seeing as she’d never visited a human hospital before, we believed him.

He told the attending that so long as the heart went to someone else, we could use it.”

“No

wolf would ever agree to that,” Ash bit out, lunging in Jeremy’s direction.

Zander was on her in an instant, his wolf rushing to the surface as he fought her back down. “Remember where we are, pup. If you shift now, there’s no going back.”

“Do you have a name?” I asked, looking through Dani’s report and finding none.

“I do,” Jeremy said, his voice low. “His name was Coren.

It was another detail I had to find as even Dani’s file was altered, claiming the organs were no good and disposed of after the fact.”

Now it was Zander’s turn to lash out, ripping the papers from my hands so he could read over the report. “I’m gonna kill him. I’m gonna kill that waste of fur.”

I placed my hand on his arm, gently removing the papers from his grasp. “If he brought her here—”

“Then he knows how she died,” Ash finished for me. “I always had my suspicions but—”

“You needed proof,” Zand said with a nod. “This all makes sense now. From her passing to the botched medical records and him claiming Jo was bitten. He’s trying to cover his tracks.”

“But giving the heart to a human?” Jeremy urged, not sounding convinced.

“There was no telling what a wolf heart might do in a human body. He probably hoped the host would die along with it, covering the truth indefinitely.”

“But when he saw me in pack territory—”

“He panicked,” Fallen said, taking my hand in hers. “He had to find a way to hide it again, which is why he gathered the other packs.”

“But he wasn’t counting on me being in a listening mood,”

Zander finished for her.

“And it’s a good thing you were,” I said, walking over to one of the chairs before my legs could go out from underneath of me.

“This also explains why you didn’t shift for so long,”

Zander went on when we didn’t say anything. “Not wanting you to turn, you were put on suppressors.”

“Which I didn’t need once I started work.”

“Exactly. Taking your wolf into a place like this when she’s been pushed down for so long is bound to have some unwanted consequences.”

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“But how did you know I was here?” I asked Ash as she glanced at the front lobby.

“Because I sensed her. You. I thought that she might’ve...

that maybe—”

“She hoped we were wrong,” Fallen said. “We never recovered a body, and now we know why. But Ash felt her light go out. It’s someone we get to feel as mates. When Dani’s warmth ceased to exist...”

“I knew she was gone.” Ash wiped her eyes, then faced me again. “Until you. The moment your wolf started to surface, I could feel you. I’d never expected to find a human in that parking garage.”

“But you helped me anyway,” I said.

“I did, mostly because Dani had so much trust in this new system. She always wanted to make sure she could help someone else once she passed, though she never imagined...

she never thought...”

“It would go to a human.” It all made perfect sense, but it didn’t really fix the problem.

“Jeremy, I need to report this.”

“I know. My involvement, no matter how small, will also come into question.”

“And you’re okay with that?” I asked.

“Getting tricked by Doug? Not really, no. But if I have to answer to my decision to act without checking the files first, then I will.”

“So you never knew? You never wondered why I left?”

“I did, but I figured you weren’t ready to work. I didn’t even think to read over your medical files or dig up the original ones because you’d been perfectly fine until you returned to work.”

“And everyone else in that room stayed quiet?” A groundbreaking surgery such as this? Someone would’ve bragged about it for sure.

“There were rumors about Patient Zero, but that’s all I thought they were. It was hypothetical and not... not you.”

“Jo, it’s okay,” Ash said, placing a hand on mine. “As much as it pains me to hear the truth, he isn’t the one to blame.”

“Doug is,” I said with a nod.

“No,” Ash corrected me. “Coren’s behind all of this. He orchestrated the entire thing.”

“And he’ll be dealt with accordingly,” Zander assured her, running a hand through his hair as he spoke. “It’s quite the mess. I’m not sure how we’re going to clean it up.”

“I’ll help where I can,” I said, “but I need to report to the board about this first.”

“Please do. When you’re done, we’ll be out in the car waiting for you.”

He offered Ash his arm, then walked out of the room without another word. Fallen stayed with me, joining Jeremy as well as myself as we made the long walk upstairs.

Hopefully, the board would be as understanding about Jeremy’s involvement in all of this as I was. If not, I was pretty sure Ash would let him work with the pack. She’d already

offered the same to Val, and seeing as he was in the medical profession as well...

“Everything will be fine,” Fallen assured me, likely sensing my concern. “Whatever the fates decide, we’ll get through this together.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

“I know, but things like this always sort themselves out in the end.”

Nodding, I left it at that, steeling myself for what was to come.

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In the end, the board fired Doug and had him arrested.

Jeremy was also placed on probation for not bringing it up sooner, which gave him enough time to sort things out with me and the other packs.

The wolves that tended to Dani's wounds knowingly agreed to give the heart to a human. Those same wolves were the strays Fallen warned me about. Strays like Coren.

Coren probably offered them a place at his side once he took over our territory, which was why they helped him in the first place. His plan backfired the moment I took on my first shift.

"Are you ready to go home?" Fallen asked once we were through.

"To see Val?"

"Considering how well your wolf's behaved, I suppose we have time for a short visit. Unless you disagree." She gave Ash and Zander a pointed look.

"It's okay with me," Ash said, sounding exhausted.

"I'd like to meet this Val," Zander agreed.

"Then it's settled," Fallen said with a huge smile on her face. "Let's go and see Val."

Epilogue

The morning of our ceremony, my stomach was in knots.

After everything that had happened with Coren, Fallen was even more determined to finish our bond. Before anything else can happen, I could almost hear her say.

The other packs were reluctant to side with our story, but once Zander went over the details, the other wolves slowly dispersed. Everyone except Coren.

No one explained where Zander was taking him, but knowing how upset the white wolf had been, I had a feeling it wasn't just to place him under arrest.

Coren knowingly put all of the other packs in danger. If any of the wolves were to fall during an attack because of Coren's little rumor, he would've been banned for life.

Wolves without a pack were one thing. Ones without a home and completely kicked out of all territories? That was something else altogether.

Needless to say, when Fallen mentioned the ceremony to Ash and Ash agreed to officiate it, things moved pretty fast.

And now, after a long day, it was almost over.

"Well, that was..." Jeremy trailed off, completely at a loss for words.

"Interesting," Val offered, smiling at me and Fallen. "It's certainly not the kind of ceremony I'd expected."

Me either. Well aware of ribbon tying ceremonies, weddings, and everything in between, this was the first time I got to experience the bind between wolves for myself.

Much like my hunt with Fallen, we woke fir

st thing in the morning, leading a morning howl with the rest of the pack.

A pack hunt took place shortly after that, our wolves running as one while Fallen and I chased down and finally killed my first buck. It was freeing an exhilarating all at the same time, but it couldn't compare to the run we shared with Val and Jeremy.

According to Fallen, it was what solidified the bond not only with her but the rest of the pack, and seeing as Jeremy and Val were a big part of mine, they got to go along with us.

"So do you have to run like that all the time?" Jeremy asked, reclining in a chair next to our bonfire.

"If my wolf needs it, yes," I said, smiling at him.

"Oh, before I forget. Luke told me you could have your old job back. If you want it, I mean."

I considered it a moment, then took Fallen's hand in mine.

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“Actually, I think I’m better off staying here with everyone else.”

“You fit right in too.” His eyes filled with mirth. “You wolves sure know how to throw a party.”

“No,” Fallen corrected him, taking me in her arms before lifting my chin so our lips were a breath apart. “We just know how to live.”

Val clasped her hands beside me, her smile as wide as it could go.

With the entire pack and my own family looking on, I let down my guard long enough to meet Fallen in a hungry kiss. It was the same kind of kiss that made my toes curl and took me all the way back to our very first one.

I could almost hear the bubbling stream and smell the trees, not opening my eyes until I sank in her embrace.

Tilting my head back, Fallen looked at me from under her long lashes, her eyes shimmering with the fire of her wolf.

“Welcome home.”