



The Pack (The Pack 1)

Author: *Kristin Coley*

Category: Fantasy, Young Adult, Horror

Description: Jess Carter only wants to finish out her senior year of high school. No friends, no boyfriends, and definitely not an insanely hot, overprotective guy who might possibly be her mate. No thanks. She only came to the tiny town of Banks, Idaho to make sure her dad doesn't do anything too crazy. Like buy the local motel where you pay by the hour.

Dangerous stalkers and a group of students known as the Pack are the opposite of what she plans on, but that doesn't change the fact that she has zero intentions of getting involved.

At all.
Period.
End of story.

Except, the stalkers are after her, the insanely hot guy is one of the high school coaches, and the Pack....well, let's just say the name suits them.

With nowhere else to turn, Jess must rely on the Pack to protect her, but in doing so, she becomes caught up in a brewing war over territory and power. One that may cost her everything.

Mild language. No cliffhanger. HEA guaranteed.
A paranormal, shifter romance.

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Chapter One

The smell of exhaust fumes hit me as I stepped off the Greyhound bus and into my new life. The driver didn't even bother getting off since my luggage consisted of the duffel bag slung over my shoulder. I hadn't taken two steps before he was bumping back over the shoulder and onto the road.

Guess Banks, Idaho wasn't a hotspot for travelers.

I considered my options, which were exactly nil, and let out a sigh. I was literally standing on the side of the highway with no phone – thanks again, Mommy Dearest – and no real idea of what to do next.

A covered bulletin board caught my eye and I wandered over to it, hitching my bag higher on my shoulders. Considering it holds all of my worldly possessions, it should be heavier, I thought idly as I perused the board. It had the bus schedule and – thank you, God – a map of this tiny town. It wasn't much but it gave me a direction to start walking once I figured out which way was south. According to the tiny map, there was a town called High Valley to the north, but nothing between here and there. I was looking for the only motel around which based on my own sketchy brand of logic should be in the center of the town.

I headed south, fingers crossed I was actually going south, and thanked whoever was listening once again that I'd had the foresight to wear tennis shoes when I told my mom I was going to live with Dad. I'd packed my stuff in anticipation of what would no doubt be an epic showdown. What I hadn't expected was the sheer vindictiveness she'd displayed. When she realized she couldn't stop me, she'd refused to let me take

anything, including my phone or debit card. I'd been allowed one duffel bag of clothes so I'd been choosy since I had no idea what to expect. As I hiked along the shoulder of the highway, it was clear I was no longer in the city. Massive trees surrounded me, the highway nothing more than a ribbon cutting through deep forest, and I shivered slightly. When I'd decided to move in with Dad, I hadn't really considered the consequences of my decision.

My phone confiscated by a petty parent while I tried to figure out how to survive my senior year in the backwoods of Idaho. Part of me wanted to turn back, wait for the next bus and go back home, but after Mom's last words, I knew that would never happen. I had to make this work.

After fifteen minutes of walking, my duffel bag was getting heavy and I needed to find a bathroom. I was also cursing my inability to call Dad to come get me, and somewhat shocked that not a single car had gone by the entire time I walked. I was starting to think there was no town and the bus driver had just decided to drop me in the middle of nowhere.

A couple more minutes of trudging and it looked like there was a break in the never-ending wall of forest. My steps got a little faster and then I saw the sign.

Wander Inn Motel

I snorted at the pun, but was also relieved to find it actually existed. I'd begun to wonder if Dad had just dropped off the face of the planet, but no, he'd just found the furthest place from Mom and his old boss as humanly possible.

I turned on to the gravel drive, and then stopped and stared. When Dad had told me about the place, he'd described it as old school, retro even. Staring at it now, I could definitely state that old school was a generous term for what amounted to a pay per hour dump. It was one of those old types where you drove up and parked right at the

door of your room. Two levels with a staircase, no elevators here, and while it could have been nice, now it just looked like a hangout for drug dealers and pimps. I scanned the doors to see if any of them were open waiting for a John to stroll by.

I steeled myself and headed for room 119, the room Dad said he'd rented for the duration. Duration of what, I still had no idea. Midlife crisis? Licking his wounds? Finding himself? Really, no clue here. I just couldn't abandon him to do it alone. Mom was the master of that.

I knocked a little harder than I intended, not realizing the door was some hollow core piece of crap. It wasn't long before Dad threw it open, and I wanted to ask if he'd even bothered to check and make sure I wasn't some drug dealing thug.

"Bunny!" I winced at the familiar nickname, the one I still hadn't broken him from using as he engulfed me in one of his bear hugs. Even as quick as he'd been to embrace me, I'd still witnessed his surprise at seeing me. I'd told him I was coming, but I guess he'd thought Mom would convince me otherwise. He knew how she was, as well as I did.

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“When did you get here? How did you get here?” His forehead wrinkled in bewilderment – a familiar expression – and I smiled. “You should have called, I would have come to get you from.... wherever.”

“She ‘confiscated’ my phone,” I answered, using air quotes with a roll of my eyes. “I took a Greyhound, apparently the stop is a couple miles north of here, so I walked the rest of the way,” I explained as I checked out the accommodations, relieved to see it was at least clean, if extremely old. The color scheme fell somewhere between rust orange, avocado green and a shade of yellow I was unfamiliar with. There were two beds and, surprisingly, a tiny kitchenette. It was roomier than most standard hotel rooms nowadays and not too terrible if you ignored the shag carpeting.

“Well, kid, welcome home,” Dad said enthusiastically as he watched me take everything in. I knew him well enough to see the uncertainty he was trying to disguise and gave him a small smile.

“Which bed is mine?” I finally asked and he let out a relieved laugh.

“Whichever you prefer, Bunny.”

“You’ve got to stop calling me that, Dad.” I shook my head, glancing away to hide my smile at his use of my nickname. As much as I despised it, I also couldn’t imagine him not using it.

“I will,” he promised for the umpteenth time.

“Yeah, when I’m eighty?” I said in my standard reply.

“Eighty, eighteen, somewhere in there,” he answered, our routine familiar by now.

“You have a month. I don’t think you can do it,” I dared him, mentioning my upcoming eighteenth birthday.

“So little faith in your old man,” he answered, acting wounded as I threw my bag on the first bed and then proceeded to bounce on it.

“Ompf,” I grunted as the bed gave a loud squeak and I felt a spring poke me in the back. “Comfy.”

He looked abashed as he went to the other bed and sat down. “It’s temporary. They don’t have a lot of available housing and the local community college just started their semester and all of the apartments got snapped up,” he rambled, eyeing me sheepishly.

I nodded, not wanting him to feel any worse, but I did wonder how long I could share a hotel room with my Dad. I loved him, but there was no escaping the ick factor.

“I’ll figure something out,” he promised, and I nodded as he ducked his head. “I’m glad you’re here, kid.”

“Me too, Dad. Me too.”

Chapter Two

Two days later, Dad deposited me in front of my new high school and drove off with a honk. I got a few sideway glances and some out right stares, but ignored them as I climbed the steps of what I’d mistakenly assumed was an old courthouse before spotting the sign proclaiming it to be Banks High School. The brick building was beautiful, if intimidating, and like everything else I’d seen so far, old. As I stepped

inside, I was relieved to see the requisite linoleum floors and double stacked lockers lining the halls as I followed a sign to the office.

Half an hour later, I had enrolled and been directed to my first class of the day. It didn't take me long to find since the halls were numbered and apparently all of my classes were in hall 400 since I was a senior.

I squinted at the doors trying to find Room 412. A couple of the florescent lights were out, leaving the hallway dim. I wasn't paying attention so when he spoke I jumped, letting out an embarrassingly girly shriek.

"What are you doing here?" The tone was accusing, instantly pissing me off.

"You scared the shit out of me," I snapped back, aggravated. It took my heart a second to slow from the sudden rush as my eyes found the person who'd spoken.

I studied the guy in front of me and mentally corrected myself. The man in front of me wasn't smiling as he crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes the only thing standing out in the dimly lit hallway. They were a light yellow, almost luminescent, and I took an instinctive step back when they met mine, the primitive part of me recognizing danger.

"Class," I stammered, my heart suddenly racing again. "I'm trying to find my class." I waved the schedule in my hand as evidence, but it didn't erase the grim expression on his face. "412 is my homeroom."

"You don't go to this school," he stated and I shook my head before I realized what I was doing.

"I do," I disagreed before adding, "Go to this school." He didn't look convinced and I felt annoyance start to creep back in. This guy had me flustered and I didn't like it.

“I’m a new student. Hence the looking for my classroom.” Again, I held up my handwritten class schedule since the hundred-year-old printer in the office refused to print and the school secretary had decided it was faster to write it than get someone to fix it. “Jess Carter.”

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Some of the tension seemed to leave him when I said my name and I frowned. The entire situation was odd and as the guy stepped closer, I felt myself step back once again.

He was huge.

It wasn't enough he had to be brushing 6'7 or 6'8, but he wasn't one of those tall, lanky guys. Noooo, he was broad shouldered and there was a definite possibility his bicep was bigger than my head. My mind immediately jumped to steroid use and the likelihood of him going after me in a roid rage when he lifted his arm, but he only flicked his wrist toward the door on the right.

"412," he muttered before turning and disappearing down the hall. I let out a shaky sigh, not moving until he was out of sight. I wasn't sure if it was his enormous size or his instant dislike that had me on edge, but I could only hope we didn't run into each other again anytime soon.

The rest of the morning flowed smoothly as I accepted textbooks from teachers and ran the gauntlet of curious stares. There were a few friendly overtures but for the most part people left me alone. I couldn't decide if this was a normal reaction to new students or I was special somehow. I'd gone to the same private school my entire life and the few new students we'd had were the main source of gossip for weeks.

If anybody here was gossiping about me, they were doing a great job of hiding it. When the bell rang for lunch, I followed the crowd of students to the cafeteria, glad this was one place I didn't have to hunt for. When I entered, I saw there were four serving stations set up, each in a corner of the room with tables in the center. I

defaulted to the salad bar since that was all I ever ate at my old school. The quest to be skinnier than the girl next to you had been ingrained inside of me. I was surprised to find a wide variety on the salad bar and without anyone there to judge me, I took more than normal even going so far as to get regular salad dressing instead of light.

After I'd filled my plate I glanced around, wondering where to sit. Past experience told me most people divided up into specific groups, and at the moment I belonged nowhere.

"Jess, right?" A friendly voice asked and I spun around to see an adorable guy smiling at me. The first thing I noticed were his bright blue eyes and open expression.

"Yes," I managed, remembering he had asked my name. "Are you in one of my classes?" I didn't think I'd seen him yet and it wasn't like the classes were huge.

He shook his head, an easy smile on his lips. "No, I'm a junior. We wouldn't have any classes together. Would you like to sit with us?" He gestured to two tables shoved together where an eclectic group of students sat. There was freshman mixed with seniors, one girl in a cheerleading outfit and another with a ring through her nose. Two guys had a chess board set up between them and I noticed the guy talking to me had a football jersey on.

Now, I came from a private school, where common interests generally divided groups, and as I scanned the rest of the cafeteria, I could see the clearly defined clusters of students here as well. This guy's group had the unusual distinction of spanning the spectrum of all of them, but I also noticed his table resembled an island in the large cafeteria.

"No, Caleb," another voice piped up next to me as a girl from one of my morning classes hooked her arm through mine. "You are not stealing the new girl."

His eyes flickered to her quickly before settling back on me.

“It’s not stealing if she already belongs,” he replied cryptically and my forehead wrinkled in confusion. He backed away, giving a slight wave as he said, “Later.”

The arm looped through mine gave a tug, steering me to another table of girls I did recognize from my classes. It wasn’t a large senior class so most of us wound up shuffling from one class to another together.

“I’m Leah,” she introduced herself and I responded automatically, “Jess.”

“Short for Jessica?”

“Unfortunately,” I replied to her confusion, but didn’t bother to explain the origins of my name. I was caught by the fact that she hadn’t known my name and we had at least one class together, but the guy – Caleb I reminded myself – had known my name and he was a junior. “What’s the deal with them?” I asked my curiosity spiked. She didn’t even need to turn her head to know who I was talking about.

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“The Pack,” she answered instantly, rolling her eyes. “They all live together.” I felt my eyebrows lift at that information and she shook her head and explained, “Not like together in the same house, but they all live on the same road.”

My confusion at why that was weird must have shown because she continued, “They have their own little community. They keep to themselves and as you can see, they eat lunch together. They’re nice to everybody, but they’re really only friends with each other.”

“Then why did he invite me to sit with them?” I asked, baffled by her explanation.

Leah lifted her shoulder uncertainly as she glanced over at them. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen Caleb invite an outsider to sit with them.”

“Outsider?” I echoed, my eyes drawn inexorably back to the table. They were an odd collection, almost a group of outsiders themselves, which made it so strange that he’d invited me to sit with them. “Maybe he was just being nice to the new girl,” I offered, trying to make sense out of it.

“Maybe,” Leah repeated doubtfully, clearly not buying what I was selling. I shrugged it off and took a bite of my salad. It was nice of him to try to include me, but I was here to finish out my senior year and make sure Dad didn’t do anything crazy – besides move to the middle of Idaho. Once I graduated, I was headed to Brown University and far away from any and all drama.

I glanced around the cafeteria as the other girls talked about people I didn’t know and noticed a couple of tables filled with teachers. Leah caught my gaze and told me,

“Since the entire school has lunch at the same time, most of the teachers eat in here with us.” She mock frowned and added, “To make sure we don’t start a food fight or something. A few of them eat in the teachers’ lounge, but most stay in here.”

I nodded and continued scanning the room, not sure what I was searching for until I found him. He was impossible to miss as he came through the doors and made a beeline for the hot lunch station in the far corner from me. I didn’t even have to stretch to keep him in my line of sight – he was just that big. I expected him to join one of the teachers’ tables, but he bypassed them and went straight to the two tables pushed together in the middle of the room.

“There is no way he’s a student,” I muttered aloud and Leah heard. She followed my gaze and giggled before letting out a sigh.

“If only,” she purred, eyeing him lustily, and I jerked my head toward her in surprise. She sounded ready to take him under the bleachers and show him a good time. She caught my disbelieving stare and laughed. “All the girls have a thing for Coach Dom.”

I blinked and blurted out the first thing that came to mind, “Dom like in 50 Shades of Gray dom?”

Leah busted out laughing, shaking her head. “Oh, I wish.” She glanced back at him and sighed, “I’d let him tie me up anytime.”

“He’s a jerk,” I protested and she gave me a surprised look. “He caught me looking for my class this morning and gave me the third degree. I thought he was going to throw me out.”

Leah’s nose wrinkled as she listened and gave me a shrug. “He’s usually easygoing. Plenty of girls have signed up for Gym even after they’ve fulfilled their requirement

just for the chance of getting into his class.”

My eyes drifted back to him, surprised by her admission, and found him staring straight at me. My gaze dropped immediately and I cursed myself for hiding. When I peeked back up through my eyelashes, he was talking to Caleb, who discreetly gestured to me. If I hadn’t been studying him so intensely, I would have missed it entirely. It appeared they were talking about me and I had no idea why.

“His name is Dominic Navarre and he lives out in the same community. I wasn’t kidding when I said they stick together. He doesn’t eat with the other teachers or coaches, only them,” Leah continued, tearing her eyes from him to look at me. “He doesn’t even date.”

I must have looked disbelieving because she nodded emphatically. “Really, you see Miss Dyson over there?” Leah pointed with her fork to a gorgeous blonde woman at one of the teacher tables and I nodded. “She went after him for a solid year and he never took the bait.”

“How do you know?” I scoffed, thinking he might just be a private guy. No way did a guy like that not date. He was just too masculine.

“It was obvious,” Leah assured me and some of the other girls nodded, eavesdropping on our conversation. One piped up, “I heard her ask him out, some theater thing in Boise, an overnight trip and he straight up told her no. No sugarcoating it at all.”

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“Maybe girls aren’t his thing?” I offered, not even believing myself, as I said it. A few shook their heads, and I propped my head on my hand, letting long strands of hair fall over my face in an effort to hide from his intense stare.

Because he was staring, almost like he was trying to figure me out, as if a detailed analysis of my face would somehow give him the answers he sought. Occasionally he’d glance away and I could take a breath before I felt his stare once again.

I debated getting up and leaving, but was afraid he’d follow me and the last thing I wanted was to deal with him face to face again. After a long twenty minutes, the bell finally rang and I followed Leah and her friends out of the cafeteria and back to our hall, the weight of his gaze following me all the way out the door.

I spent the rest of the day turning over what happened at lunch and had almost convinced myself I’d imagined him staring. It didn’t make any sense for him to stare at me because I was obviously not one of them and Leah had made it clear they stuck to their own.

During my last class, I received a few curious glances from another girl, one I didn’t recognize from my earlier classes. She looked like she wanted to talk to me when class ended, but I practically ran from the room. I was beyond tired and didn’t want to deal with anyone else that day.

I jogged down the steps of the school, grateful to see Dad’s Land Rover waiting. It was the only thing he’d taken when my parent’s divorced and that was only because Mom hadn’t wanted it. She’d had no compunction about taking the house and everything else, even though she was the one in the wrong. Anytime I brought it up to

Dad, he made excuses for her and I was waiting for the day when he finally wised up and placed the blame squarely where it belonged.

I jerked the door open to see Dad smiling at me, crinkles at the corner of his brown eyes, which happened to be the exact same shade as mine. I was fond of calling them shit brown, but Dad would always correct me saying, “Chocolate brown sounds better, even if it is the exact same shade as shit.”

“Bunny! Good first day?” I slammed my door shut and rested my head back, thinking how I wanted to answer him. My roving gaze paused when I saw a familiar group of people collected by some parked cars. One of them was the girl who’d tried to talk to me in my last class, but the others were the ones I’d seen at Caleb’s table. Scanning them, I didn’t see Caleb or Coach Dom, but there was no doubt in my mind, it was the rest of the group. They appeared to have ridden together in several cars and I couldn’t help frowning at the oddness of it all.

“Bunny?” Dad prompted and I pasted a smile on my face.

“Different. It’s not Ellison Academy, that’s for sure,” I joked, referring to my old school.

“Better, worse?” He dug, putting the car in gear. My eyes drifted back towards the group involuntarily and I saw the girl lift her hand in a wave. I averted my gaze as if I hadn’t seen her, but I knew she knew better.

“I don’t know,” I finally answered him. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I have some good news,” he boomed cheerfully and I rolled my head toward him. “We don’t have to share a room anymore.”

I grinned, lifting my head. “Really?”

“Yep,” Dad continued proudly. “Annnnnd,” he dragged out and I waved my hand for him to say it already. “I have a job.”

“What? That’s great!”

“And so do you,” he added in a muffled rush and the smile on my face froze.

“What was that?”

He glanced over at me with a semi-apologetic look.

“We both have jobs.”

“Okaaaaay,” I drawled, taking a deep breath. I knew Mom had done a number on Dad and his finances. It was my decision to live with him and if that meant I needed to work, then so be it. “Doing what exactly?”

“Housekeeping,” he said gingerly, eyeing me like I was a bomb about to detonate.

“Housekeeping?” I repeated in disbelief. “Dad,” I started before he stopped me.

“I know, I know. It’s not what you signed up for when you came out here, but the deal was too good to pass up,” he continued excitedly.

“Deal?” I was starting to get a bad feeling about whatever it was Dad had done.

“Yeah, I bought the motel,” he told me proudly, a huge grin on his face. Somehow, I kept a smile on my face as I absorbed what he’d just said. Dad had bought a crummy old motel in a tiny Idaho town....and he was incredibly excited about it. It was the happiest I’d seen him since Mom had admitted to cheating on him with his boss, and even I wasn’t heartless enough to crush his happiness even though all I wanted to do

was shout, “What the fuck?” at him.

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“That’s great,” I lied, injecting as much false cheer as I could into my voice. “I had no idea it was for sale.”

“Me either! I went to the manager to see about getting you your own room and we got to talking.” I bet you did, I thought, wondering how long it’d taken for the guy to see Dad was a sucker. “He mentioned how he wanted to travel with his wife and go visit the grandkids, but couldn’t because he was tied to the motel.” Annnnnnd there it was. “That’s when I knew I needed to buy the motel from him. He didn’t want to at first,” I’m sure, I thought doubtfully, “But I finally convinced him. It’s a fresh start here. Fate brought me here.”

You mean a dart and one too many drinks brought you here, I thought but refrained from saying it. Dad had been distraught after Mom kicked him out. It hadn’t even mattered that it was his house and she was the one having the affair. She’d kicked him to the curb and moved his boss in immediately.

One night, I’d gone to visit Dad, only to find him drinking and throwing darts at a map of the United States. When I’d asked him what he was doing he’d told me he was trying to find a place to start over.

Hence, my arrival to the tiny town of Banks.

“Dad, I’m happy you’re happy, but what do you know about running a motel?” I asked carefully, trying to keep my emotions from seeping through.

“It’s a business, Bunny. And I can make this one profitable,” he answered confidently, a hint of the old Dad peeking out and the rest of my questions died. I’d

almost forgotten this version of Dad, the one in his element when presented with a challenge.

“Housekeeping though?” I said in chagrin, redirecting the conversation and he chuckled.

“We’re going to have to operate lean, Bunny girl. That means housekeeping too.”

“I’ve never cleaned anything in my life,” I reminded him, giving him a sideways glance only to catch him doing the same.

“Me either,” he admitted with a rueful grin. “It’ll be an adventure.” He turned onto the gravel drive and I tried to see the place with new eyes – the kind that were invested – but it hadn’t magically improved. The paint was still peeling and I was pretty sure there was a busted window in room 214.

Dad caught sight of my expression and said, “It’s rough, I’ll admit that, but it’s got potential.” I nodded, not seeing this ‘potential’ but not wanting to shit all over his dream either, that specialty reserved for my mother.

“I believe in you, Dad,” I replied with forced cheer, and he answered me with a beaming smile. Another thought occurred to me and my eyes narrowed. “How did you pay for this place?” I asked suspiciously; dread forming as he gave me an apologetic look.

“Well, Bunny,” he started and I interrupted, “Dad, no,” already suspecting what he was about to say.

“I only used a little of your college fund,” he said in a rush, like that made it easier somehow.

He didn't seem to know what else to say, and I could feel my heart start to beat harder. Brown University had been my dream for as long as I could remember. I wasn't even sure when I'd decided on that school, but it had been the foremost goal most of my life. An escape from Mom and her demanding perfectionism, the cold house, and my little brother's existence. The idea that it might be gone, spent on a rundown motel on the edge of a tiny town in the middle of nowhere, was crushing.

"Dad," I breathed, trying to control the emotions rushing through me. I didn't want to ruin this for him, but my mind was racing and it was hard to hold back the tears.

"Just a little of it," he promised, holding his fingers barely an inch apart. I let out the breath I'd been holding, hoping that meant I could still go. "Barely a year's tuition."

I nodded. I could live with that. If it meant he was happy and my dream was still possible, then this new life of ours might be bearable.

"Granted, I might need to borrow a little more for repairs," he admitted his expression contrite as he peeked at me. The look on his face had my emotions taking a nosedive as my dreams faded once again. I sucked in a sharp breath and held it for a full minute to keep myself from lashing out. As I finally released it I felt calmer, or maybe just oxygen deprived, but I was able to address him more calmly than I felt.

"Can you do it, Dad?" I glanced at the motel, seeing all of its flaws and wondering if what I was asking was even possible. "Can you make it profitable?"

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“I can, Bunny. I know it sounds crazy, but I can do this.” He leaned over the console and gripped my hand. “With your help.”

I let out a slow breath and put my faith in the man I’d always thought hung the moon. “Alright then, let’s do it.”

His smile was brilliant and almost made up for the fact that there was a distinct possibility I’d no longer be going to Brown University, but instead Bank’s Community College. Maybe they’d let me transfer, I considered as I hopped out of the SUV. I let out a semi hysterical giggle at the ludicrous thought and shook my head. There was still money for Brown, we just needed to get this place going first. I pushed my doubts aside and asked, “So, when do we get started?”

Dad shook an enormous key ring at me.

“Right now.”

Chapter Three

The next morning, Dad dropped me off once again since none of the school buses passed the motel. Not that I wanted to ride a school bus. I’d never ridden a bus in my life past the one that had brought me to this miniscule town, and it hadn’t impressed me. Movies and television had also convinced me I wasn’t missing anything.

Dad managed not to honk goodbye this time, to my relief, and I noticed fewer stares, but definitely more whispers. It was almost a relief. Gossiping about the new girl was normal in my world, and I wanted normal again.

I couldn't go back to Mom, and honestly didn't want to, but it would be nice to have a couple of friends again. Dad had promised to get me a new cell phone, but it wasn't like any of my old friends were reaching out to me. They had their own lives and from what I saw on social media, they weren't missing me.

"Hi."

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice so soft I wasn't entirely sure I'd heard it. At least until she stepped in front of me. "I'm Anna."

"Jess," I answered automatically

"I know. I wanted to talk to you yesterday but you were in a rush to meet the guy picking you up," she continued, and I realized her soft voice concealed a truly forceful personality. "That was your boyfriend?"

"My dad," I answered, taken off-guard by the direct question. Her soft voice and downcast eyes had given the impression she was shy, but she immediately disproved that.

"Oh, nice. Did you just move here?" She continued, trailing me as I started up the steps. I debated answering, wondering what her agenda was. She was part of the Pack and I couldn't figure out what their interest in me was, or if I even wanted to know. My goal was to be gone in a year, and even if having friends would be nice, I didn't want anything holding me here.

"Yeah, a few days ago," I answered shortly.

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"A younger brother," I answered warily, under the distinct impression I was being

pumped for information by the Pack's least intimidating member.

"How old is he?"

"What difference does it make? Are you looking for a boyfriend?" I retorted, spinning around to face her. "And the fifth degree? It's one thing if you want to be friends, and another if you're just looking for the inside scoop on the new girl."

"I wasn't," she trailed off under my glare, seeming to shrink in on herself.

"Weren't you?" I snapped back, ignoring the sensation that I'd just kicked a puppy, and stomped inside the school. By the time I reached my locker I'd cooled down a bit and felt embarrassed by my reaction. It occurred to me that maybe she was shy and didn't know how to make normal conversation, and instead asked a bunch of questions. But I couldn't shake the feeling that whatever I said to her would be reported back to the group. I just couldn't figure out why.

The rest of my morning went normally until 3rd period when the crackle of the loudspeaker interrupted our class.

"Please send Jess Carter to the office."

I glanced up at the mention of my name and the teacher nodded to me. I stood self-consciously as she handed the hall pass over, feeling multiple eyes on me. I left my stuff, hoping whatever this was wouldn't take long.

When I got to the office there were three other students waiting. The receptionist sorted them out quickly and I stepped up to the counter.

"How can I help you?" She asked, not glancing up.

“Jess Carter, I was called to the office?”

“Oh, yes. Your father called and left a message for you.” She glanced up then with a frown. “We’re not an answering service you know. Personal business should be done on your personal phone.” She sniffed, giving me a onceover. “It’s not like you don’t all have cell phones.”

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“I don’t actually,” I responded dryly, grabbing the note in her hand. “But thanks for the lecture.”

I left before she could comment and hoped like hell whatever message Dad had left didn’t require a response.

Can’t pick you up after school.

The message was exceptionally short for my dad, so I could only guess that the receptionist had summarized. I groaned, crumpling the note and tossing it in a trashcan. I didn’t relish the idea of walking the two miles to the motel, but I didn’t have a lot of other options, not unless I wanted to beg someone for a ride, and considering my stellar record at making friends that wasn’t likely to happen.

The bell rang before I made it back to class and instead of fighting the stream of students, I positioned myself against a locker to wait. Since everyone was headed to lunch, it wasn’t long before the halls were empty and I started back toward the classroom. I needed to grab my stuff since my lunch money was in my bag. However, before I even made it to the hall, I was brought short by a voice behind me.

“You’re going the wrong way,” he said, his words a low rumble that somehow matched his size. I didn’t even have to turn to know who’d spoken. “The cafeteria is that way.” He raised one muscular arm and I noticed the enormity of his hand. He could easily wrap it around my neck, snapping it with no effort whatsoever. I suppressed a shudder, disturbed by the image.

“I left my bag in the room. I had to go to the office,” I babbled, waving the hall pass I

still held as some sort of proof. I didn't know why I felt the need to explain myself to him. He might be a teacher, but that wasn't enough reason for me to seek his approval.

"You'll have to wait until after lunch," he answered, dismissing me as he turned away. I huffed, irritated by his casual dismissal. He must have heard me because he turned back and lifted his eyebrow. I froze under the force of his gaze and it was only the sight of the tiny smirk on his lips that snapped me back into my normal snarky self. I despised the fact that I was a source of amusement to him, even as I forcibly ignored the thrill I felt at witnessing the tiny grin.

"I need my bag," I managed to say; straightening my spine as if it was somehow going to put me on the same level as him. He didn't respond except to cross his arms over his chest, a sight I couldn't help but follow as his shirt pulled taut over muscles I didn't even know existed. "My lunch money is in it," I finally admitted, feeling like a five year old.

"The doors are locked when the teacher leaves the room. School policy," he explained, some of his gruffness easing. I frowned, wondering if my day could get any worse. I had to walk home, and now I had to do it on an empty stomach. "Come on, I'll buy your lunch today."

My head jerked up at his words and for a brief second I saw his hesitation, as if he'd surprised himself with the offer. I was about to politely refuse, because no part of me wanted to be indebted to him for anything, when my stomach growled.

Loudly.

To my utter mortification.

He fought a smile as I blushed a new shade of red and crossed my arms over my

stomach as if I could somehow muffle the sound.

“Let’s go,” he snapped, his smile gone like it had never happened as he turned back into the jerk I was fast becoming familiar with. “I’d rather not miss lunch waiting on you.”

He was already half way down the hall when I moved. He held the door open for me as if he knew I would follow, and I edged past him, making sure I didn’t brush against him. At the cashier, he paid for two lunches and when he handed me my ticket he didn’t let go when I grabbed it.

“Why don’t you sit at our table today?”

I tugged a little more forcefully on the ticket, not wanting to answer, but he didn’t intend to release it until I gave him an answer.

“Is that a question or an order?” I snapped, wondering where the hell my bravery was coming from because the guy in front of me was terrifying.

He tilted his head as if he hadn’t expected that particular response and let go of the ticket. I stumbled slightly, since there was no longer any resistance and he shook his head.

“An invitation,” he murmured, lowering his hand to his side as he stepped aside to let me go ahead. I eased past him, suddenly uncomfortable with him behind me. A quick glance around the room revealed numerous curious stares, and as my gaze skated over the teachers’ tables, I was reminded he wasn’t a student. One teacher in particular was watching us intently and I recognized her as the one who gossip said had been rejected.

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“I don’t think I should,” I finally replied, my words almost inaudible. But of course he heard.

“They don’t matter. Not to us,” he said, following behind me. I shifted slightly so my back wasn’t turned to him completely, and a smile flashed across his face so quickly I wasn’t sure I’d actually seen it.

“You’re a teacher,” I responded, feeling like I was warning him, but not sure what I was warning him about.

“And you’re a student,” he answered, his amusement clear. “Is that your argument for not sitting with us?”

“No,” I answered quietly, before glancing up at him. “But it should be yours.” He paused, and I grabbed the first thing offered to me at the food station – a pizza.

“Don’t mistake this invitation as more than it is,” he warned, coming up behind me, so close my heart pounded. “Caleb asked you yesterday.”

“At your request,” I declared, remembering how Caleb had inexplicably known my name. Dominic’s eyes narrowed and I knew I was right. “I admit I don’t get why you want me to sit with your group when it’s clear you don’t invite strangers.”

“You’re more clever than I gave you credit for.” He stepped around me, as I stood frozen. “I have no doubt you’ll figure it out fast enough,” he paused and added, “If you sit with us.”

He grabbed food from the hot lunch station as I tried to decide if I was going to follow him to the table in the middle of the room, or go sit with Leah, who was staring at me in awe. I released the breath I'd been holding and trailed after the broad shoulders of Coach Dom.

He had the grace not to smirk as I set my tray on the table. In fact, he ignored me completely as he spoke to Caleb, who in turn, gave me a quick nod.

"I don't want him as a boyfriend," I jumped at the soft statement, already instinctively knowing who it was.

"Anna," I sighed, feeling a tad guilty for my earlier behavior.

"I was just curious about you. Caleb said he invited you to our table. We don't get a lot of new people."

"I gathered that," I muttered as others at our table tried to hide their curious gazes. People not at the table didn't even bother to hide their amazement as they stared openly.

"I don't know what to say," Anna admitted softly, since apparently that was the only volume she had. The loud buzz of hundreds of voices made it difficult for me to hear her so I leaned closer. "I'm not used to talking to outsiders."

I winced at her words, but then considered the idea that maybe she could provide some answers. She was willing to talk to me at least, and Dominic had practically dared me to figure it out.

"Why is that?"

"Why is what?" Anna repeated as I bit off a piece of pizza. A quick glance at her

plate had me doing a double take. She had a double portion of the hot lunch.

“Why aren’t you used to talking to outsiders?”

She shrugged and answered, “We just don’t really. It’s not something we do. Sometimes people leave and will bring new people back with them, but by then they know.”

“Know what?” I asked, wondering if finding out the answer would really be that easy.

“Who we are,” she answered immediately and I held in a sigh.

“Are you really going to eat all of that?” I asked as she finished off her first plate of food and started on the second.

“You know it’s rude to ask people about their eating habits,” she replied archly and my mouth dropped open. She flashed a mischievous grin and added, “That was for the boyfriend comment.”

“Fair,” I replied with a chuckle.

“You never answered my question,” she reminded me, nodding encouragingly. “What brought you here?”

“My dad. My parents got divorced and I chose to live with my dad.”

“Here?” She was rightfully disbelieving and I took another bite of pizza to give myself a minute to answer. I didn’t really want to get into my Mom’s misdeeds, but I had to admit it was odd for me to choose this place over the life I’d had.

“It seemed like an adventure,” I finally answered with a shrug and then deflected.

“And my brother’s four.”

“A little young for me then,” she joked seeming to get that I didn’t want to discuss my parent’s divorce.

“So what’s an outsider doing at your table?” I asked bluntly, growing a little tired of the mystery. She gave me an assessing glance and opened her mouth to respond when the bell rang, and I grimaced. I was never going to find out at this rate.

Anna smiled serenely and leaned down, her voice even softer as she said, “I don’t see any outsiders at our table.” She took her empty tray and slipped away before I had a chance to comment. Caleb flashed me a grin as he passed and whispered, “Glad you joined us today.”

I nodded, wishing I could say the same.

The end of the day couldn't come fast enough as my thoughts churned. I couldn't decide if the Pack was playing an elaborate prank on me or if there really was something different about them, and by default, me. They seemed to think I belonged, but to what?

"Jess, can you stay a few minutes after class?" The teacher interrupted my internal turmoil and I nodded automatically. She gave me a forced smile and I frowned, my thoughts now distracted as I wondered what she wanted to talk about. Anna gave me a curious glance from across the row, but all I could do was shrug.

Once the bell rang, the teacher waited until everyone had left before approaching me.

"How are you settling in, Jess?"

I blinked, her question not what I had been expecting. It seemed like a strange thing to keep me after school for.

"Good," I answered as she stood next to my desk, her position keeping me trapped. She gazed at me expectantly, but I kept my mouth shut. Years of dealing with my mother had made me an expert in the art of the silent treatment.

"Are you making friends? It's so important to have the right friends." The stress she put on right gave me a clue as to why she'd suddenly decided to 'check in' on me.

"I've met several people. Everyone is so friendly," I replied, avoiding a direct

answer.

“Reputations are equally important,” she continued and I narrowed my eyes. “It’s wonderful when a teacher takes an interest in a student.” Hmmm, wonder what she could be referring too? “But it can have unintentional repercussions.”

“I don’t understand,” I replied blandly, keeping my eyes trained on her. “What repercussions could there be with you taking an interest in how I’m doing?” A light flush appeared on her cheeks as I intentionally misunderstood her question.

“I was referring to other teachers,” she amended, shifting slightly.

“Who?” I gave her a puzzled look, wanting to know how far she’d take this. It was clear my arrival in the cafeteria with Dominic hadn’t gone unnoticed, but this seemed extreme.

“Coach Navarre,” she clarified, as I acted surprised.

“Coach Navarre,” I repeated slowly and then smiled brightly. “Oh, is that the guy who escorted me to the lunchroom?”

“Yes, you sat with him at lunch.”

My forehead wrinkled with a confused frown.

“I had lunch with Anna,” I answered politely.

“Yes, but Coach Navarre was there,” she explained tightly.

“Is that an issue?” I asked carefully and then widened my eyes. “Are you saying Coach Navarre likes me?”

“No!” She answered sharply. “Of course not, but you can see how easily people could believe something like that.”

“He’s old,” I informed her and leaned forward as if I was confiding in her, “And kind of a jerk.” I stood up then, the motion catching her off balance as she scrambled to stay upright. “But I’m so grateful for teachers like you.” She smiled in pleasure until I added, “Otherwise, people might gossip about me and who I eat lunch with and imply things that aren’t true.”

The classroom door opened then and we both turned to see Caleb standing in the door.

“Hey, I thought we were walking together,” he said, a bright smile on his face. Gratefully, I took the out he gave me, having a feeling Anna had sent him.

“Yep, Ms. Nichols was just seeing how I was settling in and giving me some advice.” She stepped aside as I shuffled past her, my bag bumping into her. “Apparently eating lunch with teachers is bad for my reputation.” Caleb’s eyes widened as she sputtered next to me, but I was through caring.

I hitched my backpack higher and made a beeline for the door. No doubt, I’d just made an enemy but it seemed like she’d already had her mind made up. Sitting with the so-called Pack at lunch was apparently enough to convince people I was one of them, but Dominic’s attention toward me was an entirely different issue, one that came with insinuations.

When I exited the classroom, Caleb jerked me to the right, nodding toward the exit doors leading to the fields in the back.

“Are you walking home today?” He asked, his question friendly, and overall the total opposite of Dominic.

“Yes,” I answered, wondering how someone so easygoing could be friends with –

“Dominic,” I sighed aloud as he appeared next to me. “Not Anna then,” I murmured, answering my own question of who had sent Caleb in to rescue me.

“What does Anna have to do with anything?” Dominic questioned with a lift of his eyebrow.

“Nothing apparently,” I replied. “What are you doing here?”

“It appears you were right,” he stated, a grim expression on his face.

“How much does it pain you to admit that?”

“A little bit,” he admitted as Caleb watched in amusement. “Apparently, I showed you preferential treatment.”

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“Wow, if that’s preferential I hate to see what the standard treatment is.”

He gave me a hard stare, which so far was the only type of stare he’d given me, before choosing to ignore my comment.

“I figured Regina would say something and when Anna said she held you after class...” Dominic trailed off as Caleb finished.

“We thought you might need rescuing.”

“Surprisingly, thoughtful of you,” I managed, glancing up at Dominic. He caught my glance and frowned.

“Not my idea.” He jerked a thumb at Caleb. “Chivalry over here wanted to do it. I thought you could handle her.”

“I did handle her!” I exclaimed, irritated at the idea he might believe I needed rescuing.

“She did,” Caleb admitted with an easy smile. “You might even have cracked a smile at witnessing that putdown, Dom.”

Dominic snorted as if that would never happen, and I took a second to notice we were walking away from the school and directly into the surrounding forest.

“Where are we going?” I asked, stopping. While they didn’t seem like bad guys, walking blindly into the woods with them was also not on my list of smart ideas.

“Home,” they answered in unison and I shook my head.

“I don’t live with you,” I replied tartly.

“Thank God,” Dominic muttered under his breath, not even pretending to be apologetic when I glared at him.

“Same here,” I retorted before looking over at Caleb, the easier of the two. “I don’t want to get lost. I’ll just take the road.”

I turned back toward the school when a hand wrapped around my bicep. Heat radiated from his palm, seeping into my bloodstream and sending warmth curling through me.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Dominic informed me roughly, his hand dropping from me as if I’d burned him. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, the imprint of his hand still branded on my skin. “It’s not safe.”

“To walk home? Or to walk home with two men I barely know? One of whom could break me in half without a second’s hesitation.”

“There would be at least a second’s hesitation,” he replied comfortingly, his lips tilting upwards slightly, but not enough to be considered an actual smile. “There are wild animals. Dangerous men who would think nothing of kidnapping a single woman off the road,” he continued, his eyes hooded as he listed the dangers. “At least with us, you know what you’re getting.”

“Do I?”

“We’ll protect you,” Caleb promised his eyes sincere. “We’ll make sure you get home safely. Dom is right. Not everyone is friendly.”

“You don’t say,” I agreed, my eyes darting to the least friendly person I’d met since I’d arrived. He smirked as he caught my glance, not concerned in the least with my opinion.

“You don’t even know where I live,” I told them, waving at the woods in front of us. “How do I know this is even the right direction?”

“Where do you live?” Dominic asked patiently, his confidence making me hesitate. It was almost as if he already knew.

“The motel,” I finally muttered, noticing neither seemed surprised. “Apparently, my Dad just bought it.”

“Nice place,” Caleb commented and I blinked at him.

“Is that a joke?”

A choked sound next to me almost had me thinking I’d made Dominic laugh, but a quick glance showed his normal stone faced expression.

“No?” Caleb said hesitantly, confusion written on his face.

“You might be the first person since it was built to call it a nice place,” I explained. “I prefer dated and borderline criminal.”

“And you worry about us escorting you home,” Dominic mentioned lightly. I sent him a sideways glance only to see him gesture for me to go ahead.

“I take it the motel is on the way home?”

“Actually it’s a little past our turn but like the gentlemen we are, we’ll escort you to

your door.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said flatly, brushing past him. “Next you’ll be carrying my book bag.”

No sooner had I said it then I felt my backpack slide from my shoulder, the heavy weight disappearing. I turned to see the bag dangling from one of his fingers and smiled.

“I’d protest about feminism or something, but you look like you can handle it.”

He hooked it over his arm since there was no way it would fit over his shoulder, following Caleb and me as we started walking. I was marginally less uncomfortable having my back to him with Caleb walking next to me, but I could still feel his presence. It was impossible to forget, even as silent as he was.

“Did you happen to put every textbook you have in here?” He grumbled a few minutes later and I laughed, glancing at him over my shoulder. The weight didn’t seem to bother him as he kept his strides in check with ours.

“I didn’t get a chance to go to my locker today. My bag was locked up during lunch and I was shanghaied after school,” I informed him.

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“Shanghaied? I do believe that would be considered a rescue mission,” Caleb interjected, a tiny pout on his full lips.

“You are ridiculously adorable, you know that?” I laughed, not in the least swayed by his pretty features.

“I’ve been told that numerous times,” came the dry reply from behind.

“What, that your face was going to get stuck like that?”

Caleb busted out laughing and a glance at Dominic revealed the tiniest crinkle by his eyes. It might have been a glimmer of a smile, or more likely the sun in his eyes. I was going to go with a smile though.

“You know I’m not really into hiking,” I told them, gesturing to my tired tennis shoes. I wanted to say I wasn’t really into walking either but didn’t want to come off as a whiner. Cabs were my preferred method of transportation but those seemed few and far between out here.

“Why don’t you have a car?” Caleb asked, hands looped through the straps on his backpack. The position highlighted his chest and shoulders and I realized Dominic wasn’t the only one who was built. Caleb was too, just on a smaller scale, and easily overlooked in comparison.

“Why don’t you?” I retorted right back.

“I do,” he answered and I heard a throat clear. “Well, Dom does,” he corrected with a

sheepish glance over his shoulder and I hid my smile. “According to my dad, I’m not responsible enough for a car.” The note of bitterness I heard was surprising coming from Caleb and I glanced back at Dominic, who kept his face expressionless. “Not compared to my older brother at least.”

My eyes flickered between them and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“You’re not brothers, are you?”

This time it was Caleb looking at me like I was crazy and we both turned as a low rumble reached us.

“Is he laughing or choking?” I whispered in concern.

“Laughing. I think,” Caleb answered uncertainly. A moment later, we saw a flash of white teeth and I stepped back because it was the single most terrifying smile I’d ever seen. “Laughing, definitely,” Caleb confirmed with a nod.

“Remind me to never make him laugh again,” I replied faintly as Caleb caught my arm and tugged me back towards them.

“Really, he’s a teddy bear.”

“Sure,” I agreed, not believing him for a second.

“Did you really think we were brothers?” Dominic asked finally, his tone implying how stupid he thought I was.

“I wasn’t sure!” I exclaimed, throwing my hands up.

“Maybe it’s the fact that we look nothing alike?”

“You could be half-brothers,” I argued, unwilling to concede defeat to Dominic over my assumption.

“Yes, of course,” he said silkily and I frowned as Caleb chuckled at his next question, knowing he was making fun of me. “Same mother or father?”

I growled and stomped forward. I would admit they looked nothing alike. Dominic had silky black hair and the strangest yellow eyes I’d ever seen while Caleb was blue-eyed with sandy brown hair. Not to mention the difference in size. Caleb was a few inches taller than me, probably 5’10 or 11 and muscular, but nothing remarkable. Dominic was a giant. There was no way to miss him in a crowd with his towering height and broad shoulders. His massive size should look abnormal – a result of the illegal use of steroids perhaps – but he was perfectly proportioned. An oversized version of the perfect masculine form.

“Hey,” Caleb’s low voice caught up to me a second before he did. “He didn’t mean anything by it. We’re just so used to everyone knowing us that it was strange to have someone mistake us for brothers.” He glanced back at Dominic and grinned. “Bonus points for making him laugh. I don’t think that’s happened since,” he stopped and I raised an eyebrow curiously, as Caleb’s face went serious. “Well, let’s just say it’s been awhile.”

I got the feeling he wasn’t going to talk about why Dominic didn’t laugh and I wasn’t about to admit my own insane curiosity about the formidable giant, so I let it go.

“So, why do you live in a motel?” Dominic had caught up by this time and heard the question.

“Yes, why don’t we talk about you now?” He agreed, my bag now dangling from his hand, but he was so tall it didn’t come close to the ground.

“I thought we had,” I retorted, pausing as the path we’d taken through the woods opened up to a wide cleared area. “What is this?”

“The path home,” Dominic answered, his sheer mass pushing me forward as I stood there staring. There was a real possibility of being plowed down if I stood in his way. “The electric company is kind enough to keep it maintained for us.”

“Ha,” I muttered, as I noticed the enormous power lines arching above us for the first time.

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“Path of least resistance,” Caleb said with a shrug. “It follows the road for a few miles.” He pointed to the left and what I assumed was the road on the other side of the dense forest. “We could walk along the road but we prefer the forest.”

“It’s safer to walk this way?” I questioned, not sure if I bought that as their reasoning. They didn’t seem like people who were afraid of much.

“You could say that,” Dominic replied cryptically. “It’s safer for some.” The implication being someone other than them. It was safer for others if they took the path in the woods.

“Oh,” I responded, not knowing what to say.

“We usually take Dom’s Jeep, but when we don’t have football practice we walk,” Caleb explained as he moved over to give me space. Now that the trees didn’t confine us, all three of us could walk side by side, and both guys shortened their stride to match mine.

“How often do you have football practice?” I asked curiously and they exchanged glances above my head.

“Three days a week,” Dominic answered. “Alternating weight and endurance training to keep in shape.”

“Is there a prize if one of them can beat you?”

“No,” Dominic answered flatly.

“No one ever has,” Caleb confided and with a wicked grin added, “Not even my brother.”

Dominic’s lips twitched as he glanced over at Caleb. “In fairness, there’s no way your brother ever could. He’s not like us.”

“Hold on,” I cried. “Are you telling me you ostracize people inside your Pack too?” I inadvertently used the nickname given to their group, as I tried to grasp that they viewed people inside their own families as different.

Within seconds, Dominic had my arms gripped in his massive hands and my feet were hanging above the ground. I kicked them helplessly; my body suspended and held up only by his strength.

“What are you doing?” I cried out in shock.

“What do you know about the pack?” Dominic’s question rolled right over my own as he growled at me and I felt my eyes widen. He shook me slightly as Caleb reached for his arm, and my head bobbed. “You’ll tell me what you know,” he warned as I gaped at him.

“Dom, chill.” Caleb was tugging on Dominic’s arm with no success. “Put her down, Dom. She doesn’t know anything. You can tell,” he grunted, putting weight into his effort to get me back on the ground.

“Then why did she mention the pack?”

“Because that’s what they call you,” I spit out, kicking my foot harder and actually connecting with his knee. He didn’t so much as twitch but I felt some satisfaction. “Put me down you Neanderthal. I thought you said you were a gentleman.”

I'd gotten over some of my shock at being held like a doll and started to squirm. At least if he dropped me I could run, but his hands didn't budge.

"What do you mean that's what they call us?" Caleb had given up on trying to get Dom to put me down and instead stared at me in interest.

"Are you kidding me?" I groaned in disbelief. "Put me down!"

"Answer us and I will," Dominic stated as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world.

I kicked a little harder and he held me out further so I couldn't reach him. "Ugh, fine."

"The kids in school call you the Pack." They glanced at each other as I told them this and I arched an eyebrow in disbelief. "You can't tell me you didn't know that. Not after you just had a hissy fit over the fact that I referred to the Pack."

Dominic lowered me carefully, but kept his hands on my arms so I couldn't run. "Misunderstanding," he murmured as my mouth dropped open.

"A misunderstanding? A MISUNDERSTANDING? You freaking held me up in the air and demanded I tell you what I know. WHICH IS NOTHING! I don't care about your secrets. I'm only here to make sure my Dad doesn't run off with a floozy named Flo and join a motorcycle gang. Once I graduate, I'm off to Brown. I don't care about your PACK!" I was panting by the time I finished shouting and didn't want to admit it was only Dominic's hands on my shoulders that held me up as the adrenaline left my body in a rush.

"A floozy named Flo?"

I groaned and rubbed my forehead. “Not that it’s any of your business but my Dad had a hard time after he found out my mom had been cheating on him for the past five years. He made some poor dating choices.”

“And you’re here to make sure he doesn’t continue those?” Dominic asked in amusement.

“Well he is living at a motel where you can rent the rooms by the hour,” I answered tightly.

“I heard it was just sold,” Caleb added helpfully and I grimaced.

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“Yes, to my Dad. Who used my college fund to buy it.”

“Ouch,” Caleb muttered sympathetically. “Guess my perfect brother isn’t so bad.”

“Yeah, we’ve all got problems,” I grumbled, glaring at the ground. “Are you planning to let go anytime soon?” I asked tightly, unwilling to look up at the giant who held me in his grip.

“You gonna fall down if I do?” He replied, his hold easing and I scowled at the realization that I hadn’t fooled him.

“I’m fine,” I snapped, jerking back as he let go. I swayed and almost fell until Caleb extended a supporting arm.

“Fine,” Dominic mocked and I glared at him.

“Yes, and I would be even better if you hadn’t picked me up and shook me!”

He tilted his head in acknowledgement, increasing my urge to punch him, but my toes already throbbed from the few kicks I’d gotten in and I could only imagine what it’d feel like if I actually hit him.

“Okay, it was a little misunderstanding, but now we’re good,” Caleb soothed, obviously wanting to keep the peace. I eyed him and shook my head.

“You’re both fucking crazy,” I muttered and stormed away, my angry strides eating the ground.

“I have your bag,” a lazy voice called and I barely paused.

“Keep it,” I shouted back, not even bothering to turn around.

Once I got back to my room at the motel, my legs were about to collapse from the anger fueled march. All I wanted was to sprawl on the bed and forget my day, but no. There was a note stuck to the fake pine headboard telling me rooms 207 and 110 needed cleaning. I dropped my head back on the bed only for it to bounce up before falling back again.

“Why?” I groaned, hauling myself back up to go clean the rooms. “The housekeeping gig goes to the girl who has never cleaned anything in her life. I wouldn’t even be qualified if this was a paying gig.”

It took me awhile to get the cart stocked and moving and of course, the rooms were on separate floors so I had to do it twice. I slapped on rubber gloves as I moved through the rooms, trying not to think about what went on in them as I changed the sheets. When it came to emptying the trash, I almost gagged at the number of used condoms in it. “At least they’re being safe,” I comforted myself as I made a mental note to have Dad find a hazardous materials container for the cart.

I shoved my cart back into the closet and set the sheets to wash before going back to my room. As I approached the door, I saw something hanging from the doorknob. Closer inspection revealed my book bag, but when I glanced around, I didn’t see anyone.

I lifted my bag from the door and a note drifted to the ground.

I’M SORRY

The words were in all caps, tightly written, and I knew instinctively it was Dominic’s

handwriting. I folded the note in my hand as I glanced at the parking lot. He was long gone, but only one thought ran through my mind.

How did he know which room was mine?

Chapter Four

When I woke up the next morning, irritation from the previous day continued to eat at me. There was something odd about the Pack, from their self-imposed isolation to their decision to include me for whatever reason. Add in the fact that Dominic didn't like me referring to them as the Pack, and suddenly it all seemed entirely too mysterious.

A mystery you have no desire to solve, I reminded myself as I shoved the covers aside and got ready for the day. You'll stay away from them, I added for good measure. My mental pep talk was singularly unconvincing as I felt curiosity tug at me. You want to leave, remember? I told myself almost desperately.

I rubbed my arms unconsciously as I remembered Dominic picking me up like a ragdoll. The ease in which he'd lifted me was terrifying. I wandered to the mirror and saw two perfect handprints encircling my biceps where he'd held me. The span of his fingers was almost unbelievable, and as I ran my finger over one of the bruises I winced. It was sore, but I knew it would fade quickly. My skin tended to bruise easily, and I could admit he hadn't held me with the intention of hurting me. In fact, my own struggling might have been what caused the bruises, but the sight of them solidified my decision to avoid the Pack.

All of them.

I wasn't one of them.

I didn't want to be one of them.

I stripped off my pajama set and reached for a long sleeve t-shirt. I didn't want questions or apologies. Dominic was a jerk and it was better for all of us if I continued to remind myself of the fact.

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Dad was distracted as he drove me to school and I was grateful. Conversation would have been difficult since my thoughts churned, unwillingly consumed by the mystery of the Pack. I wondered if they would be waiting. If Dominic would shrug off the ‘preferential’ treatment warning or send Caleb. Most likely, they’d send Anna, I decided. She was the least intimidating and made a great mole.

“I’m going to get you a phone today,” Dad said, interrupting my thoughts. “I meant to yesterday, but it took longer than I expected at the lawyer’s office. You need a phone though.” He shook his head in distress. “I still can’t believe your mom would take your phone like that. It’s a matter of safety. What if she wanted to get in touch with you?”

I didn’t have an answer for him, at least not one he’d believe. Dad had blinders where Mom was concerned and it didn’t matter how often she’d abused him, he still believed the best of her. I could only hope he’d wise up eventually.

“I don’t know, Dad. She was upset,” I finally offered.

“Yeah, I guess so. It would break my heart to see you leave,” Dad concluded, patting my hand. I didn’t have the heart to tell him it was more likely she had been infuriated I’d left, choosing him over her, an action she’d never once considered I’d do.

“Well, you’ve got a few months before that happens,” I joked, trying to lighten the suddenly somber mood. “You can be like all the other dads crying as they drop their kids off at college. Maybe they have a support group.”

“Eh, maybe. We’ll worry about that when it happens.”

I shook my head at his classic response. Dad didn't worry about anything until he had too. Probably one of the reasons he'd been blindsided by the divorce.

"I love you, Dad," I said affectionately, glad I'd made the decision to come, even with the weirdness around here. I glanced out the window to see Anna and a few others hanging around the steps to the school, no doubt waiting for me to arrive. "You picking me up today?" I mock frowned at him. "Walking home from school is not going to become a habit is it?"

Dad chuckled as he came to a stop at the bottom of the steps. "I thought you were used to walking?" He teased and my frown deepened. "Not quite what you're used to?" I shook my head, one hand wrapping around my arm protectively. This place was nothing like I was used to. "No worries, Bunny. I'll be here with bells on."

I gave him a dry stare.

"You can leave the bells at home, and it's Jess!"

"Jess, of course." He smiled and I rolled my eyes at his attempt to humor me. "Have a good day at school."

I hopped out of the car, snagging my heavy ass backpack as I went. My first stop was going to be my locker so I could unload some of my books. I wrestled the straps on my shoulder as I steeled myself to walk past Anna.

"Hey!" Her soft voice was almost lost in the crowd and I felt my steps falter for a half of a second. Giving her the cold shoulder felt wrong. I shoved the feeling aside, not glancing over as I heard, "Jess?"

I practically ran up the steps, wheezing from the weight of my backpack only to slam to a stop at the sight of Caleb. His disappointed stare told me he'd seen me ignore

Anna and the tiny wrinkle above his eyes was enough to flood me with guilt. Caleb was a good guy, and Anna had been nothing but kind to me and it wasn't right how I was treating them.

I lowered my eyes and shoved past him, not stopping until I'd reached my locker. I rested my head on the locker door for a second before spinning the combination. I shuffled the books around in the narrow space, trying to make them fit as I ignored the guilt churning inside of me.

"I said I was sorry," he rumbled in lieu of an actual greeting, his immense size shielding me from view. "You ignored Anna? And Caleb?"

"Hello to you too," I muttered under my breath, or what I thought was under my breath.

"Hello," he replied, sarcasm thick in his voice.

I growled impotently, feeling him against my back and knew I wasn't going anywhere till he'd said his piece. The helpless feeling that accompanied that knowledge had me going on the offense.

"Do you have some weird telepathy going on? Is that what makes you different? Because there's no way you already know what happened outside two minutes ago."

"Ever heard of text messages? Caleb types faster than most girls," Dominic answered instantly and as much sense as it made, it felt like an automatic response, like this wasn't the first time he had to defend himself against knowing impossible information.

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“And my ignoring them was somehow need to know info for you?” I snapped back as I wedged a notebook in my bag and spun around to face him. An action I instantly regretted when faced with his immense chest.

“Yes,” he answered bluntly not adding anything to make his response less creepy.

“Yes? That’s it? Why would you need to know that?” I tilted my head back so I could see his face, hoping he’d take the hint and step back, but no. He stayed firmly in place, my open locker door blocking me on one side and his body blocking everything else. I could hear other students walking the halls and locker doors slamming, but I couldn’t see a thing around the massive body in front of me.

“I was a little abrupt with you yesterday. Caleb feels like I might have frightened you,” Dominic replied slowly, his jaw tightening at the admission.

“You didn’t,” I denied instantly, even though he technically had for like a split second when he’d first grabbed me. I wasn’t about to admit that though, not even under threat of tickle torture. Showing any type of fear or weakness around Dominic seemed like a foolish idea, and I liked to believe I was smarter than that. “I just don’t like hanging around bullies. Especially weird ones with secrets,” I finished bitingly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me I have to go to class and you wouldn’t want to be found granting me preferential treatment, now would you?”

I stood tall, forcing myself not to fidget as I waited for him to move. I wasn’t about to beg him to move and there was no way I was getting around him unless I wanted to duck between his legs and that had bad idea written all over it.

He shifted an inch to left, giving me the world's narrowest opening to escape, but I took it without a qualm, brushing past him. I thought I was home free until his hand wrapped around my arm, his fingers settling unerringly over the bruises he'd put on my arm.

His touch was gentle enough that I didn't even feel pain from the bruise, but his face said he knew they were there.

"Don't walk home alone. Stay away from High Valley," he warned cryptically, releasing my arm and I hightailed it down the hall, wondering where the hell Dad had moved us.

Chapter Five

It had been two weeks since the day I'd sat at the Pack table, and things had returned to normal or whatever version of normal my life had become since I'd moved to Banks, Idaho to stay with Dad. He'd bought me a phone, but Mom hadn't called or responded to the text Dad insisted I send her with my new number. He'd wanted me to call her but I put my foot down on that. If she wanted to talk, then she had to be the one to call. And considering our last conversation, it would be a cold day in hell before it happened.

I sat with Leah and her friends at lunch, enduring endless questions about Coach Dom and the Pack before finally refusing to answer anymore. After my refusal to gossip about the Pack, I thought they'd ignore me, but they didn't. I didn't contribute much to their conversations, but they tried to include me. Between school and my new maid gig, I didn't find much time to go anywhere. I did manage to look up High Valley on my phone though and found out it was another small-town north of here. Why Dominic didn't want me going there was still a mystery, like so many other things revolving around them, but I also hadn't made a trip there in some ridiculous fit of rebellion.

I was too exhausted.

Being a motel housekeeper was surprisingly tiring and early morning wakeup calls from the construction crew Dad had hired to remodel the manager's living quarters didn't help. He wanted me to be happy and the crappy little motel room wasn't cutting it. I couldn't wait till the small apartment was finished, if for nothing else to sleep in the new bed. I could even forgive the fact that my college fund was slowly dwindling away with every new improvement Dad made. There was a steady stream of guests, enough to keep the place in the black according to Dad, and a few of them were actually respectable. Fishermen from out of town, and some visitors to the town. We were the only motel in a hundred-mile radius so that didn't hurt things.

Dad had managed to drop me off and pick me up every day, but I knew it was getting old. He talked about getting me a car, but it seemed pointless with me leaving in a year. He said I could take it with me, but I didn't want to deal with a car on campus.

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I slammed my locker shut, ignoring the few curious glances I still got. I hadn't really made friends since I'd basically shut down Anna and Caleb. A few people still gave me sideways glances, but the curious ones always came from the Pack table. I recognized them by now, the people who were part of the Pack or the ones who sat at the table. I didn't realize at first that I was studying them as intently as they studied me. My gaze inevitably wandered to their table during lunch every day, to the point that I'd memorized all of them.

Apparently, I was just as fascinating to them as they'd become to me. Maybe it was the mystery I couldn't quite let go of.

More like a certain angry giant, a mocking voice whispered to my irritation. Dominic had made it a point to ignore me after his warning, but it didn't mean I hadn't occasionally caught his gaze on me, usually after I'd been searching for him with my own.

I avoided Caleb's gaze like the plague, always feeling a rush of guilt when our eyes met, like I'd refused to come play with a puppy. His disappointment was second only to Anna's worry. The first time our eyes had met after I'd pointedly ignored her, I'd expected anger, instead I'd gotten a glance full of worry and it hadn't changed over the past two weeks. Out of all of them, Anna's gaze bothered me the most. I had the feeling she was genuinely concerned about me, but again I didn't know why other than it had something to do with Dominic's cryptic warnings.

As I slid into my seat, I felt the buzz of a text message against my leg. Surreptitiously, I reached for the phone in my pocket, making sure Ms. Nichols didn't catch me. It was my last class of the day, and ever since the incident when she'd

warned me about Coach Dominic, we hadn't been on the best of terms.

"Stuck in town picking up supplies. Won't be there in time to pick you up from school. Sorry, Bunny." A frowning face followed the text and I let out a sigh. I didn't relish walking home again, even with Dominic's warning floating around the back of my head. I really didn't see any other options though. I hadn't made friends and awkward wouldn't begin to describe me asking Anna for a ride. The same went for Caleb or Dominic. Plus, my pride wouldn't let me. I'd been successful in my attempt to be an island for the school year. It was a little lonely, I'd admit, but it would save some heartbreak down the road when I left for college. And I was determined to leave.

I sighed and quickly typed a reply while the teacher wrote on the board.

"It's fine. I'll catch a ride with someone." I lied with ease, nothing in a text message to give me away to Dad. I added a smiley face for good measure and shoved my phone back in my pocket as Ms. Nichols turned to face us. I loitered after class, rearranging my book sack, and giving the rest of the class time to leave. Since it was our last class, it didn't take long.

I knew some members of the Pack drove to school together and I wanted to give them time to get on the road. I didn't want any of them to catch me walking because somehow, I knew it would get back to Dominic and I'd have him breathing down my neck again.

By the time I made it to the front of the school, it was practically a ghost town. Few people lingered on Fridays, and I watched several teachers make a beeline toward their cars. I'd stopped at my locker to lighten my load of books, grateful the teachers had been kind this weekend and not assigned a ton of homework.

I forced myself to start walking, a strange dread pooling in my stomach. I couldn't

shake Dominic's warning to not walk home alone and almost turned back to see if they were still at the school.

"ARGH, you're being ridiculous," I told myself, shaking off the odd feeling and marching toward the road. I would not let some cryptic warning scare me from walking down a main highway. It wasn't like I hadn't walked to the motel the first day I arrived. Dominic was being overly cautious. I appreciated his concern, but I hadn't seen a single reason for it.

As I walked along the shoulder of the highway, I glanced over my shoulder, my back exposed and vulnerable to whoever might drive by. I hadn't forgotten Dominic's declaration that some people would have no issue snatching a lone woman walking down the road.

My foot hit a rock and I watched as it skipped across the blacktop. The road was a four-lane highway with a wide shoulder, but it was mostly deserted at this time of day. The sound of an oncoming car had me moving closer to the shoulder, but it roared by without incident and I let out a sigh of relief. I didn't want to admit how jumpy I truly was.

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Our motel was on the outskirts of town, barely noticeable in the towering forest that surrounded it. The entire town was encircled by forest and it wasn't unusual to hear howling at night. Dad had joked that it was nothing to be worried about, just wolves howling at the moon. Glancing at the dense forest pressing in on either side, I tried to remember if wolves were nocturnal animals. Dominic and Caleb hadn't seemed concerned so I crossed getting eaten by wolves off my list of fears as I continued to walk.

The roar of another car had me shifting closer to the edge of the shoulder. I wasn't as concerned this time when I glanced over my shoulder, shoving my windblown hair from my cheek. It was an older pickup going much faster than the posted speed limit, but what caught my attention was the crazy guy hanging out the window howling.

I blinked, wondering if I was seeing things, but as they raced by, their wheels crossing the line onto the shoulder where I was, I realized, that no, a guy really was hanging out the window howling. The wind from their truck almost knocked me over even as gravel hit me.

"Stupid teenagers," I muttered, barely keeping upright as they flew by me, and ignoring the fact that I was also a teenager. The quick glimpse I'd gotten of the guy assured me he wasn't much older than me, but infinitely dumber.

Their brake lights flashed up ahead, tires smoking as they came to a screeching halt a few dozen yards ahead of me. They waited there for a second, the guy ducking inside of the truck, and a chill went through me. I was a girl, by myself, on the side of an empty highway. Dominic's warning flashed through my mind and I cursed myself for not listening, even as I glanced around frantically for escape.

Please God, don't let me die and Dominic be right, I prayed, panicking.

When I saw the brake lights go off, I felt a rush of relief, at least until I realized they were turning around. Within a second, I made my decision and darted into the woods. Caleb had indicated the road was on the other side of the path we'd walked home on and I hoped desperately that I hadn't misunderstood him.

I crashed through dense underbrush, praying the men wouldn't bother to get out of their truck to follow me. I had no plan other than to lose them and hope like hell Dominic and Caleb were walking home today. Instinct drove me forward through the bushes, knowing I couldn't let them catch me.

After several minutes of struggling over roots and getting slapped in the face by low branches, I found myself in an open area. I stopped in shock, wondering if I'd actually made it. It only took me a second to realize I was standing under the same massive power lines. My breathing slowed as I paused, thinking maybe I'd escaped my pursuers.

My sense of relief was quickly squashed though as I heard the sound of pursuit. I dashed further into the clearing as I realized the guys following me hadn't given up.

My muscles screamed but I didn't slow as their mocking voices rang in my ears.

"Bitch in heat," one cried, his laugh sounding maniacal to my ears.

"I could follow that scent all night," another answered, the eagerness in his voice chilling me.

Up ahead I saw two men walking, and I could have cried in relief at the sight of them. Caleb was wearing a familiar shirt with the school's mascot on the back – a howling wolf, and Dominic was recognizable by his sheer size.

“Dominic!” I screamed so loudly I could feel my throat tearing. He paused and a surge of energy went through me as I raced toward them.

Dominic turned, his head tilted, as he seemed to be listening for whatever had sent me running toward them. He stood there, alert to the approaching threat, as I threw myself at him, nearly hysterical with a fear I couldn’t begin to explain. His arms closed around me automatically as I clung to him, and prayed I hadn’t just made the situation worse. If the men chasing me had guns, they could easily kill Dominic and Caleb and it would be my fault. Over my thundering heart, I heard them talking, Dominic’s voice radiating with anger. My breath came in desperate gasps as I tried to speak

“Please don’t let them hurt me,” I begged, any embarrassment I felt at needing to be rescued gone as I considered what the guys chasing me had intended. Some of what they said hadn’t made sense to me, but I got the gist. If they caught me, they would rape me.

“Shhh, you’re safe now,” Dominic soothed, his chest rumbling under my ear as he spoke. I felt his hand smooth the hair against my back and I buried my face more firmly against his solid chest. For some inexplicable reason, my fear disappeared at the sound of his voice.

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“Hanley,” Caleb spat out, confusing me. “We fight?” He asked with a mixture of eagerness and caution, as he glanced at Dominic for permission. A split-second pause and then Dominic spoke, “No, not the place.” His arm tightened around me and I knew his decision had to do with me. He pried me away from him, staring down at me with those eerie yellow eyes of his.

“Can you hang on to me?”

The question was so unexpected it took me a second to process it, but finally I nodded and he threw me on to his back. I hooked my legs around his hips and wrapped my arms around his neck, making a conscious effort not to choke him.

As soon as I settled in place, his arms locked around my legs tighter than steel bands, and he started running. I tucked my head into his back to block the wind, not pausing to think how he could run so easily with me on his back. Caleb kept pace with us, not even looking out of breath as Dominic’s long legs ate the ground.

After what felt like an eternity, they slowed and I picked my head up in time to see another path intersecting with the one we were on. Dominic nodded to Caleb, indicating he should go down it.

“Inform the...” he broke off suddenly, shifting his hold on me and I saw Caleb’s eyes widen as they slide toward me and then away as he stepped back. “Inform the others. About Hanley.” Caleb gave a quick nod and looked like he wanted to question Dominic, but a shake of his head had Caleb running down the other path.

We kept going, now at a slow jog instead of the run from earlier and I thought I

should tell Dominic he could put me down now, but the firm grip he had on me indicated it would be pointless.

“What happened?” He asked, his words surprisingly steady given he’d been running with me on his back for over a mile.

“I was walking,” I croaked, the words barely a whisper as my throat tightened in fear. I cleared it, realizing just how closely I’d come to being assaulted. Dominic waited patiently, his stride never faltering and I felt a rush of gratitude toward him. “They drove past me...one of the guys was howling out the window....” Even with everything that happened, I couldn’t mask how stupid I thought that was and a low rumble escaped Dominic. “They stopped and then I saw they were turning around. I ran into the woods. I thought they might not follow me there.” My voice trembled and Dominic squeezed my legs reassuringly. He didn’t question me further and a few minutes later the motel came into view.

He slowed to a stop and I loosened my arms from around his neck, but he didn’t release his grip on my legs.

“Wait,” he whispered, scanning the parking lot from where we’d come out at the edge of the forest. “They could have circled back here.”

“How...how would they know I live here?” I asked, my heart racing at the thought they could come to my home.

He didn’t answer me, instead tugging at my legs wrapped around him. I unbent them as he released me from his hold and I slid down his back, the drop longer than expected as I landed on rubbery legs. He steadied me, his eyes watchful as he continued to monitor the parking lot.

“We’ll keep an eye on the place,” he told me cryptically, not bothering to explain

who the 'we' were, and I edged back as embarrassment came rushing though me. I'd literally thrown myself at Dominic, and demanded he save me. After he'd already warned me about walking home alone. Humiliated didn't begin to describe how I felt as I studied him carefully, wondering how long he was going to hold this against me, but not really caring since they'd saved me. I got a little distracted by his face as I was reminded why he was so popular among my female classmates and teachers. His dark hair framed a face that was simply...classic.

I shivered slightly as my gaze dropped to his massive build. Any questions about how he could carry me so easily were put to rest seeing him standing there. My breath caught as he turned those unnaturally luminescent eyes toward me and inhaled deeply. My natural inclination to make a joke about how he resembled a dog stalled as his expression changed.

The stoic expression I was accustomed to from him turned to one of complete and utter arousal. It was the only word I knew which could convey how his lips parted and his eyes grew hooded. I held completely still, some primal instinct warning me if I so much as twitched he'd pounce and then nothing would stop him.

My heart started to race as I wondered if I would want him to stop.

If the chase wasn't the whole point.

He prowled closer and I didn't move, didn't breathe as his body brushed against mine. My heart pounded so loudly I wondered if he could hear it as he surrounded me.

"Your scent," he rumbled, causing heat to flare through me, even as my last few working brain cells wondered what the hell was up with my scent. He shut his eyes and exhaled deeply, his fists clenched at his sides. He took a shallow breath and shook himself muttering, "Not helping." He blinked his eyes open and said, "I'm going to step back. Stay."

I wanted to protest I wasn't a dog, but decided it wasn't the time as he struggled to step away from me. My body swayed forward and he froze, his eyes glued to me. I understood what he meant as I fought the urge to follow him, his heat an irresistible lure. I held still and he edged back another step. I wanted to ask him why, but was afraid if I spoke, it would break his concentration. And he was focused, so focused as he pulled himself further from me. Finally, after a few yards, he stopped.

He spoke, louder than before to account for our new distance. "I'm going to take a look around, make sure those guys didn't follow you here." He nodded toward the motel. "Go inside, lock your door, and don't let anyone in." My lips parted to ask if that included him and his eyes flared with desire. "Including me," he added, answering my unasked question. I hesitated, caught between the weight of his stare and the safety my room would provide. "Go," he barked suddenly and I went, my

steps quick, but not so fast as to be considered a run.

I struggled with the door briefly, but managed to get it open and slip inside, slamming it behind me as I slide down, my heart thudding uncontrollably as I sat there wondering what the hell just happened.

Chapter Five

“Did you hear the howling last night?” I asked, exhaustion tugging at me as I poured some coffee in a cup. I’d barely slept as my mind kept rehashing everything that happened and the howls hadn’t helped. “I could swear they were outside my window.”

“I didn’t hear them,” Dad said jovially, but since he was known to sleep like the dead, I wasn’t surprised. “We’ll get you moved to the manager’s apartment this week. Much better insulation. You won’t hear a thing.”

I gave him a doubtful stare as I picked up the waffle he’d toasted for me.

“You want the car today?” Dad asked, and my slower than normal brain took a minute to process it as he scooped up my empty plate to put in the sink.

I said the first thing that came to mind.

“I don’t have a license.”

He gave a rueful smile at my response.

“I know that, but I don’t need the car today and thought you might want the chance to drive it.” He glanced out the window at the parking lot. “The school isn’t that far and if you promise to come straight home I don’t see the big deal.”

The big deal was he was as different from Mom as night was to day. There would be no way in hell she'd let me drive without a license and here was Dad acting like it was no big deal.

My natural inclination was to tell him, "No, it wasn't far," but after what happened on Friday I couldn't make myself say the words. Instead, I nodded in acceptance, grateful for the protection having the car would provide. No way did I want to chance running into the guys who'd chased me and after the incident with Dominic I wasn't entirely sure I'd be safe walking with him either.

He's dangerous, I acknowledged to myself. I'd already known that on some level, but this was a new kind of dangerous, one that had my body humming as I flashed back to the moments outside when he'd changed. I'd spent the entire weekend rehashing it in my mind and as hard as I tried, I couldn't come up with a better word for his reaction. Dominic was gorgeous, there was no doubt of that but he'd never given any indication that he was attracted to me. His sudden lust for me, and even as inexperienced as I was I could recognize lust, didn't make sense. It was as if his entire demeanor changed when he released me.

You mean when he got a whiff of you, a little voice corrected to my irritation.

"I don't smell that good," I said out loud and my Dad turned to me questioningly. "Nothing," I muttered hastily as my face flushed at being caught talking to myself. There was a distinct possibility this place was slowly driving me insane. You mean a certain someone, an amused voice piped up and I growled. "I'll be home right after school." I paused on my way out the door. "Anyone checking out?" I asked, wondering if there would be rooms to clean that afternoon. We'd had a few guests but it still wasn't a bustling business.

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“Yeah, 210 and 107 are leaving today,” Dad answered with a smile, happier than I’d seen him in ages at the challenge of revamping the motel.

“I’ll get them done when I get back,” I responded as I grabbed my backpack and headed out.

My drive was quick, but after parking, I hesitated. Part of me thought I must have exaggerated what happened Friday, since I’d spent the entire weekend reliving it. Dominic wasn’t lusting after me and there was no way they’d known who those guys were. I’d misunderstood the entire thing, but it didn’t escape me that their initial warnings had been valid. Almost as if they’d know what happened was a possibility.

I shook off my nerves with a quick pep talk, reminding myself that nothing had happened over the weekend and I was perfectly safe on school grounds. I didn’t feel a shred of shame for avoiding the front entrance as I ducked through a side door. I wasn’t ready to run into Anna or Caleb. I had no doubt they were well aware of what happened on Friday. My chest clenched at the thought that they might also know about Dominic’s reaction to me. I faltered for a second before pushing on, my head held high. So, what if they did? I’d done nothing wrong. Except walk home alone when they warned you not to, my conscious chided.

“Shut up,” I hissed, startling a passing freshman. I forced a fake smile and kept walking but there was no escaping the curious glances thrown my way from members of the Pack. There was a new intensity to them, and even if I didn’t know exactly what it meant, I knew it had to do with what happened after school on Friday. Dominic had sent Caleb to warn the others, and the Pack were the only others I could think of. And now they all watched me with careful eyes.

By the time I reached my locker, it was all I could do not to duck my head and hide. My hands trembled and I curled them into fists. I would not be afraid or embarrassed even if they all knew what had happened.

The memory of Dominic's heat and the intense desire in his eyes rushed through me and my knees weakened. If nothing more than a memory could cause such a reaction, it didn't bode well for when we came face to face again. It was almost guaranteed I'd embarrass myself. The only thing that kept me moving was the fact that the only chance we had of running into each other was in the cafeteria. I patted the lunch I'd packed just to avoid such a situation and the reminder kept me going.

The weight of their curious stares followed me as I kept my head down. I was grateful the entire school wasn't gossiping about it, but the few who knew were watching me deliberately, almost studying me and it was creepy as hell. I wanted to confront them, demand to know why I'd been targeted and what it all meant, but at the same time my desire to stay aloof remained. The conflicting desires frustrated me and I forced my mouth to stay shut. The only thing that truly mattered was that the guys in the truck didn't go here, and that they had just been out joy riding and would never come back.

My thoughts were interrupted as someone sidled up next to me. I slammed my locker shut and eyed the girl before walking down the hall. She didn't take offense, only gliding along next to me, her movements silent, and I sighed.

"Why am I not surprised," I said, adjusting my backpack on my shoulders. Her tinkling laugh matched her tiny stature, leaving me feeling like a giant compared to her, and I had the uncomfortable sensation of knowing what it felt like to be Dominic.

"You're the talk of the Pack," she responded, putting stress on pack in a way that hinted at an internal amusement. "I imagine you've noticed all the sideways looks you're getting today." She caught me off guard by directly mentioning the few who'd

been studying me so carefully. “You made quite the stir when Caleb came home Friday.”

“I bet,” I replied noncommittally.

“But it was nothing compared to when Dominic came home,” she added lasciviously, and my eyes widened at her implication. She laughed as she noticed my shock. “I wondered,” she said amused, before bumping me and I had to catch myself against a locker. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen Dominic so close to losing control, except for when his sister...” Anna trailed off, clearly not wanting to say anymore.

This was the first mention I’d heard of a sister, but considering I’d tried to avoid knowing anything about them, it wasn’t too surprising.

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“Dominic,” I murmured, his name swirling around my head as I tried to fight the emotions it suddenly evoked in me.

“Yep, he was pretty tight lipped when he got home. Wouldn’t even talk to his Dad or Caleb’s dad.” My eyes shot back to hers as she spoke candidly and I wondered what else she might tell me.

“He didn’t tell you anything,” I made it a statement, suddenly knowing it was true. He’d protected us both by not admitting to whatever moment we’d had and I was glad to know the stares directed at me had nothing to do with a teacher student romance.

Not that we had any type of romance going on, I tacked on hastily before my mind got any ideas.

“Nope,” Anna replied instantly, polishing an incredibly sharp nail on her sweater. “Dominic is a gentleman.”

“Nothing happened.” I said sharply, and Anna gave a knowing nod.

“Oh, we’d know if it had.”

I frowned at the mysterious response and she recognized that maybe she’d said too much.

“Gonna be late for class,” she said abruptly, giving me a little wave, further confusing me as she disappeared from view.

I avoided the cafeteria at lunch, instead begging for a library pass with the excuse that I had to do research for a paper. I ate my lunch hiding between the stacks of books and trying to convince myself I wasn't taking the coward's way out. When the bell rang, I left the library, hanging a sharp left and ran into a wall. The force was enough to make me bounce back and I would have fallen on my ass if he hadn't grabbed me at the last second. As his fingers wrapped around my upper arms, heat seared my skin and I knew who my wall was.

"Dominic," I murmured without thought.

"Jess," he answered, the sound of my name on his lips sending an unwanted shiver down my spine. A million questions hung suspended from my tongue, but they all dried up as he studied me. I wasn't sure what he was looking for but coherent thought was difficult to come by when he touched me.

"Are you okay?" He asked and I managed a nod, feeling a bit like a bobble head in his grip.

"Good," he answered before he nodded and then repeated to himself, "Good." To which I continued to nod. "Anything unusual happen over the weekend?"

Besides you and that hot as fuck moment?

"No," I replied, ignoring my internal snark. The bell rang again, breaking our spell as students began to stream around us. "I need to go to class," I told him, his hands still holding me hostage. He let go so quickly I stumbled and his arm shot out to steady me.

"You sure you're alright?" He appeared amused by my apparent clumsiness and a retort died on my lips at the sight of his smile. Handsome didn't begin to cover it, I thought, as his lips curled up revealing straight white teeth. Gorgeous was a little

lackluster too. A shout interrupted my attempt to find a word that could describe his looks.

“Coach Dom!”

He eased back, his eyes still watchful as a guy bounded up to us.

“Miller, to what do I owe the pleasure of you shouting my name in the halls?” His wry expression and pointed question stopped Miller in his tracks as I wondered if that was the guy’s first or last name.

“Ahh, yeah,” Miller hesitated, shifting his backpack awkwardly. “Caleb was looking for you.”

“In that case, I’ll overlook your rule breaking. Now, get to class.” He didn’t bother to raise his voice, but Miller shot down the hall at his command. I watched, bemused, as the feeling that I was missing something hit me once again.

Dominic tilted his head toward me, keeping his expression carefully blank, as I walked backwards in the direction of my next class, unwilling to turn my back on him. Instinct warned me I was in the presence of a predator.

For a second, I thought I saw a hint of a smile on his face at my hesitation and my heart reacted, but he controlled his expression, with an abrupt motion turned, and went down the hall, releasing me from his presence.

The rest of the day was a blur as I tried to piece together Anna’s cryptic remarks and Dominic’s presence. He’d made it a point to search me out today and I wasn’t sure if it was concern for me after Friday’s events or something more.

Like he wants to jump your bones? A naughty voice whispered and I shoved the

errant thought away. He was older. A coach. Besides that, he was dangerous.

Not to you, the same voice whispered and again I ignored it. He may not have been like the guys who chased me in the woods but the memory of his desire, the control he'd had to exert to let me go, wouldn't leave me. He might be more civilized but he was still a threat.

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I slammed my locker shut after the end of last period only to find Anna standing there. I jumped slightly, not having seen or heard her approach, but she just gave me a smile.

“Need a ride?”

Somehow, her question wasn’t wholly unexpected which might indicate I was getting used to the weirdness that surrounded me.

I shook my head as we walked down the hall, stares following us.

“They do realize staring is rude?”

“Yes, but you’re special,” Anna answered thoughtfully. I nodded, as she confirmed what I’d already begun to suspect. “You can really blame Caleb for that. He was pretty excited when he ran into the village.”

From the corner of my eye, I glanced at her wondering what else she was going to reveal.

“It’s not often the Hanley’s come into our territory and the fact they were chasing you....” She trailed off to my irritation, but I already knew she wasn’t going to explain.

“You know you don’t make a lot of sense,” I told her.

“To you,” she replied with a grin. “So do you need a ride?”

I was almost tempted to say yes, if only to see what else she would let slip, but the memory of the rooms I had to clean reared its ugly head and I shook my head.

“I have the car today,” I replied, hitching my backpack up as we stepped outside.

“Are you going straight home?”

Her question made me pause as I considered what it meant.

“Those guys – Hanley’s or whatever you called them – are they a threat to me?” I asked her directly and she froze. I pushed harder at her reaction, needing to know the truth. “Anna, are they going to come after me?”

“Probably not,” she whispered, not meeting my eyes.

“Probably or not? You can’t have both.”

“I don’t know,” she cried, looking worried all of a sudden. “We’ve never had this happen.”

“What happen? Random guys chasing a girl through the woods?” I just wanted a clear answer and all she was doing was raising more questions. The sensation of missing a big portion of the picture was settling in and I grew frustrated. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on and if you can’t tell me, then we’re done. I’m going home.” At her questioning glance, I clarified, “Straight home. But if you know something that puts my life at risk and aren’t telling me....”

“They’ll protect you,” she squeaked and I shook my head in frustration.

“Who? Who will protect me?” I demanded but she only shook her head and I stomped off, aggravated. I was so irritated I almost passed up my car and stormed all

the way home on foot, but a niggling fear stopped me. The idea of those guys waiting for me down the road seemed ridiculous, but Anna's questions had brought back my earlier fears.

I tossed my backpack into the passenger seat and started the car. I rolled the windows down to let the breeze in as I exited the parking lot. The normalcy of driving calmed me as I shoved all the weirdness of the day out of my mind.

It wasn't until I passed a gravel driveway connected to the main highway that I realized Anna might have been right to be concerned. A beat up old truck was sitting in the driveway, idling, as I passed by.

A familiar truck.

I flattened myself against my seat, hoping they hadn't seen me and then tried to reassure myself that there was no way they could recognize me. I mean, I couldn't have picked them out of a line up. I'd never really gotten a good look at either of them, only the sound of their taunting voices had stayed with me.

As I got further from the place they'd hidden, I relaxed. They didn't recognize me. Movement in the rearview mirror made me glance back and fear gripped me as I saw the truck peel out of the driveway and turn in my direction. Within seconds, they'd caught up to me. They came up behind me so fast I was sure they would bump my car.

My fingers tightened reflexively on the steering wheel, knowing I had to maintain control. If I stopped or they ran me off the road, it would be over. They would come after me, and this time there would be no one to save me.

Chapter Six

“You just have to make it to the motel,” I spoke aloud, the sound of my own voice reassuring. I pressed harder on the gas to create a gap, but it did no good. They stayed on my bumper. If intimidation was their goal, they were succeeding. The truck behind me made to dart in the other lane and I jerked my wheel, cutting him off. He swerved back behind me and I prayed I could hold him off. If they got beside or in front of me, they could easily run me off the road.

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“You can do this,” I whispered, fear making my voice hollow. “You have to do this.”

The truck tried to swerve around me once more and I jerked the wheel, but this time an oncoming car had me darting back to my lane. The truck saw it a second later and was forced to get behind me once again.

For a brief second, I contemplated the idea they were crazy drivers and just wanted to pass me, but a glance in the rearview mirror revealed one of the guys balancing out the window of the truck, a rifle in his hand. The sight pushed my foot to the floor as I gave the car more gas. The sign for the motel appeared and I could have cried. I was going so fast I was terrified I’d spin out of control when I attempted the turn, but I couldn’t slow down. If I did, they’d overtake me.

I waited until the last second to jerk the wheel and for a moment, I could swear the car was airborne, but with a jolt, I fishtailed into the driveway. I was grateful the entrance was empty as the heavy car skidded into the other lane before I could straighten it. I slowed as I entered the parking lot. The sound of squealing brakes pierced the air, and I hunched over the wheel knowing they were coming back around.

I had no idea how I would make it inside before they caught up to me and if it would do any good if I did. I came to a stop right in front of the manager’s office, terrified if I went inside they’d hurt my dad.

Just then, the office door opened and a man stepped out.

A giant of a man.

For a split second I thought it was Dominic, but then realized there was no way he could have made it here before me.

The rumble of the pickup truck that had followed me caused my fists to clench as I waited for the guys in the truck to jump out after me. The man who'd come out of dad's office stepped in front of my car, a terrifying expression on his face, and while I knew it wasn't Dominic, I knew they had to be related.

The terror drained from me as I watched him stand there fiercely, his gaze locked on the truck that had followed me. His face was older, but there was no mistaking that protective stance and those distinctive eyes.

I could see Dominic had come by it honestly, because the man standing next to the car was as intimidating as hell, and as I glanced out my window, I watched the truck peel out of the parking lot. I wanted to believe it was because they wouldn't start something in front of witnesses, but as the man's eyes flickered to mine, I knew the real reason they had run away was staring straight at me.

He tilted his head toward me respectfully before walking away, and my gaze followed him until he disappeared into the edge of the forest surrounding the motel. It was only then, I managed to get out of the car, walking on shaky legs as the adrenaline dissipated.

I made my way inside the office to find Dad on the phone. He gave me a smile and I forced a matching one to my face. I debated telling him what happened, but I didn't want to frighten him. Or explain all of the weirdness going on, an annoying little voice chimed in.

I headed for the janitor closet to get my cart, not even bothering to change out of my school clothes. I wanted to get the rooms cleaned as quickly as possible and then lock myself in my room. Apparently, those guys hadn't given up and I no longer felt safe

anymore.

“We had a visitor today,” Dad said, poking at an unidentifiable lump on his plate. My heart started to hammer as I thought of the large man who’d managed to scare off my pursuers with nothing more than his presence.

“You did?” I squeaked, before clearing my throat and informing him, “It’s a piece of chicken, Dad.” He gave me a bright smile even as I poked at my own plate doubtfully. “At least I think it is.” The frozen dinners had become a staple since neither of us knew how to cook, but sometimes it was difficult to tell what we were eating. For a moment, I recalled the dinners we used to have, before reminding myself of their cost.

“Yeah, a guy named Hank Navarre.” My chest eased when he didn’t say Hanley, even though I still wasn’t sure if that was a name of a person or group. “He and his family own all the land surrounding us,” Dad continued and I perked up. “He just wanted to stop by and welcome us to the neighborhood.”

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“Big guy?” I questioned, confirming my suspicions.

“Oh, yeah,” Dad chuckled. “Enormous. Nice though. Friendly. Gave me his number and said to call if we had any problems.” I narrowed my eyes.

“Problems?”

Dad looked up then and gave me a reassuring smile. “Kids. He said sometimes they get bored and go joyriding or shooting. Stupid stuff, but Hank said if we have any issues, he’d take care of it. Talk to the parents and such.”

I wondered if Hank really meant the guys who’d chased me – the Hanley’s – whoever they were. If he was Dominic’s father, then he must have known what happened Friday and now today. He’d seen the guys in the parking lot, but I couldn’t help wondering what he thought he could do to help the situation.

I only nodded at Dad though, not telling him what happened. He was happy, happier than I’d seen him in forever and I refused to ruin that because some guys had apparently taken an interest in me.

Interest? You mean obsession. Those guys weren’t out for fun. I shuddered as the voice whispered my fears, and stood abruptly.

“I’m finished. I have a ton of schoolwork.” Dad looked surprised, but waved me out the room.

“I’ll clean up since you cooked, go do your homework.” I paused, slightly worried at

the idea of him trying to operate a dishwasher, and he shooed me off. “Go. I know this is a shock but I survived till you got here.”

“Yeah, with takeout and paper plates,” I shot back and he shrugged.

“I got this.” He picked up our plates and I noticed he hadn’t eaten half of his frozen dinner either. I was going to have to mark chicken and spring vegetables off the shopping list. At this rate, we might have to learn to cook or else starve.

I headed to my room to start my homework but every rustle and creak made me jump. I abandoned my work to take a shower, hoping it would relax me, but instead I spent the entire time waiting for those guys to bust through the door and grab me. I towel dried my hair and pulled on sweats, both for comfort and to keep off the chill that had settled into my bones.

I closed the blinds on my window and curled up on my bed with the assigned reading from English class. It was difficult to focus, but I was able to get a couple of chapters read. Exhaustion from the day tugged at me and I finally gave in, snapping off the light.

Darkness draped across me, only the glow from the security light outside coming in through the window. I closed my eyes, but a thump had them flying open again. A shadow in the corner loomed like a man’s silhouette and I felt my heart race uncontrollably until I remembered it was a coat rack.

“Calm down,” I whispered to myself, pulling my legs up as I stared at the corner until my eyes had adjusted enough to see the clear definition of my coat hanging on the rack. My eyes darted to the window as I heard something screech outside and I had to remind myself, “It’s a cat. Nothing but a stray cat.”

I clutched my pillow, staring at the window unblinkingly, as I wondered if they

would break through it and take me. If they had realized they'd found where I lived. Fear ate at me, tightening my muscles uncomfortably.

Suddenly, a howl broke the silence and I jumped so hard I almost fell off the bed. Another joined the first and then another creating a chorus and I felt my muscles loosen, as some of the stiffness dissipated. Instead of my usual annoyance at the howls, this time I felt... comforted.

The last of my tension slipped away as they continued, the howls giving me an unexpected sense of protection. My eyes drifted closed as I listened to their song, confident their presence would keep any threat away.

Chapter Seven

"You'll be alright walking home?" Dad asked, ducking his head so he could see me as I exited the car.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I lied, my smile feeling false to me but it seemed to reassure him.

"We'll have to get you a car," he promised and I nodded as if we hadn't already had this discussion. "I'm really glad you're here, Bunny."

"Me too, Dad. Me too." I slammed the car door as I remembered the fallout from my decision to move in with Dad. Mom had never in a million years considered I would choose Dad over her. Therefore, when I'd packed my stuff and told her I was leaving, she didn't take it well. Her last words had been, "When you come back, and you will, you better be prepared to crawl on your knees begging forgiveness."

I could have told her right then that would never happen. Ever. It didn't matter if I wanted to come back. After those words, I never would.

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I sighed, pushing the memories back as I turned to face the school. I'd have to figure out a way to get home which didn't involve walking. First though I needed answers. After yesterday's car chase, I had one goal. Find Dominic and demand the truth.

By lunch, it seemed my goal was impossible. It was as if the guy had disappeared. When I spotted a member of the Pack, they'd vanish before I could get to them. It was like they were avoiding me, and I had no idea where to find Dominic. My only hope was he'd show up in the lunchroom, otherwise I'd make a stir and sit at the central table until someone talked to me.

"Hey," her soft voice caused my head to lift and I saw Anna hovering next to my open locker. My breath gusted out of me as I took in her sudden appearance.

"I've been trying to catch one of you all day!"

"One of us?" Anna questioned carefully.

"One of the Pack," I hissed and she smiled at my use of our classmates' nickname for the group of outsiders.

"Well, here I am. Why were you looking for one of us?"

"Why do you think?" I retorted bitterly and Anna glanced down, unable to meet my eyes. "I want answers."

"Do you?" She murmured cryptically.

“I at least want to know why two guys keep following me and how to get them to stop. Do I need to go to the cops?”

“NO!” Anna shouted, so loud students passing us stopped to stare. I glared at them until they moved on and returned my attention to Anna. Her outburst was unexpected to say the least.

“Most people go to the cops when they get stalked,” I informed her slowly, still astonished by her reaction. She shook her head and frowned.

“Not when the Sherriff’s last name is Hanley,” she replied, watching me closely. My eyes widened and she nodded in satisfaction. “Now, you see why it would be a bad idea to talk to the sheriff.”

“Why me?” I whispered the question, not expecting an answer because how would she know why those two had targeted me? But as her eyes darted away, I came to the realization that maybe she did know. “Why me?” I spoke a little louder and she swallowed hard.

“I can’t answer that.”

My eyes narrowed as I said, “Can’t or won’t?”

She only shook her head as frustration crawled through me once again. I was ready to walk off, but she was my only source of information. Scanning the hall, I didn’t see any of the others who’d stared at me with such curiosity the day before. It was as if they’d all disappeared. I already knew Caleb wasn’t in any of my classes and unless Dominic showed up like he had yesterday – something I seriously doubted given the sudden ghost routine of everybody else – Anna was my only chance to find out anything.

Which meant I needed to stay calm and see if she could lead me to Dominic. I released the breath I was holding and studied her. She'd come to me, so far the only one, and I knew she knew more than she was letting on. But for some reason, she was not willing to tell me. Maybe it was fear or something else, but I couldn't push away the only person who might lead me to the answers I was looking for.

"What about Dominic? Hmmm? Can he tell me anything?" I was grasping at straws, but if there was a chance he could help me, I would take it. She hesitated so I pushed harder. "Those guys almost ran me off the road yesterday as I was driving home." Her eyes widened in surprise and I felt a second's satisfaction at knowing something she didn't. "They aren't giving up and you're telling me it's pointless to go to the sheriff. I'd at least like to know what I'm up against." I softened my voice, almost pleading with her. "Please help me."

"I can't tell you anything," she started and I reared back with an angry huff. "No, no. I can't. I really can't, but maybe Dominic can." My forehead wrinkled as I considered her. She was upset, like she really wished she could tell me, but why couldn't she?

"I'll admit I don't understand any of this, but if Dominic can help me...." I trailed off and she bobbed her head.

"He coaches gym this semester and then he's usually at football practice after school," she whispered and I relaxed. She was going to help me. It might not be much but I felt like Dominic was the lynch pin in this whole mess.

"I don't have gym this semester which is why I never see him," I admitted. "Is there a practice after school today?"

"Yeah, Caleb will be there. He plays for the team. It's why Dom coaches." She gave a shrug like that was perfectly normal and I shook my head. Something was odd about this entire situation, but I was more concerned about my own little stalkers to

worry about their weirdness.

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“So I can meet him after school and he’ll talk to me?” I questioned, hoping I wasn’t wasting my time again. Anna was obviously dodging my questions and I didn’t want to find out Dominic was going to do the same.

She shrugged uncertainly and I sighed.

“He’s probably not bound like I am, but I don’t know how much he can tell you,” she finally answered and I rubbed my forehead. Bound? What the hell did that mean?

“Well, if he can tell me how to get rid of those assholes, I’ll call it good and leave him the hell alone.”

Anna nodded as the bell rang, disappearing down the hall to her next class.

The rest of the day dragged, as I waited impatiently for the last bell. I had the niggling thought that Anna might warn Dominic I was coming and he’d vanish before I could get to him, but she’d seemed genuinely concerned for me so I didn’t think she’d do that.

I popped out of my seat the second the bell rang and headed toward the gym. I had to fight against the flow of people eager to leave, and had a fleeting worry about how I would get home if everyone had left by the time I was finished with Dominic. I shrugged it off since I was more determined to find answers and possibly a solution to the problem at hand. If nothing else, I’d wait and have Dad come get me.

I finally made it outside and hurried toward the football field, surprised at how few people were around. The majority of students had left, leaving only the few who had

gym last hour and those were all athletes. The campus felt empty and I couldn't help glancing over my shoulder. There was no one there, but I walked faster anyway, almost gasping by the time I made it to the chain link fence surrounding the fields. I slipped through the gate and followed the sounds of their practice.

As soon as I stepped around the bleachers onto the edge of the field, he spotted me. There were easily a couple dozen guys between us, but my eyes went to him instantly. He met my eyes and jerked his head to the bleachers so I gave him a short nod, making my way carefully to one of the lower seats as I settled down to wait.

I was working on equations when silence caught my attention. Practice had been dismissed and the guys were all headed for the locker room and showers, except one.

I watched as he headed toward me, his long stride eating the ground, and the sudden flip in my stomach had nothing to do with fear. His body was rigid, his expression purposefully blank as he came to a stop a few feet away. He took a shallow breath and then a deeper one and I watched as some of the tension eased out of him. I didn't take my eyes off of him as he stepped closer and the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

"You're brave. Foolhardy, but brave."

"Trust me, I'd rather be anywhere but here," I responded tartly even as my inner voice screamed I was a liar. "Anna told you I was coming," I didn't make it a question because it wasn't one. My heart hammered as he came closer, his steps smooth and slow to not frighten me away, knowing I had the urge to run, to flee him, and our strange connection.

He dropped down onto the bleacher by me, a good three feet between us, but still I could feel the heat from his body.

“You have questions,” he stated and I nodded. I had no doubt Anna had relayed our conversation in microscopic detail to him, so I just waited.

“The Hanley’s are a family that live in the next town. High Valley. One of the reasons I warned you to stay away from there.” Dominic pointed to the east and my eyes followed the length of his muscled forearm and the dark hair covering it. “They’re our rivals.”

“Like school rivals?” I questioned doubtfully and he tilted his head.

“Yes, they are actually, but it’s more than that.” He gazed at me for a second before taking another deep breath, and I sensed him relax a little more. Something about me set him on edge, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it was the same thing that had caused the Hanley’s to stalk me. “But it goes a little deeper than that. They don’t like us and we don’t like them.”

“A feud?” I laughed as the words escaped me, my mind picturing something like the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s.

“Yes and no,” he finally answered and I stopped laughing. “It’s a rivalry and feud rolled into one. We don’t cross onto their land and they don’t come onto ours.”

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“But the road?” They’d come after me in the woods, but they’d seen me on the road both times.

“The road is different, but they shouldn’t have chased you into the woods or followed you home yesterday.”

“You know about that,” I exhaled, shifting slightly on the hard metal bleacher. He nodded and I knew I’d been right about the man being his dad. “Hank Navarre is your dad.”

“He is. He wanted to check the place. Make sure the Hanley’s hadn’t come sniffing around.”

My eyes met his as I remembered them following me into the parking lot. He glanced away, his jaw clenched, and I knew he was aware of where my thoughts had gone.

“Why are they coming after me?”

My question caused a slight flush to form on his cheekbones, which only further spiked my curiosity.

“That’s a complicated question,” he said, rubbing his hands along his jeans. “Suffice to say, you’re here and not there.”

“As in,” I pointed to the ground, wondering if he was really trying to tell me this had to do with geographical location.

“Navarre lands instead of Hanley lands, yes.”

“That wasn’t why they chased me in the woods.”

“No, but it’s one of the reasons why they’ll keep coming after you.”

“There’s no way to stop them?”

“Not unless you want to go over there and become their sexual property,” he growled so bitterly I slid back at the force of it, almost falling off the bleachers. He caught me before I fell, standing next to me, as his hands wrapped around my forearms, supporting my weight as he dragged me toward him. “They are not good people. They treat women as possessions. You don’t want to be involved with them.”

“I know,” I stammered as his grip on me tightened. “I mean, I know I don’t want them to catch me.” My heart was racing from his proximity and the sheer rage radiating from him. He hated the Hanley’s on a primal level. This had nothing to do with rivalry or feuds, but a bone deep hatred. “They don’t seem like nice people.”

His tight hold relaxed a bit, but we were still a hairs breadth from one another. One of my legs was holding me up, the other braced on the bleacher, and if he let go I’d fall on my ass. My hands curled around the back of his biceps, the muscles taut as he supported me. If he let go without warning, at least I’d have a chance to catch myself.

“They’re dangerous,” he cautioned, giving me a tiny shake as if he could force me to understand. “They...” he trailed off as his eyes lost focus, recalling something, perhaps a memory. Whatever it was had me flinching away from his expression. I wasn’t sure I could handle knowing what would cause a man like Dominic such pain.

His face returned to the normal impassiveness I’d come to expect, and only then did he seem to realize how close we were. He lifted me up, giving me a chance to

straighten my leg before setting me back down. I forced myself to let go of him as his hands trailed down my arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

Once he was no longer touching me, I exhaled and clenched my fists. His touch had an odd effect on me, wiping my thoughts of everything except him.

Anger flared back to life as I stepped away from him and remembered I was still in danger. You're safe with him, a voice whispered. Fat lot of good that'll do me when he isn't around, I snapped back, fed up with feeling helpless.

"What am I supposed to do about them?" I snarled, needing a solution.

"You will do nothing," he informed me and I crossed my arms, glaring at him.

"They're after me. I should be able to do something," I argued, the sense of helplessness I was feeling not something I appreciated. "Anna mentioned the sheriff was a Hanley, so no cops?" Police corruption was something I could wrap my brain around so I latched on to it gratefully.

"Yeah, no cops. They can't help you in this situation anyway." I felt my eyebrows pull down at his words, because I was pretty sure cops dealt with these types of situations all the time. "This is pa....," he cut himself before he could finish, his jaw locking.

I stepped forward, back into his space, and ignored the intense desire to touch him. "I don't care about your secrets," I informed him, my eyes burning as they met his. "I just don't want to be afraid."

His expression softened, and I backed away in a hurry. A caring Dominic was even more dangerous to my mental health.

“I don’t want your sympathy,” I warned him, dragging in a shaky breath. He pressed his lips together and gave a short shake of his head.

“Hey, we walking you home today?” A new voice caused me to jump, my nerves on edge, but I wasn’t in the least bit surprised to see Caleb standing there. His face was open and friendly, the complete opposite of his guard dog, Dominic. I gathered my stuff up and shoved it into my backpack. It was already after four and I knew there would be no one in the parking lot. I also knew I was terrified to walk home alone.

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“Yeah, Jess is walking with us,” Dominic answered for me, his voice final as I paused to glare at him. He met my eyes for a moment, an awareness in them that disappeared as he glanced away. “Let me get my bag.”

“Hey, you okay?” Caleb touched my arm and I jerked away, surprising both of us. He stepped back, hands raised, and I nodded.

“Sorry, a little jumpy,” I replied, wondering why Caleb’s touch had me jerking as if I’d been scalded, while Dominic’s had the opposite effect.

“Understandable,” Caleb didn’t seem concerned and I relaxed slightly. “I guess Dom was telling you about the meeting. Hopefully, that’ll keep the Hanley’s away from you. They really pissed Uncle Hank off yesterday. What happened?”

He was openly curious and I realized he didn’t know they’d chased me once again. But I also realized I might have found a new source of information in friendly Caleb.

“You and Dominic are related?” I found myself asking in surprise, instead of something useful, like “Tell me more about this meeting.”

After the whole brother conversation, I’d just assumed they weren’t related at all, considering how different they looked from each other.

“Not exactly,” he hedged, looking a little nervous. “It’s something we say. We call each other family, but we’re not blood.”

“The meeting.... when is it?” I glanced down at my backpack, tugging on the strap

like the whole meeting thing was unimportant.

“Today. It’s probably over by now.” Caleb shrugged, unconcerned. “My dad and Uncle Hank were going to tell the Hanley’s to leave you alone. Dom doesn’t seem to think it’ll work.”

His words blindsided me as I considered what he’d just told me. Men I’d never met were going to have a meeting to stop guys from chasing me, and everyone acted like this was somehow normal!

“You been running your mouth?” Dominic growled as he came up to us. Caleb’s eyes went wide as he glanced between us.

“At least he tells me things,” I retorted, aggravated that it was Caleb who’d finally let me in on what was going on. “Were you going to tell me your dad is meeting with the Hanley’s? Isn’t that dangerous?” Obviously, they were worried about my safety, but didn’t that mean they were at risk too?

“No, my Dad will be fine,” Dominic assured me. “He’s just reminding them of the rules.”

“Rules?”

“To keep the peace between our families,” Caleb answered, his open face now surprisingly serious. “No one wants a war.”

I happened to see Dominic’s face as Caleb spoke and his expression told me he didn’t believe Caleb’s words.

“A war?” I laughed nervously. It seemed a little farfetched that my presence would spark a war. “Are you planning to fight for turf? Like gangs in a gang war.”

“That’s not a bad analogy,” Dominic answered, not seeming to realize I’d been joking. “We’ve been fighting them for years over our boundaries.”

“We don’t want a war,” Caleb interrupted firmly, giving Dominic a look I couldn’t interpret. “That’s why my Dad and yours are speaking to them peacefully in a meeting.”

“Over me,” I deadpanned, watching for their reactions. They both nodded as if it was completely normal. “You are aware none of this is normal, right?” I glanced between them, noting their puzzled expressions. “Idahoan gangs. Meetings between families – and I use that term loosely – over my presence. Cops who are labeled bad because of their surname. Caleb, are you even a Navarre?” I finished, exasperated.

“No,” he answered slowly, eyeing me.

“The Hanley’s all have the last name Hanley. It should tell you something about them and how they marry,” Dominic interjected smoothly and I frowned in distaste at what he was implying. “Navarre is my family name. Caleb is a Bradshaw. My family was one of the first to settle this land and so it’s always been known as Navarre lands. However, there are several families who live on the land in a small community.”

“So, this meeting is to tell them to back off and leave me alone?” I reiterated to make sure I was clear.

“Among other things,” Dominic replied, his tone indicating the conversation was over. I let it go, accepting I may never get a straight answer out of him. We had started walking as we talked and I saw we were almost to the woods.

“Is this how you get home every day?”

“Mostly,” Dominic answered and I snorted. He gave me a sidelong glance, but I just

walked ahead. “I’ll drive if the weather is bad. Which it’s supposed to be tomorrow. So, we can pick you up.”

I slowed, glancing over my shoulder at him. It almost sounded like he was asking, but with his blank expression I couldn’t be sure.

“Six should give us enough time to get to school,” he continued as if my acceptance was a foregone conclusion and I let out the breath I was holding. He wasn’t asking. I’m not entirely sure he knew how to ask.

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“I’m not sure who died and put you in charge, but that’s not gonna work for me,” I informed him, turning back around.

“Excuse me?” Dominic asked in disbelief as Caleb choked back a laugh.

“I get up at six. There’s no reason for me to be at school that early.” I turned around and walked backwards a few steps as I added, “And has it ever occurred to you to ask instead of tell?”

“No,” was his only reply as Caleb shook his head at me. “We have weight training in the mornings.”

“That sounds like your problem, not mine,” I retorted, spinning around.

“It’s not safe for you to be alone,” he called after me and I slowed. “Not even to drive yourself. Get a ride with someone. You can ride home with us.”

“What about Anna?” I asked, moderating my voice so it wasn’t so harsh.

“No,” Dominic said and I stopped to give him a questioning look. “She can’t protect you.”

“They might not bother her after today,” Caleb pointed out and I started walking again so they didn’t get ahead with their longer legs.

“I’m not willing to take that chance,” Dominic replied, his tone indicating he wasn’t going to argue the point. He didn’t bother to mention what he thought of the meeting,

but he didn't need to.

We continued to walk in silence as I contemplated what I'd learned. So far, there didn't seem to be anything I could do besides stay in a group. I wasn't exactly an expert in self-defense and a gun on school grounds was a great way to get expelled. But the idea of relying on others to protect me was difficult to accept, especially since they seemed to have a bunch of secrets of their own they were keeping.

"Caleb, go straight home," Dominic's voice broke through my swirling thoughts and I saw we'd reached the path toward their house, community, whatever they called it. I hesitated, but Caleb only gave me a wave as he turned off.

"I can get myself home," I started, waving my hand down the path Dominic was supposed to go down. He gripped my arm and nudged me forward.

"Not a chance. I'm walking you home." Again, his voice brooked no argument and I relented with a sigh. Truthfully, I had no desire to walk the last stretch by myself, but it was irritating to let him have his way.

We walked in silence and I was surprised at how quietly Dominic moved for such a large guy. If it wasn't for my heightened awareness of his presence, I might forget he was even there.

"Those guys, Hanleys," I began and paused to see if he was paying attention. He gave a low hum to indicate he was listening and I continued, "They chased me and said something about my scent." I paused as I felt him tense, my words obviously skating close to his secrets but I wanted to know something. "You mentioned it too," I continued carefully and he shifted a little further from me. "Why didn't it bother you like it bothered them?"

He stopped so suddenly and quietly, I was a few steps ahead before I realized he

wasn't next to me. I stopped and turned to see a conflicted expression on his face.

"It bothered me," he finally answered quietly. "Never doubt I'm just as dangerous to you as they are." I flinched at his words, recognizing how vulnerable I was just then. We were surrounded by forest and I doubted anyone would hear me if I screamed. He seemed to sense the fear he'd inspired as he stepped towards me, his finger running along my jaw and down to my exposed collarbone. He leaned forward and involuntarily my eyes drifted closed as I tried to breathe. "The only difference between them and me....is that I'll never force the decision on you."

His lips were barely a whisper against the curve of my neck, but it felt like he'd branded me. My eyes flew open, only to find him standing there, watching me with hooded eyes.

My fingers drifted to my neck where the imprint of his lips throbbed on my skin. As I touched the spot, a low growl rumbled through the clearing and he moved away from me. I dropped my hand immediately and he stopped, pulling his intense gaze from me.

"We should keep going," he advised, gesturing for me to go ahead. I started walking, feeling the weight of his presence behind me. My body tensed as I waited for him to pounce on my exposed back, defenseless against the predator stalking me.

It was a long few minutes until the parking lot finally came into view and I could take an easy breath.

"Remember," Dominic spoke gently, almost apologetic as he gazed at me. "Don't go anywhere alone. They won't give up so easily."

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I nodded and cleared my throat, wanting to ask, but also afraid of his answer. He paused, his head tilted in question and I spit it out.

“Caleb said you didn’t think the meeting would do anything. Why?”

“Because if it was me, I wouldn’t give up either,” he answered simply, the words causing my body to flush as the spot he kissed on my neck burned. His gaze was knowing as I leaned back against the door to my motel room, my legs weak. My hand found the doorknob behind me, but I waited to go in, watching him as he turned and headed back into the forest.

Chapter Eight

The next few days were quiet as I begged my dad to drive me to and from school. I wasn’t ready to face Dominic or Caleb, not even to find out the outcome of the meeting their dads had supposedly had with the Hanley’s. I hadn’t seen the guys or their truck so I assumed they must have gotten the message. I personally had no desire to piss off Dominic’s dad. He didn’t seem the type to turn the other cheek.

Anna continued to talk to me in the halls, making sure I had some form of transportation each day. We didn’t speak about meetings or families, keeping our conversation strictly on school and our classmates. I’d gotten to know a couple of other students, one had even asked if I wanted to join them at the town library to study, but I turned her down. I wasn’t ready to take a risk by being in the open. I knew groups offered some protection, but I was also afraid someone would get hurt if the Hanley’s spotted me out with them.

By Friday, I had relaxed somewhat, between school and working at the motel my life had developed a routine, one I had begun to enjoy. It was nothing like my old life, which had required nothing from me but false smiles. None of my old friends had bothered to text or call once I left, as if my absence meant nothing. It might have hurt if I hadn't seen it happen before. Where I'd come from the friendships were as shallow as a puddle, everything was about who you knew and who you had done. I'd discovered it was a relief to be away from them.

I paused as I walked into my next class, the sight of Dominic at the front of the class an unexpected surprise. One that wasn't entirely welcome.

"Mr. Parker is out today so I'll be subbing this hour," he said and I lifted my head to meet his eyes. Our glance was brief as he moved on to scan the room, looking for anyone who may have an issue with his words.

As if.

There were a few nods and more than a few hair flips as girls giggled. I'd already heard enough girls discussing taking an extra year of gym on the off chance they might get put in Dominic's class.

"I'm Coach Dom for any of those who may not know me." I ignored the weight of his stare, already knowing better than to call him Dominic. "Parker made it easy on me today. He left a worksheet for you to complete and turn in before the end of the hour. This should help with your test on Monday."

There were a few groans at the reminder of the test and he chuckled. "This is why I teach gym. No tests. Now get started and I shouldn't have to remind you to work quietly." The worksheet was handed back to me and I took one before passing it along. I concentrated on the work in front of me, resisting the urge to peek at Dominic.

I scribbled an answer and then unconsciously reached up to rub the spot on my neck. The clatter of a chair slamming into a wall brought my head up along with everyone else's. Dominic's eyes burned into mine as he clenched his fists rhythmically. Eyes darted between us as I slowly lowered my hand from my neck. The tension radiating off him seemed to ease slightly and he straightened his chair.

"Back to your worksheets," he barked and everyone obeyed instantly. I sucked in air, my heart pounding in my chest as I slowly went back to the sheet in front of me. When the bell rang half an hour later, there was a mad scramble as students left the room, dropping their worksheets on the desk in front of Dominic. I took my time packing my bag as I waited for the room to empty, finally standing up with my worksheet.

I walked to the front, feeling his eyes on me as I dropped the worksheet on the top of the pile. I glanced up, meeting his eyes and smiled.

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“I thought you had better control,” I said offhandedly, trying to make a joke of what happened. His hand seized my wrist, keeping me from going to my next class. His hold was ironclad and I froze, wondering if I’d pushed him too far.

“You think it’s funny?” He whispered as he came up behind me, his body taut against my back. “Do you have any concept of how much control I’m exerting right now?” The words were precise, as he maintained the barest inch between us, our only contact the hand shackling my own.

“I....,” I paused to gather my words and inhaled, a musky scent filling my nose and causing me to lose my train of thought.

“What?” He gave my wrist a shake, but I only shook my head as I resisted the urge to press against him. It took everything I had to fight myself, and only when the classroom door opened and he released me, did my head clear.

“It was a joke,” I finally answered him, unable to meet his eyes. “A poor one,” I admitted as he moved back around the desk and students came in. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply you were anything like them.”

He nodded and I darted from the room, wondering what had come over me. His touch had started it, but when I’d inhaled his musky scent I’d lost all ability to think. It had been all I could do to control my body, and not rub up against him. If the door hadn’t opened just then....it had given me an inkling of just how much control he did have.

“He’s a teacher. Older than you. And dangerous,” I whispered to myself as I leaned against a wall of lockers. “Never forget dangerous.”

I closed my eyes, remembering his body hovering behind mine as I reached up to touch my neck, my skin tingling. How could one brief brush of his lips leave such a long lasting mark? It wasn't even visible, but I could trace the exact place his lips had pressed against my skin.

My eyes opened as a door slammed and I saw him stalk toward me, his gaze lasered on the spot my fingers stroked. I hesitated for a fraction of a second before I took off down the hall, my feet pounding against the linoleum, afraid of what would happen if he caught me.

I skidded to a stop in front of my next class, my hand already on the knob as I glanced back at him. His eyes were still on me, but he'd stopped, his hand gripping the back of his neck as he fought for control. I turned the knob, and for a second I thought I saw a glint of admiration in his eyes before he twisted on his heel and went back down the hall. I almost collapsed against the door, my legs weak as I considered how close we'd both come to losing complete control.

I didn't understand his draw to me or mine to him, but it was wrong. Completely and utterly wrong. Our attraction was dangerous for both of us.

I slid in my seat as the teacher remarked, "How nice of you to join us, Jess. That's your second tardy this week so you can stay after class and clean the boards."

I winced, knowing Dad wouldn't be happy about having to wait for me. I took out my book and then slid my phone under my notebook to text him I'd be late. However, when I unlocked my phone, I saw I already had a text message from him.

I had to run to Brinkston for supplies. I'll be late getting home. Sorry you'll have to get a ride or walk today.

The sad emoticon following his message did nothing to make me feel better.

Brinkston was a two-hour drive and this message had come in an hour earlier. Sometime around when Dominic had been handing out worksheets. Either way it was too late to convince Dad to wait until I got out of school to go.

I typed out a reply, glancing up occasionally to make sure Ms. Nichols didn't catch me. No telling what she'd make me do if she caught me texting in class even if it was to my Dad.

No problem. Drive safe and bring me back a candy bar. Please.

I finished with a smiley face emoticon, ignoring the dread curling through me. I hadn't really made any friends who would wait for me to finish cleaning boards on a Friday to give me a ride. Anna might, but I'd have to catch her right after class since I didn't have her number. I also hadn't forgotten Dominic's warning about her being unable to protect me. But there was no way in hell I was going to walk with Dominic and Caleb not after what had just happened. That would be asking for trouble.

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I tried to focus on class as I debated my options in the back of my mind. By the time the bell rang, I knew my best option was Anna. If I hurried with cleaning the boards, she might not mind too much waiting for me on a Friday.

What about when you get to the motel? A little voice questioned. What are you going to do if they're waiting for you there?

I pushed the worries aside, crossing my fingers my luck would hold. They hadn't shown up again this week so there was no reason to think they would now.

I stood up the instant the bell rang to grab Anna but she was already next to my desk, smiling. I gave her a sheepish grin and she laughed.

"Need a ride?" She asked knowingly and I nodded gratefully.

I rushed through cleaning the boards, the job less than perfect but the teacher waved me out – no doubt ready to go home on a Friday too. I grabbed my backpack and met Anna, who'd waited in the hall.

"She let you off easy," Anna whispered, her eyes darting to the doorway. "I thought she'd torture you by making you redo it."

"She might hate me, but I think she was ready to go. Maybe she's got a hot date," I joked, equally ready to put the week behind me. Besides being stalked by the Hanleys, I now had to deal with Dominic and the sudden connection we seemed to have. A connection that was wrong on every level.

“How are you doing?” Anna asked softly as she unlocked her car. The school parking lot was empty and I had a strange sense of déjà vu.

“Trying to keep my head in the sand,” I admitted, more candidly than I intended. Anna made a soft sound of encouragement, as she started the engine, and words poured out of me. “I don’t understand what’s going on and I’m not sure I want to. Coming here was an unexpected detour in my plan. I thought it would be easy and then crazy stuff started happening and it’s weird. Undeniably weird and if I look hard enough I know I’ll figure it out, but part of me, a huge part just wants to look the other way. I don’t want to get involved.” I paused then whispered brokenly, “I don’t want a reason to stay.”

Anna reached over and squeezed my hand gently before returning her hand to the steering wheel. “Knowing doesn’t mean you have to stay. It just means you’ll understand a little better.”

“I’m not so sure,” I replied, clenching my hands together in my lap so my fingers wouldn’t stray to my neck where I could feel the burning outline of Dominic’s lips. “It feels inevitable somehow.” I stared out the window at the dense forest, knowing just past it was a cleared path and a little further a small community of people who kept a secret that could change my life.

“Everything will work out,” Anna said confidently. “You’ll see.” She tossed me a smile and I was suddenly grateful for her. As quiet and unassuming as she was, there was a core of steel running through her. She’d become a friend despite my best attempts and I was glad.

“So, what’s it like living in a motel?” She asked, her nose wrinkling.

“About what you’re imagining,” I answered ruefully. “A little noisy, somewhat gross, and I’ve done more cleaning in a week than I did my entire life before coming here.”

“That’s gotta be rough,” Anna said sympathetically and I shrugged.

“The howling was the worst, but now I find it kind of comforting.” Anna’s smile turned unexpectedly brittle and I rushed to reassure her that I didn’t hate my life. “Trust me, you get used to it. All of it. I consider it great preparation for living in a dorm.”

Anna’s expression eased as she turned into the parking lot. “Your dad is here?”

“No, he had to go to Brinkston for something.” I clutched the door handle as she stopped, suddenly nervous at being alone. “Thank you for the ride,” I said awkwardly.

“Can I see your room? I’ve always wondered what the inside looked like.” Anna shifted the car in park as I gratefully accepted the lifeline she threw me.

“Sure. But don’t expect much,” I warned her as we got out of her car. She stiffened suddenly, glancing around the parking lot before coming over to me.

“Let’s get inside,” she urged, and I felt a trickle of alarm. I led her to my room, watching carefully as her expression blanked. Whatever it was that had spooked her, she didn’t want to scare me.

“Anna.”

“It’s nothing.” She gave me a tight smile. “I hope,” she tacked on, shifting restlessly next to me.

I unlocked my door and pushed it open right before she jerked me behind her and growled. I blinked in shock as I slammed into the motel wall.

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“Did you just growl?” I asked in disbelief, the sound so animalistic my mind couldn’t process Anna making it.

“They’ve been here,” Anna responded instead, frightening me further.

“How?” I pushed around her, coming to a halt in the doorway. “What’s that smell?” I gasped, my hand coming up to cover my nose.

“Urine,” Anna answered shortly, her hand pulling me back. “It’s urine and I need to call Dominic.” Anna was already pulling her phone from her pocket as she continually scanned the parking lot.

“Why Dominic? Why not his dad?” I asked, trying to distract myself from the fact that someone had come into my room and peed on my stuff. Because that was completely normal.

“Dominic is less scary.”

I nodded, since that was a reasonable answer.

“Dom, come to the motel.” A pause. “Yeah, she’s safe.” A minute later, she hung up and glanced at me. “Is there somewhere we can go? Preferably with a lock?”

“Will that stop them?” I asked doubtfully, as my hand lifted toward my door.

“Probably not, but it’ll give us time to get away.” I nodded faintly, wondering how it was that my life now revolved around escape routes.

“The manager’s apartment,” I croaked, clearing my throat as I led her toward the office and behind it, the newly renovated apartment. I prayed it was untouched so I didn’t have to try and explain to my dad why someone was urinating on our things.

“Why?” I glanced over my shoulder at Anna, my question trailing off as I considered my question. Why had someone peed on my stuff?

“They were marking territory,” Anna answered tersely, seeming to understand what I was asking without me finishing the question.

“But how did they know which room?” I continued, the same question I’d asked myself when Dominic had left my backpack on my door.

“Your scent.”

“Seriously? What do I smell like? Bacon?”

Anna snorted, almost involuntarily, and I glanced back in time to see the barest lift of her lip as she smiled in spite of the tension coursing through her.

“Close enough,” she agreed, standing behind me protectively as I worked the key into the lock. Dad had given it to me a couple days before when they’d finished the renovations. “Don’t open it. I’ll go first,” Anna warned. I was about to protest since she was tinier than me when we heard gravel flying in the parking lot. I flinched back against the door, remembering the guys chasing me in their truck, but Anna relaxed and I saw why a second later.

A jacked up open air Jeep was careening into the parking lot and there was no mistaking the man behind the wheel. Caleb hung on to the side for dear life as Dominic slammed to a stop inches in front of us.

“How?” I broke off as I stared at them in shock. “How the hell did they get here so fast?” I glanced back at the door to my room and then at the apartment door. It had been barely five minutes since she’d called them. Probably less.

“They’re fast,” Anna answered unnecessarily as I took in the guy’s clothes. Caleb was in a tank and shorts, sweat still glistening off him as if he’d been interrupted in the middle of a workout.

And Dominic.

I knew he was big.

There was no denying his size, fully clothed, but in workout gear?

Holy hotness.

Low slung pants clung to his hips and a black tank top hugged his chest and abdomen, leaving his massive arms and shoulders exposed. He was also sweaty, his hair damp, and I swallowed hard, my throat dry as the Sahara as all the moisture in my body headed south. My hand inched toward my neck and his head swung toward me, yellow eyes piercing mine.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded, since my dry throat had suddenly closed up, making speech impossible.

“Hasn’t been long,” Dominic observed, and Anna nodded.

“I smelled them when we got out of the car,” she told him and he turned to her, glaring. She held up her hands defensively. “I thought we’d go to her room and I’d stay with her until someone arrived.” His stare didn’t relent and she met him with one

of her own. “What would you have had me do? Hmm? Take her to my house?” He jerked his head, not having an answer as Caleb stood silently watching.

My head was bobbing back and forth as if I was watching a tennis match, except I had no idea what they were talking about. I attempted to discreetly sniff the air to see if I could smell whatever they did. Like did those guys reek of BO and I apparently just didn’t have a sensitive enough nose?

I’d smelled the urine easily enough even if I hadn’t known what it was until Anna told me.

“What happened?” Dominic asked, his gaze on Anna, but occasionally drifting to me as we stood outside the apartment. It dawned on me that I should ask if they wanted to come inside, but I was almost afraid to. What if they were like vampires and an invitation was all they needed?

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“They marked her room,” Anna answered flatly and this time I didn’t so much hear his growl as I felt it. The low sound reverberated through me, the vibration of it raising the hairs on my neck.

“They what?” Caleb asked in shock, straightening abruptly.

“This is a declaration of war,” Dominic snarled, his body seeming to get even bigger if such a thing was possible. Anna took a step back, brushing against me as I felt my eyes widen. I wondered if I was about to see the Hulk in live action, as my fingers gripped Anna’s sleeve.

“Calm down,” Anna said soothingly and I jerked at the sleeve I held like a lifeline.

“Are you kidding me?” I hissed. “No one on the face of the planet has ever calmed down because someone told them too!”

“Do you have a better idea?” She asked between clenched teeth, a fake smile plastered to her face as she huddled next to me.

“Dom,” the name cracked through the air like a whip and I felt myself jump slightly, even as the sound seemed to snap Dominic from his rage.

Anna sagged against me, murmuring, “Thank God he brought Caleb.”

“Why would he listen to Caleb?” I questioned, my forehead wrinkling at the undercurrents I couldn’t understand.

“It’s complicated,” Anna answered, but a quick glance at my face had her elaborating. “Dominic’s job is to protect Caleb. Same as his father protects Caleb’s father. It also means he has to listen to him.”

“Clear as mud,” I replied, slumping back against the rough brick of the motel as we watched Dominic pace in front of us, his fists opening and closing steadily. I had no doubt if either of those guys had stuck around there wouldn’t be anything left of them.

“You don’t want to know, remember?” Anna gazed at me, her eyebrow lifted as she waited for my answer. When I didn’t reply, she hummed softly and turned back to Dominic. “Pretty sure it’s the Hanleys, but if you want to go take a whiff....” She gestured toward my door and Dominic took a step forward. Caleb placed a hand on his chest, stopping him as they exchanged a glance. Dominic’s eyes narrowed and Caleb shook his head, stepping forward instead.

“Make sure they’re safe,” Caleb told him, and Dominic inclined his head slightly, his expression torn as he watched Caleb walk toward my room. I wasn’t sure if it was because he wanted to go instead or because he didn’t like leaving Caleb vulnerable. Or a combination of both.

Anna’s explanation, lacking as it had been, did explain Dominic’s protectiveness over Caleb. Sometimes he acted more like a bodyguard than a coach or friend.

“Stay behind me,” Dominic commanded, his hand wrapping around the door handle as I bristled.

“It’s my house,” I argued and he paused.

“Go ahead then,” he said, stepping back and waving at the door. “Holler if you see them.”

I fumed for a second before reaching for the door, unwilling to step down from his challenge.

“Dom!” Anna hissed behind me and as my hand wrapped around the knob to open the door I felt his hand cover mine. Instead of yanking my hand away, I felt him twist his wrist, turning the knob for me. His body hovered over me and I knew he would have me behind him in a millisecond if there were any type of threat in the room.

The scent of fresh paint hit my nose first and I inhaled deeply, happy for the familiar smell. It was a thousand times better than the acrid urine now coating my old room.

I felt the rise and fall of Dominic’s chest against my back as he too took a deep breath. I had the feeling his nose detected far more than mine.

“They weren’t in here,” Anna stated, relieved. Dominic slid past me soundlessly, his movements graceful in spite of his size.

“Yet,” he muttered, his gaze taking everything in as he searched the room for a threat.

“That’s super comforting,” I interjected, my smile bitter as I walked to the kitchen island. It separated the kitchen from the small living room, and there was space for a tiny dining table, but Dad hadn’t bothered. We had grown accustomed to eating at the island and it was more important to get the couch replaced. The old one had been a hideous orange plaid that had somehow managed to continue matching the brown shag carpeting through the years. Now the floor was a clean wood look tile and I didn’t have to worry about what lived in it anymore.

“Hear anything?” Anna murmured under her breath to Dominic and he shook his head.

“Supersonic hearing to go with that sense of smell?” I offered sarcastically, moving

automatically toward my room to put down my backpack. When Dad had renovated the apartment, I'd asked for two things. My own bathroom and that my room be as far from his as possible in the small space. He'd accommodated both requests, creating two suites, one on either side of the small living space. It wasn't ideal, but still better than the initial shared motel room.

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Dominic followed me, bumping into me when I stopped abruptly at my door once I realized he was coming with me. Heat flashed through me as our bodies grazed against one another and this time when I inhaled all I could smell was the musky odor of his body. It should have been unpleasant, since he'd clearly been working out before they'd arrived, but instead it smelled better than any cologne on Earth. I made a tiny sound and suddenly he was gone. His body as far away from mine as he could get in the small apartment.

"Anna," Dominic grunted, gesturing toward me. "Stay here until her Dad gets home. We'll keep watch outside after we send word of what happened." He escaped out the door after that as if the hounds of Hell were after him.

Anna had a bemused smile on her face and I knew I must look as confused as I felt. Anna didn't seem surprised by Dominic's reaction to me, in fact if didn't seem to concern her at all that she'd just watched a teacher and student almost embrace in front of her. If it hadn't been for Dominic's quick action, I was positive I would have turned around and kissed him.

"Potent," she murmured idly and my eyes darted to her. I opened my mouth to question her then snapped it shut.

"I don't want to know," I muttered out loud instead, turning to go back inside my room. "Not my monkey, not my zoo," I whispered under my breath. Only to feel my shoulders tense as I heard Anna reply just as quietly, "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

After a weekend of cleaning out a urine soaked room, the thought of going to school was almost a relief. At least until I saw the Jeep idling in front of the apartment door.

“I guess you don’t need a ride today?” Dad asked, managing not to bump into me when I froze inside the door.

“I guess not,” I sighed, hitching my backpack higher as I girded myself for battle. Because that was what it had become. A battle between the known and the unknown. One I was steadily losing with every minute I spent around the Pack.

“Have a good day,” Dad called behind me and I gave him a short nod, never taking my eyes off the Jeep rumbling in front of me. Caleb hopped out as I came to the door, gesturing for me to get in. My eyes wandered to the driver’s seat where a less than enthusiastic Dominic sat, his fingers steadily drumming against the steering wheel.

“You can sit with me,” Anna offered, her soft voice breaking the spell that seemed to weave around me whenever Dominic was near. I smiled at her gratefully as I attempted to haul myself up into the Jeep. The oversize wheels combined with the lift kit made it difficult. Caleb watched me, his hands hovering like he wanted to boost me up, but a quick glance at Dominic had him keeping his hands to himself.

Grumbling, Dominic finally reached over and yanked me in with one hand. The motion was so sudden I landed face first in his lap. I scrambled to sit up as I heard him curse under his breath.

“For fuck’s sake,” he swore as my hand landed on the inside of his thigh as I pushed myself up. He shook his head as I fell into the backseat next to Anna, who was kind enough not to say anything, even though a smile danced on her lips.

“Hurry up,” Dominic growled and Caleb jumped in, barely getting the door slammed before Dominic was backing out in a spray of gravel.

“So, I qualify for an escort now, huh?” I murmured to Anna, low enough he shouldn’t have been able to hear me, but a glance in the rearview mirror showed Dominic staring straight at me.

“It’s a precaution,” Anna answered lightly, her smile not as bright as she probably thought it was.

“Is there any way to stop them?” I asked, barely audible, but again they all seemed to hear me. Anna’s eyes flickered to Dominic and she opened her mouth like she was going to answer, but he stopped her with a shake of his head. She bit her lip and gave me a regretful shake of her head.

My eyes narrowed as I sat back with a thump, unsatisfied by their little exchange. Caleb leaned forward to fiddle with the radio, his sandy hair flopping in his eyes and I heard a little sigh next to me. I glanced over at Anna only to see her staring at Caleb. No one commented or even looked uncomfortable as my gaze wandered over them. How was it they could hear every word I spoke, but somehow missed Anna’s lovelorn sigh?

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I let out a sigh of my own and instantly Dominic's eyes shifted to me in the rearview mirror. I glared at him, knowing he was keeping something from me. If there was a way to get rid of the Hanleys I wanted to know what it was.

When we pulled into the parking lot, Dominic parked in the teacher's area. I hunched over as we piled out, feeling conspicuous riding with him. It didn't matter that Anna and Caleb were with us, it still felt wrong somehow. Dominic went to the back of the Jeep and tugged out his gym bag, ignoring me completely.

"Practice is until four today," he announced, his eyes flickering to me for the briefest second. "You can wait in the bleachers for us."

I stared at him in disbelief then turned to Anna for support. She lifted her eyebrow curiously and I turned to Caleb.

"It's freezing," I stated, just as a cold wind sliced through my jacket. The weather had been mild but a cold front had blown through and they were calling for snow. "I'm not sitting outside during practice. Are you nuts?"

Their puzzled expressions cleared as they exchanged quick glances. I noticed for the first time that none of them wore a jacket and seemed perfectly comfortable. I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets as I shouldered past them.

"I'll wait for you in the library after school," I muttered, feeling more than a little irritated at being out of their little secretive exchanges – even if it was at my demand.

Dominic must have felt I was safe enough at school because he didn't demand I eat

lunch with the Pack, but there were more than a few lingering glances from them. Enough to make Leah question me.

“What’s going on?” Leah demanded, the arch in her eyebrow expectant.

“Uh, school?” I guessed, having been lost in thought when she poked me.

She huffed and pointed to the tables centered in the middle of the room. “No, girly. The looks being directed this way. I swear every one of them has glanced over at least once.” She stared at me as I pasted an innocent expression on my face. “And don’t even deny they’re looking at you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I denied, strictly out of habit.

“Yeah, right.” She rolled her eyes but let it go and I let out a sigh. My eyes strayed over to the tables, my gaze immediately finding Dominic only for our eyes to connect. For once, neither of us glanced away immediately and as our gazes lingered on one another, the rest of the room faded. With each thump of my heart, our connection deepened. There was a pull between us, one that only seemed to grow with our continued proximity, and at the thought I felt my chest tighten, similar to how a noose might feel around my neck.

The bell rang and with a pop the room came back into focus, and I was able to lower my gaze. Pain in my hand caused me to glimpse down and I saw I had clenched my fists so tightly I’d cut off circulation. The tingling sensation of pins and needles distracted me as blood rushed back into my fingers, and I stood as the others left the cafeteria, trailing after them automatically.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the final bell rang and not a moment too soon. The teacher gave me a lingering stare, which I pointedly ignored. She’d made a variety of cutting remarks the entire hour, all aimed at me. It was clear she’d seen me arrive

with Dominic this morning and had taken issue with it. I didn't know what her problem was and at the moment, I didn't care. Luckily, she didn't say anything as Anna came to stand next to my desk. I had been sure she was going to talk to me after class, and I didn't have the patience to play nice.

"Let's go," Anna said, hurrying me along as she saw how fed up I was. "We don't need to make it worse." Her stare warned me to keep my cool and I nodded. They were protecting their own secrets and now me. I'd already realized how dangerous the attention Dominic showed me was, and drawing more attention to it would only hurt us both.

The library was empty when we arrived, but after a minute the librarian shuffled from the office to greet us.

"We just needed to do some research," Anna explained and the librarian nodded in approval as Anna dragged me to a table in the back. We were still in eyesight of the librarian but not earshot. "You're right, it's much warmer in here." Anna's tone was reconciliatory as she glanced at me through lowered eyes. I tugged one of my books out to start on my homework, grateful I didn't have any rooms to clean this afternoon.

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“What didn’t you tell me this morning?” I asked, ignoring her attempt to play nice. “You were going to say something, but didn’t. Not after you looked at Dominic.” I stared hard at her. “If there’s a way to stop them, I have a right to know.”

“But do you want to know?” Anna’s smile was barely more than a grimace and it stopped me cold. “You keep insisting you don’t want to know. You can’t pick and choose, Jess. It’s all or nothing, and in this instance it’s going to be nothing.” I sat back, startled by her hard tone. “Sometimes, it doesn’t affect just you, and if things were different.....” She trailed off and I bit back my instinctive desire to ask what things.

She was right.

I was burying my head in the sand, quite intentionally, and would continue to do so as long as I could. I’d felt the pull at lunch, a connection so strong it had the potential to change the course of my life. I wasn’t ready for that, and would fight it as long as I could.

“You’re right,” I finally answered, flipping open my book, thumbing through the pages blindly. “There are things I don’t want to know and I appreciate you respecting that.” I paused my rapid flipping as she reached over and squeezed my hand.

“We’ll keep you safe,” Anna murmured, withdrawing her hand as she opened her own notebook. I nodded, knowing they would, but wishing desperately that they didn’t need to.

The drive home was silent, each of us lost in our own thoughts and when we arrived,

Caleb and Anna surprised me by getting out too.

“We’re going to go home from here. Cut through the woods,” Caleb explained, nodding to a faint trail right at the edge of the forest. They were gone before I could even acknowledge him and when I glanced at Dominic, he shrugged.

“It’s faster than the road,” he clarified as I shifted awkwardly on the ground next to his huge Jeep. His next words relieved some of the anxiety I hadn’t wanted to admit to. “Nobody showed up here. We’ve kept watch. Your Dad is home. You should be fine.” I nodded in appreciation, as the question I wanted to ask stuck in my throat. I closed my eyes and backed up a step, losing my nerve. “The only way to truly stop them is to kill them,” he stated without preamble and my eyes shot open. It was like he’d read the question straight from my mind. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly and I steeled myself for one of his terrifying smiles, but it dropped just as quickly. “Anna mentioned your earlier conversation.” My nose twitched as I tried to figure out when she could have mentioned it since we’d all been together since I’d spoken to her. I gave up when he shifted, his t-shirt pulling taut across his bicep as he gazed down at me. “I don’t relish killing a man, but I will to keep you safe.”

A completely inappropriate thrill zipped down my spine at his words, his matter of fact tone leaving no doubt he meant what he said.

I gathered my crazy thoughts as I shook my head.

“I’d rather you not have to do that,” I finally managed, clearing my throat. He snorted softly at my answer, shaking his head.

“Yeah, me either but it’s still better than the alternative,” he replied, his glance cryptic. I struggled briefly with the thought that there was more to his answer, but finally gave it up.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said instead, stepping back far enough I could close the door.

“Same time tomorrow,” he told me right before I slammed the door shut and he drove off.

I hadn’t stepped two feet in the apartment before he pounced on me.

“Making friends, I see.”

I shrieked so loud I hurt my own ears, and whirled around in time to see Dad wince. I clapped my hand over my thundering heart and gave him a withering glare.

“Don’t sneak up on me!”

“Who else would it be?” He asked, holding up his hands.

“A bad guy?” I offered, still trying to get my racing heart under control. There had been way too many terrifying moments in my life recently. “Geez Louise, Dad. I think you took off five years.”

“I think you took them off me too, and I don’t have that many left, Bunny,” he retorted, heading to the kitchen island.

“Please, you’ll outlive us all and, Jess, remember?”

He frowned at my reminder to give up the old nickname and then ignored me to go back to his earlier remark.

“You making friends?”

“I guess you could say that,” I answered, going to the fridge, and missing his glance

at my doubtful tone.

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“They’re nice, but I’m not here to make friends, Dad.”

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“I know, no ties,” he repeated with a sigh, his eyes worried. “But ties aren’t so bad, Bunny.” I held in my own sigh at his use of my nickname, listening as he continued his old spiel. “There are ways to keep in touch. How long are you going to hold people at bay? When will you decide its okay to let people in? You wait too long and one day you’ll wake up and realize you’re all alone.”

I peeked at him from around the refrigerator door, hearing an unfamiliar note in his voice. For a second, I thought I heard loneliness and my chest tightened. I hadn’t forgotten I was all Dad had left and it was one of the reasons I’d moved in with him. I wasn’t responsible for his happiness, but I couldn’t help the trickle of guilt I felt at knowing I’d be one more person to leave him when I went to college.

“Dad, I’m fine,” I answered instead, pushing away the guilt and the doubts. “I’m not closing off the possibility of friends and relationships. I’m just exerting caution. You should be happy about that.” I gave him a quick grin. “You don’t have to worry about scaring off any potential boyfriends.”

“You don’t know how relieved that makes me feel,” he answered dryly, seeing my diversionary tactic for what it was. “Funny though, I’m pretty sure I saw two guys picking you up this morning and dropping you off?”

“There was a girl too,” I was quick to add, not wanting to delve too deeply into who Dominic was. Caleb was easier to explain, but even my Dad would have to question why a teacher who looked like Dominic was picking students up and dropping them off. “By the way, we don’t have any food.”

“Oh, yeah. I was going to tell you that.” Dad wore a sheepish expression and I arched

an eyebrow. "I meant to go to the store. Had your list and everything," he rushed to explain, pointing at my list like it was some kind of proof. "But the contractors came by and they noticed some paw prints around the motel." My heart stuttered for a second for no apparent reason as he continued, "I mentioned we'd heard howling and they recommended we place traps around the perimeter to discourage the wolves from coming to close to the motel."

"You didn't?" I questioned sharply, not understanding my sudden uneasiness. I found the nightly howls comforting, but it did make sense for the wolves to stay in the woods. Guests wouldn't like a wolf padding around outside their rooms, but the idea of one of the wolves getting hurt twisted my stomach.

"Well, no, not yet."

"No," I shook my head instinctively and Dad gave me a puzzled frown. "We haven't even seen a wolf," I mentioned, trying to explain my sudden aversion to scaring off the animals. "They haven't gotten into the trash or done anything. We shouldn't be hasty."

"I agree," Dad said slowly, watching me carefully. "I told them it wasn't necessary and if there were issues, we'd look into the possibility." My breath left me in a rush as I ducked my head back into the refrigerator to cool off. My hands were shaking and I felt like I'd just avoided some horrible accident. My reaction didn't make sense to me, but some instinct clawed at me, desperate to protect our nightly visitors. "Anyway, I never made it to the store, so if you want to eat, we'll need to run out and pick up some groceries."

I hesitated for a moment, remembering Dominic's warning, and then finally nodded. I should be fine going to the store with Dad and, either way, I didn't want to be left alone here.

When Dad turned right out of the parking lot, I panicked, thinking he was going to High Valley.

“Where are we going?” My voice was high and Dad gave me a questioning glance.

“The store....” He trailed off, his glance going back to worried. “Is everything okay with you?”

“Yeah, of course. I didn’t think we were going to High Valley is all.”

“We’re not,” he replied and suddenly I could breathe again. “There’s a bigger grocery store between here and there. Figured we’d stock up so we don’t run out again anytime soon.”

“Of course. Great idea,” I answered brightly, trying to banish the lingering fear. I hadn’t realized how terrified I was at the idea of meeting up with any of the Hanleys. I still couldn’t figure out what it was about me that made them so desperate to have me, but if their interest concerned Dominic enough to protect me, I didn’t want to face them alone.

Dad didn’t say anything else, thank goodness, but I caught him giving me a few sideways glances as he drove. I pretended not to see them as I fiddled with the strap of my purse, wondering if I should text Anna where I was going to see if it was safe. The ridiculousness of the thought hit me as I was reaching for my phone. What could she do, after all? And when had my life begun to need round the clock protection? I shoved the phone deeper into my purse and crossed my arms. I wasn’t going to be the helpless girl, too afraid to go to anywhere by herself, for the duration of my time here. It was impossible.

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And what were the odds I'd meet a Hanley at the grocery store? I reminded myself. The guys who had chased me didn't seem the type to be wandering the grocery aisles looking for feminine products and toilet paper, two must haves on my list.

When we arrived at the store, Dad hovered next to the grocery cart uncertainly. I took pity on him and tore the list in half, making sure I had the products I needed on my half.

"Here," I said, shoving his half at him. "We'll meet over there when we finish." I indicated a small area dedicated to complimentary coffee and he nodded his agreement. I left him with the buggy since what I had to grab wasn't heavy. I found myself scanning the faces around me, waiting for someone to point and scream, "Grab her!" I settled after a few minutes as people ignored me and went about their business. I grabbed my favorite brand of pads and wandered down the aisles looking for the dishwashing detergent. I accidentally turned down the baby aisle, and it was as I passed a woman pushing a baby boy that I finally got the reaction I'd been anticipating.

I brushed past her, murmuring, "Excuse me," when she went rigid. The smile I'd been aiming at the little boy froze on my face as I felt her tense. My own shoulders tightened, and I forced myself to glance over my shoulder at her. There was something familiar about her features, but it was the terror on her face that set my heart to hammering. She wasn't out to get me. She was terrified for me.

"You're not safe here," she said, almost under her breath as her hand wrapped around my arm. "You aren't safe," she spoke again, agitated as she repeated her warning. She searched the area around us as she pushed her cart forward, dragging me with

her. I followed along, unable to tear myself from her grip if I'd wanted to. She was striking, and her build could be considered statuesque, but there was no mistaking her strength.

I stared at her as she moved us along, her eyes peering around almost frantically. I knew I should be frightened, but oddly felt safe with her, and her familiarity was distracting me from the terror I knew I should be feeling. I glanced down at the baby boy sitting in the cart as he fussed, and it was like being slammed in the face with a sledgehammer.

"Shh, don't cry, Nicky," the woman soothed as I stared into the little boy's familiar yellow eyes. He shoved his fist into his mouth and stared back at me unblinkingly. It was hard to draw a breath as I memorized the boy's face, knowing instinctively I would be asked about him. I didn't know how old he was, probably between one and two, but the woman's features suddenly made more sense.

"Here," I stumbled as she released me suddenly and I found myself surrounded by cleaning supplies. "Look, I know this doesn't make a lot of sense but you need to get the hell away from here." She glanced around, but her tension only seemed to increase as she hunched forward protectively. "I'm going to get him out of here. Stay here. Don't move. If he discovers you...." She trailed off as she patted the baby's head and then glanced back at me. "I'm sorry. I know this seems crazy. Just stay here. Give me 15 minutes to get him out of the store." I nodded, already figuring out she was somehow connected to the Hanleys.

"I know Dominic," I told her as she gave me another concerned look. "I'll do what you asked." Tears welled up in her eyes when I said his name and she glanced down at the boy, Nicky. "Do you want me to give him a message?" I offered, sensing regret mingled with her fear. Her soft expression hardened, startling me into stepping back at the violent emotion now displayed.

“Tell him he was right,” she replied, her grimace brittle. “And he could do worse,” she finished cryptically. I frowned, opening my mouth to question her when we heard a man bellow, “Samantha!”

Her face transformed then, going from bitter to determined in a flash. I barely saw her move, but suddenly I was being splashed with bleach as the acrid smell caused my eyes to water.

“Stay,” was the last thing I heard as she hurriedly pushed the cart away from me, her back straight as she turned the corner and I heard her greet someone. I shrank further back into the shadowed corner she’d found to hide me in. The scent of the bleach she’d drenched me in no longer bothered me, as it protected me from the man on the other side of the aisle.

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I stayed there for twenty minutes just to be sure before creeping out of the aisle, my clothes damp and discolored from the straight bleach.

This time I did get a few stares as I made my way to the spot I was supposed to meet Dad at. Not only were my clothes oddly tie dyed now, there was no mistaking the strong odor of bleach emanating from me. Dad was staring down at something when I slunk up to him. I watched his nose wrinkle before he glanced up at me.

His eyebrow lifted in disbelief and I quickly muttered the story I'd come up with as I'd waited. "I thought we needed bleach. The bottle was broken. I got it all over me," I explained before he could ask. He nodded as I tossed my pads into the cart – the only thing I'd managed to get before I'd been forced to hide.

"Okaaaay," he drawled out, his eyes crinkling with a familiar look of worry. "Do you want to wait in the car while I get the rest?"

"NO!" I practically shouted, and lowered my voice as we garnered some glances. "I'd rather stay with you. The car would be cold," I tacked on, trying to make it seem more believable why I'd rather walk around the store covered in bleach than wait in the car alone.

He looked like he wanted to argue, but finally just pushed the buggy back the way I'd come. We finished grabbing the rest of the stuff in record time as I tried not to flinch at every corner. Dad paid the bill and as we wheeled the cart into the parking lot, I huddled close to him, hoping the woman had succeeded in getting the man away. I knew she'd used the bleach to disguise my scent, but I had no way of knowing if the man would actually recognize me, if he was one of the ones who'd chased me. I

hoped not, if not for my sake than for hers.

The memory of her fear wouldn't leave me. She hadn't been frightened for herself, but for me. And that was more terrifying than anything else I'd experienced.

I shivered as we finished loading the Land Rover, not from the snow blowing around me, but the realization of how close I'd come to falling into the clutches of the Hanleys. She'd saved me, and I owed her for that. Which meant I needed to tell Dominic what she'd said even if it didn't make sense to me.

"Don't even think about sitting on those seats," Dad warned as I went to get in his Land Rover. "Here," he tossed a towel over the leather even as he eyed it skeptically. "Sit forward. Don't lean against the leather."

"Geez, Dad. I think you love the car more than me," I huffed, but obeyed since I could feel the wetness of my clothes. My skin was already itching where the bleach had hit exposed areas, parts of my hair were damp too and I wondered if I'd have bleach highlights in my hair.

"Never, Bunny," he denied, less than convincingly as he watched me as often as the road.

"Dad, the road," I reminded him, as his gaze strayed to me once again. "I'll keep your seats safe if you keep us safe."

He relaxed slightly, his smile sheepish, as he replied, "Deal."

Chapter Ten

The next morning, the Jeep once again idled right in front of the apartment and Dad grinned.

“I could get used to this,” he told me, raising his coffee mug as I grabbed my backpack.

“Don’t,” I warned him, already anticipating the blow up that was headed my way when I told them what happened the night before. “Just because they’re picking me up doesn’t get you off the hook.”

“Understood, but it’s still nice,” he retorted as I shot him a warning glare, and slipped through the door. Again, Caleb hopped out to let me in, but this time his nose wrinkled when I stepped past him. I ignored it, reaching my hand up instead and felt Dominic’s hard palm wrap around my wrist and jerk me up. I was prepared this time and didn’t land in his lap, but it didn’t stop the tingle that ran over my hand where he had touched me.

“Did you take a bath in bleach?” Dominic asked as soon as everyone was in their seat. “It almost makes it tolerable to be around you.”

I frowned at him and Anna hastily tried to smooth things over. “Did you have to clean this morning?”

I grasped her words like a lifesaver, taking the opportunity to avoid the reprimand coming my way for at least a little longer.

“Yeah, I spilled some bleach,” I answered gratefully, but didn’t miss Dominic’s doubtful stare in the rearview mirror. He seemed oddly entuned to my lies and I knew I’d have to watch myself around him.

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“I thought I’d gotten it all off, but I guess not if you could smell it,” I continued, wondering if they were going to cop to their super sensitive noses. I’d scrubbed the bleach off the night before and thrown away the clothes I’d worn, but the smell must have lingered. I fought the urge to scratch my arms where the bleach had splashed, not wanting to draw any more attention.

“I doubt anyone else will notice,” Anna rushed to reassure me and I nodded, settling back against the seat.

“We only have weight training this afternoon,” Dominic said abruptly. “You can wait in the library again, but we should be done by the final bell.”

I nodded in agreement, before turning to look back out the window. A flash of white caught my attention and a second later I saw a tail dart through the trees out my window. My breath stuttered as a scrawny wolf seemed to follow the Jeep, keeping to the shadows of the forest.

“Guys,” I called, my voice cracking.

“What is it?” Dominic growled, picking up on my anxiety instantly.

“Are wolves nocturnal?”

“Yes,” Anna answered as Caleb said, “Generally, why?”

Dominic was already glancing around as his eyes switched from the road to the woods. “Where?”

“Over here.” I pointed out my window to where I’d last seen it and as Dominic glanced over, the wolf suddenly darted from the trees and across the road directly in front of Dominic’s Jeep. I screamed, but instead of swerving or hitting the brakes like I expected, Dominic pressed on the gas, the Jeep shooting forward, straight at the wolf in front of us.

“Dom! No!” Caleb shouted, but he didn’t seem to hear and I squeezed my eyes shut, preparing myself for the thud I knew was coming.

“Son of a bitch,” Dominic cursed a moment later and I opened my eyes to see we’d slowed down and I glanced back to see if there was a wolf lying in the middle of the road. I hadn’t felt a thump, but there was no way the wolf could have escaped unscathed.

“Damn it, Dom. That was too close.” Caleb looked angry and Dominic swiped his hand through his hair in frustration.

“You’re damn straight it was too close. It was entirely too close,” Dominic answered, his eyes darting to me in the rearview mirror. Adrenaline coursed through me as I slowly eased back in my seat, not sure to make of what happened. It had appeared like Dominic wanted to kill the wolf, but that didn’t seem like him. But it had also seemed like the wolf was following us.

I twisted my hands together, fighting the urge to touch my neck where the imprint of Dominic’s lips had suddenly begun to burn and pulse, the sensation distracting me from what just happened.

“Sometimes wolves get disoriented. He might have been sick,” Anna informed me faintly, her own face pale.

“Sure,” I murmured, not really paying attention to her as I watched Dominic’s hands

fist around the steering wheel. The wolf's presence had clearly upset him, and Caleb too if the tension in the Jeep was anything to go by. They weren't speaking. At least not out loud, a small voice chimed, and my head thumped back against the seat. There was no doubt they had some method of communication, and I was sorry, but texting did not account for all of it. I couldn't escape the knowledge that the more time went by the further I got pulled into their web of secrets.

Dominic and Caleb weren't at lunch that day and Anna only gave me a soft smile as she passed the table I sat at with Leah and the other girls. Part of me wanted to stand up and follow her to the tables the Pack sat at, but I resisted the urge. I wasn't ready to commit to their secrets, not even after what had happened the night before. Things seemed to be escalating and I knew it couldn't all be because of me.

When the final bell rang, Anna and I lingered for a minute in the hall, neither of us wanting to go back to the library, but also trying to avoid the elephant, or more aptly, wolf in the room.

"I'm sorry you're stuck riding with me every day," I apologized finally, feeling like I was the reason she had to wait. She looked up in surprise before a sweet smile took over her expression.

"It's not a hardship," she replied, shaking her head, her gaze straying to the doors leading out to the field house and weight room. "I consider it an opportunity to get to know you better."

"And spend time with Caleb?" I asked, knowingly. She flushed, her cheeks bright pink, but before she could answer, those same doors banged open and in walked Caleb.

"Coach let us off early," he said, sending a wink to Anna that made her cheeks go a deeper shade of pink. "We're meeting Dom at the Jeep," Caleb glanced at the

classroom we'd just come from pointedly, "He didn't want to draw attention."

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I nodded, shifting my backpack as I started down the hall toward the front of the school. I heard whispering behind me, but since my hearing was nowhere as good as theirs apparently was, I couldn't make out a word. By the time I hit the front doors, they were way behind me, walking slowly, and since I didn't want to deprive Anna of Caleb's company, I just kept going to the teacher's lot and Dominic's Jeep.

He was leaning against the door, the chilly air seeming to have no effect on him as he stood waiting patiently for us. I tugged my sleeves further down over my hands, trying to hide some of the red blotchiness and wishing I hadn't stuffed my jacket in my backpack.

Dominic straightened when he spotted me, his eyes narrowing as he took in the fact that I was alone. "They're coming," I called out, raising my voice slightly to compensate for the distance, but it was unnecessary. He nodded and opened the Jeep door as I came closer. He sniffed the air as the wind blew my hair around my face and toward him.

"Spilled bleach, huh?" His gaze softened as he studied me, no doubt wondering what actually happened, and I reveled in the momentary concern he had. I nodded and his face sharpened as he thought I continued to lie.

"More like spilled on me," I told him, adding, "Intentionally." I stopped a few feet from him, not wanting to get too close without some other distraction around. He tilted his head, urging me to continue without words. "I have a feeling you know her," I continued and his expression went blank. "This tall," I lifted my hand a several inches above my own head since she had to have been 5'11 at least. "She has your cheekbones and her little boy has your eyes." Dominic rocked back like I'd thrown a

punch at him, not that I could even budge him if I had. “Honestly, I thought the kid was yours for a second, but then I realized the woman looked familiar...she looked like you.”

“Sam,” he whispered, the sound a little broken. “A boy? With my eyes?” He clarified and I nodded. A second later, he was kicking the tires and cursing. “Goddamn Hanleys, I should have fucking run that mangy mutt over.”

I didn’t follow everything he muttered and I tried to ignore why he felt running over the wolf this morning would somehow hurt the Hanleys. Their secrets were right there for the taking, but still, I tried to protect myself.

“She protected me,” I said, interrupting his little conniption fit. He paused, staring at me to go on. “She told me I wasn’t safe, shoved me in a corner, and doused me with bleach.” I rubbed my fingers over one of the marks on my wrist and his eyes followed the movement. “She was trying not to scare me.” Dominic nodded like he would expect nothing less, and stepped closer to me. I felt myself sway toward him, like a magnet attracted to its other half. “I told her I knew you and she looked, well, she looked shocked to be honest.” Dominic’s lip curled up, involuntarily amused by my words. His hand captured mine as my fingers curled into my palm in an effort not to scratch. He pushed my sleeve up and I heard his breath hiss as he took in the angry red blisters the straight bleach had left on my skin. My skin was sensitive to start with and the bleach had stayed long enough to leave a mark. His fingers brushed gently over the marks and he brought my hand toward his mouth like he was going to kiss the wounds. He paused though when I spoke, my voice shaky as I tried to distract myself from the thought of what it would feel like to have his lips on my skin once again.

“She said you were right,” I blurted out and he froze. “And that you could do worse.” He released me like my skin had somehow burned him, almost throwing me away as he spun around, leaving his back exposed to me.

“Ignore her,” he muttered, pacing away from me. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” He paused and glanced back at me. “Except for the fact that you’re not safe here. She was right about that.” His eyes strayed behind me and he sighed, “Finally,” and I knew without turning that Caleb and Anna were headed our way.

“Where were you that you even saw her? That you were in danger?” His glare was meant to be intimidating and I barely refrained from stepping back as he stalked toward me, anger emanating from him.

“The store,” I whispered faintly. “The store. We needed groceries. I was with my dad,” I spoke louder, trying to force myself not to shrink before him.

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“Is your dad okay?” Dominic’s question threw me and it took a second for me to nod. I hadn’t expected him to ask about my dad.

“He wasn’t with me when I ran into her,” I admitted and he arched his eyebrow in question. I heaved out a breath, knowing he wouldn’t let it go. “I was getting feminine products,” I answered him, begging my face not to give me away with a blush. He didn’t seem to care at all, nodding as his gaze became unfocused.

“Was she okay?”

I nodded, unable to speak as I witnessed the emotion on his face as he asked about her. He nodded again and wiped his face of all emotion as Caleb came closer. “Don’t mention this.”

I’d barely nodded when he lifted me by the waist and set me inside the Jeep, his thumb rubbing against the exposed skin where my shirt had drifted up.

“Also, don’t go anywhere without one of us.” His warning was barely audible but I heard. A minute later, Anna was sliding into the seat next to me, her smile telling me she was on cloud nine from her short conversation with Caleb. My own pulse was pounding and I knew it was from more than my conversation with Dominic, as the skin that his hand had brushed continued to tingle.

Hours later, I struggled to concentrate on the English essay of two thousand words that was due tomorrow. I’d planned to start it over the weekend but that had been a failure and after the run in with Dominic’s sister, and I was pretty sure it was his sister, I hadn’t written a word the night before. After several more minutes staring

that the screen blankly, I slammed the laptop screen down.

“Whoa, what did it ever do to you, Bunny? You act like it stole the last cookie, which I didn’t by the way, in case you were looking and that’s why you’re angry. I totally didn’t take it,” Dad said as he rambled into the apartment right during my fit of frustration.

“So, to be clear, you didn’t eat the last cookie? Of the cookies we just bought yesterday?” I verified, fighting back a smile. It never failed that Dad could make me smile, no matter how pissed off I was.

“Right,” he confirmed with a head bop. “And these are in no way replacement cookies so you won’t know I ate the whole box of original cookies.” He waved the box he’d had hidden behind his back at me like a white flag. “These are back up cookies in case we run out during an outbreak of famine or you know, emergencies like now when the laptop cusses you out.” He nodded to my closed laptop and the grin I’d been fighting came out. His smile widened and he offered me the box of cookies. “You look like you need these.” I accepted the peace offering with a nod.

“Maybe,” I admitted, grabbing a fistful of cookies and simultaneously stuffing one in my mouth. Dad raised his eyebrows slightly but kept his mouth shut. “You shouldn’t expect to get any,” I told him around a mouthful of crumbs and he nodded.

“Noted.” He glanced at the stove and back to me. “Should I bother to cook dinner or just win the award for worst father and let you eat cookies for supper?”

“Some might say worst father, I say best father,” I answered and he nodded as he went to the fridge. He proceeded to pour a glass of milk and hand it to me. When I gave him a questioning stare, he shrugged, “At least I can say, I filled one of the food groups.”

“Chocolate isn’t a food group?” I questioned, biting another cookie.

“I’m seriously concerned about your education now,” he said in response and I snorted into my milk, making bubbles.

“Drink it, don’t inhale it,” he reminded me gently, before adding sotto voice, “Maybe she’s not ready for college.”

“Dad!”

“Bunny!” He rejoined, matching my tone exactly. I was about to respond when the sound of snarling interrupted us. I jumped up and raced to the door, but Dad slammed his hand against it before I could yank it open.

“Nope, too dangerous,” he grunted and for a second I thought he was talking about it was too dangerous for me outside because of the Hanleys, then I realized he was talking about the actual fighting outside our door. Once he determined I wasn’t going to open the door, he moved to the window and I followed him. The lights in the parking lot lit the area, but we didn’t see anything. Another yip and then a howl had us moving to the windows facing the back of the motel. A blur of black and white was all I could make out as we peered out the window. A few more snarls and deep-throated growls pierced the air before fading off.

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“Maybe I should think about setting some traps,” Dad muttered. “That’s entirely too close.” My head snapped toward him as his words echoed Dominic’s from this morning.

“Maybe we should just put lights up in the back,” I suggested instead, still resisting the idea of traps. If what I was starting to believe was true, then traps would be the worst thing in the world for the people trying to protect me.

The next morning, I was unsurprised to see the Jeep sitting in its familiar spot, but when I went to the door, Caleb didn’t jump out to let me in. I yanked the door open myself and saw why.

Caleb was driving. Anna was in the backseat, and both of them looked exhausted.

“Is Dominic alright?” I couldn’t imagine a reason other than death for Dominic not to be here, and the thought made my blood run cold.

“He’s fine,” Caleb answered immediately, relieving my mind until he added, “Just a little banged up.”

I clambered my way into the Jeep, ignoring Caleb’s proffered hand, while managing not to analyze why too deeply. “What do you mean banged up?” My voice was low and a little dangerous as I asked and Caleb shifted uncomfortably.

“He’s got some bruises and a cut. Nothing major, but the elders wanted to talk to him,” Anna answered, her voice soothing, and I glanced back at her.

“Elders?”

“That’s what we call the older generation. The wiser ones.”

“The level-headed ones,” Caleb muttered next to me, putting the Jeep in gear. I clicked my seatbelt into place, eyeing them suspiciously. There was no longer any doubt in my mind that the fight last night outside my door had something to do with the Hanleys and possibly Dominic since he wasn’t here.

“He disagrees with them,” I mentioned casually and Caleb’s head jerked toward me along with the entire Jeep.

“Watch it!” Anna screeched and Caleb corrected the wheel.

“What do you know about it?” Caleb’s voice was surprisingly serious as he glanced at me quickly.

“I know what I’ve heard. He thinks war is coming. You disagree. The Hanleys want something and as flattering as it isn’t, I’m not the only reason they’re willing to trespass on what you claim is your land.” I didn’t bother to use air quotes, my tone sufficient in stressing what I thought.

“You pretty much have it in a nutshell,” Anna piped up from the backseat.

“Yeah, great. Except, I don’t know what the Hanley’s want, why they decided to harass me, or whatever else it is you’re hiding.”

My rant managed to silence them and we rode the rest of the way to school without a word. I jumped out as soon as we stopped, not bothering to wait for them since they wouldn’t say anything in front of me anyway.

I knew my anger and frustration were my own fault. They'd never indicated that I couldn't know their secrets. I'd built that wall, but now found myself wanting to tear it down. Suddenly, my concern was for Dominic and the fact that he was hurt because of me. For his sister, whose bitter words, "He was right," wouldn't leave me even as she risked herself to protect me. I wasn't necessarily sure knowledge was power, but it couldn't hurt at this point. I was already in too deep. I cared about these people who so casually risked themselves for me, to keep me safe from a threat I didn't truly understand, but was frightening enough to make me want their protection.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, the Jeep was in its usual spot and this time Caleb jumped out to let me in. I peeked inside only to see Dominic's hand reaching to yank me up. I tried to be surreptitious as I studied him, but he noticed and gave a disgruntled sigh as he met my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"I'm fine." He told me and it was true, he looked fine. Not a bruise or scratch anywhere on him. At least that I could see. "Rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated as you can clearly see."

I snorted at his words and snipped back, "How disappointing."

His lips twitched, but thankfully, my retort didn't earn a full grin that might bare his teeth.

"We have a scrimmage this afternoon."

"Good for you?"

"It's at the school, but we'll be late getting out. You and Anna can take the Jeep home. Caleb and I will walk." I glanced at Anna in surprise and she widened her

eyes, grinning.

“You trust us to drive?”

“I trust Anna to drive. You, not so much.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Do you even have an Idaho license?”

“The better question would be, ‘Do I have a license?’” I informed him loftily.

“In that case, I absolutely do not trust you to drive my Jeep.”

“Fine,” I grunted, not bothered in the least. I’d discovered I didn’t really love driving anyway, especially if there was a chance someone would be chasing us.

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“Straight home though.” Dominic’s gaze was serious as it met ours in the rearview mirror. “No stops, detours, or helping turtles cross the road.”

“Turtles?” I snorted before I could stop myself and he glared.

“Yes, turtles.”

“Anna’s been known to stop for just about anything, but there’s been more than one turtle,” Caleb explained helpfully as Anna sank down in the seat.

“No stops,” Dominic reiterated and we nodded.

I bumped Anna’s shoulder lightly as I whispered, “I’d stop for a turtle too.”

She gave me a tiny grin as Dominic muttered a little too loudly, “Not today, you won’t.”

I skipped out on lunch so I could finish the essay I’d been putting off, and had just finished when Dominic showed up. He met my eyes for a second before he stopped to greet the librarian.

“Coach Navarre, what a pleasant surprise,” the librarian simpered and I rolled my eyes. It seemed his good looks charmed women of all ages, even those old enough to be his grandmother.

“Ms. Steele, I clearly don’t visit often enough if my presence is a surprise.”

My mouth dropped open at his flirty response. I'd thought he was only capable of grunts and the occasional chest pounding.

"Then I should expect to see you more often," she twittered back and I pantomimed gagging. The librarian couldn't see me but Dominic had a clear view of my opinion and he wasn't amused.

"Of course, Ms. Steele," he replied with a wink and I almost fell over in shock. "Right now, I need to grab a book for Coach Thomas."

"If you need any help, you just ask," Ms. Steele offered, batting her eyelashes and even Dominic looked uncomfortable as he gave her a close-mouthed smile, which disappeared the second he turned toward me. He tilted his head for me to follow and I gave a subtle nod as he strode past, not missing the fact that Ms. Steele was checking out his ass. I tapped my pencil impatiently as I waited for her to go back into her office so I could follow him.

"Took you long enough," he grumbled when I came around the stack.

"Your admirer was checking out your ass." I took some satisfaction in his wince as I continued, "I had to wait until she went in her office to follow. Wouldn't want to be suspicious after all."

"It's really inconvenient having to hunt you down," he replied, ignoring my comment.

"Not sure why you felt the need to hunt me down. You could have texted me," I retorted, indicating the phone in my pocket.

"I don't have your number."

“Anna does.”

“Anna’s not here. That’s why I came to find you.”

“Why isn’t she here?”

“She wasn’t feeling good. I sent her home in the Jeep.”

“Oh,” I said in a small voice. “I hope she’s okay.”

“She’ll be fine,” Dominic said dismissively. “The bigger thing is you’ll need to wait till the scrimmage is over to walk home with me and Caleb.”

“I can see if my Dad can pick me up,” I stated in a hurry, not sure I wanted to walk home with them. Already, our close proximity in the narrow aisle was affecting me. Dominic had to stand sideways so his shoulders wouldn’t brush the bookshelves and that left me with my back pressed against the shelf and only a couple of inches between us, not nearly enough for my piece of mind.

“No,” he stated bluntly and I opened my mouth to argue. He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a sigh. “It’s not safe, Jess.” His use of my name stopped me and he peered down at me in surprise when I didn’t argue, before he slowly continued. “Things have escalated and I don’t want to take any chances with your life.”

I found myself nodding as I pressed more firmly against the shelf, the corner of a book wedged uncomfortably against my shoulder.

“You’re not going to argue?” He asked in disbelief and I shook my head. “Are you feeling okay? You aren’t feeling sick too, are you?” His disbelief morphed into sudden concern and I found myself smiling. I shook my head again and he huffed out a breath.

“I’m not going to believe you until something smartass comes out of your mouth, you realize this right?”

My grin widened and I tilted my head to the side, looking away from him.

“Jess,” he growled and the low sound made me realize when I’d turned my head, I’d exposed my neck, specifically the exact spot he’d marked. Suddenly, his body came around me, his hands on the shelf above, caging me in as his head ducked close to my own, hovering over my neck. “You have no idea how badly you tempt me.” My breath hitched at his words and I felt his chest vibrate with a rough chuckle. “You’re lucky I won’t give into my baser instincts. That I truly do want what’s best for you.”

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My eyes shot to his at the admission and I could see the struggle it took him to maintain his distance. His arms were solid iron braced above me, but they weren't there to hold me captive, but to make sure he didn't touch.

"You'll wait after school," he stated it as fact, but the words were softer somehow, uncertain and I nodded so he'd know I'd wait. "You should go," he whispered, his jaw taut as he maintained a control I could only admire.

I quickly rattled off a string of numbers and his eyebrows lowered. I said them again, slower and his face cleared as he realized I was giving him my phone number.

"How good is your control?" I whispered, my eyes darting to either side to check we were still alone.

"Better than I thought," he admitted reluctantly, before his eyes hooded in suspicion. "Why?"

I didn't bother with an answer, lifting up on my toes instead to brush my lips against his. The touch was brief but scalding and I could swear I felt his groan down to my toes. A fire lit in his eyes and the wooden shelf above me creaked as he tightened his grip.

"Run," he murmured his low voice raspy. "Run, little girl, and hide while you still have a chance."

I spun and darted down the stack, my steps light and soundless. I grabbed everything from the table I'd been at, not bothering to take the time to shove it in my backpack

as I did exactly what he told me to do and ran.

Luckily, the weather had warmed up so sitting in the bleachers while the team scrimmaged wasn't as miserable as I'd imagined. I was surprised to find I wasn't the only one in the stands watching. There were several students and the cheerleaders were down on the field. Some teachers had even lingered, primarily the young, single ones whose eyes never left the giant standing above the other athletes.

Unconsciously, I rubbed the skin near Dominic's mark, and when one of my fingers brushed over it, he stilled. I froze, my eyes watching him as he turned to stare at me, and heat flashed in his eyes, both a warning and a promise. I lowered my shaking hand and he turned back to the field. I glanced around to see if anyone had caught the small interaction, only to find Ms. Nichols staring at me. I cursed under my breath, fed up with her obsession. Ms. Nichols clearly had a thing for Dominic or maybe just a dislike of me, but whatever it was, it was becoming inconvenient.

I smiled at her, baring my teeth, and she flinched, her gaze skittering away. I clenched my fist around the strap of my backpack, resisting the urge to hurl it at her. A dark chuckle escaped me as I thought about what her reaction would be if she knew, I'd kissed Dominic, a fact I was still trying to wrap my head around.

I knew better. He was older. A teacher. And dangerous. All excellent reasons not to tempt the beast, and what did I do?

Waved a flag in his face.

I snorted at my stupidity and one of the freshman sitting on the next row glanced at me. I arched an eyebrow at him and he flushed, averting his gaze. I rubbed my hands on my jeans, trying to ease some of the tension coiling inside me. Walking home with Dominic seemed like such a bad idea now, and my gaze strayed to the spot in the woods where the path led home. It was only my earlier promise to Dominic that kept

me seated.

I might be occasionally stupid, but I wasn't suicidal. Recent events had confirmed the Hanleys were dangerous and going off on my own would endanger more than just myself. My gaze was drawn to Dominic once again, knowing he'd put himself at risk to save me.

It wasn't long before the game was over, our team the uncontested winners, and no wonder why with a coach like Dominic driving them. I stayed in the bleachers, figuring they'd come out when they were finished with whatever it was guys did after a game.

People filed out of the bleachers slowly, talking among themselves, and I took out my phone to occupy me while I settled in to wait.

"Waiting for someone?" The brittle voice interrupted me after a few minutes of reading on my phone and I glanced up to find Ms. Nichols staring at me.

"I am," I answered easily, before glancing back down at my phone in a clear dismissal.

"Your actions have grown increasingly embarrassing, Jess. It's growing noticeable, in fact."

I lifted my head at her words and stared at her until the satisfied expression on her face slowly faded.

"I'm warning you for your own good," she blustered, trying to regain the upper hand. It was a losing battle since she had nothing on my mother, who was the undisputed queen of cutting someone down.

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“I appreciate your concern, Ms. Nichols, but I assure you it’s unnecessary. You seem to be under a misconception about me.” My smile was sharp and she gave a disbelieving laugh.

“Oh, it’s perfectly clear from your actions, Jess,” she sneered and I smiled as my eyes narrowed.

“Then maybe you should spell it out, Ms. Nichols,” I bit out, done with her innuendos.

She opened her mouth to speak when Caleb walked up and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, squeezing gently.

“Hey, glad you waited for me,” he said softly with a warm smile that managed to disarm Ms. Nichols. She blinked, her mouth opening and closing like a fish and I snorted. Caleb kept his smile, but his fingers dug in to my shoulder slightly.

“You ready?” He asked, glancing between the teacher and me. I nodded, figuring it was best to keep my mouth shut. “Thanks for coming to the scrimmage, Ms. Nichols,” he added cheerfully as he steered me around the stupefied woman. “Bye!”

“What about –”

“Just walk,” Caleb muttered under his breath, his stride not missing a beat as he propelled us away from my toxic teacher. “He’ll follow. We can’t afford any suspicion.”

“I know,” I grumbled, my backpack dangling from my hand since Caleb’s grip made it impossible to shoulder. “I think that woman is ridiculous.”

“So does Dom if it makes you feel any better,” Caleb mentioned, smiling down at me.

“Maybe,” I muttered, resisting the urge to glance over my shoulder for him. It would only undo what Caleb had done. “Should we stop here?” We’d reached the woods by then, thanks to Caleb’s rapid pace, but he didn’t hesitate as he shook his head.

“Nah, he wants us to keep going. It could be a few minutes.” He rolled his eyes. “She cornered him.”

“What is her deal? I thought a different teacher liked him?”

“They all like him,” Caleb joked, slowing his pace now that we were in the trees. I glanced around uneasily, unable to shake the feeling this was a bad idea. Even with Caleb by my side, the forest seemed to press in on me, darker than normal, and capable of hiding all kinds of things that could jump out at us.

“We’re safe from wild animals, right?” I asked, jumping at every noise.

“Wild animals? Yeah.” Caleb glanced down at me and his smile did nothing to reassure me as he added, “It’s the domesticated ones we need to worry about.” He seemed to realize it too because he said, “We’re safe. Nothing will dare attack us in broad daylight. The Hanleys won’t risk a direct attack with you under our protection. And Dominic will be right behind us, protecting our flank.”

My nose wrinkled at his use of words, but his mention of Dominic stirred up other considerations. The memory of Dominic braced over me, our bodies not quite touching, reinforced my desire to avoid him. Nothing screamed bad idea like him being in close proximity just now. I couldn’t trust my own control must less his.

I started to relax when nothing jumped out at us. I hoped it meant Caleb was right and the Hanley's weren't completely stupid. We'd made it to the clearing and even though Dominic hadn't caught up yet, I was more at ease.

A few seconds later though, a low growl raised the hairs on the back of my neck and I felt Caleb bristle next to me. We paused, our movements cautious as we turned to see an enormous dog at the edge of the forest, its eyes locked on me. Terror coursed through me, for not only myself but also Caleb, who had dropped into a crouch, his body slightly in front of mine.

Wolf, I thought, quickly recognizing the familiar shape. I wasn't positive it was the same wolf that had followed the Jeep, but Caleb wasn't taking any chances, as he herded me backwards.

I eased back a step, hoping slow movements would prevent it from attacking. It followed, his eyes tracking me and I let out the breath I'd been holding. I'd never once considered the wolves who howled at night to be bad, but staring into the eyes of this wolf, I knew I'd been wrong. There was a wrongness to him, a malevolent energy I wouldn't have expected in a wild animal.

"Dominic is on his way," Caleb murmured softly. "When it attacks, run straight back the way we came. He'll protect you while I hold this one off."

"I don't like this plan," I muttered, tugging at the edge of Caleb's shirt. "It's a bad plan. That wolf is probably rabid."

His fur was matted and there was blood around his muzzle, but he was painfully thin compared to some of the pictures I'd seen of wolves in the wild. For a second, my mind blanked as I considered another possibility, but the sound of a branch snapping dragged my attention away from the growling wolf.

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He stood there, a violent excitement rolling off him as he watched me. I didn't need an introduction to know he was one of the Hanley's. He was practically panting with eagerness, and a wave of revulsion went through me as he licked his lips.

I had no doubt, what he planned for me, and knew I couldn't leave Caleb alone. A fact he realized as I heard him curse at the man standing there. "It doesn't have to be this way," Caleb called out, trying to reason with a lunatic.

"This is an act of war," Caleb yelled, his fist clenched as he stood between the snarling wolf and me. "Leave now and we'll forget this trespass."

"Give us the girl and we'll go," Hanley offered, pointing to me. "She's fair game. No matter what your fathers say," he sneered. I shook my head, ready to take my chances with the rabid wolf when Hanley giggled and said, "You can't protect her, not without your guard dog. She's ours now." The wolf snarled, as if in agreement, and as my horrified gaze darted between them, I realized the wolf belonged to Hanley. I stumbled backwards, my earlier unbelievable thoughts coming back as Caleb let out a vicious snarl of his own.

I dropped my bag and found my feet, running as hard as I could back the way we'd come. My only thought was reaching Dominic. He could protect us. The wolf gave a short howl behind me, snapping into silence when Hanley shouted for him to shut up. I didn't waste energy wondering about why he didn't want him howling, since I wasn't sure I could outrun a wolf anyway. I ran as if my life depended on it, knowing both of our lives just might. My chest seized within seconds as I tried to suck air into my panicked lungs. I felt something behind me, the thud of paws on the ground catching up, as I desperately tried to keep going. A quick glance back revealed the

wolf lunging at me and I couldn't stop a scream from escaping. I felt the punishing hit of his paws slam into my back, the force sending me to the ground. Right before I hit, I spotted Dominic running toward us.

I curled into a ball as the wolf twisted, trying to right himself as he flew past. Angry snarls met my ears as I kept my eyes closed and rolled myself sideways.

"Shit!" A loud voice cursed and I knew it had to be Hanley because I'd be cursing too if I saw an angry Dominic running toward me. I scooted myself back, stopping when I bumped in to a tree. My heart was threatening to beat out of my chest as Dominic skidded to a stop in front of the wolf. He glared at it, giving no indication of fear as he faced the feral wolf.

"You know better than to be here," Dominic told it, surprising the shit out of me. The wolf only growled, its feet curling into the ground in preparation to launch itself at Dominic.

"Wrong choice," Dominic growled as the wolf lost patience and lunged at him. Dominic moved faster than I expected as he ducked and then shoved the wolf into a tree. It leapt back up instantly, charging Dominic, but as Dominic ran at the wolf, his body seemed to blur and seconds later a massive wolf was in his place. My mouth dropped open as I watched the two wolves fight for dominance. The sound of another fight came to my ears but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the two wolves in front of me. As impossible as it seemed, one of them was Dominic and I was afraid to look away in case something happened to him.

Like he turns back into a man? An internal voice whispered and I shook the thought away. Dominic quickly overpowered the other wolf, size and rage on his side as the other wolf whimpered and tried to escape Dominic's lethal jaws.

A hand twisted in my hair, yanking my head back as they dragged me away from

Dominic. I grappled with my captor, using my nails to claw at the arm gripping my hair. He cursed and backhanded me, causing me to stop as pain washed over me.

“I’m not leaving without you,” he muttered, dragging me. “You’re mine. I saw you first.” My eyes watered as he continued to rant and I fought to stop him, trying to grab on to something – anything – to slow him down until Dominic or Caleb could reach us. “They think they’re special, but they’ll find out soon enough. After I’ve fucked you, they won’t want you back.” His words washed over me as I fought the dizziness trying to overtake me, knowing I needed to do something. “Not that there will be anyone left to save you,” he laughed manically, fueling my determination to escape. He continued to drag me, making it hard for me to gain any momentum. Instead, I reached for his leg, hooking my arm around his knee and knocking him off balance. He fell to the ground, but the hand still tightly wound in my hair jerked, and I cried out as it felt like he tore half my hair out.

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“You filthy bitch!” He rolled on top of me, slamming his fist into my face. “I’ll teach you to respect me.” He used the hand in my hair to beat my head against the ground, the pain blurring my vision as he continued to scream obscenities at me. Suddenly, he was gone, his body ripped off me and I laid there, my head throbbing as the sound of a high-pitched scream abruptly cut off. The snapping of teeth forced me into motion as I rolled away; keeping my eyes averted as I heard pained whimpers. I dragged myself slowly to the edge of the trees, using my elbows and feet to propel me. I collapsed against a tree, panting, as I tried to find the courage to look back.

My head hammered as pain pulsed through me, but I forced myself to take in the carnage that surrounded me. The mangy wolf laid a few feet from me, blood smeared on his white fur, his body limp. A sharp cracking sound drew my gaze to the wolf poised over Hanley. His neck was between Dominic’s massive jaws, the sharp crack the sound of his neck breaking. I swallowed hard as the wolf dropped the dead man and turned to me.

Dominic, I thought frantically to myself. It’s Dominic. Not a wild animal. Dominic.

The massive wolf’s eyes met mine, their golden yellow standing out against his black fur, and familiar enough to calm my racing heart. There was no mistaking the intelligence in them as he lifted his head and let out a long howl. Once he heard an answering howl, his head dropped down, and he paced closer to me as I held completely still, the pain in my head throbbing in time to my pulse. He paused and as I watched, the wolf blurred and there was Dominic.

He stepped forward again, keeping his movements slow as I studied him. My eyes drooped as I fought to stay awake, the pain quickly winning the battle, but as my eyes

drifted closed, I managed a smile.

Dominic naked was an impressive sight indeed.

Chapter Twelve

I woke up to a wet tongue licking my face. A large, wet tongue. As I registered the sensation, I reacted automatically.

“Ew, stop!” My hand came up as I pushed away whatever was licking me, and got tangled in thick fur. I blinked as my mind tried to sort out what I was seeing. There was a dog – wolf? – sitting next to me, its tongue lolling as it smiled at me. Yes, smiled. I blinked, remembering my head being slammed to the ground several times and wondered if this was what a concussion felt like.

As I stared into his eyes, I said the first thing that popped in my head, “Caleb?”

Those friendly eyes left mine as his head tilted and I followed the direction of his gaze. At the sight of Dominic, the breath hissed out of me. He’d pulled on shorts but there was still a lot of naked skin exposed.

“Go home and inform the....others.” I caught his hesitation as he adjusted his word choice. The wolf glanced between us and then ran off. “Are you okay?”

He crouched down, his eyes running over me, and I opened my mouth to respond only to realize I didn’t feel as bad as I thought I should.

“Depends on your definition of okay, but I’ll live.” My hand went to my cheek where the bastard had hit me, but instead of pain and swelling my fingers encountered dog slobber. “Ew. He had to lick me?”

“Healing properties.”

I nodded, a dozen questions bubbling, but as I glanced around – anywhere but at the broad and bare chest filling my line of vision – I saw a dead body.

I swallowed as the reality of what had happened hit me again. They had tried to kidnap me, and planned to – my mind recoiled at the word, but I forced myself to acknowledge it – rape me. They were going to rape me. My gaze skated over Hanley’s dead body and then landed on the dead wolf. The memory of its snarling rage, the feel of him knocking me to the ground flashed through my mind and I brought my gaze back to Dominic.

“They’re dead,” I stated, needing to be sure.

“Yes,” he confirmed, his gaze worried as he watched me. I wasn’t entirely sure how I should react. I’d just watched Dominic turn into a giant wolf and kill the guys who’d been after me, one of whom was also a wolf. I was also positive the wolf who’d licked me was Caleb, not that I was about to ask. I figured Dominic would lie to either protect his pack or he’d tell me the truth, and I wasn’t sure I was ready for either option.

Instead, I went with, “Could you put on a shirt?”

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He rocked back on his heels, startled. I rubbed my hands against my jeans and he finally said, "I didn't have an extra shirt in my bag."

"Guess I'll be grateful for the shorts then," I muttered under my breath, but a flash of his teeth made me think he'd heard.

"We should talk about this," he started, his expression turning serious as he waved his arm at the carnage surrounding us.

"I hit my head pretty hard," I murmured, avoiding the question. "You came to my aid. You and Caleb. Those guys attacked me. There was a rabid wolf. That's all."

He sighed, dropping his hands to his thighs as he looked away from me. I could feel his indecision, practically see the wheels turning as he debated if I was serious.

"I don't want to know your secrets," I lied with ease. I wanted to know them, all of them, but his secrets had the potential to alter my life in a way I wasn't ready for. A way I couldn't allow. I had a goal and it was a college far from here. I was only here long enough to make sure Dad was okay, and then it was Brown University. This world, whatever it was, wasn't mine and I didn't want it to be.

"Little late for that," he replied, his eyes coming back to mine. I shook my head. "You're not what I expected," he continued with a sigh.

"You either," was my cheeky response.

He nodded and pushed himself up.

“Let’s get you home.” He reached down to help me up and as his hand clasped mine, the spot on my neck burned white hot.

My lips parted, but his hand tightened around mine, stopping me from saying anything. He guided me around the dead body on the ground, blocking it from my view, but I couldn’t resist the urge to look. The snapped neck left his head at an odd angle. His shirt had torn where claws cut through the material, but it was the scratches on his arm that sent satisfaction through me.

“You fought hard,” he said, admiration in his voice as he gave my hand a squeeze.

“I was no match for him,” I admitted as I reached up to rub my aching scalp. The tenderness made me ask, “I guess he didn’t have time to lick my head?”

Dominic gave a surprised bark of laughter and then tugged me against his chest. I bumped into him, and my breath left in a rush as I found myself pressed tightly against bare skin. His arms wrapped around me in a tight hug and I cautiously lifted my hands to his back. Heat radiated from him as my hands settled onto the firm planes of his bare back. Every inch of him was enormous, slabs of muscle layered over one another, and his embrace should have terrified me. Instead, I dug my fingers deeper and burrowed my head into his chest as tears slipped down my cheeks.

“Hey, don’t cry,” he crooned roughly. “You survived.” He paused before adding in a rush, “I’m proud of you.” He shifted uncomfortably, and my body curved around his more firmly. He felt safe and I wasn’t ready to lose the feeling, not after what just happened. “Of all the reactions, I never expected crying. You never react normally.” I heard the frustration in his voice, and a reluctant smile tilted my lips up as tears continued to drip down my face.

I didn’t know why I was crying. It wasn’t the man’s death. He deserved it. I knew that. He would have done horrible things to me if given the opportunity. It wasn’t

even the pain, which had subsided considerably since I'd woken up, thanks to Caleb's slobber. I grimaced at the reminder of reality and clung a little tighter to the man holding me, afraid when I let go that it would be for good. Dominic's hand cradled my neck, the tips of his fingers massaging the back of my head as he tried to figure out how to stop my crying.

"Do you want me to lick your scalp?" He finally asked in desperation and I laughed, quickly sniffing back the remaining tears as I realized he was serious.

"No, no licking," I answered hurriedly, pulling away to swipe at the tears on my face. I left my other hand resting against his side, my fingers taking the opportunity to trace the ridges.

"Seeing you run toward me as he lunged at you was one of the worst moments of my life. Then watching Justin drag you, hit you, I lost any control I may have had," Dominic whispered, one hand running along my spine. I squeezed his side as I looked up at him. "You should have never been put in that kind of danger."

"It wasn't your fault," I told him, seeing the guilt in his eyes. "We thought it was safe or we wouldn't have kept walking, and honestly it was them." I glared at the dead guy, Justin, as anger rolled through me. "He did this. He thought I belonged to him. He said stuff..." I trailed off, swallowing hard as I tried to forget the stuff he'd muttered as he dragged me along.

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“Forget him and what he said.” Dominic tilted my head up to meet my eyes. “You’re safe and I will keep you that way,” he promised.

I nodded in agreement, but couldn’t shake the nagging fear that the worst had yet to happen. A tug on my hand propelled me forward as we walked away from the bodies. Within minutes, we came across my backpack where I’d dropped it and I glanced back ruefully.

“I didn’t get very far,” I noted, fully aware if Dominic hadn’t come along they might have succeeded in dragging me away.

“You tried. That’s what’s important.”

“I couldn’t fight them off,” I said, the words bitter on my tongue as I remembered the futility of my efforts.

“You shouldn’t have had too,” Dominic rumbled, the anger in his voice directed at himself.

“We thought they’d given up. It was my mistake,” I shook my head, upset. “And all I did was put you at risk too.”

“No, it was bound to happen eventually,” he denied, letting out a sigh. “This has been building for years. You happened to be the catalyst. They would have never given up trying to take you.”

“Is it wrong that I’m glad they’re dead?”

He squeezed the hand he hadn't let go of and shook his head. "No, they terrorized you. They deserved what they got."

"I wish I could have fought them off, done more," I admitted, hating how helpless I felt.

"You couldn't have," Dominic stated bluntly. I glanced up at him in curiosity, and he shrugged. "You couldn't have fought them off. You couldn't have beat them. Not even Justin. No more than you could fight me. We're too strong. Stronger than normal," he added carefully, respecting my choice to remain ignorant.

"So there's nothing I could do if one of them comes after me again?"

"A gun," he answered baldly. "And zero hesitation." He stopped and faced me. "Promise me, if you are ever in that position you'll take the shot. No hesitation. You'll have one chance and one chance only. Use it."

His golden eyes were serious as he stared down at me, and I wondered if I could do it.

If I could kill someone.

He answered for me as he read my expression.

"You can. You would have today if you'd had the chance. There's strength in you, Jess. A power you haven't tapped into. A will to survive no matter the consequences."

"You can't read my mind, can you?" I asked, only half joking. He smiled, but it didn't ease the intensity of his gaze.

"No, but your face is expressive enough," he replied as he started walking again. He

kept his strides in check so I didn't have to struggle to keep up. "What will you tell your father?"

"I don't know," I replied, not having thought that far ahead. I reached up to my face, knowing there would be a massive bruise. "It'll be hard to hide a black eye."

"You should be fine. Your face at least. I can't promise the rest of your body won't feel the effects of today." Dominic smiled at my surprised glance. "Stay alert for symptoms of concussion. Our saliva is potent but not a miracle."

"I'm grateful I won't have to explain a black eye," I answered quietly, my finger tracing the spot, still surprised by the lack of pain. The edge of my hairline was damp and my nose wrinkled in disgust. "I'll need to wash my hair."

"Small price to pay," Dominic replied, his gaze reflecting his relief that there were no other causalities.

"So, I'm safe now?"

He didn't answer immediately and I halted, our linked fingers drawing taut before he came to a stop too. Seeing his torn expression, I waited.

"For now," he finally answered, his expression not encouraging. "What happened here – " he broke off as his eyes closed, hiding the warm golden color from me. "There will be consequences."

"What kind of consequences?" I asked, already mentally cursing myself for my curiosity.

"None you need to worry about," he replied dismissively and I fought the urge to argue. He had a point. I'd expressed my desire to remain ignorant and even if that had

started to change, I wasn't sure I was ready for everything knowing would entail.

Moments later, we reached the edge of the woods and the motel came into sight.

"You'll be fine from here," Dominic informed me. "Stay home tonight." His gaze searched the area around the motel as he released my hand, keeping a safe distance between us now that we were back in the real world. "I don't want to see you hurt in an act of retaliation."

"I don't want you hurt either," I blurted out, surprising us both with the emotion in my voice. "I mean, I don't want you to get hurt on my behalf."

"You have no say over that." His grin was marginally less terrifying than normal, but only because I was so recently acquainted with what true terror felt like. "You're an innocent in all of this. An unfortunate victim of circumstance."

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“One I still don’t understand,” I muttered and he raised his eyebrow. “I know. I know. My fault.”

“I don’t blame you.”

My eyes shot up to his in surprise and he glanced away, swallowing.

“You’re young. You didn’t grow up in this life. You have plans, dreams. I respect that.” I blinked at the sudden turn in conversation. “I want you to pursue those dreams. You shouldn’t be shackled to a life you didn’t ask for. It’s why I’m willing to get hurt for you, to die for you, to kill for you.” His hands wrapped around my shoulders, his thumbs pressing against my collarbone as he finished, “You deserve the chance to live the life you want.”

His gaze dropped to my neck, his thumb a hairsbreadth from the spot he’d kissed me and I held my breath, wondering what he’d do.

I swallowed my disappointment as he released me and stepped away. He glanced at me, his face a mixture of desire, confusion, and resolve. “You tempt me in a way I never could have predicted. You test my willpower every second I’m in your presence.” My lips parted at his admission and he inhaled sharply. “You might be the death of me, but I’ll die happy if it means you’re free.”

“Can we stop talking about death?” I asked plaintively and he choked. “No one needs to die, especially not for me.” I debated for a brief second before asking the question that had bothered me since the start of his admission. “Is it because of your sister, Samantha?”

“Partially,” he answered, holding my gaze. “She made her own decisions, but she knew what she was getting into.” He paused and corrected himself, “She thought she knew what she was getting into. You’re a different case.”

“But you’d tell me if I wanted to know.”

His jaw worked for a second, before he gave me a short nod. “I would.”

“You don’t want this for me,” I stated, suddenly seeing his reluctance in a new light.

“This place is dangerous for you, more so than anyone else. At least the way things stand right now.”

“There’s something else you can do to protect me,” I dug, unsure why I was pursuing the dangerous topic. “But you don’t want to do it.”

“You’re clever,” he grunted, sidestepping my statement. “Which only makes all of this harder, but yes, there’s more to this. I could explain, but – ”

“It’s okay,” I stopped him, not wanting him to have to give an excuse for something that I’d decided. “I trust you.”

“You should go inside now,” he said, his voice rough. He handed my backpack to me and I glanced at it in surprise. After everything that happened, it’s presence was a reminder that school had let out only a couple of hours before.

“I have homework,” I said, the words shockingly normal in the face of everything that had transpired since I’d left school.

“You should go do it.”

I glanced at him in concern, my eyes betraying my worry, and he gave me a surprisingly gentle smile.

“I’ll be fine,” he promised, standing still as I backed away from him and everything that had happened. He still hadn’t moved when I reached the door, but by the time I made it to the window to peek out, he was gone.

“Your mom called.”

I spun around, my heart pounding a mile a minute, only to find my dad slumped over the kitchen island, a beer in front of him. I gave a quick glance back at the window, but Dominic had disappeared. My pulse slowed down slightly as I went over to my dad, taking in his depressed state.

“Did someone die?” I asked uncertainly.

“She wants you to come live with her,” he replied, taking a long pull on his beer.

“Not surprising. She never did take losing well,” I retorted, dropping my backpack on the floor as I went to the fridge. “In case you needed confirmation, my answer is no.”

“The new husband got transferred.”

I snorted, unsurprised. “Well, that was to be expected since he only got promoted because Mom helped him sabotage you.”

“Your mom....”

“Dad, please. Don’t defend her to me. I’m old enough to know what happened.”

“He got transferred to the European office.”

I paused; thankful my face was hidden by the refrigerator door. Dad knew how much I wanted to explore Europe. It was my dream to spend a summer touring the major European cities, and it was supposed to have been my senior trip, at least until the divorce. If there were ever a carrot my mother could dangle, this would be the one.

“I know how much you wanted to go,” Dad continued, as I stayed frozen on the other side of the fridge door, my thoughts warring. “And I want you to go. You deserve the chance to pursue your dreams. You don’t need to be stuck in this tiny town.”

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I closed my eyes, leaning my head against the cold shelf as Dad's words echoed Dominic's. He'd said almost the exact same thing, but he'd also mentioned the danger I was in, a fact that would only have me on the first plane out of here if my dad knew.

"Bunny," Dad said and I pressed my lips together at the nickname, fighting back sudden tears. "I love you." My eyes stared sightlessly in the fridge as he continued, "I want you to be happy."

"I am," I had to stop and clear my throat, and knew he couldn't have missed the catch. "I'm happy here."

"Are you?"

"Don't sound so surprised," I retorted. "This tiny town has its perks."

"And living with your dad in a motel where you have to clean rooms?"

"Builds character," I answered instantly, nodding my head sharply.

"Aw, Bunny," he said, his tone a familiar blend of determined and cajoling.

"Dad, I need time to process," I replied, needing to avoid the incoming spiel intended to convince me to go. One my mother had no doubt fed to him. The temptation to leave was overpowering, almost irresistible in fact, and if I let him talk, I'd be on the next plane out of here. However, a tiny, powerful part of me wasn't so sure I wanted to leave.

“I’m going to my room.”

“We’ll have to talk about it eventually.”

“Eventually isn’t today, Dad.”

I avoided his gaze as I scooped up my bag and made a beeline for my room. Sleep and with it oblivion, couldn’t come fast enough.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning I slammed the snooze button so many times, I barely had time to grab a granola bar before dashing out the door, only to draw up short.

“No ride,” Dad commented, coming up behind me.

“No ride,” I echoed, staring at the empty spot in disbelief, and a little bit of hurt. Okay, a lot of hurt. I turned and stomped back inside, flinging my backpack on the couch as I flopped down. “You know what? I don’t feel good. I think I’ll stay home sick.”

“Good idea,” Dad commented. “We can talk about your mother’s plan.”

I dropped my feet to the floor and pushed myself back up with a barely suppressed groan. My body hurt, but there was no way I was going to let my dad in on that fact.

“On second thought, I can walk to school.”

“Bunny.”

“Dad.”

“I’ll give you a pass this time, but you can’t keep ignoring it. If you stick your head in the sand, you’ll miss everything.”

“Can’t you just let me be mad?” I burst out, swallowing hard as I threw my arms out. “Can’t you just let me be sad and angry that the thing I want is in reach, but now I don’t want it because she is the one offering it?”

“You can’t hate her forever for what she did,” Dad said, his eyes pained.

“Wanna bet?”

He tilted his head in reluctant acknowledgement of my ability to hold a grudge as we both stood there, a world of shared misery between us.

“I won’t push, but you will have to talk to her eventually,” he finally said, surrendering. “I’ll give you a ride to school.” I opened my mouth to protest that I was sick, and he lifted his eyebrow. “If you’re well enough to yell at me, you’re well enough to go to school.” I snapped my mouth shut and reached for my backpack instead. “Good choice.”

The ride to school was silent, but it wasn’t an angry, oppressive silence like it would have been if I’d had the same fight with my mom. Dad had already let it go, and it was just another reminder of why I’d chosen him.

“I love you, Dad,” I blurted out, needing him to know.

He gave me a lightening quick grin as he said, “I know.”

“Oh, I forgot, you know everything,” I teased, smiling.

“And don’t you forget it.”

He dropped me in front of the school, and as I walked up the steps it felt strange not coming from the teacher's lot. I scanned faces, searching for Anna or Caleb. And Dominic, a little voice chimed in, one I pointedly ignored.

I'd snoozed so many times that morning, because my sleep had been filled with nightmares, flashbacks from the attack, and every time I'd woken up I'd felt more tired than when I'd gone to sleep.

As hard, as I tried to block the details of the attack, to reassure myself my attackers were dead and no longer a concern, my mind continued to replay the attack, as if stuck in a loop. It was only when I'd remembered the words Justin had said to me before Dominic ripped him away, that my mind had stopped, letting my body relax enough to sleep.

He'd issued a warning, one I had forgotten in the turmoil, but my mind had insisted on me remembering. Now, I needed to let Anna and the others know since it was their lives in danger.

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The halls seemed emptier than normal and I noticed a few empty seats in my classes, but the why wasn't apparent until I entered the lunchroom.

My eyes immediately went to the center tables, knowing I'd find the Pack and someone to warn. I stopped so suddenly, two girls ran into me. I apologized automatically as they eyed me curiously before moving around me. I fought against the flow of traffic headed toward the cashier and made my way to my usual table with Leah and some of the other senior girls.

"Where are they?" I asked without preamble and Leah glanced at the empty tables. Even with none of the Pack there, no one attempted to sit at the tables.

"I was waiting to ask you," she replied, raising an eyebrow at me. "Seems like you have a little more insight than the rest of us."

She was right, I did, but right now, I was as clueless as any of the other humans in the room. I glanced down at my clenched hands, as I realized I'd just referred to my fellow students as human, as if the Pack were other.

How long are you going to keep deluding yourself? A voice whispered and I flinched. Your dad was right. You keep sticking your head in the sand and life is going to pass you right by. You could have died. They could be dead and if you don't warn them they will be.

I stood so abruptly, Leah started.

"Going somewhere?"

“Yeah,” I answered absently, my mind already focused on what I needed to do next. “Thanks,” I added, tapping Leah’s shoulder.

“For what?” she asked, mystified by my behavior.

“For being my friend,” I answered honestly, not having forgotten her willingness to befriend me my first day.

“You don’t have to thank me for that,” she replied, her eyes getting worried. “Is something wrong?”

“I hope not,” I answered a little more truthfully than I should have. I gave her a reassuring smile, as her face grew more concerned. “Really, its fine. I forgot to finish a homework assignment for Nichols,” I continued, making a face and Leah relaxed.

“Oh, in that case.” She chuckled and said, “That woman has it in for you.” I nodded emphatically, already moving toward the door, and a quick glance back showed she’d already started talking to one of the other girls. I hoped that meant she wasn’t going to remember my weirdness when I didn’t show up for any of my afternoon classes.

I shot off a text to Anna, hoping she’d answer and lay some of my fears to rest, but by the time I’d reached my locker, I hadn’t gotten a response. I quickly unloaded my textbooks, and checked the gun I’d hidden at the bottom of my backpack. It was against school policy to have a gun on school grounds and would result in instant expulsion if I were caught with it.

And probably a trip to the police station, I reminded myself uneasily. The sheriff was a Hanley and after yesterday, I wasn’t sure they wouldn’t just kill me on sight.

But I hadn’t forgotten Dominic’s warning either. My only defense was a weapon and the determination to use it. Dad had taught me the basics of gun safety and how to

shoot, but I wasn't kidding myself. I was in no way a crack shot and my only chance would be the element of surprise.

Since I'd never seen where Anna and the others lived and had no idea what to expect, I applauded myself for my foresight in bringing the gun. Granted, I hadn't expected to be making a trip into their stronghold, but that was really beside the point now. I had to go and warn them. If I wasn't already too late.

I made my way to the back exit, the one overlooking the gym and field house, keeping my strides quick and confident. Nothing said suspicious like slinking around in the shadows. I reached the field house without being stopped, and paused to take a breath. The next part was the trickiest. I had to cross an open field before I reached the cover of the trees and anyone who spotted me would know I was ditching. I wasn't worried about getting in trouble, so much as getting caught and detained. I was determined to go, and after taking a second to steel myself, I strode across the field like I was supposed to be there. I kept my pace even, barely breathing as I anticipated someone shouting at me to stop. When no one did and the trees hid me from sight once again, I stopped and glanced back. When I didn't see anyone following, I let myself breathe easier.

The forest felt different now, darker and more ominous as I walked alone, without Caleb's off tune whistling and Dominic's occasional grunt when I tripped. I tried not to think of what happened just the day before, telling myself, they were dead and it was unlikely anyone would be in the woods waiting for me. If my suspicions were true, Dominic and the Pack were in more danger than I was now.

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It didn't take long before I came to the spot of the attack, and I stayed close to the tree line, skirting the area as best I could. The bodies were gone, but blood still stained the ground as well as marks indicating a fight. I hurried, having no desire to linger here alone. I slowed when I realized I was practically jogging in my effort to get away, my pace quickly bringing me to the path I'd seen Caleb take.

I glanced around nervously, the silent forest disturbing in its own way. There was no sound of birds chirping, even the wind was still, and it left me with a sense of wrongness. I refused to turn back now though, and pushed forward, alert to any possibility as I pulled the gun from my backpack and tucked it into the waistband of my jeans, making sure the safety was on and the bulge hidden by my backpack.

The path was wider than I anticipated and smoother. It appeared well used and intended for more than one person to walk side by side. It wound into the forest for a long way, a couple of miles at least before I saw a break, a brightness which indicated a clearing. My eyes flickered side to side, the fine hairs on my neck rising as the sense of being watched washed over me. I gripped the shoulder strap of the backpack on my shoulders with one hand as I left my other hand hanging loosely, ready to grab the gun if necessary.

No one approached me, but I knew they knew I was there. My mind screamed at me that I was foolish, that the place could be overrun with Hanleys by now and I was taking a huge risk.

I ignored the fearful thoughts that would send me scurrying back. Anna had never responded to my text. The Pack hadn't show up at school. I knew the Hanleys were targeting them. If I didn't at least try....it didn't matter if I was putting myself at risk.

I owed it to them after everything they'd done for me.

"Dominic warned them you'd come looking for us. I don't think they believed him," Anna laughed lightly, spooking me. "I didn't believe him."

"You weren't at school," I replied, spotting her next to one of the houses as I stepped into the clearing. There were at least a dozen homes in the large clearing, almost forming a ring as they left the middle area wide open, a space at least five acres in width.

"We weren't allowed," Anna admitted, her face contorting like the admission pained her. "Not after what happened yesterday." I nodded, my eyes taking in everything at once, and noticing that the area was oddly empty for as many houses as there were.

"Where is everyone?" I asked finally, spinning in a slow circle. I could feel the eyes, but other than Anna, it appeared no one was around.

"Hiding from the scary human," she mocked, the words sounding peculiar coming from her soft voice. She eyed me with determination and said, "You can't expect to remain ignorant when you walk straight into our compound."

"I came to warn you," I answered simply. "The guy who attacked me, Justin? He said some things. Things that make me believe they're going to come after your," I paused and then shrugged, "Pack. That's what you are, right?"

She nodded, a glint of admiration in her eyes.

"You walked in here blindly, completely alone, to warn us?" I nodded and she laughed the sound unexpectedly loud for her. "Dom was right, you are an idiot."

I bristled at the insult and snapped, "Not a complete idiot. I have a gun." Her laughter

cut off in surprise and in case she was about to question me further I added, “And I know how to use it.”

She nodded respectfully even as she said, “It was still a foolish thing to do.”

I was still glancing around curiously when I told her, “Trust me, I know.”

“Come on, I’m sure Dom knows you’re here, but I’ll go ahead and bring you to him,” she replied, waving her hand for me to follow.

“You don’t have to do that,” I backtracked, wary to face Dominic after yesterday’s events. Anna lifted her eyebrow as I stammered, “I can tell you, or someone else. No need to bother him.”

“He wouldn’t be happy if he knew you were here and didn’t see him. I’m sure he’d like to yell at you for taking such a risk.” She smiled and it wasn’t a nice smile. “And trust me, you don’t want to talk to someone else. Dominic is high enough in the ranking to pass a message along, and maybe keep you away from the more scary members.”

“Scary?” I echoed, running to catch up with her as it sank in that Dominic wasn’t the scariest person around

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“Powerful might be a better word,” Anna corrected absently. “Not that they would have a lot of power over you, but they know how to throw their weight around.” She shot me a grin over her shoulder. “Good thing for you, Dominic outweighs most of them and he likes you.”

“He does?” I asked, wincing at the girlyness of my question even as I waited anxiously for Anna’s response.

“Oh yeah, no one has seen him in such a frenzy since...”

“I think that’s enough, Anna.” He appeared out of nowhere, but I didn’t even so much as twitch at his presence. It was as if I was attuned to him, so much so that even his silent arrival wasn’t enough to startle me. “I’ll take over from here,” he finished, his smile a little more feral than normal.

Anna shot me a sympathetic glance, but walked off without a word. I turned to face him and barely had time to stop my mouth from dropping open.

He was once again shirtless, and only wearing loose workout pants that barely clung to his hips, and his skin glistened, as if he’d just finished a run or a workout. I swallowed the sudden drool forming in my mouth and the words, “Holy hotness,” that begged to escape.

“I’m going to have to keep a better eye on you if you’re going to walk in unannounced on pack territory,” he warned me as he reached for a t-shirt he must have had tucked into the back of his workout pants, because there was no other place it could have been hiding according to my objective perusal of him. My lips twitched

as he pulled the shirt over his head and I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head

“You’re a shifter.”

He paused in pulling his shirt down at my words, leaving his chest on full display. My eyes lingered on the well-defined muscles of his abs, each one more developed than the next.

“What? No werewolf nonsense?” He questioned, surprise coating his words.

My eyes had trailed down to the sharply delineated muscle at his hip and I murmured distractedly, “Werewolves are so last year.”

A sudden burst of laughter brought my gaze up as he tugged his shirt the rest of the way down.

“So, are we discussing this now?”

I let out a deep sigh, not sure if it was disappointment at him hiding those gorgeous muscles or the topic of conversation.

“Yes,” I answered dejectedly, looking up to meet his eyes.

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic, Jess. People might take you for a wolf lover,” Dominic deadpanned and it took me a second to realize he’d made a joke.

“That was so bad, it was almost funny,” I informed him and he smirked. “I had a reason for coming here and I’m not so ill prepared as you think,” I tacked on, taking objection to his implication that I needed looking after.

“Yeah, you brought a gun,” Dominic said idly. “Anna warned me in case I said something to piss you off.”

I exhaled, chagrined at his lack of concern at my having a weapon. He didn’t seem happy I’d taken his advice, or concerned I’d use it on him. I frowned, unhappy with both possibilities.

“You know how to use it?”

“Yes,” I answered, not as enthusiastic as I had been.

“Good, I’m glad you have it.”

His praise, faint as it was, had me standing a little straighter. I knew I’d taken a foolish risk coming here, but at the same time I knew I’d make the same decision every time.

“The Hanley who tried to drag me away – ”

“Justin.”

“Yeah, him. He said some things to me.” Dominic glanced at me in concern and I realized he thought I was worried about myself, at whatever vile things he imagined Justin had said, and I hurried to correct the impression. “About you or more the Pack.”

“What do you mean?”

We were walking along a path that meandered past the houses and occasionally I saw a flash of curtain as we walked past.

“Are they watching us?” I asked, trying not to make my own covert glances obvious.

Dominic snorted and waved pointedly at one of the twitching curtains.

“Of course. You’re an oddity and they’re curious.”

“An oddity?” I replied, questioning. I waved my hand after a second and said, “Never mind, a question for a later date. I’m more worried about what Justin said.”

“I’m listening,” Dominic said, his gaze focused carefully on me. He was paying attention and I knew he was going to take whatever I told him seriously.

“He was gleeful, it was almost like he was high. He said, ‘They think they’re special, but they’ll find out soon enough.’” I paused and rushed through the next words, “After I’ve fucked you, they won’t want you back.” Dominic let out a low growl, the sound so menacing the fine hair stood up on my arms. I hurried to finish before he got lost in a rage. “Then he said, ‘Not that there will be anyone left to save you.’” We stood there silently for a minute, Dominic’s face carefully blank.

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“He said that?” Dominic asked. “No one left to save you?”

I nodded in confirmation, the memory of his fanatical laughter as he said it making me shiver. Dominic saw my fear and rubbed his hands over my arms.

“We expected retaliation, but this....”

“Sounds premeditated?” I offered helpfully and he gave me a nod as his jaw worked.

“I need to go talk to the pack elders,” he finally said, removing his hands from my arms. “Would you like to meet them?” He added, almost as an afterthought. The question was innocent enough, but I saw the caution in his eyes. These people were important to Dominic, I was also sure one of them was his father. Part of me wanted to shake my head and go hide somewhere with Anna, but I was curious and since I’d abandoned any pretense of ignorance it seemed like I should face them head on.

“Yes,” I answered, drawing a steading breath. There was a flicker of admiration on his face as he placed his hand on my back to steer me toward one of the houses. I let out a hiss, reflexively pulling away from his touch and he stopped. I saw the confusion on his face and gave him a halfhearted smile. “You were right about feeling the pain the next day.”

Understanding dawned on his face as he grimaced in sympathy. “No one’s licking your back,” he informed me and I let out a choked laugh.

“I wasn’t planning on letting anyone,” I popped back and he gave me a sideways glance.

“I do have pain reliever though.”

“You probably should have started with that,” I told him.

“Noted,” he answered dryly, coming to a stop in front of one of the larger buildings. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a few people outside, casting glances our way. They stayed close to the houses, but there was no doubt they were staring at me.

“You’re definitely going to have to explain why I’m so damn interesting,” I murmured to Dominic, getting a faint grin for my efforts. “And are we supposed to knock?”

Dominic blinked at me in surprise and then his smile widened to reveal straight white teeth, a sight I no longer found so terrifying. “No need,” he answered, right as the door opened behind me. I twisted back around in surprise, and then craned my neck to see the newcomer’s face.

“The girl,” the man stated his expression so intimidating I took a step back right into Dominic’s chest. This was Dominic’s dad, if the expression hadn’t been a giveaway, the eyes were.

“I prefer Jess,” I replied faintly, forcing myself to step forward again and away from the comfort of Dominic. “You must be Hank Navarre.” I stuck out my hand and he stared down at it in bemusement. “I can’t say I’ve heard much about you, but I understand you’ve been trying to keep me safe.” I paused, wondering if I should lower my hand, but I wanted to finish. “Thank you.”

“I like her,” he rumbled, taking my hand and shaking it gently, as if my bones were made of glass. “You’re trouble, but sometimes that’s a good thing,” he informed me and moved aside so we could enter the building.

“Thanks?” I offered, stepping inside and gazing around. The place was bigger than I’d thought from the outside, and looked like a cross between a church and a meeting hall. The room we entered was round and reminded me of an amphitheater, but that wasn’t its sole purpose. Part of it had been dug out so that a round table could sit low in the center of the room while rough wooden benches formed seating around it. Everyone sitting would have a clear view of what was happening at the table and be able to hear them clearly.

“Welcome to the Pack, Jess.” I smiled at his emphasis on my name, but my attention focused on the other four people in the room. I was surprised to see a woman among the men, and something about her was familiar.

“Anna’s mom and dad are both pack elders. One day Anna will take their place,” Dominic said under his breath, leading me to a low bench under a window.

“Do we need to tell them?” I asked, concerned.

Dominic tapped his forehead, “Done.”

“That is equal parts creepy and cool,” I replied, my eyes narrowed and he smiled.

“It comes in handy,” he said. When he didn’t say anything else, I gave him an expectant look. “My dad is an elder. Caleb’s father is alpha,” Dominic’s eyes flickered to an older man whose sandy hair had a good amount of gray in it, but reminded me of Caleb. “Anna’s parents. And the last one is our oldest pack member, Gregory.”

There was no mistaking him. When Dominic said, “Oldest pack member,” I think he meant to say, “Oldest person alive.”

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“How old is he?” I hissed, the man’s thinning silver hair and wrinkled folds making me think he had been born in another era.

“103,” I heard, but it wasn’t Dominic who answered. The old man didn’t bother turning toward me and I elbowed Dominic in the side, hissing almost silently, “You could have warned me he has the hearing of a bat!”

“How was I to know you’d ask his age?” Dominic said defensively.

“Because he looks older than time?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” the old man retorted, finally turning toward us. “You’re a first for me. A breeding female raised among humans.”

I frowned, slightly insulted at being called a ‘breeding female’ it sounded entirely too much like being called a brood mare. Dominic wrapped his hand around mine, prying my fingers loose from the fist I’d made. “It’s not an insult,” he murmured between his teeth. “It’s one of our most prized titles. Do not insult him over it.” He paused and then added, “Please.”

I unclenched my teeth and whispered back just as quietly, “Only because you said please.”

The old man just watched us, smiling faintly, and I had the feeling he heard every word we spoke.

“Back to the business at hand,” Caleb’s dad broke in, the command in his voice

snapping everyone's attention to him, even mine. "You've all been informed of what the girl – " he broke off as Dominic's dad leaned toward him, whispering. Caleb's dad glanced up at me with a curious expression, but quickly continued. "Jess has brought some interesting information to us and in light of it we need to reconsider our strategy."

"We don't have the numbers," Anna's mom said, the words tired like she'd said them a dozen times before. "Yes, Dominic is a force to be reckoned with, that was made clear by the two dead Hanley men yesterday. But we don't know their exact numbers and we just don't have enough men to fight. We're a small pack."

"I'm not sure we have a choice anymore, Gillian." This time it was Dominic's dad, Hank, who spoke. His expression spoke of frustration, not with Gillian but the situation. "We need to be prepared. An offensive strike may be our only chance."

"And our children? The members of the pack who aren't capable of shifting? Do we force them to fight as well?" Anna's dad sounded defeated. "It could be annihilation."

"Leaving would be the safest choice," the old man said, his voice strong in spite of this frail body. "Packs roamed in the past. We've become complacent."

"Wolf packs roamed. That's no longer an easy option. We need land for the ones who can shift. Jobs for those that can't. Picking up and leaving is a last resort."

"At least we'll live," Gillian cried out fiercely.

"But we will no longer be a pack!" Caleb's dad roared, causing me to jump at the power radiating from his voice.

"We should go," Dominic whispered, pulling me along the bench as I stared at the five elders locked in conflict. Dominic's dad met his son's eyes for a brief second

before flickering to mine and he nodded respectfully. I suspected he'd communicated with Dominic, but didn't want to ask till we were far away from listening ears.

Once we were outside, I noticed the sun had dipped lower in the sky. I reached for my phone to see the time and cursed.

"I need to –"

"Get home." Dominic finished for me and I nodded. "I'll walk you." He gave me a rueful grin. "I imagine you have a few questions."

"A few," I agreed.

"I'll do my best," he stated, and waved his hand toward Anna who stood next to Caleb by one of the houses. They both waved, but didn't make an effort to join us. "Anna might actually be able to explain some of it better than I can, but I'll try."

I nodded, but stayed silent as we made our way to the path in the forest. I wanted some semblance of privacy before I asked the questions racing through my mind.

"There's a shorter path back to the motel, but much rougher," Dominic told me, keeping his long strides in check as he steered us to the wide path I'd come in on. A guy met us at the edge of the forest and handed Dominic something. It wasn't until we'd gone down the path that I realized what it was. Dominic handed me a water bottle and a single dose pack of ibuprofen.

A foolish grin fought to escape, but I forced it back as I tossed the pills in my mouth and swallowed them with the water. I pressed my lips together and glanced up at him, mouthing "Thank you."

"Least I could do," he said nonchalantly, keeping a polite distance between us as we

walked.

“It’s kind of you,” I murmured, no longer feeling unsettled as we walked through the forest. He made a noncommittal noise and I dropped it, instead focusing my attention on what I should ask. There were so many questions running through my mind that I finally gave up. “I don’t know what to ask you. I don’t even know where to start.”

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He chuckled lightly at my obvious frustration, but started talking before I became impatient. “The easiest place to start is with the basics. You’ve figured out we’re shifters. Specifically, wolf shifters. So are the Hanleys. We just have very different pack rules.”

“Clearly,” I interjected. “They like to kidnap women into their pack while you take the time to woo them.”

“Woo?” He choked out and I grinned.

“Well, yeah. I am a breeding female after all.”

His laugh boomed through the forest, so loud it actually startled a bird into flight.

“I didn’t think it was that funny!”

“You don’t even know what a breeding female is,” he retorted as his laughter died down. “But you’re actually close.”

“Ha,” I sputtered, quickening my steps to keep up with him. He noticed and shortened his strides once more.

“Don’t get too pleased with yourself,” he retorted, giving me a dry glance and I shrugged. “Breeding females can have cubs. You carry the gene for it.”

“That’s it? I can have babies?” I asked, somewhat disappointed. It didn’t sound that special to me.

“You can have shifter babies,” he specified and my eyes narrowed. “And yes, it’s worth killing for.”

“Why?”

“We’re not a prolific bunch to begin with, and for years...centuries, packs didn’t understand genetics. They bred for stronger wolves, but eventually the female births dropped and there were fewer and fewer cubs being born each generation.” He paused to see if I was following and I nodded. “We know now that it is all genetics. Some carry the gene, others don’t. In some individuals it may be recessive, and others dominant. To simplify it, you’re a carrier.”

“Which means?”

“If you mate with a male who can shift, there’s a high chance the babies you have together will be able to shift.”

“You say, ‘able to shift’ like some might have the gene and can’t shift?”

“Yes, Caleb’s older brother is an example,” he answered and I blinked in surprise. He saw it and smiled. “Yes, the alpha has a son who isn’t a shifter. He does carry the recessive gene though.”

“How does that work?” I asked, truly fascinated by how something that seemed magical to me was so scientific.

“Well, his father, the alpha, fell in love with a girl who didn’t have any shifter genes. Carter was the result.”

“And Caleb?” I asked, sniffing a potential love story.

“Has a different mother,” Dominic stated evasively. “What makes you different is that you were not raised in a pack. You have the gene from your father, but he’s not a shifter and there are no indications either of you were aware of shifters before coming here.”

“My dad was adopted,” I told him as I processed the information. “How did you know though?”

“Know?”

“That I have the gene.”

Suddenly, he looked uncomfortable and I raised my eyebrow, “Really? Spit it out.”

“Your scent.”

“Back to that. You seem really bothered by my scent and so did those Hanley’s but Caleb doesn’t seem to care.”

“Caleb isn’t old enough to mate,” Dominic said with a growl. He bristled beside me, his body seeming larger and I edged away.

“Okay, chill. I wasn’t asking for myself,” I said, knowing any implication that he was jealous would snap him out of it.

“Good thing,” he snapped, not calming down in the slightest. “That little mark on your neck would be a hell of a lot more permanent if you were.”

The mark chose that moment to burn as we stood there tensely staring at one another for a second.

“Sorry,” he muttered as I lowered my gaze. “That was uncalled for.” He rubbed the back of his neck, and started walking again. “I never realized how strong the mating desire was until I met you. We instinctively know by scent a female that can bear our young. The longer we’re in contact the stronger the desire becomes to claim.”

“So, you don’t develop an immunity the longer I’m around you?” I joked.

“No, afraid not. And when you’re in heat...”

“What?” I shrieked, suddenly thinking I was emitting some scent that was calling all the dogs to the yard.

“It’s not like a wolf. Not exactly. Women ovulate. When you’re fertile, you’re difficult to resist,” he finished awkwardly, but it was the tightness on his face that clued me into how difficult.

“The Hanleys. The day they chased me,” I murmured, that day finally making sense.

“Yes,” he broke off and I didn’t press, my mind flashing back to another moment that day. His sudden, inexplicable desire now made sense, and it was starting to dawn on me how much danger I’d been in.

“I guess I should thank you,” I mumbled quietly and he gave an unamused chuckle.

“You should thank me every day you aren’t pinned to the ground and mounted,” he responded tightly and a flash of heat went through me so hot I thought my insides might melt.

“Another topic?” I asked faintly and he nodded, edging a little further away.

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“We’re not a large pack. Less than a dozen can shift which puts us at a disadvantage,” he stated matter of factly. “The Hanleys have focused on increasing the number of shifters in their pack for years. Basically by breeding any female they can get their hands on, willing or not.”

“Like me.”

“Exactly. My sister – ” he cleared his throat, but didn’t finish the thought. “Now they need more land, and the easiest way to do that is to take our territory. Add in the fact that we’ve never gotten along,” he stopped and I finished the sentence.

“And it means war.”

“Yes, in a nutshell.”

“But not everyone agrees.”

“No, and I understand why they are resisting, but what I don’t think they get is we won’t have a choice.”

“You could leave,” I said, my voice small as a sharp pang went through me at the thought.

“No,” he denied. “I can’t. I left for college, got my degree and came right back here. This is my home and I can’t walk away from it without a fight.” He glanced down at me in sympathy. “You would need to leave as well. In fact, leaving may be the safest thing for you.”

I kept my mouth shut, knowing he would be insistent I leave if he knew it was a possibility. Intellectually, I knew it would be the smartest decision. Not only was I a prize to be fought over here, this place would soon be a war zone between two packs of wolves. I should want to leave as soon as possible and drag my dad with me. But, I didn't want to leave. Which just went to prove my point that caring about people was the fastest way to get hurt.

The motel came in sight and instead of leaving me; Dominic continued to walk beside me. I fiddled with the strap on my backpack and remembered the gun tucked into my waistband. I reached behind me to pull it out and Dominic eyed me.

"Would you have used it?"

"If necessary," I replied quietly, determination echoing through my words.

"I admire your courage even as I curse your foolishness," Dominic murmured as we reached the apartment door.

"Would you like to come in?" I asked, unlocking the door, relieved Dad wasn't there. I wasn't sure how I would explain Dominic's presence. At least, I had remembered to send him a text saying I'd found a ride home.

"Foolish," he grumbled, low enough I was sure he thought I didn't hear him, as he followed me inside anyway.

Chapter Fourteen

"Welcome to our humble abode. The tour will be quick since we're standing in the living room, dining room, and kitchen," I said brightly, setting down my backpack more gently than normal since I'd shoved the gun back into one of the pockets. "There's a bedroom and bath over there and my bedroom....is over there." I waved

vaguely to the other side of the apartment, suddenly feeling very foolish indeed. It was one thing for him to walk me home, but for me to invite him in as well? After everything he'd admitted and the brief kiss I'd given him. My face flushed as I wondered if he thought I was a tease.

He stared at me in amusement and my cheeks heated even more.

"I'd love to know what's going through that head of yours right now," he admitted and my tongue darted out to moisten my suddenly dry lips. He dragged in a deep breath and then cursed. "This was a bad idea," he muttered under his breath and I gave him a questioning glance. "Your scent is everywhere. It saturates the air."

"Oh," I uttered as he moved toward the door. However, a quick glance out the window revealed my dad's SUV pulling up in front of the apartment.

"No!" I grabbed him before he could open the door and started tugging him toward my room. He didn't really move and I finally said in exasperation, "My dad just showed up."

He followed me after that, letting me lead him into my room where I slammed the door shut behind us.

"Is there a reason you brought me here?" He said, his nostrils flared and I realized if my scent was strong in the living room it must be torture in here.

"I didn't want my dad to see you here."

"Why?"

"Because then I'd have to explain why a teacher was standing in the living room...a gorgeous teacher who owns a Jeep that comes to pick me up every day," I finished,

glancing at my door like it was going to fly open any second.

“Gorgeous?”

“That’s what you took from that?” I questioned him in disbelief right as I heard the front door slam open.

“BUNNY!” Dad shouted his voice livid. My forehead wrinkled as I wondered what had upset him.

“Bunny?” Dominic mouthed, his eyes wide as he fought to hold in a laugh. I glared at him, but a second later Dad pounded on my door.

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“Open up, Bunny. You have some explaining to do!”

“One minute,” I called frantically, trying to find some place big enough for Dominic to hide.

“NOW!” He rattled the doorknob threateningly and I shouted the first thing that came to mind.

“I’m naked!”

The doorknob stopped shaking and Dominic stared at me in shock.

“Two minutes and I’m coming in there, naked or not,” Dad threatened and I motioned to Dominic, like I was getting on all fours. He stared at me in confusion and I finally, whisper shouted, “Shift!”

“What is going on, young lady?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Dad. I took a shower when I got home.”

“From school?”

“Yeah.”

“And when was that?”

“A little while ago,” I called back, barely registering his questions as Dominic

proceeded to strip down. He caught me staring and smirked as he shimmed out of his boxer briefs. A moment later, he blurred and a massive black wolf stood in front of me.

The door burst open and Dad stood there panting, his expression furious as he stared at me, completely missing the large wolf on the other side of the room as he glared at me.

“You cut class,” he accused, his mouth tight as he stared at me in disappointment.

“I did,” I admitted, not even glancing at Dominic’s wolf form for fear of drawing Dad’s attention to him. “I had a good reason.”

“Oh, and what would that be?” He demanded to know, his arms crossed.

“I was helping a friend,” I started, scrambling to come up with something.

“A friend,” Dad echoed. “With what?”

“Dog sitting.” I said, wincing even as the words came out of my mouth. A low growl met my words and I rubbed my hands together nervously as Dad slowly turned.

“Dog?” Dad said faintly, staring down at the massiveness that was Dominic in wolf form.

“He’s a hybrid,” I chirped, trying to hide my nerves.

“A hybrid?” Dad repeated again, seeming incapable of anything else as he stared at Dominic. On a positive note, he had apparently forgotten about me cutting class. Not so good was the gently growling Dominic, who apparently didn’t care to be referred to as a dog.

“He’s really friendly,” I said loudly to cover the threatening sounds coming our way.

“Friendly?” Disbelief coated his words and I winced.

“Friendly,” I repeated firmly, giving Dominic a pointed glare. He quit growling and I smiled brightly at Dad. “See? He’s a little wary around strangers. Very protective though,” I rushed to reassure him as it looked like he might grab me and run from the room.

“How long?” Dad asked with a frown. I glanced at Dominic, uncertain how to answer. His stare said, “You got us in this mess, now you get us out.”

“Overnight,” I blurted out then bit my lip. Overnight with Dominic. I was an idiot.

“I don’t know, Bunny,” Dad said slowly and Dominic chuffed. I shot him a glare, but there was no mistaking the amusement in his yellow eyes.

“He’s a perfect gentleman, Dad,” I rushed to reassure him and then had a thought. “He’s trained.”

“Trained. He’d have to be or you’d never be able to control him.” Dad looked him over more closely and I cringed. “Where’s his collar?”

“He’s chipped,” I said, clearing my throat as it came out as a squeak.

“Hmm,” Dad hummed and then told Dominic, “Sit!”

I compressed my lips to hide the smile threatening as Dominic just stared at my dad in disbelief.

“I thought you said he was trained?” Dad turned to me at the exact same time as

Dominic, and I shrugged helplessly.

“He is. Um, you just need to say his name first,” I made up, glancing pointedly at Dominic.

“What’s his name?” Dad asked, lifting his eyebrow.

“Dom –” I cut myself off as I decided it might not be the wisest idea to use his real name. “Domino.”

“Okay,” Dad said, turning back to the massive black wolf. “I think Kujo might have been a better name,” he muttered under his breath and Dominic nodded. I glared at him and swore he rolled his eyes.

“Domino, sit.”

It took a second but slowly Dominic lowered his haunches to the ground and my dad beamed as if he’d just saved Timmy’s life. “Good boy!”

“Domino, lay down.”

Slowly, so slowly I thought for a minute he wasn’t actually going to move, Dominic slid down until his body rested on the ground. “Very good!”

“Domino –”

“Dad, I think that’s enough,” I broke in hastily, afraid of what might happen if Dad continued to see what ‘tricks’ Domino knew. An angry and naked Dominic came to mind and I hurried to get Dad out of the room.

“He’s had a long day, and he’s in a strange place,” I explained and Dad allowed

himself to be shoved to the door, but when I went to close it, he stopped me.

“Oh, no. Don’t think I forgot you skipped school, Bunny. This door stays open until I can trust you again.” He glanced at Dominic and then back at me. “And make sure you take him outside so he doesn’t have an accident inside.”

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“Of course,” I said faintly as a sharp bark of objection came from the wolf on the floor.

Dad frowned again and added, “And he better not bark all night.”

“He won’t,” I promised quickly as Dad continued to linger at the door. I knew better than to hurry him or he’d just dig his heels in. Like someone else I know, I thought glaring at the wolf on the floor.

“And keep him off the furniture,” Dad demanded, pointing at the bed. I felt my face flame as Dominic closed his eyes.

“Got it, Dad.”

“I’m making steak for dinner,” he mentioned and Dominic’s ears perked up.

“Can you cook one for Domin..no?” I quickly corrected myself as Dad stared at me in disbelief. “What?” I shrugged. “He’s gotta eat.”

“Of course he does,” Dad replied and went down the hall muttering something about big ass dogs and his steak.

“Love you, Dad!” I cried out and he tossed me a wave of acknowledgement over his shoulder.

I slumped against the wall, eyeing Dominic. He tilted his head in the wolf equivalent of ‘what now?’

I took a deep breath and told him, “Forget you ever heard him call me Bunny and I’ll never mention you and obedience training in the same sentence.”

I held my hand out and he eyed it disdainfully before reluctantly placing his paw in it. I had to brace myself against the weight since it was at least twice the size of my hand.

“Good, we have a deal.”

Dominic lowered his paw, trotted over to the bed, and jumped on it. I sighed, glanced over my shoulder to check that Dad couldn’t see him, and decided to give in gracefully. It wasn’t like I could move him anyway.

Dinner went better than expected since Dominic busied himself with gnawing on an enormous T-bone. Dad finally stopped muttering about expensive appetites and I excused myself saying I had homework.

“Aren’t you going to take him out?” Dad called after me and I hesitated. Did he need to go out?

“Right,” I answered, turning around. “I will take him outside.” I forced a grin and added, “He probably needs to stretch his legs anyway.”

“Does he need a leash?”

I closed my eyes at the idea of putting a leash on Dominic and his immediate growl assured me that would never happen.

“No, he comes on command,” I replied, going to the door.

“Come, Domi....no,” I called, catching myself before I used his real name. He got to

his feet and came over to me, nudging his head against me so I couldn't go out before him. I smiled faintly at his protectiveness even when forced to act like a dog.

He sniffed the air, and cocked his ears forward, listening. After a minute, he deemed it safe enough and walked out with me trailing behind him. Once we'd turned the corner of the building, he bumped me again, herding me to the wall, lifting his head up and down. I eyed him curiously, before I figured out he wanted me to sit and wait for him there. I nodded and sank down, leaning my back against the wall. He gave me a hard stare and I muttered defensively, "I'll sit right here until you come back."

He nodded in satisfaction and ran to the woods. I tilted my head back and looked up at the night sky, seeing a blanket of stars above me. It wasn't something you could see in the city and I wondered if staying was the right decision. Was I risking Dominic's life by staying? Or was leaving just another instance of me shutting people out?

A few minutes later, I heard several howls, one in particular distinctive, and I knew it was Dominic. I didn't know how I knew only that I did. I let my mind wander, abandoning the never-ending loop of what-ifs as I studied the millions of stars. I wondered if there was anyone up there staring back down at me. If I was, nothing more than a distant star in the sky to them.

A cold nose bumped me and I glanced over to see Dominic's golden yellow eyes staring at me. It was about the only thing I could make out in the darkness since he blended in so well.

I reached out, my hand hovering over the fur behind his ear, unsure how he would take my petting him. He tilted his head back, allowing my hand to make contact and I took that as permission. My fingers sank deep into the silky fur and as I massaged he made a humming noise. Something about the moment gave me courage, maybe it was because he couldn't talk back or the darkness, but I let the words I could never say,

spill out.

“My mom is a bitch. Coldhearted and selfish. She only wants to win and I swear she’d do anything so she can. She needs to control everything. Including me.” Dominic settled his massive head on my knee as I spoke, telling me he was listening. “She told me I was dead to her when I chose to live with Dad. Told me I was nothing but a waste and a mistake. That if it hadn’t been for me and the fact that Dad stopped her from getting an abortion, she’d have been free a long time ago.” Dominic rumbled and I shook my head. “I’m not upset about it. With my mother, a lie could be the truth and the truth nothing but a lie.” I let out a sigh and my gaze went back to the stars above. “She just has to win,” I said bitterly. “She has to be right, no matter what.” I plunged my hand deeper into his fur, rubbing the scruff around his neck. “She knows how much I want to see Europe. It was supposed to be my senior trip, but she made sure when they got divorced that it was canceled. Now, she wants to dangle living in Europe in front of me.” Dominic’s head turned the bright yellow of his eyes curious. “My stepfather was transferred,” I explained. “The European office. She wants me to live with them. Spend my senior year there.” Dominic made a noise, human enough to make me start. I shook my head and told him, “I’m not going.” A low growl was his response and I smiled. “This is what she does. Dangles an irresistible carrot and then makes your life hell when you take it.” I smoothed his ruffled fur as I continued. “I know I should go. It’s selfish for me to stay honestly, but I’m happy here. I belong. I’m glad to be with my dad and even though I never in a million years would have dreamed this life,” I shrugged reluctantly, “Now, I can’t imagine not being here.” He leaned his weight into me, the closest he could come to hugging me and I wrapped my arms around him. “Not that I’m giving up on my dreams or even promising I can stay forever, but this deserves a chance.” Dominic sighed and I squeezed him tighter. “I know it’s dangerous. Foolish.” He snorted and I smiled into his inky black fur. “But there’s this guy. He’s younger, has sandy blonde hair,” I was interrupted by a growl and giggled. “Let me finish,” I admonished, squeezing a little harder than necessary. “He’s great, but he has this guy who would lay down his life for him. This guy who is a little grumpy,” another growl interrupted

me so I added, “Okay, a lot grumpy. But he’s honorable. Honest. Kinda of good-looking. And massive. Oh my god is he huge.” A shaking chuff met my words and I grinned. “He’s looking for a mate. Not that he said as much but I can read between the lines.” Those golden eyes swung to mine and I stroked the soft fur of his cheekbone. “He’s all low key, but I feel it too.” He stared at me unblinkingly and then his tongue curled out and swiped my chin.

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I sat there for a second, stunned, and then shouted, “You licked me!”

Dominic bumped his nose against my cheek and smiled, his tongue lolling out as I stared at him in disbelief.

“For that you can sleep on the floor,” I informed him, trying to keep myself from laughing at his suddenly dejected face. “Let’s go back inside. I need to wash dog slobber off my face.”

Chapter Fifteen

I woke up sweating, my body situated awkwardly along the edge of the bed. I shifted, or attempted to shift to the middle only to be stopped by the massive wolf taking up my entire bed. I grunted, shoving at one of the paws tucked against my back, and when I couldn’t even move that, I gave up and tried to get out of the bed, catching myself as I fell.

The thump of my knee hitting the floor had Dominic’s eye cracking and I glared at him as I managed to stand up.

“You’re a bed hog!”

He gazed at me for one second before lazily closing his eye and I smacked his flank, not that it did much good covered in layers of fur. Which was probably the reason I was sweating in a room Dad liked to call a meat locker because I kept it so cold when I slept.

“I have school,” I reminded him as he stayed in the bed and was met with a snuffling snort as he snuggled in deeper. I paused on my way to my closet, letting out a laugh as I realized Dominic wasn’t a morning person. No wonder he was so grumpy picking me up in the mornings.

I shook my head and grabbed my clothes, figuring I’d change in the bathroom. He might have given me a show, but I wasn’t ready to return the favor. Dad met me in the kitchen, a bowl of cereal already poured for me. I eyed it and then him, and he gave me an exasperated glance.

“Think you can manage to stay at school all day today?” He asked, plopping the milk down in front of me.

“I should,” I answered casually, woofing down the cereal. “Do I need an excuse for yesterday?” I added carefully and he snorted.

“Lucky for you, I told them I’d forgotten to call and let them know you had to leave.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said cheerfully, smiling at him. He only lifted his eyebrow meaningfully, so I added, “It won’t happen again.”

“Let’s hope not or I’m going to have to figure out some way to punish you.”

“Cleaning dirty motel rooms isn’t enough?” I asked dryly and he forced back an involuntary grin.

“Alright, let’s not have you turning this around on me,” he said defensively as I laughed. “Did anyone ever tell you, you’d make a damn good lawyer?”

“Only the man who spawned me, and he’s slightly biased.”

The click of paws on the floor ended our conversation as Dominic padded his way through the room.

“That is one damn big dog,” Dad muttered under his breath as Dominic went to the door and gazed at it expectantly. “You need to go out, boy?” Dad called, pitching his voice higher as I cringed internally. There was no way Dominic would ever forget this.

I went over and peeked out the window to see a familiar Jeep sitting in the parking spot.

“Actually, our ride is here,” I told Dad and he gave Dominic an impressed glance.

“Smart dog,” he said and I mumbled, “You have no idea.”

I slipped out the door before he could say anything else Dominic would hold against me and made my way to the Jeep. I yanked the door open and Dominic jumped right in.

“Way to make it look easy,” I grumbled, grabbing the seat to haul myself up. Dominic was already in the back seat, bare skin on display as he pulled on clothes. Anna kept her eyes politely averted, but Caleb was laughing as he eyed Dominic through the rearview mirror.

“How was your night as a dog?” Caleb snorted, ducking as Dominic reached around to slap the back of his head.

“Better than yours,” Dominic retorted, slipping a shirt over his chest. “I slept in a warm bed. You?”

Caleb flipped him the bird and I lifted my eyebrow questioningly to Anna.

“Caleb had night watch since Dominic was with you,” she explained, smiling at Caleb who also grinned.

“Anna kept me company,” he said and I widened my eyes at Anna.

“Yeah, cause last time you fell asleep,” Dominic interjected flatly and Caleb flushed.

“Have they decided if they’ll attack or not?” I asked uncertainly, knowing it wasn’t exactly my business. They all exchanged glances but it was Dominic who answered.

“No. No decision has been made.” His jaw worked as he spoke and I knew he was unsatisfied with the lack of a decision.

“You think they’ll attack soon, don’t you,” I stated.

“It’s only a matter of time,” Dominic said, but it was the look on Caleb’s face that caught my attention. He looked like he wanted to argue, and I remembered him disagreeing with Dominic about a coming war.

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“You disagree?” I asked him directly and Caleb gave me a startled glance. I kept my expression blank, but Caleb had been there when the Hanleys had attacked. He knew what they intended and had told them himself it was an act of war.

“I don’t think violence is the answer,” he answered diplomatically and Dominic snorted in the back. Anna kept her gaze focused out the window, and I made a note to ask her opinion later. “I also wonder why they haven’t retaliated yet if their purpose is to start something.”

“It’s Dom,” Anna said quietly, so low I almost missed it, but the other sharper ears in the Jeep had no trouble. “They’re afraid of him.”

“With good reason,” Dominic snarled, his body tense, as he shifted around uncomfortably in the back seat of the Jeep.

“And Uncle Hank,” Anna continued as if he hadn’t interrupted. “Both of them are powerful fighters. Caleb too when necessary. They’re going to be cautious. Try and catch us when we’re weak.”

“You agree?” Caleb questioned, a hint of betrayal in his voice.

Anna gazed at him, her expression a curious mix of patience, sympathy and exasperation. “Yes, Caleb. I agree with Dom.”

“But your parents....”

“Are wrong in this instance.”

Anna shifted restlessly and for the first time I saw a flicker of fear cross her face.

“They’ve already attacked Jess multiple times. It’s only a matter of time before they come after me.” The Jeep jerked slightly as Caleb’s grip tightened on the wheel. “They targeted Samantha when Dom was away. Their intentions are clear. It’s only a matter of time before I’m next.” Anna turned her head to look out the window at the dense forest that was her home. “I don’t like it, but I also don’t want to live in fear of the day they come for me.”

“Anna,” Caleb said, horror in his voice before he cleared it. “They will never touch you,” Caleb promised, his voice deeper than I’d ever heard and both Anna and Dominic’s eyes jerked to him.

“That was –” Dominic started, but cut off abruptly.

“I’ll talk to my father,” Caleb stated and they both nodded, silenced by the forcefulness of his words.

The rest of the ride was quiet and when we arrived, Dominic told us to meet at the field house after school.

“Stay together,” he admonished. “No one goes anywhere alone. Especially, you two,” he added, eyeing Anna and me. We nodded, neither of us bothering to argue after recent events.

Anna stuck with me as we walked down the hall, and there were a few curious glances, but none of them came from Pack members. I smirked internally at how accurately the humans had labeled them, even if it was completely unintentionally.

“Why are you amused?” Anna whispered, catching sight of my expression.

“It’s nothing,” I answered, glancing over at her. “Just it makes sense why Dominic freaked out when I referred to him and Caleb as the Pack.”

Anna snorted and shook her head.

“They are so oblivious it hurts. We’ve had that same nickname forever at this school.”

I lowered my voice even further, knowing what I was about to ask was not for human ears.

“You’re a wolf?”

Anna shot me a quick glance and nodded.

“That’s rare?”

She nodded again and when we reached my locker she said, “My mom is too. It’s why she’s an elder. Genetically speaking, it’s rare for a female to have the ability to shift.”

“Wouldn’t that make the Hanley’s want you even more?”

“We’ve managed to hide it from them. I was worried when Samantha joined them that they’d find out, but she must have kept our secret.”

“Why can’t they sniff you out like they did me?” I asked curiously, failing to hide my offended tone as I did.

Anna smiled and answered, “The shifting helps that too. Like Caleb isn’t old enough to mate even though he is clearly capable of actual mating,” she paused, a pink blush

crawling up her cheeks as I lifted my eyebrows. “I mean, not that I know he can or has, but I would think,” she stumbled over her words, flustered, and I bit back a smile, waving my hand for her to move on. “Anyway, it’s the same for me. I mean girls mature faster than boys, obviously,” she rolled her eyes and I laughed. “But when it comes to shifters we have to be of age.” She gave me a curious glance. “Dominic is the only one in our pack of age to mate.”

“Is that why I got so many weird looks when I was there yesterday?”

“That was one of the reasons,” Anna laughed, but before I could ask her what she meant, the bell rang. I didn’t get a chance to talk to her again until lunch, but when I walked in, Leah caught my eye and waved. I glanced at the center tables, but when I veered off to sit with Leah, Anna gave me an understanding smile. I was one of them, but I wasn’t. I still didn’t fully understand my place with them other than I was capable of having little shifter babies, and that was enough for them to welcome me with open arms.

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“Well?” Leah asked immediately when I sat down. She gave me an arch look and continued, “Rumor has it you skipped out after lunch.”

“I had a doctor’s appointment,” I answered, using the same excuse my dad had. “I’d totally forgotten about it.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you went to check on your friends,” she replied, nodding toward the Pack who had congregated at their normal table as if nothing unusual had happened.

“Nope,” I responded brightly, maybe a little too brightly because Leah shot me a glance. I toned it down and tilted my head as if I had gossip to share. She leaned toward me eagerly and I told her, “I heard there was a death in their community and everyone stayed home to pay their respects.” Leah’s mouth formed an O and she nodded, slightly abashed. Anna had told me the story they’d fabricated to excuse so many of them and since Hank Navarre allowed the principal to hunt on part of his lands, he’d accepted it easily enough.

“That’s so sad,” Leah murmured, casting a lowered gaze toward the Pack’s table. “Hmm,” she hummed after a second and I knew exactly why she’d made the noise. I could literally feel the weight of his gaze on me and shifted my head slightly so it wasn’t as obvious when my eyes met his.

There was no mistaking whom he was staring at and I lifted my eyebrow in warning. Nothing had changed where we were concerned. Too many looks like this would garner unnecessary attention.

He pulled his gaze away from mine. Finally. But by then it was Leah who was giving me a curious glance.

“You ride with him, Caleb, and Anna every morning,” she mentioned casually.

“Yeah,” I answered, not elaborating.

“I’m impressed, girl. So, how big is he?” I choked at her question, but she ignored me as she continued to talk, “I mean considering the rest of him.” She held her hands apart, widening them when I didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I answered, a little too desperate in my denial. “I know him but only because he brings Anna.”

“Yeah, but Anna didn’t start riding with them until you did,” Leah replied, satisfaction in her voice as I glanced at her in startled surprise. I hadn’t put that together, but she obviously had.

“I mentioned I might sit with them at lunch. I’m sure he was just curious why I wasn’t over there,” I stumbled through my hastily made up excuse, and even though Leah wrinkled her nose like she didn’t believe me, she let it go, obviously having tortured me enough today.

Chapter Sixteen

Two days later, I was pushing the heavy cleaning cart to my next room, cursing a sticky wheel, when someone cleared their throat.

I stopped suddenly, my gaze sharpening on a good-looking male standing right in my path, my cart millimeters from ramming him.

He smirked at me, a dirty green duffel slung over his shoulder, and I took a wary step back, my hand going to my side where I'd hidden my gun under my shirt. The Hanleys hadn't attempted anything yet, and it had everyone on edge. The elders hadn't decided to attack, citing the Hanleys' continued nonviolence since Dominic had killed two of their pack members, but we knew it was only a matter of time.

I'd continued to hide the gun in my backpack at school and taken to keeping it on me when I cleaned the rooms. I even stashed it next to my bed at night. Dominic and the other wolves in his pack continued to keep watch over the motel, their howls comforting me, but I also wasn't content to let them be my only defense if I could do more.

"Room 206?" He asked, and I nodded to the room I'd just freshened up. We weren't so busy that it needed an actual cleaning, but Dad thought mints on the pillow and a dusting was good business. I couldn't argue since there wasn't much else to recommend the place. The lower floor was in the process of renovation, but until it was done all we had to offer were rooms straight out of a seventies horror movie.

He nodded his thanks and I watched as he took a deep breath and froze. My hand went to the gun, fumbling with my shirt as I worked to free it, my hands shaking as I remembered Dominic telling me not to hesitate.

"An unclaimed female?" He tilted his head, not seeming to notice my nerves as he sniffed the air again. "Not completely unclaimed," he continued and my hand gripped the gun. "Someone has their scent all over you and I can't blame him, but I also can't believe he'd leave you here unprotected." He glanced around warily and I managed to get the gun up.

"I can protect myself," I informed him, holding my hand steady, the cart a barrier between us. I took a few steadying breaths, already knowing I should have taken the shot and cursing myself for my hesitation.

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“I see that,” the man answered, lifting his own hands up easily as his forehead wrinkled. “I’m not in the market for a mate so you can rest easy.”

“What are you doing here?” I bit out suspiciously.

“I came at the request of a friend,” he answered cautiously, still eyeing the gun I held on him. I didn’t lower it, but we were at an impasse. I couldn’t exactly call out for help. Dad would wonder why I’d decided to hold a guest at gunpoint and I didn’t have the nifty telepathy with the others.

“Who’s your friend?”

He didn’t answer, his eyes going behind me as an arm came around me, forcing the gun down.

“Me,” was the answer and I sagged in relief.

“You failed,” he continued and I frowned, not upset with his statement, but at the truth in it. “You should have shot him. No hesitation.”

“Hey,” the other guy cried, finally lowering his hands.

“He could have taken you in a second. Next time, take the shot,” Dominic continued, ignoring the guy as he admonished me. I nodded, shame flickering through me.

“Did you really just tell her to shoot me next time she saw me? I’m staying at this hotel,” the guy grumbled, clearly not upset.

“Motel,” we corrected him in unison and he rolled his eyes.

“Motel, hotel, it’s better than my truck,” he mumbled, hitching his bag higher as he reached out to shake Dominic’s hand. “I’d say it’s good to see you again, man, but you just sic’d your girlfriend on me.”

“You’ll understand when I explain why I asked you to come,” Dominic answered, unconcerned as he took the hand offered. “I appreciate you coming.”

“Anything for you, man.”

“You’re friends?” I asked carefully and they glanced at one another.

“Acquaintances,” they echoed together and my gaze shifted between them questioningly.

“Trent isn’t pack,” Dominic answered, confusing me further.

“I’m a lone wolf,” Trent specified and I shrugged, still lost as to what that meant. Trent glanced at Dominic in confusion, and Dominic sighed.

“Jess wasn’t raised pack,” he explained and if it was possible Trent’s eyes widened so much I thought they would pop out of his head like some type of cartoon.

“She’s a –” Trent began and I raised my hand.

“Don’t say it.” I glanced over my shoulder and up at Dominic. “We really need to come up with a better term than breeding female.”

Trent snorted and said, “I like her, man.” Dominic growled and Trent hastily added, “Not like that though.”

“It does explain your scent all over her though, but not why you didn’t finish claiming her as your mate.” Trent looked puzzled, but I was stuck on his use of the word finish. Dominic caught my glance and gave an unimpressed shrug.

“I’ll explain, but not now. It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking?” I immediately shot back and he gave me a look. He handed back the gun he’d taken from me at some point and said, “Next time shoot him.”

“You really don’t have to,” Trent told me, shaking his head as he followed Dominic toward his room. “You’ve got good instincts, follow them. Thanks for not shooting me,” he called before disappearing into room 206. I shook my head, irritated with both myself and Dominic who apparently had a few more secrets.

I put the cleaning cart away with a reminder to grab some WD-40 for the wheel and went down the side stairs. Right as I turned the corner, a small multi colored wolf darted out at me and I shrieked, falling on my ass as I tried to reach the gun I could feel wedged into my side.

The wolf ducked her head down, bowing to me and some of my panic eased. I had no idea how I knew she was female, but as I stared at the little wolf with the beautiful gray and brown markings, I knew I was staring at Anna.

“Anna, you’re adorable,” I burst out, reaching out to stroke her muzzle, stopping short when she growled, her fur puffing out. She glared at me and gave a stiff legged bounce. “Er, I mean you’re ferocious,” I corrected myself, widening my eyes. “Terrifying, in fact,” I continued and she preened slightly. I bit back a smile at the idea of Anna ever terrifying anyone, but a glimpse of her sharp canines quickly reminded me she was a natural predator.

“I have questions,” I told her and she gave me a short nod, dashing into the woods.

Moments later, she emerged, tugging down her shirt.

“Dom’s friend arrived?” she called as she came across the clearing.

“Yeah, a guy named Trent,” I answered with a nod. “A lone wolf?”

Anna nodded knowingly. “Yeah, you don’t see them too often. They’re considered dangerous.” I blinked and Anna read the doubt on my face. “Trent isn’t. Dom would never let him stay here if he was,” she added hastily.

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“But he’s not welcome on pack land?” I asked, arching an eyebrow and Anna gave me a sheepish nod.

“The pack doesn’t know Dom called him,” she told me and I reared back in surprise. Anna nodded, looping her arm through mine. “He met him while he was at college. Thought Trent might want to join our pack, but he didn’t.” Anna paused and glanced at me, “Not that the Alpha would have allowed it.” I glanced at her curiously. “Caleb is more open minded than his dad. I mean, don’t get me wrong, his dad is more modern than most, but lone wolves have a stigma.”

“But Dominic doesn’t agree?” It seemed like Dominic didn’t agree with a lot of what the alpha said.

“No, he does, but with Dom it’s more of a case by case basis. Caleb’s the same way,” Anna added hurriedly. My mind got sidetracked from my original question as what she said reminded me of another question.

“What’s the deal with Caleb and Dominic?”

“What do you mean,” Anna asked evasively and I just looked at her. She huffed, but finally relented. “Fine, Dominic is tasked with protecting Caleb since he’s the alpha’s son.” That sounded right, but why hide it? “And next in line to be alpha,” Anna added, glancing at me quickly.

“Caleb is next in line?” I confirmed and she nodded. “So, wait, alpha is inherited?”

“Not exactly,” Anna hedged, glancing around like she wanted someone to come

rescue her.

“Then why is Caleb next in line? Wouldn’t it be a vote by the elders?” I was seriously confused by this. I’d read up on wolf behavior in the wild, but could admit it didn’t necessarily apply to shifters.

“Generally, wolves fight for dominance and the dominate male is alpha.” I nodded since this fit in with what I’d read. “Clearly, neither Caleb or his father or the strongest wolves in the pack.”

My mind flashed to Hank Navarre and his sheer size, the same size he’d passed onto his son.

“Dominic and his dad are,” I replied slowly, wondering why Hank Navarre wasn’t alpha.

“He didn’t want it,” Anna answered, reading my expression correctly. “So, Hank became beta, second in command, and protected the alpha’s flank from other wolves who might try to come in and take the pack. The others agreed to the arrangement.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“There isn’t one, not really,” Anna answered hesitantly. “It’s just the alpha wants the arrangement to continue with Caleb.”

“Dominic seems okay with it,” I replied.

“He is, but some of the others aren’t,” Anna admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“Some agree with Dominic’s views and they think the strongest wolf should lead the pack.”

“But Caleb and Dominic have similar views,” I replied in confusion.

“They do! Caleb isn’t like his father, not really. And Dom doesn’t want to be alpha. He’s content to keep Caleb and the pack safe.”

“So, again, what’s the problem?”

“Nothing, for now,” Anna answered quietly. “It’s only when the alpha dies we’ll see issues. There will be several who want Dom to take the position and it could cause the pack to divide.”

I nodded slowly, as I analyzed the new information. I hadn’t realized there were politics in play in the pack, and wondered what Dominic’s thoughts were on it.

“What’s does it mean when a claiming is unfinished?” I asked abruptly, remembering Trent’s words.

Anna flushed tomato red and I sighed.

“Let me guess, it has something to do with sex,” I muttered and Anna nodded, glancing at the ground. “Can you explain what mating and claiming involves?”

“Um, yeah,” Anna responded slowly. “One, you have to be able to mate.” I shot her a curious glance. “Not everyone has the genes,” she explained. “Only those capable of having shifter children are considered ‘mates’ in our world.” We reached a bench Dad had just installed and sat down. “Caleb’s older brother wouldn’t be able to mate with anyone, but Caleb would.” Red inched up her cheeks again, but I didn’t mention it. “Two, they have to agree they want to mate. At least in our pack,” she corrected,

her mind going to the Hanleys like mine. “Then, they, um, well, they have sex,” she mumbled in a rush and my eyes squinched.

“That’s it?”

“Well, no,” she answered. I shook my head and looked at her in expectation. “They also bite each other.”

“Bite each other,” I echoed in disbelief.

“It’s not as weird as it sounds,” Anna said hastily. “It’s actually an important part of the mating. And its not like a bite that hurts. It’s kind of a claiming.” She scrambled for the right word, “A marking, you could say.” My hand drifted to my neck where a particular spot burned like a brand.

“Would a kiss work?” I questioned and Anna shook her head in the negative, relieving my mind. If there also happened to be a spurt of disappointment in there, I ignored it.

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“No, the bite is part of it, but it’s completed with sex, and it forms a bond,” Anna continued and my attention snapped back to her.

“A bond?”

“Yes, it creates a connection similar to pack mates. Close mates have the same telepathic ability and can sense when one another is in danger.” I nodded, frowning at the implications. “It’s a lifetime bond.” She confirmed one of my fears as she continued, “Mates can only have children with one another, and only when one of them dies is the bond broken.”

I sat in silence as her words sank in. I hadn’t considered what mating entailed, not really. It was more involved than I’d expected, and if the word mate hadn’t really clued me in on the level of commitment involved that was my own fault. There had been a certain level of caginess in Dominic when it came to talking about mates and now I understood why.

“That’s what you were avoiding telling me, wasn’t it?” I finally asked, and Anna immediately understood what I was talking about. She nodded as I recalled the conversation when I asked if there was more I could do to protect myself and they’d avoided the question. “If I was Dominic’s mate they would leave me alone, wouldn’t they?”

I couldn’t hate them for not mentioning it. Taking a mate was a serious commitment, one I wasn’t prepared for and couldn’t expect Dominic to sacrifice himself for.

“No,” the answer came from next to me but it wasn’t Anna. “The Hanleys are cruel.

You being mated might not have stopped them from raping you just for the hell of it.”

Anna slipped away as Dominic lowered himself next to me. I turned so I could face him, my arm crossed protectively over my chest, my hand curled around the mark on my neck.

“I don’t want you to think I didn’t consider it.” I shook my head automatically and he held up a hand. “Hear me out. I would never do anything without your consent, but if I thought for a second it would keep you safe I would have given you the option.” He nodded to where my hand rested on my neck. “That was an accident.”

My eyes jerked to his at the admission and he gave me a rueful smile. “Not the kiss. I intended that, but the effect it had on us...that wasn’t supposed to happen.” He leaned back against the bench, studying me openly and my hand slowly lowered. “The act of mating is intentional. You can’t just bite someone’s neck and suddenly you’re mated. Same with sex. It’s a deliberate act with both people committed. When I kissed you, I did leave a mark, a partial claiming.”

He confirmed my suspicions with his words and for a second the mark flared, the imprint of his kiss clear. His eyes darkened for a second before he shook it off.

“I never meant for it to happen. To claim you in any way. You’re young. Innocent to our world. You had no idea what it meant and I had no intention of letting it go further.”

“Had?” I asked, my mind catching on the past tense.

He cleared his throat and settled his hand over mine. “Things have changed. I care about you.” He paused and admitted, “More than I should. More than is appropriate given our circumstances.” He rubbed his thumb across the stubble on his cheek, the sound raspy. “I’m not saying anything needs to happen now or soon, but I also don’t

want to miss this opportunity.”

I nodded since my throat was suddenly too dry to speak. He seemed anxious to fill the silence as he started to speak again, and I understood the sentiment exactly. The feelings were too much, too soon, and a huge part of me wasn't sure what to do with them.

“There's a magical aspect to mating, to shifting in general. Genetics is part of it, but our bodies shift from one form to another easily. No pain. We can communicate mentally with others in our pack who shift and with our mate when the bond is true. When I kissed your neck,” he hesitated and I flipped my hand over to squeeze his. He smiled, and I noticed they seemed to come more easily to him now. “It was almost a compulsion, a desire as necessary as breathing, and the effect it had on both of us was.... unexpected to say the least. I've never heard of something like that happening between mates even after they decided to mate with one another.”

“So, you're saying we're special,” I murmured in summary, shifting my leg until it pressed against his.

“Something like that,” he replied, the heat in his eyes sending a corresponding heat through me.

“I'm not just some random breeding female that landed in your lap who you can get your paws on,” I continued and he snorted.

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“You’re more trouble than you’re worth,” he retorted, one hand coming up to smooth the hair from my cheek.

“I feel really special now,” I whispered as his head tilted down.

“You should. You know how many women have tried to catch me?”

Laughter bubbled as he rested his cheek against mine.

“Hmmm, one?”

“What part of women didn’t you realize was plural?”

“Two then,” I corrected and felt his lips curl into a smile against my cheek. “Were you planning on kissing me sometime today?”

“Does it make me less manly to admit I’m afraid to?”

My head jerked in surprise, before I settled it back against his gently.

“No, not really,” I told him. “Maybe it makes you manlier,” I replied gallantly and swore I felt him roll his eyes.

His breath puffed against my cheek as he chuckled and then the barest brush of stubble against my skin.

“You’re dangerous.” His lips skimmed the bone above my eye. “Addictive.” Fingers

trailed down my neck and I trembled as they found his mark unerringly. He stroked the skin, sending shivers down my spine as my head fell back involuntarily. “Mine.”

The word burned through me, charging the air between us as our eyes met. Something passed between us, an acknowledgement that whatever tied us together was more than simple chemistry.

A throat cleared, a familiar throat, and I froze.

“Dad,” I managed to stutter out, wondering how the hell I was supposed to explain my current position.

“Hang on, I think I got it,” Dominic said, his thumb rubbing briskly over his mark as I stared at him in disbelief. “Yup, all gone. Spiders are bad around here.”

“Do I know you, son?” Dad questioned his tone brusque, as he stared Dominic down like he wasn’t twice his size. Dominic jumped up, shaking his head as he held out his hand for Dad to shake.

“No, sir. You’ve met my father though,” he answered politely and I watched my father thaw slightly as he put it together.

“Hank’s son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“He’s a good man. Stopped by a few times to chat and lend a hand,” Dad replied as my eyebrows raised at this unexpected knowledge.

“Yes, Dad mentioned he’d come by. He’s impressed with what you’re doing here.” Dominic said, as I just sat in bemused silence watching their conversation and

remembering the last time Dad had spoken to Dominic it was to call him a good doggie.

“What brings you out here?” Dad asked, clearly still a little suspicious.

“One of my college buddies rolled into town and is staying here. I came by to pick him up,” Dominic answered easily enough, and only someone familiar with him would recognize the subtle tension now running through him. It startled me to realize I recognized it.

“And how do you know my daughter?” Dad continued, persistent. Dominic shot me an apologetic glance before answering him smoothly.

“Jess is friends with one of my students. You probably know him. Caleb? He’s practically family,” Dominic informed my dad, who gave me a curious glance.

“He drive a Jeep?”

Only I noticed the momentary pause as Dominic hid his grimace.

“He does.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen him around,” Dad’s gaze flickered to me and back to Dominic, “Jess hasn’t bothered to introduce him though.”

“He’s a good kid,” Dominic told him and I rolled my eyes as they continued to talk as if I wasn’t there. “I’ve known him his whole life and coach him on the football team. I’ll tell him to stop by and introduce himself.”

“Well, since I’m not needed for this conversation, I’ll just take myself inside and get dinner started,” I stated sarcasm thick in my voice. Dad grinned, and Dominic had the

nerve to chuckle as I sashayed myself inside and away from the testosterone-laden conversation.

Chapter Seventeen

“I can’t wait to see it,” one of the girls squealed and I winced at the sound. “I heard there’s several nude scenes.”

I didn’t need to look up to know Dominic had glanced over at Sara’s or was it Sasha’s? words. I kept my eyes glued to the table resolutely, not allowing my thoughts to wander to the last nude body I’d seen that wasn’t mine own. A chuckle reverberated through my mind, causing my head to come up, but Dominic was no longer looking my way and I chalked it up to my imagination

“Did you want to come?” Leah asked, glancing at me, her expression resigned as my smile quickly turned apologetic. She seemed to expect the shake of my head, but still nodded as she said, “Maybe next time.”

“One day I will,” I told her, a promise in my voice. “You might fall out of your seat when I do, but I will.”

She grinned, tucking her straight hair behind her ear.

“When your dad finally gives you a get out of jail card?”

“Exactly,” I agreed, laughing, but still uncomfortable with the web of lies surrounding my life. Leah always made it a point to invite me, but the nearest movie theater was in High Valley. It wasn’t like I could ask them to make the longer drive to the next town because I didn’t ‘like’ High Valley.

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“Then I’ll keep asking,” she teased before turning to answer one of the other girl’s questions. My eyes strayed to the table in the middle of the room, the people there a little more subdued than normal, but nothing the rest of the school would ever notice. I felt the weight of someone’s gaze and a surreptitious glance at the teacher’s table told me it was Ms. Nichols.

“I’d love to know what you did to get on her bad side,” Leah whispered, giving me a sideways glance. “If nothing else so I can avoid it.”

“Don’t worry,” I answered, staring straight at Ms. Nichols. “I think you’ll be safe from her wrath. At least as long as I’m around.”

“You have my sympathy,” Leah replied, popping an apple slice in her mouth as the bell rang. As we got up from the table, I saw Ms. Nichols smile and fear zipped through me. My intuition screamed as my gaze automatically sought Dominic. He met my eyes over the herd of students heading for the exit, but couldn’t reach me without making a scene. I shook my head slightly to keep him from coming to me, figuring I had nothing to worry about at school.

The crackle of the intercom interrupted fifth period as the school secretary requested my presence in the office. The teacher nodded for me to go and I grabbed my backpack since class was almost over.

When I got to the office, I saw Leah behind the counter, her eyes going wide when she spotted me. She worked in the office as a student aide fifth period, a fact I was grateful for now. No one else was in there and I gave her a questioning glance.

“The sheriff is in there with the principal and Ms. Nichols,” she hissed and I felt my heart drop. I glanced frantically over my shoulder, my feet already backing toward the door. Flight or fight kicked in as my instincts screamed I was in danger. It didn’t matter why the sheriff was here, if he got his hands on me....

“Where are you going?” Leah’s eyes got even wider if it was possible as she glanced between the principal’s office and me. “What is going on?”

“I need to get to Dom....Coach Navarre,” I corrected myself quickly. “Or Anna or Caleb. They’ll help me.”

“Help you with what?” Leah grabbed my arm forcefully, stopping me. “They say you brought a weapon on school grounds.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. How did they know?

“They searched your locker and found a knife,” she continued and my eyes narrowed. I had a gun in my backpack, but they were accusing me of having a knife in my locker?

“It’s not mine. I don’t own a knife,” I told her with complete honesty. She stared at me for a second and I flipped my palm so I could squeeze her wrist. “I didn’t do whatever they’re saying. This is a setup. I need to get to Dominic. He’ll know what to do.”

Leah gave a last glance at the door and nodded, releasing my arm. I darted toward the exit, but at that exact moment the door opened and the sheriff walked out with Ms. Nichols.

“There she is,” Ms. Nichols declared, satisfaction coating her words. The sheriff sniffed and a predatory smile came over his face.

“So she is,” he purred, the dark undertone in his voice causing the principal to cast him a wary glance. Leah shrank back, her eyes apologetic, as I straightened my spine. I would not cower in front of him or show even the smallest hint of the fear that hammered through me.

“You’ll need to come down to the station with me, girl,” the sheriff said, his beady eyes boring into me as he licked his lips. I suppressed my shudder at the sight, seeing the resemblance between him and the men who’d chased me.

“I’d like to call my father. He should accompany me,” I said determinedly, not backing down when his eyes narrowed, the threat in them clear. Come quietly or pay dearly. I narrowed mine back, willing to pay the consequences.

“Here’s the phone,” Leah said, thrusting it out toward me in a desperate attempt to help. I reached for it, but the sheriff knocked it away and I heard Leah gasp as the phone clattered to the floor.

“Now,” the principal started and the sheriff waved his hand, cutting him off.

“You’ve been a great deal of help today. I’ll be sure and remember that, Tom,” the sheriff interjected smoothly. “But I’ll take it from here. This girl is clearly a danger to her classmates from the evidence in her locker. You’ll have to trust me to handle the situation accordingly.”

His hand wrapped around my arm with bruising force as he jerked me toward the door and the principal watched with sudden concern. I caught a flash of Ms. Nichol’s face and the satisfaction on it made me wish my arm was free to punch her in the nose. Leah came around the desk, her hands balled into fists, and I had one last desperate hope as I mouthed, “Dominic,” to her and she nodded as I was yanked through the door.

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“You’re making a mistake,” I threatened as the sheriff walked us out of the building, the empty halls making it easy since everyone was in class. “They’ll come for me.”

“I hope they do,” he replied me as we came to a police cruiser and my blood turned to ice. He opened the door to shove me inside, leaning in close, too close, as he whispered, “But it’ll be too late to save your innocence.” My head slammed against the side of the car as he thrust me inside, and I suddenly prayed Leah didn’t give Dominic the message because I couldn’t live with myself if I was the cause of any of their deaths.

My head throbbed where it had hit the car, but I refused to rub it. Any hint of weakness would be a mistake around my kidnapper, and I was determined to escape at the first opportunity.

He hummed to himself as he drove the same three notes repeatedly, the sound making my skin crawl. After a few minutes, a buzzing pierced the air stopping and then starting again. My fingers hooked around the bars separating us as I eyed my backpack in the seat next to the sheriff. My phone was tucked in the outside pocket, close enough to touch if not for the damn bars.

“Your friends, I presume?” The sheriff reached for my bag and my heart jumped. If I could get my bag back, and get to the gun hidden inside, then maybe I could escape him. But I’d have no chance if he found it.

“It’s probably my dad. He was supposed to pick me up. I wonder what he’ll think when he finds out the sheriff picked me up from school and I’m not at the sheriff’s office when he comes looking?”

“Oh, your daddy will know, little girl,” the sheriff promised, taking a deep breath, his eyes flickering in pleasure as I stared at him in horror, pushing myself back against the seat as far as I could. “He’ll know what happened to you and if he wants to stay alive, he’ll keep his mouth shut.”

“You seem confident,” I bit out, rage pushing my fear down as I thought of this man abusing his power, of taking me from the school and hurting my dad. “It’ll be your downfall,” I promised him, retribution in my eyes.

“Feisty,” he laughed. “Let’s see how long it takes to break you of that.”

Another buzz of my phone and he growled, grabbing it from its pocket and tossing it out the window. I watched as it hit the road and bounced out of sight, my heart hammering with fear and anger as he started to hum again, his hands on the steering wheel at ten and two.

We zoomed through town, the markings on the car ensuring we weren’t stopped for speeding and it wasn’t long before we were turning down a gravel road. I tried to track our route so I would know how to get back, but as we drove deeper into the woods, the road steadily getting worse, I started to despair of ever being able to make it out.

Our arrival was met with a crowd, mainly men with hungry eyes and a few females, whose expressions remained blank as the sheriff hauled me out of the car by my hair. I struggled against his tight grip, but was relieved to see my backpack in his other hand.

“Look what I got,” he announced, pride in his voice, as some of the men moved in closer, jackals ready to pounce. “A breeder,” he answered himself, dragging me closer and rubbing against me as I tried to hold myself away from him.

“You’ll never get a turn so I don’t know why you bother,” one of the men called, laughing, and I felt tension snap through the sheriff.

“You either since you’ve yet to produce a pup,” the sheriff sneered and the other man snapped at him, the sound so animalistic I wasn’t sure it had actually come from his mouth. The sheriff scurried back, holding me in front of him like a shield and the other men gave him looks of disgust.

“I’ll take her,” another man leered, reaching for me as I cringed away. He thrust his hips a few times, his hand rubbing his crotch and I couldn’t stop my lip from curling. “Look, the bitch thinks she’s too good,” he cried and his hand came around so fast I didn’t see the blow, but I felt it. The only thing that kept me upright was the sheriff’s hand in my hair. Blood flooded my mouth and I coughed, bloody spit hitting the ground.

The sheriff let go of me in disgust and as I fell to the ground, I grabbed my backpack. He must have thought I was trying to catch myself because he let it go too and I landed on it, curling my body around it protectively. My fingers itched to grab the gun and shoot them all, but common sense told me I didn’t have enough bullets.

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Hands grasped my arms, pulling me up, and I tried twisting away but the hands didn't budge as I was marched to a house separated from the others. The door opened as we came up the steps and I swallowed as I saw the woman standing there.

"Sam," the man holding me said and there was an odd note to his voice. Sam gave him a kind smile as she reached for me.

"Dylan, thank you for bringing her to me," she spoke softly, guiding me to her side and as I turned to see the man who'd brought me to her, I saw why.

"They were mean," he told her, frowning and she nodded. "But I wasn't," he assured her and she smiled.

"I know you weren't. You're too much of a gentleman."

A pleased smile broke out across his face, the distinctive shape of his eyes giving away the fact that he had Down syndrome.

"You're such a help to us," she continued and he puffed with pride. "You'll stay nearby tonight, won't you?"

He nodded eagerly and Sam gave him a smile of thanks as she gently ushered me inside.

"How did they get you?"

"School," I garbled, pain arcing through my face as I spoke.

“The bastards,” Sam snarled as she guided me to a barstool. “Let me see,” she insisted, her fingers prodding my cheek where I’d been slapped. “Doesn’t look broken, but we can’t be sure without an x-ray.” She tilted my head to peer into my mouth. “You bit your cheek.” I yanked my head away and eyed her.

“You’re not going to lick me are you?”

She gave me a bemused stare and shook her head.

“Only shifters can heal with their saliva.” She backed away and I saw the worry she’d been hiding. “He’ll come for you.” I nodded, my own fear threatening to overwhelm me now. It wasn’t fear for myself though, but fear for Dominic, Caleb, and the others who would come and fight. “We can’t let him, not now. They’ll be slaughtered,” she said matter of fact as I stared at her. “Can we get a message to them? Your phone?”

“Thrown out the window by the sheriff,” I told her and she sat down hard in the stool next to me.

“You didn’t mate with him,” she stated and I shook my head even though I didn’t need to. She already knew. Rage flickered through me, stealing my breath as it was quickly followed by a sharp despair. Sam eyed me curiously and I attempted to explain the sudden emotions. Excitement surged through her as I spoke and she grabbed my shoulders, shaking me lightly.

“Focus on them. It’s Dom,” she told me, a desperate light in her eyes.

“But,” I tried to protest and she shook her head.

“Did he mark you in any way? Share something with you? You smell like him. I recognize his scent and it coats you almost like a mate. Somehow, you’re connected to him. Maybe....maybe it’s enough to save you both.” Fragile hope lit her eyes and I

wasn't willing to destroy it so I focused.

"Don't come here. Don't come here," I muttered over and over, focusing as hard as I could until abruptly the emotion was gone and I sagged against Sam.

"You think it was enough?" I whispered against her shoulder as she cradled me to her.

"I don't know," she answered, her voice catching. "We can hope."

I closed my eyes, wondering if I'd saved him at the expense of myself. Sam shoved me back and my eyes flew open.

"We don't have much time," she told me sharply and I noticed the room was dimmer than it had been. The sun must be setting; I thought distractedly, my eyes searching for a clock.

"They'll fight over who gets you first and since the alpha enjoys the fights he'll egg them on," Sam informed me, going to the door as we heard a knock. She cracked it and then opened it wider as she determined who it was. "Well?"

"We brought out several whisky bottles," the small woman confirmed, eyeing me curiously. "They protested, but once Lily opened one and took a swig, they all started to drink." I stared at the woman who spoke, equally curious. She was tiny and brown. I blinked at her, but again all I could think was she was brown. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin and the way she kept her head tilted down made me think of a small bird.

"Thank you, Wren," Sam told her and I started, thinking Sam had somehow read my mind about the bird comment. "You were brave to do this."

“Can she help us?” Wren whispered, her gaze equal parts hopeful and disbelieving. I couldn’t blame her, I wasn’t sure I could save myself, much less anyone else here.

“She’s part of the plan,” Sam reassured her. “We have to stay focused now.” Wren nodded and slipped back out the door and I lifted my eyebrow at Sam, wincing when the movement hurt.

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“None of us wish to be here, but we can’t leave,” she replied, her hands rubbing together as she paced the room. “We have children and very little freedom.”

“But we’ve survived. Created allies. Found their weaknesses and exploited them,” she continued, her voice growing stronger with every word. “They tricked me here, they wanted information about my pack, my brother, my father. I was foolish,” she admitted, shame and loathing on her face. “But I won’t let them destroy my family, my son’s family.” Determination shone in her eyes as she stopped in front of me. “They think they’ll be easy to kill, to take down the Navarre pack and steal their lands, but they won’t. I know my brother.” I nodded, knowing she was right. Dominic would never let that happen. “The Hanleys have been planning their attack for a long time, and then you showed up.”

I tilted my head and she grinned. “Oh, you took them by surprise and then when Dominic killed two of the Hanleys, he made them wonder. You were the thing I prayed for.” I blinked at the thought of being the answer to someone’s prayers and she took my hands. “You can get the information to my brother, prepare them. They’re distracted right now,” she said in disgust as she gestured to the outside wall, indicating the men who’d kidnapped me. “We’ll get you out and Dominic can prepare.”

“There seems like a lot of ifs in your plan,” I informed her.

“No, we will get you out. You will make it back to my brother and when the fight comes it will be in my brother’s favor.” There was an eerie cadence to her words and I didn’t protest. I could only imagine her life here, and I would do whatever I could to help her.

“How am I supposed to escape?” I asked instead, figuring she had a plan.

“You’re going to run,” she stated baldly and I blinked.

“That’s it?”

“There are a few good men here. They are under alpha orders,” she paused since I must have looked confused. “An alpha’s order cannot be disobeyed,” she informed me. “Some of the men here disagree with how things are, but they are as trapped as the women. But they can look the other way, and Dylan is not bound by the alpha.” Her smile was satisfied as she told me that. “The alpha doesn’t know that.”

“Dylan can shift?”

Sam nodded, and my forehead wrinkled.

“But not all of the men are shifters, are they?”

“Not all, the ones who can’t, agree with how things are. They can all be gutted in my opinion,” Sam snarled, glaring out the window. “But there aren’t as many of those. The Hanleys prize shifters. If a child isn’t born with the right genes, they’re often killed.” I stared at her in horror and she nodded. “Wren has had two babies killed.”

I swallowed hard, the metallic taste of blood in my mouth making me gag.

“They will drink tonight and fight for the privilege of fucking you,” I jerked at the word fuck and she gave me a flat smile. “They will hurt you if we don’t succeed.” I nodded faintly, but determination was filling me. I would help these women and if that meant I had to do what they couldn’t, then I would. “But they’ll be distracted and that’s all we need. You’ll have to run and if you fail, we’re all doomed.”

“I won’t fail,” I promised her, and pride filled her eyes.

“You match him, you know. In fierceness. He needs that.” I nodded as she spoke and she curled a piece of paper into my hand. “Give this to him. It has what he needs to win.”

Shouts came through the walls and the sounds of fists slamming into one another. Darkness had fallen completely by then and nerves shook me. I knew what they were fighting over and my only chance was my own ability to run.

“Come with me,” I begged, suddenly desperate not to be the only chance these women had. “Come, run. We’ll make it together.”

She gave me a soft smile even as she shook her head.

“I can’t. I won’t leave Nicky behind and we’d slow you down too much. You can do this. I know it.” I nodded, accepting her words as my fear solidified into a solid knot of determination. She guided me to another room, a bedroom by the looks of it, and to the window. She pressed my backpack into my hand and I remembered suddenly that I wasn’t completely defenseless. I handed my backpack back to her and she gave me a puzzled frown.

“There’s a gun inside,” I murmured almost inaudibly, suddenly afraid they’d hear us right as I was about to make my escape. “Keep it. Use it.”

“You may need it,” she replied, her voice pitched just as low. I shook my head.

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“You’ll need a way to protect yourself. If there are any stragglers in the fight.” Our hands fought for a moment before she gave in with a sigh.

“Okay, but please, survive. Not for my sake, but Dominic’s.” Her eyes pleaded with me and I nodded before hugging her and taking us both by surprise.

“I will. For all of our sake’s,” I whispered.

“Go through the window, run straight to the woods and don’t stop. Keep going straight until you find the creek, head south then, following the creek. Eventually, you’ll come to the road. Stay to the woods, follow the road home.” I nodded, repeating her instructions until she gave me a satisfied nod of her own. “Now, you need to hit me and tie me up.”

“What?” I cried in shock, staring at her in horror.

“It’s the only way,” she said adamantly. “Trust me; it’ll go easier for me if you do it.” Only because of that did I do what she asked, not questioning when she explained to me how to tie the knot so she couldn’t escape. “Hit me.”

I hesitated then, remembering the pain when the man had slammed his fist in my face earlier, my face still throbbing.

“It’s okay,” she said encouragingly. “It won’t be the first time.” I swallowed, balling up my fist in rage at the thought. “Good, now hit me across the cheek.” I did it, my eyes closed as my fist thudded against her face, crying out involuntarily at the pain radiating through my hand. “Okay, how does it look?” I blinked my eyes open and

saw a red mark already swelling along her cheek.

“Like I hit you,” I answered and she nodded.

“Good enough.” She tilted her head to the window. “Go and don’t stop. Don’t look back. Just run.”

“We’ll come back for you,” I told her and she smiled.

“I know you will,” she responded, her smile painful. “Go.”

Chapter Eighteen

Fear laced with determination kept me moving even as my lungs begged for oxygen and my heart threatened to burst out of my chest. My feet pounded the ground, tree limbs slapping my face as I ran.

Don’t stop.

Don’t stop.

Don’t stop.

The words echoed through my head, pushing me forward when my body would have given out. I ran with such frantic desperation I almost didn’t notice as my feet splashed through water, my body now on automatic pilot as it fought for survival.

Water.

The knowledge triggered the next thought.

Creek.

Follow the creek.

I turned back, slowing to a jog as I tried to find my way back to the water I'd splashed through. It took me longer than I expected and for a moment I was afraid I'd gotten turned around. My heart hammered madly as my breaths became panicked and I wondered if I'd find myself back in the Hanley's camp.

My feet slipped just as my ears picked up the sound of water. I fell into the creek, landing on my knees as the shallow water flowed around me. I stayed bent over on my hands and knees for a second, relief coursing through me. I crawled to the side, tears splashing into the water below as I got my bearings.

I had to go south.

I swiped my face, trying to remember if I was supposed to go left or right at the creek. My wet hands did nothing to wipe away the moisture on my face, and I rubbed my cheek against my shoulder instead. Fear started to filter back in, clouding my thoughts and I rested my hand next to me. The water flowed around it and I glanced down.

Water flows downhill. The thought hammered through my head. South.

It wasn't always true, but it gave me hope as I hauled myself up, my body protesting, but stopping wasn't an option. If I didn't find Dominic and the others soon, they would come for me and likely be slaughtered.

My hand went to the paper I'd tucked in my bra so I wouldn't lose it and I was grateful it had remained dry. I pushed myself on, staying in the creek as I remembered some long-forgotten Girl Scout survivalist trip. It was almost impossible

to track someone through water. I didn't think that would necessarily stop my captors but I figured it wouldn't hurt.

It took longer since I had to slog through the water and after a while I debated climbing to the edge and going through the woods. I stayed in the water though as I remembered the slap of branches hitting me as I'd run earlier. At least in the water, the branches hovered above my head.

I wasn't sure how long I sloshed along before I heard a whooshing sound and paused, trying to determine the source of the sound. It was sporadic and I moved forward cautiously, my chest heavy as I tried to peer through the darkness. My eyes had long ago adjusted to the dark, but it didn't mean I could see much.

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Another whooshing sound made me pause and I swayed, laughter bubbling out of me as I realized what the sound was.

The highway.

I'd made it to the road.

I moved faster then. My body getting a second wind or maybe third as I realized I'd made it a little closer to safety. Once I'd gotten closer to the road, I used a tree to pull myself out of the creek. My jeans were soaked to the knee from wading, and my shoes squished, but none of it bothered me as I spotted the road splitting the dense forest I was hidden in. I stumbled on a root, scraping my hands against the bark of a tree as I caught myself.

I rested there for a moment, my body exhausted.

Where are you?

My sluggish mind responded instinctively.

By the road.

Relief shot through me, startling me with its intensity and I realized the emotion didn't belong to me.

I'm coming.

Tears slipped down my cheeks at the determination in the thought and I nodded, pushing myself to keep moving.

I had no idea how we'd managed to push our way into one another's thoughts or what it meant, but I trusted he would do exactly as he promised. I pressed my fingers to the mark on my neck, invisible to anyone's eyes, but still there, an ever-present reminder of Dominic. I pulled strength from its presence, trudging ahead, keeping the road in sight as I remained out of sight.

I wasn't sure if it was hours or minutes I walked, forcing one foot in front of the other before the low rumble of an engine reached me. Headlights pierced the darkness, illuminating the night as the oversized Jeep drove slowly along the road. I took a relieved breath at the sight of it creeping toward me, knowing I'd made it. I broke from the cover of the trees, trusting his superior night vision as I stumbled toward the familiar safety of the Jeep and Dominic. The Jeep hadn't even stopped when Dominic leapt out, his long strides reaching me in seconds.

"Are you okay?" His voice rumbled through me, warming the cold fear that had ate through me. I couldn't speak, my face buried against his chest, nodding instead as I wrapped my arms and legs around him, burrowing into his warmth. "Let's go home," he whispered, his arms supporting my weight as I clung to him like a monkey, one of his hands cupping the back of my head.

"Thank God," I heard as Dominic somehow got us both in the Jeep and slammed the door without letting go of me. I felt the Jeep shift into gear and make a U-turn as I rested my head against Dominic's chest, inhaling his scent.

"You're safe now," he murmured, rubbing my shoulders and my eyes grew heavy. I wanted to tell him everything, explain what happened, and what his sister planned, but my exhaustion had caught up with me and the wheels on the road lulled me to sleep.

I woke with a gasp, sitting straight up as my heart thrummed in my chest, desperate fear telling me to run.

“You’re safe,” a low voice rumbled and I relaxed, recognizing it. I turned to see him sitting next to the bed, his broad chest bare as he held a glass of water out to me. “I’d hoped you’d sleep longer,” he told me as I gulped the water gratefully. “But you were restless once I stopped lying next to you.”

“You slept next to me?” I repeated uncertainly, positive I’d misunderstood him. A smile tugged at his mouth, but never reached his eyes.

“I did.” His lips tightened. “I was afraid you’d disappear,” he admitted roughly, rubbing one hand over his jaw, scrapping against day old whiskers.

“Not on purpose,” I replied, my thoughts and my mouth not keeping up with each other. I pulled my legs up to my chin before I noticed I wasn’t wearing pants. I slid my legs back under the covers in a hurry and he reached over to tuck one edge of the blanket in.

“Your jeans were wet,” he told me. “I took them off so you’d be more comfortable.” I nodded automatically, appreciating the sentiment behind it even if it was slightly uncomfortable sitting there talking to him with no pants on while he didn’t have a shirt. He had black workout pants hanging low on his hips, but there was no avoiding the acres of bare skin in front of me.

“My dad,” I shouted suddenly, causing both of us to jump.

“He’s safe,” Dominic rushed to reassure me.

“But what does he think happened to me?”

“Anna called and told him you were staying with her,” Dominic explained and I eased back.

“Oh, okay,” I responded, my thoughts swirling dizzily as my aching body reminded me I’d put it through hell the night before. I gingerly reached up to touch my cheek, but the swelling I expected wasn’t there.

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“We healed that wound. I wasn’t sure where else you might be hurt,” Dominic ground out, his eyes flickering everywhere but me.

“They hit me. That’s all,” I told him, my hand reaching for his clenched fist, as his eyes begged it to be true. “I swear. Sam protected me and someone named Dylan.”

His fist relaxed, as he trusted what I told him, and he curled his fingers around mine.

“Your sister is something else,” I said to distract him, garnering a faint smile before it quickly disappeared. “She’s as tough as nails. She also has a plan.”

His head tilted at my words and I tugged my hand from his.

“I need that for one second,” I told him as he tried to take my hand back. I slipped my hand in my shirt as his eyes widened, fishing around in my bra for the slip of paper she’d given me. “Here,” I said with a flourish as I pulled it out. “Your sister sent this for you. And this too,” I added as I leaned across the bed and hugged him tightly.

“Is she.... alright?” He asked after a pause.

“Yeah, she’s you except with boobs.” His chest rumbled under mine as he laughed involuntarily, his arms coming around me to squeeze gently. “I swear she’s okay. I think she’s more worried about you to be honest.”

He scoffed, “Why? She’s the one with those people.”

“Yeah, but those people want to kill you and everyone here. She doesn’t want that to

happen,” I informed him, waving the paper she’d sent. “This is your advantage according to her.”

He plucked the paper from my hand, his fingers rubbing it gently.

“She was always the one with a plan,” he said, glancing at the paper. “They weren’t always good plans,” he added ruefully and I chuckled.

“I believe that.” I sat back down on the bed, cross-legged. “But what they may lack in finesse is made up for in sheer willpower.”

“My sister in a nutshell,” he murmured, still staring at the paper.

“Um, can I take a shower? Change clothes?” I asked, wanting to give him some privacy to read whatever she’d written and also to get the grimy feeling off.

“Yeah,” Dominic answered, standing abruptly. “Here,” he grabbed a folded pile of clothes off the nightstand next to the bed. “Anna sent these over. They might be a little small, but anything of mine would swallow you whole.”

I took the clothes and glanced around for the bathroom. He steered me to a door, opening it to reveal an oversized shower and higher than normal sink.

“It was built for me,” he said awkwardly and I smiled.

“It’s perfect,” I answered, and it was perfect for him. Everything about his bathroom was efficient and larger than normal. “You’ll be here?” I asked, stopping him as he was shutting the door. He looked at me questioningly and then his expression eased.

“I’ll be right outside the door,” he replied and my suddenly tight chest relaxed. I nodded and he pulled the door almost closed, leaving a tiny gap so I could decide if I

wanted it closed. I left it open.

It took me a few minutes of fiddling to figure out how to operate his shower, and another half hour before I was willing to leave the hot water pulsing down on me. I dried myself off and dragged the only comb I found through my wet hair. I wiggled into the clothes Anna had lent me, key word wiggled since they were at least a size too small. I was thankful Dominic's mirror was also higher than normal so all I could see was my head. I was afraid to take a deep breath for fear of popping a seam so I could only imagine what the clothes looked like on me. I would have to borrow something of Dominic's even if it did swallow me whole.

I pulled the door open silently, and had a second to observe Dominic as he sat there staring down at the opened letter in his hand. His usually expressionless face was anything but as he gazed down at what his sister had written. Hope, sorrow, joy, fear, and a bitter anger were all there, but determination superseded all of them.

Whatever she'd told him had inspired the same determination I felt. We would end the Hanleys' tyranny and protect our pack. I didn't have time to linger on the idea that I considered the pack mine as Dominic glanced up. His lips parted as his eyes slid over me, and I had a feeling the clothes were more inappropriate than I'd imagined.

I tugged at the hem of the sleep shorts she'd lent me, trying to make them longer. I'd given up on the shirt already, knowing a strip of my bare belly was on display since I filled the top out a little more than Anna.

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Dominic still hadn't said a word as his eyes lingered on me. He set the letter on the nightstand and stood up. My eyes flickered down to the pants clinging to his hips and a bulge caught my eye. Heat crept over my skin and a low growl filled the room, causing my nipples to pucker. The growl deepened and suddenly Dominic was in front of me, his hand hovering over my hip, his body millimeters from my own.

I tilted my head up to meet his eyes and the growl cut off. He stared at me, a question in his eyes and I nodded. The hand by my hip settled against my skin, his thumb stroking as his other fingers kneaded deep. He lowered his head toward mine, the motion slow and even, driving me insane when all I wanted was the press of his lips against me.

He didn't invade or demand. His lips brushed gently against mine, each slow stroke a question until my lips parted in invitation. The hand on my hip dug in, gripping me as he carefully explored my mouth with his tongue, his decision to be gentle clearly costing him. His other hand found its way to my hip and he dragged me closer, lifting me up until I balanced on my toes, my hips tilted toward his and the bulge I'd felt earlier. I wound my arms around him, a frustrated whimper escaping me at his slow pace. The sound seemed to snap something inside of him because he suddenly jerked me up, forcing my legs around him, as his hand buried itself in my hair and he angled my head to ravage my mouth. I moaned at the sudden feel of him surrounding me, his tongue commanding mine and he spun us around, walking toward the bed.

He lowered us down, his heavy thigh wedging itself between my legs as his mouth trailed down my neck with hot open-mouthed kisses. When he came to the mark on my neck, he paused as I panted, my skin tingling. He lowered his mouth, his tongue gently tracing the spot as heat surged through me and I gasped. His hand stroked

down my side, so enormous it practically spanned my waist and I felt his thigh rock against my mound. I moaned, tilting my head back to push the sensitive mark closer to his mouth.

His nose rubbed against my skin as he nuzzled me and I felt him hesitate before his teeth gently scraped against the mark. My body was taut, balanced on the precipice when he bit down and I convulsed, pleasure washing away everything but the feel of him.

It took a few minutes before I became aware of his palm running up and down my spine. He'd flipped us over and I was sprawled across his chest, my legs on either side of his waist.

"That was..." I trailed off, not entirely sure there were words in the English language that could convey what that was.

"Life altering?" Dominic offered, his deep voice gravelly. It might have seemed like a joke coming from someone else, but I caught the note of nervousness in the words.

"Yeah, you could say that," I answered, shifting myself so I could look at him. "Was that mating?" I asked cautiously. Anna had said sex was involved and I wasn't an idiot, we hadn't had sex, but it seemed like we were the exception to the rule.

"No," he answered quickly. "Well, yes, but not really," he corrected himself as I became thoroughly confused. He frowned, "I'm not explaining this right." I chuckled, my earlier bliss not allowing any anxiety to seep in. "You're taking it better than I thought," he mumbled and I smiled.

"Blame the afterglow," I informed him and his eyes flared for a second. "Don't get distracted," I commanded, slapping his chest, but not moving from where I sat. I was essentially straddling him, but was too comfortable to move. "Explain."

“I talked to Gregory,” he started and I shook my head at the mention of the eldest shifter in the pack.

“That’s one way to kill the mood,” I muttered and he tightened his abs, making me bounce slightly. “Okay, continue.”

“Anyway, Gregory knows the most about mates. There haven’t been as many recently, at least not like us.” I was sorely tempted to ask what he meant but figured he’d get around to it eventually and wouldn’t appreciate another interruption. “My accidental marking shouldn’t have created such a strong connection, hell, it shouldn’t have done anything, but it did. I could even connect to you mentally. Granted, it wasn’t a strong connection but it was there. Normally, that’s unheard of. Gregory said he hasn’t seen something like it since his grandparents.”

“So, we aren’t special,” I cried dramatically and he rolled his eyes.

“No, we are,” he corrected. “Gregory’s never heard of any other mate being able to do this.”

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“And what exactly is this?” I asked, my hands braced on his shoulders, the spot he’d bitten still tingling. He gazed at me for a second, understanding there was more to my question.

“We’re able to communicate the way only full mates and pack mates can. Without actually completing the mating bond,” he stressed.

“No sex,” I clarified and he smiled.

“No sex,” he echoed.

“And you bit me again. Why?” My gaze didn’t shift as I waited for his answer, needing him to tell me.

“Because.....because I can’t go through that again. Not knowing where you are. If you’re safe. What they might have –” he cut himself off, glancing away from me.

“So, you bit me so you could strengthen our connection,” I summarized, lifting my eyebrow.

“I need you to be safe,” he replied simply. “I’ll do whatever is necessary to make sure you are.”

“But you didn’t finish the bond,” I reminded him, feeling the heavy bulge of him against my ass. “You could have,” I continued and he stopped breathing for a second.

“You’re seventeen,” he ground out, his hands squeezing my thighs.

“Eighteen actually,” I told him. “My birthday was two days ago.”

“That’s still too young,” he informed me and I smiled.

“I agree,” I answered.

“Then why are you telling me this? Do you have any idea of how tempting you are? Of the effort I’m making not to roll you underneath me and finish this?”

“Maybe,” I said and then corrected myself, “Probably not. But you aren’t, and there has to be a reason.”

“It should be your choice. It’ll always be your choice, and it won’t be made in a moment of blind lust,” he promised, his golden eyes glittering.

“But what about you?”

“What about me?” He asked carefully, his hands on my thighs acting like a cage, so I didn’t do something irreversible, I thought.

“You keep biting me and marking me. When is it my turn?”

“You want to bite me?” He asked, blinking.

“Why not?” I shrugged, “It felt amazing and it can only make our bond stronger.” My eyes narrowed. “You bit me but we didn’t have sex so we’re not fully mated, but does this mean we’ll always be connected even if we never complete the bond?”

Dominic was already shaking his head before I finished the question.

“No, it will wear off. We have to maintain the bond or complete it. If we do nothing

and avoid one another, then it will eventually fade.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” I whispered, my voice unintentionally throaty as I stared at the strong column of his neck. I watched his Adam’s apple bob and his fingers tightened on my legs as I leaned forward.

“I have no idea how I’ll react,” he warned, his fingers slipping as he debated if he would stop me. “I could lose control. Take you.”

“Worth the risk,” I answered as my lips touched his skin and his entire body went taut. I trailed light kisses along his neck, the skin salty and so incredibly smooth. “I’m curious,” I mentioned, my tongue following a dip in his throat.

“About?” He asked the word strangled.

“You bit me on the neck. Is that a requirement? Is it the location? Or the act?” I questioned, my lips brushing his shoulder as I hovered above him.

“I’m not sure,” he rasped out, his chest heaving below me. “You’re welcome to test another location though.”

I smiled as I pressed a kiss firmly against his neck and sat up. He watched me with lidded eyes and I could sense the control he was exerting to let me keep the position of dominance.

“It’s about intent,” he murmured. “My initial kiss had more intent than I realized, causing our bond. My bite just now was very intentional,” he rumbled, his fingers positioning my thighs so I rested against him fully. I drew my hands down his chest, my fingers exploring the broad stretch of skin and muscle.

“Intent,” I repeated, my eyes tracing the path my hands had taken. He kept his hands

locked on my thighs as I continued to explore, letting me do whatever I wanted. I nipped his ear and he grunted.

“Gonna have to be a little harder than that,” he informed me, swiping his thumb along the edge of the shorts I wore.

“Patience,” I said and he gave a low groan. My lips followed the path my fingers had taken and I giggled as his curly chest hair tickled my nose. “You’re hairy,” I informed him.

“I’m a wolf shifter,” he replied, shifting. “Hairy comes with the territory.” I grinned and felt his chest rumble as he noticed his own unintentional pun. I hovered over one particular spot as I felt the thud of his heart, the beats faster than normal but steady. My nose brushed his nipple and my tongue darted out to taste it. His body tensed instantly, the flat brown nipple pebbling, and I knew his control was slipping.

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The drumming of his heartbeat drew me back to the heavy pectoral muscle and I kissed the spot right before I sank my teeth into his skin.

Pleasure washed over me once again and my thighs squeezed tight around his waist as his fingers dug in so hard I knew he'd leave bruises. This time, I recognized the pleasure as his. I was feeling it through him.

Mine.

The word reverberated through me. The possessiveness in it shocking me because I was the one who thought it.

"And you are mine as well," he declared, the words sending a wave of satisfaction through me so intense I shuddered.

Chapter Nineteen

"Bunny," Dad caroled, making me wince. "It's birthday time."

"Dad, you do know I'm eighteen, right? And weren't you supposed to stop calling me Bunny?"

A beat of silence followed my question.

"I thought it was eighty," he finally answered and then pounded on the door lightly. "Now, get your lazy bones up!"

I glanced over at the alarm clock.

“It’s five thirty. In the morning!” I added in case there was any confusion.

“You know the tradition,” was his only response and I groaned. I did know the tradition. I just hadn’t enjoyed it since I was twelve. The Saturday after your birthday or if your birthday was on a Saturday you woke up early and spent the day celebrating. Granted, it had always just been me and Dad since Mom had never bothered to participate that I could remember.

I dragged myself out of the bed, my body protesting the movement. Dominic had dropped me off the night before with strict promises to stay put. He would be patrolling the perimeter with Trent, but I was safer inside. He’d wanted me to stay at his house, safely in the heart of the pack, but I knew that was the fastest way to get my dad to call the sheriff and send a search party out after me.

“Fine,” Dominic had agreed grudgingly. “You need to maintain contact though.”

Yes, sir, I projected mentally and he frowned.

You can leave the sir off, he grumbled back, makes me feel even older.

Older men are hot, I informed him with a mental grin. He answered with a glare through slitted eyes and I slipped out of the Jeep before he could follow up with a verbal reprimand.

I padded into the kitchen bleary eyed mumbling, “Dad, don’t you think we could change the tradition to later in the day?”

The sight in front of me stopped me in my tracks as I muttered, “Fuck.”

“Watch your mouth. I didn’t raise you to speak that way.” The elegant woman standing in the middle of our tiny apartment glared with a familiar disdain and a surge of anger shot through me.

“Well, at least one part of your comment was right. You didn’t raise me.”

Are you okay? The thought blasted through me and I realized my burst of anger had reached Dominic.

I’m fine, I reassured him. My mother is here. A flicker of surprise accompanied that news, but he didn’t ask any questions.

“That is no way to speak to your mother,” she informed me, her chin tilting up. “I’ve come to get you. Get dressed. Don’t bother to pack. We’ll need to buy you new clothes,” she commanded as I stared at her in disbelief. I glanced at Dad, but all he managed was a shrug.

“Did you tell her to come?” I demanded, staring at him in angry disbelief.

He shook his head, and relief trickled through me. I didn’t want to believe he’d send me away, that he hadn’t called her to come here.

“I’m standing right here,” she reminded us and I shot her a look.

“The door is right there,” I informed her sharply. “Feel free to use it.”

“I don’t like your attitude.” She glared at me and then Dad. “I blame you. You were always so soft on her. Doting, even. It was disgusting.”

“Well, you were too busy fucking every man to bother being a mother,” I retorted, angry she’d once again attacked Dad. The responding slap was loud and my cheek

stung with burning heat.

Jess, Dominic shouted in my head and I winced. There was no way he hadn't felt that and I knew I wasn't going to stop him from coming to my rescue. Necessary or not.

It's just my mother, I tried to reassure him with zero faith it would work. A low growl filled my head and I sighed.

"You should go," I pointed at the door helpfully and she just stared. "Really, you should. There's nothing here you can destroy. Not anymore."

"You will be coming with me," she demanded. "It's been decided."

"By who?"

"Your father and I," she replied airily, not even glancing at my father. I spared him a quick glance, already knowing he wouldn't protest. She'd done this a million times before and I knew Dad was firmly under her thumb. He couldn't seem to challenge her.

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“Oh, well maybe you should have cleared it with me before you made the trip,” I answered, not cowed in the least.

“You’re a minor. You’ll do as I say.” She arched an eyebrow and I smiled.

“I was a minor,” I reminded her, hopping up on a barstool. “Now, I’m legally an adult.”

She blinked for a second and I let my words sink in.

“You’re shit out of luck, mommy dearest. Why don’t you go bully that new husband of yours and the bastard you had with him.”

She sucked in a breath as I swung my feet.

“You ungrateful, little bitch,” she screamed, her face contorted as she started toward me.

“OUT,” Dad roared, placing himself between us and shocking the shit out of me. And Mom. “That’s enough. Jess is able to make up her own mind and she’s right. You’ve done enough damage to last a lifetime. Get the hell out of my motel, and my town while you’re at it.” He grabbed her arm, spinning her around as he marched her to the door. Her shock was so great she didn’t protest as she was summarily escorted out the door. I followed, pride in my dad warring with amusement at the sight of my mother’s mouth opening and closing like a fish.

My eyes darted to the edge of the forest where I picked out a black wolf blending into

the shadows.

Everything's fine, I sent him.

You're happy, he replied, confused, and I nodded.

"My dad, the hero," I called as Dad marched back toward me determinedly after dropping Mom off at her rental car.

"No one messes with my Bunny," he growled and my eyebrows raised. He sounded like a wolf just then. He saw my surprise and regret passed over his face. "I should have done that a long time ago, Bunny." He gently placed his hand over my reddened cheek. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. That might be the best birthday present I ever received," I chortled, slinging my arm around him. "Worth the early morning wake up call for sure. Now, I believe there are some frozen waffles in my future?"

The rest of the day went by quickly as Dad pampered me, his guilty conscious even going so far as to have him clean the motel rooms.

"Okay, we need to hire someone to do this. That's disgusting," Dad muttered and I peeked over the couch where I had been busy watching home improvement shows.

"I know. I've been telling you that," I reminded him grumpily. "It's not fun cleaning pee off the floor." I paused thinking about the money situation. "But I still want to go to college one day."

Dad laughed and ruffled my hair. "I promise there's still enough money for college." He paused and then added, "You're good with community college, right?"

“Daaaaaad,” I dragged out, but didn’t feel the usual tight ball of anxiety that accompanied any mention of my college fund being used to renovate the motel. It had stopped being important to me over the past few weeks and I knew why.

“Dominic,” I murmured and Dad turned.

“What did you say, Bunny?”

“Nothing,” I replied hastily, not even minding the Bunny anymore. I’d apparently mellowed in my old age.

The screech of tires brought my head up and an instinctive fear had my heart racing.

“What the heck?” Dad muttered going to the door.

“Don’t open it,” I shouted, instinct driving me. “Lock the door, Dad.” Mentally, I sent an SOS to Dominic.

Get a gun. Barricade the door. His reply thrummed through me and I told Dad to get his shotgun. I’d left my gun with Sam, a small fact I’d neglected to mention to Dominic.

“What’s going on? Jess,” Dad called sharply, his use of my actual name telling me he was serious.

“There are bad people out there, Dad. Get your gun and I’ll explain.” He hesitated for a second before going to the bedroom where he kept the rifle loaded next to his bed. Dad might have lived in the city but this was where he belonged, I suddenly realized. Doors slammed outside and adrenaline shot through me. I started pushing the couch toward the door and Dad hurried to help me when he came back in.

I peeked out the window to see the sheriff standing in the parking lot along with a few faces I recognized from my time with the Hanleys.

“Why is the sheriff out there?” Dad asked in a low voice but before I could answer, Trent jumped over the railing above us and landed right in front of the window, causing me to jump.

“What the....”

Dad trailed off as Trent stripped his shirt off and shifted. He wasn’t nearly the size of Dominic, but his gray coat had distinctive black markings which made it easy to keep track of him when the others in the parking lot shifted too.

“Okay,” Dad muttered in apparent shock. A minute later, the Jeep roared into the parking lot, coming from the path in the woods instead of the road. Dominic jumped out along with two wolves I recognized as Caleb and Anna. I swallowed hard at the sight, knowing I couldn’t stop them.

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Dominic shifted a second later, his size and black coloring intimidatingly fierce. Dad choked as he turned to glare at me.

“I recognize that dog,” he accused and I opened my mouth to say what, I didn’t know. Plead ignorance? Instead, I went on the offense.

“That’s what you comment on?” I shouted instead, waving my hand wildly at the brewing battle in our motel parking lot. “Really?”

“Well, I’m sorry if as a father I’m concerned my daughter is inviting a wolf home to sleep in her room. An older wolf at that!”

I blinked at him, stunned into silence by his response, until the sound of snapping jaws drew my attention back outside.

“Hank?” Dad muttered in the same tone one might say, “Et tu, Brutus?”

“Yeah,” I grumbled, watching the older man shift. Three others, one with a sandy coat sprinkled with gray, joined him. I didn’t see any ancient wolves hobbling around so I assumed Gregory must have remained behind. Other men joined the Navarre pack, ones who couldn’t shift, I reasoned, as they remained human. The Hanley’s had a few men amongst them and I wondered what weapons they may have brought to this fight.

No matter what happens, stay inside. Dominic’s voice whispered through my mind and when I didn’t answer immediately, he nudged me.

I can't promise that, I answered, my heart threatening to jump out of my chest at the thought of him injured or worse.

His growl echoed through my mind and I flinched at the impotent fury in it. I promise to stay alive, I told him. Can you do the same?

For you, yes, he answered instantly and my chest eased enough for me to take a breath.

Stay safe, I whispered before I felt him close himself off from me mentally. I knew he'd need to focus on the fight in front of him, but I felt the absence keenly. My eyes darted constantly, keeping watch over my wolves. Lithe Anna darted between larger wolves snapping at their feet as Caleb followed, his heavier bulk finishing them off. Trent took a flank position to Dominic, as they ripped through anyone in their path. The pack elders fought intelligently, searching for opportunities to weaken the other pack by taking out key opponents. Hank stayed close to his alpha, and I watched as Dominic fought alongside Caleb, his fighting technique making more sense as I saw him keeping other wolves from attacking Caleb from behind.

My eyes kept moving, watching them as they fought, and wondering what the outcome would be. It took me a minute to realize I'd lost Anna in the turmoil of the fight, her smaller form harder to spot in the snarling mass.

Finally, I spotted her and my heart stopped. She was pinned by the sheriff and a couple of the other Hanley men, a gun trained on her. I shoved at the couch, suddenly desperate to get out and reach her.

"What are you doing?" Dad shouted, trying to stop me from moving the couch barricading the door. "You can't go out there."

"Watch me," I muttered frantically. "Help me," I finally screamed when he just stood

there. “Anna is in danger. We can’t let them get her.” I peeked out the window again only to see them trying to round her up. It looked the men’s goal was to capture females. “Dad, now,” I demanded, my eyes holding his. He read the desperation and nodded. Together, we heaved the couch away and I darted to the door. He beat me to it, his hand hovering over the doorknob.

“We go together,” he told me and I nodded. The fight was still going as we ran along the sidewalk in front of the rooms. Luckily, Trent was our only guest since I had no idea how to explain a violent wolf fight in the parking lot.

I pointed to Anna and the men, and Dad gave me a nod. I didn’t have an actual plan other than to distract the men and give Anna an opportunity to escape. The idiocy of my actions dawned on me about the same time they saw me coming. The sight of the rifle in my dad’s hands did nothing to deter their smirks as they saw the chance to nab another breeding female. Anna gave a short howl as their attention diverted to me and suddenly Dominic was in my head.

Turn around, he growled and I shook my head.

I won’t let her get hurt, I answered him determinedly.

Anna darted around one of the men, her teeth snapping his leg like a toothpick. He fell, screaming, to the ground. The sheriff stared at me wild eyed; licking his lips and my dad cocked his rifle.

I stopped my forward momentum, forcing them to come to me and giving Anna the chance to slip around them.

“I will be rewarded if I bring you back,” the sheriff crowed, his eyes gleaming with excitement and lust. “They’ll let me have a taste. A chance to sow my seed.” I cringed at his words, and the desperate need in them.

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“You’re not even a shifter,” I mocked. “None of you are. You’re nothing but a pair of hands when they’re in wolf form. You would never have a chance with me.” Rage flashed across his face and I knew I’d scored a hit.

One of the men came at my dad and he swung the rifle around slamming into him instead of shooting. Anna scrambled to bring down the other guy as I faced off with the sheriff. A manic look came over him letting me know I was in trouble. He charged me, seeming to forget he had a gun in his hand, and I couldn’t stop his forward momentum as we both hit the ground. I fought to keep his weight off me, knowing I was done if he pinned me. He swung the hand with the gun in it at my head and I blocked it, but the force of the blow snapped my wrist.

I bucked hard trying to knock him off balance as spittle from his mouth sprayed across my face. His other hand raked across my chest and I felt his excitement. He wasn’t trying to subdue me. He enjoyed the struggle. He managed to pin my arm with the broken wrist as I used my other hand to claw his face.

The sound of a gunshot froze him in place above me and I wondered for a second if he’d been shot. His next action proved he hadn’t, but the gunshot seemed to remind him of his duty.

Soon, he mouthed and I shuddered, as his hand came down with the butt of the gun aimed at my head. Another gunshot pierced the air and this time when he froze, I knew he’d been shot. The red blooming across his chest was proof as well as the shock on his face. He collapsed on me, dead weight I couldn’t wiggle out from underneath.

Within seconds, Dad was there, dragging the sheriff off me and staring at me in worry.

“I’m okay,” I managed, the words coming out automatically in light of his expression, since I obviously not okay. My wrist was definitely broken and I wasn’t sure a rib or two wasn’t as well.

“You want to tell me why the sheriff attacked you and I was forced to kill him?” Dad grunted, shoving the sheriff’s body and simultaneously reaching for me.

“Long story,” I muttered, my words shockingly loud in the still parking lot. It was silent, eerily silent, after the gunshot. There was a pounding in my temples I couldn’t explain. A weight pressing down on me, but it didn’t feel like mine.

They’re running away. The words echoed in my head, flat and unemotional.

Dominic. I whispered, an ache forming in my chest. Something was wrong. Please.

He didn’t answer as a heartbreaking howl broke the silence quickly followed by a chorus of others. I understood then what had happened.

“Dad,” I whispered frantically, tugging on his arm. “Which one, Dad?”

Chapter Twenty

“I don’t know, Bunny,” Dad answered, helping me stand. “We should go inside.” He tried to lead me back to the apartment, but I struggled against him.

“I need to know,” I protested. “Dad, it’s important.” The determination in my voice must have penetrated because he stopped trying to guide me away from the wolves collected around a single still form. I leaned against him, needing his support as I

cradled my broken arm. Only the fact that Dominic had spoken to me kept me calm as we walked closer to the gathered wolves.

Some of them shifted, allowing us close enough to see the sandy wolf on the ground. For a second, I believed it was Caleb until I saw the gray fur interspersed among the blond strands. Blood pooled beneath him as the pack mourned their fallen leader, sorrowful howls piercing the night sky.

I stared at Caleb's father's body, something about it bothering me. I searched around him, looking for the wolf that killed him. Hank stood nearby, his dark fur sprinkled with gray, dripping blood from a wound at his shoulder. I knew he'd protected the alpha's flank, and there was no way he'd let the wolf who'd killed his alpha escape. I glanced back at the body and finally saw what I'd been missing. There were no visible wounds.

My eyes skated around the closed circle of wolves, cataloguing injuries clearly made by another wolf. The few human males had jagged wounds, and I noticed one of them stood next to Caleb, his hand resting on his ruffled fur. Dominic stood on his other side, stoic as he stared unblinkingly at the fallen wolf. My eyes went unerringly back to the alpha, whispered words drifting through my mind.

"It's only when the alpha dies we'll see issues. There will be several who want Dom to take the position and it could cause the pack to divide."

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It had seemed impossible when Anna said it. The alpha was young enough to lead for several more years, but now I could see what she'd eluded to. A weakened pack was easier to destroy.

"They shot him," I breathed, swallowing thickly, as my mind pieced the events together. "They shot the alpha." Dad tensed, the arm supporting me going rigid as I spoke. "That was their plan all along. Start a fight, draw out the alpha and kill him, weakening the pack."

"If that's true," Dad's voice faltered and then strengthened, "If that's true, then this has just begun."

I nodded, my eyes meeting Dominic's for a heartbeat before my dad was pulling me away from the circle of wolves. I twisted, crying out at the pain that went through me at the motion, but needing to be with them as they mourned.

"No, Bunny. You need medical assistance. Most of them do too." He fought my struggles, holding me as I collapsed against him. "There are dead bodies littering the parking lot. One of them the damn sheriff. Listen to me, Bunny, you need to be strong for them now." My head came up at his words and he sighed. "This is why you wanted to stay, isn't it?"

I nodded and his expression settled into one of resignation. "I don't understand half of what's going on here, but I get the gist. These wolves matter to you, which means they matter to me. I'll help them, but you need to do what I say, Jess. You're hurt and I'm not okay with that." I nodded, his protective glare reminding me of Dominic. Dad set me on the bench and turned to survey the parking lot. "Jesus," he sighed and I

tugged on his hand.

“They’ll need clothes when they shift back. Their saliva can heal minor wounds.” My head spun, leaving me feeling woozy, and I leaned it back against the wall. “The sheriff deserved what he got, Dad.”

“Oh, believe me, I know. The bastard had his hands on you. He’s lucky the shot killed him,” Dad rumbled angrily and my lips tilted up in a faint smile.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I cradled my arm protectively.

“For what, Bunny?” Dad smoothed the hair from my face, just like he used to when I was a child falling asleep.

“Saving me,” I replied, blinking back stupid tears.

“Aww, Jess. You never have to thank me for that. It’s my privilege to protect you whether it’s from a sheriff trying to hurt you or an older man...wolf trying to take advantage,” Dad finished with a growl and I gave a pained groan.

“Not letting that one go, are you?”

“Hell no. You have some explaining to do, daughter. Right after I clean the dead bodies out of the parking lot.”

I gave a completely inappropriate chuckle at his grim tone and groaned at the pain that accompanied it. The Hanleys had suffered losses, many of them at the hand of Dominic, while most of the Navarre pack had only injuries, a few severe but they would survive. The greatest blow was the loss of their alpha and it was apparent by their aimless stares they didn’t know what to do next. Caleb was lost to his grief and even Hank Navarre seemed lost without his best friend.

Dad squeezed my shoulder and then went over to them.

“Is anyone trained in first aid here?” He asked and a gray wolf with distinctive black markings padded over, shifting when he reached Dad.

“I do,” Trent replied and Dad nodded.

“Anyone with injuries make your way over to the motel. Trent here will assess and triage.” Several of the wolves and men stared at my dad but didn’t move until a snarl came from Dominic. He snapped at a couple of wolves near him and it was clear he was telling them to do as my dad said. “Please, I know you’re grieving, but many of you need medical attention, like my daughter. I can’t call the police or an ambulance so we need to work together.” Shame crossed some of their faces and they started shuffling back toward me. A few wolves shifted back into their human form and I closed my eyes at the sight.

A gentle nuzzle prompted me to open them again and I smiled at the bright, yellow eyes meeting mine. His tongue curled out to lick my face and I winced at the slight pressure.

“You get an out this time,” I murmured as he continued to gently lick my swollen cheek. “Don’t think this will be a regular occurrence.”

I hope not, he replied, his voice heavy in my head as his nose nudged my broken wrist. I hissed at the pain and a wordless apology brushed my thoughts. I can’t heal this, not completely, he told me as his tongue swiped over my arm, and some of the pain disappeared.

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“It already feels better,” I replied, burying my other hand in the soft fur of his neck. “I was afraid,” I stopped, unable to verbalize the fear. I was afraid it would be you on the ground. Is it wrong that I’m glad it wasn’t?

No, he answered, and for a heartbeat I felt his relief that I was alive, the joy that came with the knowledge I was safe. I feel the same. I was coming to you when he was...killed. I heard the hesitation when he said killed and knew he hadn’t come to terms with that fact they’d shot the alpha. It was a coward’s trick, one Dominic couldn’t accept. I left my alpha undefended.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I told him fiercely, gripping the fur behind his ear. “It wasn’t.”

I knew their plan was to take out the alpha. Sam told me in her letter.

I paused, letting the words sink in.

“Why did he come?” I asked, bewildered why the alpha would risk his life when he knew he was the target.

An alpha fights with his pack, Dominic answered quietly. I failed him though.

I shook my head in immediate denial and his head turned away. I tugged it back toward me, my fingers fisted in his fur.

“Explain.”

We knew they would attack him. Trent and I were supposed to protect him along with

my dad. He paused and I waited, sensing his guilt. I felt your pain, and instead of guarding my alpha, I fought my way to you.

My forehead wrinkled at his words, not understanding.

I left my position to go to you. I was too late though. Your father killed the sheriff; a low growl accompanied the thought, his unhappiness at not being the one to kill the sheriff apparent. I was too late to save my alpha as well.

“He was shot. You couldn’t have saved him,” I reminded him, lowering my head to his, my forehead resting in the curve of bone above his now dark golden eyes.

I could have taken the bullet meant for him.

I couldn’t stop the sharp flare of agony that went through me at the thought and Dominic whimpered. I tightened my arms around his neck, my tears soaking into his fur.

“No,” I whispered brokenly. “No.”

I’m okay, he attempted to reassure me, but all my mind could see was Dominic lying on the ground, his black fur soaked in blood. “Jess,” he said, the sound of his voice snapping me out of the image my mind had created. Dominic crouched at my feet, my hands no longer buried in his thick fur but braced against wide, bare shoulders as he rubbed the tears from my face.

“We’re alright,” he promised, dragging my hand to the spot where I’d bitten him, right above his beating heart. “Feel this and know we’re okay.” I nodded, calming as I felt the reassuring thud of his heart.

“Jesus, son. If you want to spend any time at all around my daughter, you better put

some pants on.” A hand came over my eyes and I hiccupped which turned into a giggle as I heard Dominic mutter, “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t think we won’t be having a chat, son,” Dad warned him. “You’re lucky I like your dad or this would be an entirely different conversation.”

“Do you think we could have the chat without the rifle in your hand?” Dominic inquired and I reached for the hand covering my eyes.

“Dad!” I shouted when he wouldn’t budge.

“We’ll see,” Dad answered Dominic and he gave me a light shake. “You will remain like this until he puts pants on.”

I bit back my protest that it wasn’t anything I hadn’t already seen, since that knowledge wouldn’t endear Dominic any further to my father. A rush of gratitude at my silence came to me and I smiled. I’ll be right back, Dominic promised and suddenly his heat was gone and I felt Dad relax next to me.

“He’s not so bad,” I said, my eyes still covered.

“He put you in danger,” Dad replied, his voice gruff.

“No, he protected me from danger,” I responded, squeezing his wrist with the hand I had used to try and dislodge him with. “He had nothing to do with me being in danger. That was nothing more than genetics.”

Dad groaned and I felt him settle more heavily against the bench. “Bunny, you got some serious explaining to do.”

“And I will, but, Dad, you have to keep an open mind. I mean, you’re the reason

we're here after all."

"Don't remind me. I might never forgive myself," he answered, his arm tightening over my eyes.

"It's a good thing," I reassured him and he snorted. "It is. We belong here. You'll see."

"Sir," Dominic said politely, and I smiled at the image my mind formed of my giant Dominic paying his respects to my dad.

"Son," Dad said grudgingly. I tapped the hand still covering my eyes and he reluctantly lowered it. I frowned when I saw Dominic had pulled on pants and a shirt, but when Dominic reached for my hand, Dad didn't protest.

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“I only wish to keep her safe and see her happy,” Dominic told my dad, sincerity ringing in his voice and Dad nodded, unable to deny the truth of what Dominic said.

“Just don’t be the reason she cries and we’ll be alright,” Dad threatened and I flushed, but Dominic nodded seriously.

“I should have sent you with your mom,” Dad muttered under his breath and I swatted him with my good arm. “Kidding, Bunny,” Dad grumbled, a smile flickering at the edges of his lips. “You can’t live with your mom because now you’re old enough to be tried as an adult.” I blinked at him and he lifted his eyebrows. I shrugged, not denying it and Dominic choked. “Son, you have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“You may be right, sir, but I also think she’s exactly what I need.” I tilted my head back so I could meet his eyes and caught sight of something at the edge of the woods. I squinted, sitting straight up when I realized what it was I saw. I grabbed Dominic’s hand and pointed with it to the edge of the forest where a woman stood with a little boy in her arms. I heard Dominic’s breath catch as he murmured, “Sam?” And as we watched, more women stepped through the trees, lining it, children clinging to their hands.

“The plan,” I whispered in satisfaction, smiling at the sight of them.

“Good thing we have empty rooms,” Dad said, heaving a sigh. “Well, Bunny, maybe one of them will take the housekeeping job.”

One week later

“How’s your arm?” Anna asked quietly, gesturing to the cast.

“Broken,” I joked, and she gave me a brief smile, which faded too quickly. “It’s fine. Not as bad as it might have been,” I told her with a shrug.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she added, leaning against the locker next to mine. It was the first day most of the Pack had been back to school following their alpha’s death and I could see she wasn’t really all there.

“How’s everything?” I asked, keeping my question vague. I’d stopped by the community a couple of times, but there never seemed to be an opportunity to talk.

“It’s okay,” she answered and I gave her a disbelieving glance. “It is,” she said, trying to convince me. “Dominic is backing Caleb a hundred percent and the elders are working with him. It’s not perfect, but it’s good.”

“And Caleb?” I asked, since he hadn’t returned yet and neither had Dominic. I’d questioned Dominic but he didn’t have the same insight into Caleb that Anna did.

“He’s struggling,” Anna admitted. “He never thought his dad would die this soon. He’s younger than us and yet expected to lead the pack. He also wants revenge for his father’s death. It’s not a good combination.”

I nodded, feeling her pain. Dominic had implied most of what she told me, but no one wanted to admit that Caleb might not be the best choice for alpha. At least not Dominic and Anna. There were others who didn’t mind stating their opinions and it was putting stress on the pack as a whole.

“He needs time to grieve and with your support and Dominic’s, I know Caleb will be okay.” I hid my crossed fingers behind my backpack, not wanting her to see my own doubts. Dominic was determined not to let this divide the Pack. He didn’t want to be

alpha, but he'd do everything in his power to protect Caleb's position.

"The Hanleys?" I asked to distract her.

"Nothing," Anna answered, her eyes worried. "Not since most of their females showed up at your motel. I don't think they expected that to happen and now they're hesitant to start a fight...."

"In case one of their females are killed," I finished, zipping my bag up. "Or sons," I added as an afterthought. Most of the children were male with a few girls in the group. It wasn't unusual, according to Dominic since males were prized as the shifters. Females rarely carried the trait and the few females in the group would probably have the ability to breed. It was the only reason they'd been allowed to live.

"Yes, for now we're at an impasse," Anna stated, shrugging. "Sam saved us after all."

"Yeah, she said she had a plan," I said in admiration. "She wasn't playing." Sam had evacuated all the willing females and children when the Hanleys had come to attack. They'd waited in the forest until it was safe and their presence acted as ceasefire. We weren't sure if or when the Hanleys would recoup since they'd taken a severe blow when they'd attacked. The sheriff hadn't been the only one to lose his life that day, and his death had weakened the Hanley's power.

"Dominic thinks it'll be a long time before the Hanley's try again," I continued, shrugging my backpack on. "For now, we're safe."

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Anna nodded, trailing after me as we walked to class. “You and Dom?” She asked softly, almost hesitantly.

I smiled and tapped my forehead. “Still going strong. I’m still getting used to him feeling my emotions, but its good.”

“You think you’ll finish the mating?” Anna questioned, grinning archly.

“There is a distinct possibility of that happening,” I answered, a blush crawling up my cheeks. “In the distant future.”

“You love him,” Anna stated, bumping my shoulder.

“He feels like home,” I told her, swallowing. “I didn’t know that was what I was searching for. At least until I found it. I’m not ready to make a lifelong commitment just yet, but I want to give us a chance.” Anna gave me a knowing smirk and I laughed. “Doesn’t hurt that our chemistry is off the charts,” I admitted and Anna bounced happily.

“You’re staying,” she said, her voice brooking no argument.

“That’s yet to be decided. I want to go to college, but maybe I don’t need to go so far,” I replied, trying to dampen her excitement.

“We can go to college together,” she said cheerfully, not at all put off by my words. “Close by, so we can see our guys.”

“Our guys?” I questioned, lifting my eyebrow. She blushed bright red and I hid my grin.

“Caleb, sort of,” she admitted, trying to contain herself. “It’s complicated and new, but we’re trying.”

“I’m happy for you and for him. You both deserve to be happy,” I told her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. “Oh, did I tell you....Ms. Nichols got fired. Something about planting a knife in a student’s locker.”

Anna’s laugh pealed down the hall, stopping students in their tracks as the quietest member of the Pack drew attention to herself. Leah gave me a wave and I smiled at her.

What are you smiling about? A low rumble caressed my thoughts, his happiness a reflection of mine.

Anna, I answered simply, and you. A wave of contentment went through me, a sense of belonging, and of family. Home.