



The Vampire in the Potting Shed

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Description: There are two things Ana Sartori knows for certain. She can't shapeshift into a wolf like her father or his pack. And, despite her being a latent, little more than human, he loves her despite her faults. She's never going to be an alpha like him, but she can still hold her own in a fight. Not that her life is violent. He makes sure of that. Aside from occasionally wrestling pets into a headlock when it's time to trim their nails at Gwinnett Street Groomers, Ana leads a simple life.

At least that was the case until someone broke into her pet resort and spa, leaving a mystery dog behind in one of the bougie boarding suites. Not to mention there's a vampire hiding in the potting shed. A very tall, very handsome vampire. He even smells nice, minus the blood drenching his clothes.

Ana could handle those things, probably, but now there's a new alpha determined to claim the town—and Ana—as his territory. Either she stands and fights for her home, or she runs to her father with her (metaphorical) tail tucked between her legs. Life is a lot of things, but for Ana, simple isn't one of them anymore.

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one

“Red alert. Red alert. Red alert.”

Vibrant wings spread wide, Harvey the scarlet macaw threw his weight behind pumping the swing in the massive cage I kept parked in front of the wide plate glass windows at Gwinnett Street Groomers as free advertisement we catered to more than the furry pet crowd and offered services beyond what the name implied with a variety of upscale extras. Such as boarding exotic pets. Veryloudexotic pets.

“Good morning, Harvey.” I fed and watered him then turned on his TV. “You’re going home today, bud.”

“Alien invasion.”

Add-ons like screentime were available for boarded pets who enjoyed watching their shows, like Harvey, whose tastes ran toward science fiction. Not surprising when his owner spent his annual leave snooping around Area 51 with like-minded friends, every year, without fail.

“We’re all gonna die.”

Lights flooded the back room as my kennel tech, Sloane, came whistling through the employee entrance behind the old Victorian turned pet resort and spa. She wasn’t qualified to do more than feed and water the animals or clean out their runs, but that was the cost of being Carmichael Sartori’s daughter.

Dad hired qualified people. Just not people qualified for this job.

“Um.” Sloane stuck her head into the lobby as I was turning the sign from closed to open. “Ana?”

A whiff of anxiety hit my nose as I pivoted toward her, hoping she hadn’t gotten bitten again. “Hmm?”

“There’s, uh, an extra dog?” She chewed her bottom lip. “We had five last night, and now there are six.”

“That’s not possible.” I ran down a mental checklist of the pets we had in residence. “Do a recount.”

“I did?” Her voice wobbled as her scent grew more pungent. “I still get six?”

“Show me.” I walked through the door she held open for me then veered left, toward the bougie private rooms always booked out months in advance. “The extra is in here?”

The four exclusive suites were thirty-six square feet, and each one featured a different hand-painted mural in a variety of themes to fit any personality. Unlike the kennels, where plush beds weren’t allowed, here they were supplied by a local seamstress for these pampered pets to take home with them to remember their stay.

“Suite Two.” Sloane indicated the pristine observation window. “What even is that?”

The trespasser was mostly hairless, its smooth skin a mottled pink-and-black pattern, except for feathery tufts of long white hair on its head, ankles, and tail. No collar as far as I could tell, but I would check for a microchip. On a dog from a breed that spendy, there must be some identifier.

“A Chinese Crested.” I dragged a hand down my face. “Where’s Bailey?”

The golden retriever belonging to my first client without ties to the Sartori family—thank you very much—had been tucked in her favorite suite when I left for the night. She loved chasing the flashing stoplight that lent the city mural its 3D effect. Now that I thought about it, she had also been watching *Sex and the City*.

Whoever left the Crested had changed the channel so it could binge home improvement shows.

“She’s in Kennel D.” Sloane palmed her phone from her back pocket. “I’m sorry, Ana, but I have to call this in.” Her fingers hovered over her screen. “The threat risk is too high.”

This didn’t feel like a threat, but it was downright strange. I wasn’t sure what to make of it or what to do about the frou-frou freeloader. I had no room for it. I was booked solid for the next two months. I wasn’t bumping a paying customer to give this dog the treatment its owner felt it deserved on the house either.

“Yeah.” I blew out a sigh that ruffled the curtain bangs I already regretted cutting for myself. “I know.”

If Dad heard secondhand that someone had broken into GSG, he would blow a fuse. Then he would send one of his sentinels to drag me home where he could keep me under lock and key until the owner was found. And if the owner skipped town? I would never see the sun through anything but bulletproof glass for the rest of my natural life.

“Who does that?” Sloane dialed his number from memory then waited for him to answer. “Breaks in, steals a suite from a paying customer, then bounces without leaving so much as a note?”

The moment Dad thundered across the line, I made myself scarce, returning to the lobby.

Halfway to the register, I spotted a blank card I had missed earlier wedged under its slim base.

I read the note once. Twice. Three times.

Each reading cranked my temper higher and higher.

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A few minutes later, Sloane returned wearing a tight expression. “Do we call the cops?”

For insurance purposes, probably not the worst idea, but nothing had been damaged.

And that note. That damned note.

“No.” I shoved the card in my pocket. “We wait and see who comes to pick up the dog.”

Give her your best, or I’ll show you my worst.

As far as threats went, I had received better, but the penmanship was nice.

“How do you know someone will come back for it?”

“Oh.” I smoothed a hand over the thin square tucked in my jeans. “I just have a feeling.”

And if the owner tried jailbreaking their dog without first squaring up with me, they would learn fast I wasn’t Carmichael Sartori’s daughter for nothing.

two

While we waited on a full-scale Sartori invasion, Sloane and I resumed our daily routine. Pets still needed their food topped off, their water refilled, and walksies. Then there was cleanup in the runs for her while I got grooming.

After the hard work was done, we had to get started on cuddle time, one of our most popular add-ons and the bright spot in my day. Who didn't love snuggling animals? Crazy how I got paid to do it.

As I was trimming Robespierre's nails, debating on a new polish color for him to wear during his vacation to Orlando next week, the front door banged open on a bellow that startled a yelp out of the chihuahua.

"Peanut?" a painfully familiar voice boomed through the lobby. "Peanut?"

"Wait in the lobby," I called back, not wanting him to spook the animals. "I'll be right there."

I set down my tools, scooped up Robespierre, and crated him until after I had dealt with the drama.

The drama being six feet of muscle crammed into a bespoke pinstripe suit, the expensive fabric groaning at the seams as he struggled to contain his inner wolf. As soon as he set eyes on me, the wildness in him ebbed a fraction, and he opened his arms to me. Heat burning my cheeks, I walked into his embrace.

"Do you have any idea who could have done this?"

"I'm not even sure if this qualifies as a crime, honestly."

"That big heart of yours will get you in trouble one day. That's why I worry so much."

"They didn't cause any property damage." I wasn't sure why I was defending the note writer. "It's okay." I pulled back to smile my bestdaddy's little girl smile at him.

"I'm okay."

The dark-chocolate eyes that studied my face were darker than my hazel ones. He always wore his wavy, coal-black hair slicked back, but I got Mom's stick-straight golden-blond hair. The uncanny resemblance to a mother I couldn't remember had always been a sore spot for me. I wouldn't have minded it so much if I had inherited the single most important thing from Dad.

A wolf spirit of my own.

Heightened senses were nice, and the extra strength was a lifesaver in my line of work, but without a wolf, I was more superhuman than shifter, and the pack never let me forget it.

"You're in danger out here." He slid his grip onto my shoulders. "You should come home."

"Home is forty-five minutes away," I reminded him. "Thirty if I push the speed limit."

A low growl revved up the back of his throat, his eyes flashing gold, and I took a healthy step back.

"Not that I would ever break the law or endanger my frail human self, but that's what I've heard."

A masculine snort blew warm air across my nape and tempted me to break character and snarl at Bowie, who must have sneaked in through the back, but I behaved myself.

"You're not a human." Dad leaned in to kiss my forehead. "You're a shifter, the same as anyone else."

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That was the line he used to feed me when I limped home from school after the other kids, who had wolves, beat the taste out of my mouth. I wasn't sure if I preferred those early days, when he had been so sure it would happen. That a she-wolf would burst from my skin under the right conditions to protect me. Say, when kids tripped me in the lunch line in the cafeteria. Or shoved me down while we waited on the bus. Or knocked me off the swings at recess.

Violence was a classic shifting trigger, but I only fired blanks.

Now that Dad had lost hope of a wolf emerging from me, he coddled me the same as he had Mom, who had chosen divorce over his suffocating love when I was a toddler.

“Then why do I have bodyguards, unlike everyone else?”

Damn it.

I hadn't meant to let my temper slip its leash, but Bowie had that effect on me. He had since I was in the fifth grade, and his younger sister knocked out my front tooth. Then, instead of being helpful, he had the balls to lecture me on picking fights I couldn't win.

“You're the pack princess, Peanut.” Bowie trailed a finger down my spine. “You get special treatment.”

“Daddy.” Embracing the stereotype, I stuck out my bottom lip. “This creep is bothering me.”

The death stare Dad leveled at him over my shoulder broke a genuine smile across my face.

I wasn't the only one who remembered the reason I came home with my tooth in a glass of milk.

"I'll check in with Zoe," Bowie grumbled at my back. "She's expecting a call about the Walsh situation."

And if he pinched my hip on his way out, I didn't give him the satisfaction of flinching. "What's the Walsh situation?"

"There are no signs of forced entry or magic use." Mercer swooped in, saving the day and giving Dad the perfect excuse not to answer. He offered Dad his mini tablet then winked at me before presenting me with a lollipop, like that made excluding me any better. "Whoever broke in picked the lock with a good set of tools and a steady hand. This wasn't their first rodeo." He unwrapped a sucker for himself. "I would think they didn't want Anie knowing they had been here, but a dog that ugly is hard to miss."

"Hey." I anchored my hands on my hips. "We don't dog shame at GSG."

"Apologies." Mercer wiped the smile off his face, but it lingered in his eyes. "I meant no disrespect."

"No magic means the intruder left behind a scent." Dad watched the screen for long moments before he tilted it toward me. "Have you ever seen this man?"

The short clip let me watch a powerfully built man in sweatpants and a hoodie let himself in through the back with a mesh dog carrier slung over one shoulder. "I don't think so, but it's hard to tell."

For the whole minute he spent coaxing the lock to open, the man had kept his head down, denying me a glimpse of his shadowed face. He kept his wide shoulders bowed too, making it difficult to peg his height except to say that he was tall. Maybe around Bowie's height, give or take an inch or two.

"The thing is," Mercer said, circling back to Dad's earlier comment, "GSG is a public building, and Anie has all kinds of clients. Human, witch, shifter, vampire." I was damned proud of the diversity I had cultivated too, even more so when I reminded myself how few of the pet owners had Sartori ties these days. Bailey might have been my first, but she was far from the last client I earned through the reputation I built for myself, not the one attached to me at birth. "We have no means of parsing customers' scents from the intruder's scent without a baseline."

The men shared a look that transferred onto me, but I wasn't having any of it.

"We can circle back to how you mounted surveillance cameras across the street without telling me." The energy it would take to act surprised, when I was more shocked they hadn't wired the inside too, wasn't worth the effort of scrounging up enough outrage to carry me through an argument that I wouldn't win. "That poor dog has had enough excitement for one day without randos smelling like wolf backing it into a corner in a strange place and sniffing it for clues." I blasted out an exhale. "I'll do it."

A wolf spirit might have snubbed me in the womb, but I was born possessing the exact same heightened senses and increased strength and stamina as the rest of the pack. Not that anyone gave me credit for it.

One whole step later, Dad cleared his throat. "Are you sure you?—?"

"I've got this." I ditched them in the lobby and entered the kennels. "Sloane?"

“Here, boss.” She trotted over from where she had been talking to one of the sentinels. “What’s up?”

“Clear the room, please.” I palmed a ring of keys in my pocket. “I’m going to visit our guest.”

“On it.” She allowed her wolf to climb into her voice. “Everybody out.”

The four male wargs in the room hustled to obey the command in her tone, reminding me she might not be the world’s greatest kennel tech, not yet anyway, but she was fierce when it came to doing her actual job. All her anxiety melted as her dominance streak emerged from where she kept it hidden for my sake.

Because I had the heart of a dominant and no wolf to back it up if I triggered her instinct to fight me.

As soon as the room was empty, I let myself into the suite and shut the door. I sat on the concrete floor, crossed my legs, and let the dog decide when to come to me. I smelled like a predator, which helped me when it came to wrangling difficult clients into the tub for their bath or holding them steady underneath the force dryer, but it hindered me when pets had human owners.

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“I’m sure you have some kind of fancy name,” I said, voice low and soft, “but I don’t know it.”

The dog cocked its head at me, listening, but it continued lounging on the custom golden-size dog bed.

“Still, I can’t keep calling you *it* or the dog.” I couldn’t get a visual read on gender with it belly down, face aimed at me. That didn’t mean I couldn’t smell it on her. She had been in this confined space for a while, and her scent overlapped Bailey’s. “How about I call you Myrtle?”

The dog—Myrtle—appeared to consider it but found the TV bathroom demo more interesting than me.

Good thing I always carried homemade peanut butter treats in my pocket.

“Are you hungry?” I counted out three smaller ones and held them on my open palm. “Want one?”

With a sigh that hinted she wasn’t used to fetching her own treats, she trotted over and nibbled on one. I held my breath, waiting for the verdict, but the recipe must have met with her standards. She inhaled a second and third one before I promised I would get her real food as soon as the pack left us in peace.

Careful not to spook her, I leaned forward until I could get a better sniff, hoping for a clue as to her owner’s scent.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Nothing but clean dog.

Once certain I was serious about the treats, she grumbled then trotted right back to bed to watch TV.

Motion caught my eye in the observation window, and I locked gazes with Bowie, whose eyebrows rose.

“You don’t know how good you’ve got it in here,” I mumbled to Myrtle, shoving to my feet. “Back soon.”

Before my fingers brushed the knob, Bowie had the door open, his irritation with me plain on his face.

“Nothing.” I secured the door on my heels. “There are no competing scents on her.”

“I’ll let your dad know.” He raked his teeth across his bottom lip. “Has anyone been hassling you?”

“Other than you?”

“Yes.” He rolled his eyes. “Other than me.”

“No.” I shoulder checked him on my way past. “No one dares.”

Not with Sloane dogging my steps.

“That’s how it should be,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Because I’m some delicate freaking flower?”

“No.” He gritted his teeth. “You’re precious, Ana.” He cleared his throat. “More precious than you know.”

Precious was a cute word when I was a kid, but it didn’t hold much weight these days. “Do you think this has anything to do with Dad?”

“I can’t see how.” A frown gathered across his forehead. “Unless the dog is some kind of Trojan horse.”

“Myrtle.”

“What?”

“The dog. I’m calling her Myrtle. Just until we find her owner.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, but it was too late to take back the words.

“There is now.” He narrowed his eyes on me, crowding me against the door and leaning down into my face. “You don’t go looking for the owner.”

“Me?” I widened my eyes and rested a hand at my throat. “I would never?—”

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“Don’t give me that crap, Peanut.” He poked me in the shoulder, his eyes golden. “You might fool your old man, but I see you. You’re as delicate as a fucking bomb, and your fuse is shorter than my thumb.”

Oddly flattered by the comparison, I tilted my head. “Often measure things with your thumb, David?”

“For the last time,” he rumbled at me, “I was named after the knife, not the singer.”

“Then don’t call me Peanut. That’s a father/daughter thing, and you’re not my daddy.” I made gagging noises. “Eww.” I cupped a hand over my mouth. “That’s a mental picture I wish I could erase.”

Lifting his hands with a huff, he walked away to pester someone else.

“That’s Lyra’s brother, isn’t it?” Sloane sidled up to me. “I heard he was a sentinel.”

To prevent my former bullies from earning a spot on my security detail, Dad recruited from outside the pack. I so rarely saw Sloane off the clock, and almost never with the pack, sometimes I forgot she hadn’t been a Sartori but a year.

“Good eye.” I supposed they did resemble one another. “That is definitely Lyra’s brother.”

Just like that, her brows slammed down. “And do we like Bowie?”

About to snap that now we did not like Bowie, I caught her drift. “He won’t hurt me.”

“Are you sure?” She tracked every step of his exit. “He looked ready to tear out your throat.”

From her angle, I could see how she got that impression. “He’s never laid a hand on me.”

“Let me know if that changes while I’m not around, okay?”

“I will.” I touched her arm. “Thanks for having my back.”

Sad as it might sound, she was the closest thing I had to a friend, even if I had to pay her by the hour.

“It’s my duty,” she said, bowing her head, “and an honor to serve.”

Certain Dad was ready to climb out of his skin for the verdict, I went to give him and Mercer my update.

And if I felt a pair of golden eyes on me the whole way, well, I was used to feeling like there was a target on my back.

three

The shop was oddly quiet at the end of the day without Harvey warning of our imminent demise via alien invasion. I was flipping the sign to closed, eager to put today behind me, when the three dogs in the kennel runs hit the flaps on the doggy doors leading from their fenced yards into the building with resounding slaps.

Two climbed onto their elevated cots, shivering, and one slid under his, whimpering.

Surely Myrtle’s owner hadn’t gotten so bold as to let himself in while I was still here.

I might have been a touch more concerned about investigating solo if I wasn't certain Dad hadn't liberally sprinkled sentinels between GSG and home. Odds were good a wolf on patrol was the cause for the panic.

"Sloane," I called out, aiming for the rear exit. "I'm going to secure the runs."

On my way out, I flipped on the floodlights that illuminated every square inch of the enclosed property.

Walking the rows, I examined each run for signs of tampering, but the chain-link fences on the individual yards were secure. As I went through the motions of my nightly routine, I filled my lungs with air. I pushed out slow, even breaths, searching for a hint of what had frightened the dogs.

Halfway to the potting shed where we kept lawncare supplies, I caught a whiff of copper.

Dread coated the back of my throat as I crept toward the small building, noticing the door was ajar.

"Sloane?" I strained my ears for signs it was occupied but heard nothing. "Are you in there?"

Aside from the stale blood, I couldn't detect any underlying scent that hinted at who or what had gotten into the shed. As freaked out as the dogs had been only minutes ago, I got the feeling I was about to find out what sent them running to the safety of their cots.

Hand on the door, I gave it a firm shove, but it didn't get far before thumping off a shadowy lump.

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A shadowy lump that exhaled a low groan and set my spine tingling.

“I have a werewolf, and I’m not afraid to use it.” I stuck my arm through the gap, flipped the light switch, then leapt back. But the man curled on his side, blood pooling underneath him, didn’t so much as twitch in my direction. “Who are you?” I doubted he could answer. “What are you doing in my potting shed?”

Sure enough, the guy just laid there and bled out, offering no useful information.

“Please don’t make me regret this.” I scooted in and knelt beside him. “I need to figure out what you are so I can help.” I waited for him to stir, but he remained still. I gripped his wrist, searching for a pulse, and jerked at his cold skin. “For your sake, I hope you’re a vampire.”

Cedar, vetiver, and warm spices flooded my nose, and the scent of him brought a flush to my cheeks.

The touch roused him enough to crack open an eye, but I only saw white. They must have rolled back in his head. He only managed one blink before tumbling back into unconsciousness. That was when I noticed the hoodie twisted halfway under his head and the sweatpants torn down one thigh where his wound must be, and I gained a fresh perspective on the break-in. Too bad it left me more confused than ever.

Had one of the sentinels gotten ahold of him? And why come here? To get his dog? Was Myrtle his dog?

“Ana?” Sloane must have gotten tired of waiting. “You still out here?”

“Be right there,” I yelled, shoving to my feet, already reaching for my phone.

Nearly out the door, a wide palm wrapped my ankle, and I stumbled into the wall to catch my balance.

“I’m going to call for help,” I promised him. “Hang in there, okay?”

“Just...you...” He exhaled the words on a pained sigh. “Just...”

“Ana?” Sloane let the screen door slam behind her. “What are you doing back there?”

“A bird got trapped in the potting shed,” I lied through my teeth. “I’ve almost got him.”

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

I shouldn’t be covering for this guy, but I was still furious over how fast Bowie shut me down, and Dad rushing to my rescue as an excuse to lecture me—again—on why I ought to give up and go home had stoked my temper until making a bad decision was looking good.

“Oh.” Her crunching footsteps slowed far too close. “Need any help?”

“I got it.” I made a fist and thumped it against my forehead. “Just another minute.”

Another minute to change my mind before I committed an act of treason.

“Okay.” Her voice grew more distant. “I’ll go finish bleaching the mops.”

As soon as I heard the door shut behind her, I shook off the man shackling my leg and crouched over him.

“Give me one good reason not to make a call and let you become someone else’s problem.”

Nose crinkling, he lifted his upper lip to expose a long, white, very sharp fang.

“I can see you care about your oral health.” I sat back on my haunches. “Some of you guys are old and ill-informed, so I’m going to ask. You do realize vampires and wargs aren’t sworn enemies anymore? You’re going to have to give me more than a canine—pun intended—to win my silence.”

“Rían...” his inhalation whistled through his teeth, “...Walsh.”

“Oh crap.” I shot to my feet. “You’re the Walsh situation.”

And I was so totally screwed.

four

To have any semblance of privacy, say, when I slept over at a boyfriend’s house but didn’t want sentinels reporting the lurid details to my dad, I had learned how to take extreme measures to cover my tracks. As a matter of fact, I learned the trick from Mercer, who frequented a cupcake shop on Langhorne Street to purchase charms crafted by the Fabian coven. Activated by a drop of blood from whoever wore it, magic hid the owner’s scent from even warg noses.

If Dad ever learned I bought one off a sympathetic witch, when only his inner circle was allowed to possess them, what he would do to me would make Rapunzel’s tower resemble a five-star luxury hotel.

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The problem being I could either leave it with the vampire to conceal his scent from whoever was out on patrol, or I could wear it to prevent Sloane from scenting him on me.

“I have to finish locking up the building.” I daubed his blood, of which there was plenty, on the charm. As much as I hated to part with it, I placed it on his chest. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

A low sigh gusted out of him, which I took as confirmation he would be fine until I got back.

After switching off the light and shutting the door, I hurried to the rear entrance, helping myself to a jug of bleach Sloane hadn’t collected yet. I poured some on my hands then made a puddle I stepped in to clean off the bottoms of my shoes before tipping it sideways and letting the rest glug out onto the grass.

“Oh shoot.” I backed through the door, eyes burning, almost bowling her over in my rush to reach a sink. “I knocked over the bleach. Ugh. Sorry about that. I should have been watching where I was going.”

“Oh no. Your shoes.” She coughed into her shoulder. “I could have sworn I screwed the cap on.”

A twinge of regret at lying to her, at allowing her to shoulder the blame, twisted my gut.

“It’s fine.” I rubbed my hands where my skin was turning pink. “I’ll just wear scrubs

home.”

I kept spares for the revolving door of employees and always reserved a pair in my size for emergencies.

“I heard a commotion while I was battling the dryer.” She brought me a towel. “The dogs were freaked.”

Although I bought the dryer new, five years was its limit. The day after its warranty expired, it kicked the bucket. Since the washer was fine, and I didn’t want to break up the set, I paid for repairs. The dryer was pissed when I cut its retirement short and embraced the cicada lifestyle, screaming at the top of its lungs from the start of every cycle until the end. But, for once, its vocal range had done me a solid.

“The bird was...an owl.” I leaned into a lifetime of practice in concealing my scent, and the overpowering stink of bleach, to sell the lie. “Who knew they were so loud? Or big? I don’t know how she got in there.”

“Mice.” She hummed to herself. “I’ll pick up some traps from the store.”

“There was no damage.” I was digging my hole deeper with each fib. “No mouse droppings either.”

“Huh.” She leaned a hip against the sink. “Maybe she was seeking shelter after that last storm.”

“We’ll just have to give it a few days then see if she’s trying to nest or if it was a fluke.”

“Works for me.” She checked her smartwatch. “We need to get going.”

“I’m sorry I kept you late.” I glanced at mine too and did the math. “This morning cost us two hours.”

“Don’t be sorry, Ana.” Her lips hitched to one side. “That was the most excitement I’ve had in months.”

“Do you ever get bored?” I switched off the water. “This can’t have been the job you had in mind.”

“Are you not happy with my work?” Her forehead pinched as anxiety clouded her scent. “I know I’m bad with cats, but I swear I can do better. And the bird allergies are almost under control. I had no idea that I couldn’t tolerate cockatiel dander. I told you about my new doctor, right? He’s got me on shots and?—”

“That’s not what I meant. I swear.” I gripped her shoulders before she spiraled on me. “I saw you in your element today, and it got me thinking. That’s all. You could do so much more than this.”

“You could too,” she said softly, eyes downcast.

“What?” I laughed as my chest gave a twinge. “This is my dream. I’m living the dream. My dream. I mean I’m livingmydream.” I stepped away before my palm sweat left marks on her shirt. “Anyway, I’m tired. I should change and then head home. Eight o’clock will be here before you know it.”

With a short nod, she made her way toward the exit, already pulling her keys from her pocket. “I’m not saying you don’t love your job, but I do worry sometimes that your job is your whole life.”

“Aren’t you more worried thatIamyourwhole life? Do you want more for me or more for yourself? Did today remind you of what could have been, if the price of joining

the pack hadn't been so steep?"

There was more, poised on the tip of my tongue, but Sloane didn't deserve to have her choices thrown in her face just because she had dared to hold a mirror up to mine. She had asked me to look inside myself. Peer into the abyss at my core that had become a landfill for insults, ugly looks, and violence.

Internalizing that crap? Probably not my best move. But I hadn't known any better when I was a kid.

Had Mom stuck around, I could have gone to her with that stuff. She was human. She would understand what it was like to live on two legs among people who sometimes had four. Maybe not what it meant to have that lingering pit in your soul nothing could fill, but she could have brushed my hair while we talked it out. Or given me a popsicle. Or just kissed the top of my head. Any of those were better than none.

"Tai's waiting outside to walk you home when you're ready." Sloane kept her head down. "I'll see you in the morning."

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If not for the vampire in the potting shed, I would have called out an apology, but that would have led to another delay I couldn't afford if I wanted to get him off the property alive. Ish.

Once I was alone, I collected Myrtle, who had no place to stay, and let myself out the front. I didn't see Tai, but I heard him sneezing as he inhaled my eau de bleach. I only had to walk one block over to reach the small house Aunt Lettie—my mom's older sister—left me when she passed five years ago.

The unexpected gift from a woman I had never met encouraged me to pack up and move out on my own. The nest egg I also inherited was how I afforded the creaky Victorian I renovated to house GSG.

"This is only temporary," I told Myrtle as I let us in the front door. "Don't get comfortable."

The dog huffed at me through her feathery bangs and wriggled to get down.

Not a fan of being held by strangers was Ms. Myrtle.

"Hold your horses." I carried her through to the backyard and set her on the grass. "Have at it."

Dark eyes drilling through my skull, she lifted one front paw then the other.

"It's dew." I leaned down to run my hand across the damp lawn. "It won't hurt you."

A grumble in the back of her throat, she climbed onto the porch, leapt into the tiered herb garden, and...

“Myrtle.” I staggered back a step. “No.” I rushed for her. “Bad dog.”

Holding my stare the whole time, she kicked dirt—and a basil plant—onto her, um, deposit.

“I’ll add that to your tab,” I grouched as she trotted into the house with her tail held high.

I followed her in, set down a pee pad in the kitchen, then went in search of the tiny tyrant. I wasn’t surprised one bit to find her already curled up on my couch, nesting in my favorite blanket.

“I see you ignored the part about not making yourself at home.” I anchored my hands on my hips. “Food and water will be in the kitchen. Next to your personal toilet. Donotpiddle in my house. Donotchew on my furniture. Donotbark or...”

A delicate snore ripped through my tirade as Myrtle caved to the stresses of the day.

Poor thing. None of this was her fault. She hadn’t asked for her owner to ditch her.

I was taking out my frustrations on her, the same as I had with Sloane earlier.

Regret weighing me down, I slipped out of the living room, careful not to wake her. I set out the ceramic food and water bowls I kept for emergencies, as promised, then padded out into the yard and fired off a text to Sloane.

>I’m sorry.

There was no reply, but then, I hadn't expected one.

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Aware I was taking my life—no, worse, my freedom—into my own hands, I let myself into the neighbor's yard. He had been good friends with Aunt Lettie, apparently, and they had built a cross-through gate in their shared fence. From there, I climbed out of his yard into the next and then the next and then the next until I hit the one beside GSG.

Had I been wearing my charm, I wouldn't have left a trail. As it was, I had to rely on the scents of the dog in the yard behind me and the three stray tom cats Mrs. Engleton fed to conceal my route. The chemical stink wasn't doing me any favors, but it might be enough of a deterrent to keep Tai from snooping while I was gone.

Add to that any noises Myrtle made that convinced him I was pet sitting like a good little girl, and I might just pull this off.

Bleach was a part of my daily life, so I didn't struggle to check for competing scents between me and the gate leading into the side yard where the potting shed was located behind the kennel runs. Now I had to compare the angle of the video I saw earlier against the other side of the street until I located a slow red blink, barely a pinprick of light. That must be the camera. Unless I wanted to end up on a live feed on the tablet Mercer was never without, I had to think up an alternate route in that avoided the rear entrance I had no doubt would be under heavy surveillance until Dad was satisfied the doggy deposit was a one-off and not a veiled threat to prove how easily a rival pack could circumvent my meager security measures.

“What are you doing?”

A yelp stuck in my throat as I spun to find Sloane behind me with her fists anchored

on her hips.

“I forgot something.” I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. “At work.”

“And you thought you would creep through your neighbors’ yards instead of using the front door why?”

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“I thought you went home.” I spun the questioning her way. “Are you spying on me?”

“I was just down the road at Brisket Barn. I came to apologize after I got your text. I didn’t want to draw attention to you, so I used your other neighbor’s side yard to get into your backyard and—” Her cheeks flushed. “That doesn’t matter. Why are you here?”

“No reason.” I let my shoulders slump. “Let’s go to my place so I can face the music from my couch.”

The fifteen minutes I promised Walsh had timed out fifteen minutes ago.

Good thing he was already dead, or the delay might have done him in.

“Can you just—” she clutched my upper arm, “—tell me what’s so important you would risk permanent lockdown if Mr. Sartori caught wind of it? That’s why you’re sneaking in, right? You knew he would lose it if he learned you were surveilling GSG to catch the...break and enterer...by yourself.”

That wasn’t a bad angle. I wished I had thought of it. Still, I latched onto it with both hands.

“Yes.” I faked contrition. “You got me.”

“You could have asked me to stay late.” She searched my face. “I would have helped you.”

“You would have called Dad, like you did earlier, like you’re about to now, and he would have sent half the pack to stop me.”

“You don’t have to do everything alone, Ana.” She blew out a sigh. “You’ve got friends.”

“Who do I have in my life that wasn’t assigned that role by my dad?”

“I was assigned to protect you. I can do that with or without you liking me. But I want to be your friend. I kind of thought...after a whole year...” Sloane straightened her shoulders. “The point is that you’re being reckless by sneaking out alone when there’s a?—”

“Break and enter on the loose?”

“Yes.” Her complexion turned blotchy. “I can keep a secret.”

“You’re pack, so, no. You can’t resist the urge to obey Dad, and that includes orders to spill your guts.” A good friend ditched me after one such interrogation, and it left a mark. My other so-called friends? They hadn’t required convincing. “You might not want to do it or mean to do it, but everyone does in the end. I don’t blame you for your nature. Even humans and latents like me struggle against his dominance.”

“Try me.” She jutted out her chin. “Give me a chance to prove I can be a loyal friend.”

“You’ll lose your job, maybe even your position in the pack, if you defy Dad’s orders.”

And if I got hurt in the process? She might lose more. Like her life.

“Maybe I will, but he can’t stop us from being friends.”

The little girl in me, the one desperate to belong, was already planning our first sleepover.

God, I was pathetic.

But I did have a carousel of nail polish and a stash of unused face masks under the bathroom sink...

“How about this?” Sloane took out her phone, motioning me closer. “I’ll take the first step.”

A contact name popped up as her thumbs got tapping, proving she was reaching out to Tai. Now that I was safely home, or so he thought, he would patrol between my house and GSG until shift change.

>Left the key to my apartment in my locker like a dope. Be there in a minute to fetch it.

>>No worries.

>Anyone else I need to notify? This morning was tense. I don’t want to cause an incident.

>>Nah. Just me tonight. Everyone else is in Shorter at that meeting.

Leaning around her, I read the exchange. “What meeting?”

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“They never tell me anything.” She bobbed a shoulder. “I can go fishing, though.”

>I must not have gotten the memo.

>>You’re not missing anything.

“Ask him if it has anything to do with the Walsh situation.”

Any intel on my guest would help me determine how to treat him going forward, as victim or threat.

A beat of hesitation paused her fingers over the screen before she gave in. “Okay.”

>The Walsh situation, right?

>>Who told you about that?

“Now what?” She fumbled her cell. “I suck at evasive maneuvers.”

The quick clapback convinced me there was more to the bloodied vampire than met the eye.

“Give it to me.” I snatched the device, an evil smile curling my lips. “I’ll handle it.”

>Bowie mentioned it this morning.

Part of me wondered if Bowie felt the impact when I threw him under the bus.

>>What did he say, exactly?

>Just that he and Zoe were working on it.

The rest of me hoped he sensed it when I threw that bus in reverse then drove over him again.

>>Bowie has a big mouth. Forget about it. It's nothing.

>Sure thing.

“You really hate Bowie, huh?” Sloane whistled softly. “He’s going to get in so much trouble.”

“Nah. He’s nothing special. I have a list of people who—” I clamped my mouth shut. “So, your plan?”

“I’m going to shift and cause a distraction.” She reached for the hem of her shirt. “While you change into my clothes to conceal your scent and walk in through the front door.” She offered up a black hoodie tied around her waist. “This will help. It stinks like teenage boy and body spray. I stole it from your neighbors in the gray and white house, so we’ll need to return it to the lawn chair where I found it.”

“You really came prepared for anything.” I peeled out of my clothes. “I’m impressed, Sloane.”

“Without knowing what you were planning, I figured it was better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.” She stripped off the rest of her clothes until all that remained was a leather thong between her breasts strung with a hammered charm. “I won’t be able to shift back after this for an hour, so good luck. I’ll give you as long as I can, but Tai is fast. Do what you need to then meet me back here.”

Another charm Mercer bought in bulk? One that allowed a near instantaneous shift for his sentinels. The cost of forcing a body through a metamorphosis that usually required a quarter hour, for the lucky ones, to complete in under one minute induced burnout. Sloane would be trapped on four legs, and after a short burst of activity meant to give sentinels an edge in battle, her energy would gutter and she would black out until her natural magic revived her.

That she was willing to endure the pain when she had no clue what I was up to, whether it was worth it, made me want to believe she was telling the truth. But I had been let down too many times to accept an offer of friendship at face value.

As the change swept over her, she contorted, her body breaking and bending and reshaping itself anew.

How she, or the others, endured the agony without crying out never ceased to amaze me.

Sixty seconds later, a light-gray wolf with a white blaze over one eye stood before me.

Sloane wagged her tail once, butted her head against my thigh, then sprinted away into the dark.

A distant growl alerted me that Tai was in hot pursuit, and I couldn't help my smile as I tugged the stinky boy hoodie over my head and strolled to the front of GSG, mimicking Sloane's rolling gait. I let myself in then ran to the side entrance and slipped out that door. I flattened myself against the grass, praying it was only the one camera I was avoiding, and crawled to the potting shed.

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Before I reached the end of the runs, I noticed the door was cracked and cursed under my breath.

Arm over arm, I wriggled faster until I could push the door open.

Unlike last time, it swung all the way, bumping against the far wall.

Because, I confirmed with the flashlight on my phone, the vampire was gone.

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I waited twenty minutes at the rendezvous point for Sloane to return. I chewed my thumbnail ragged worrying Tai had caught her, maybe hurt her. And, though I wasn't proud to admit it, I dreaded what she would tell him to explain leading him on a wild-goose chase through the neighborhood after verifying he was on solo guard duty...

Yeah.

The simple fact of how I was as afraid for myself as I was for her, when she had taken the biggest risks to help me, forced me to consider I might not only be friendless on principle.

Claws scrabbling on asphalt, heading my way, broke cold sweat down my spine.

Bracing to face Tai, expecting him to corner me and demand answers, I almost fell over when a light gray wolf skittered past me. Sloane gave a single huff, jerking her head, and I gathered her clothes and ran after her as she retraced my path through the

neighbors' yards until we reached mine.

Breathless from the jangling nerves more than the mild exertion, I had to swallow a laugh of triumph.

Sure, the vampire was MIA, but that was a good thing. What had I been thinking? I had been crazy to risk my neck for someone I didn't know. We escaped undetected, though. I was calling it a win.

I let us in through the back door, Sloane's claws tapping on the hardwood, and Myrtle cracked open a judgmental eye before falling back asleep in her nest of blankets.

"Huh." I hadn't clocked it before, but it hit me when she didn't blink at the wolf. "She's not afraid."

Sloane rumbled agreement, padding closer to Myrtle, who ignored her in favor of beauty sleep.

Definitely not afraid, which meant Myrtle was probably owned by a shifter to act so blasé about one.

"Are you hungry?" I backed toward the kitchen. "Dad's always ravenous after a run."

That was under normal conditions, not a magically induced burnout.

Ears perking at the offer, Sloane trailed me into the bright yellow room.

"I have raw steak, of course, but also saganaki and dolmades I made yesterday."

Wolves tended to prefer meat, the bloodier the better, so I wasn't surprised when she opted for steak. As I retrieved the bundle wrapped in butcher's paper, she nosed the

fragrant container of saganaki.

“I dredge halloumi in flour then fry it up and top it with local honey and nuts.”

A low whine had me pulling it—and the dolmades—out too.

“You want to try some?” I chuckled at her exuberant nod. “The dolmades are rice, veggies, and a minced halibut with a lemon vinaigrette.” I watched drool slide along her jaw. “Here.” I tossed her the grape leaf-wrapped halibut. “What do you think?”

Sloane swallowed it whole then flopped onto the floor, sticking her legs up in the air like a dead bug.

“Tell me my cooking is to die for when you’re not about to pass out from exertion.”

The wolf rolled over as I set the plate with her dinner before her with a gooey saganaki on top.

While she gorged herself, saving the cheese for last, as was proper, I switched on the stove to reheat my leftovers. I checked on the food and water situation for Myrtle, unsurprised to find both bowls full.

A lot of pets struggled to eat or drink while separated from their people. Especially pets experiencing the stress of a new environment and new caregivers for the first time. Most of them snapped out of it in a day or two, but I would have to keep an eye on Myrtle. As far as I could tell, she seemed like an old pro at this. That or she was very chill by nature. Still. I didn’t want to risk her making herself sick.

“Do you want to crash here tonight?” I arranged my food in the hot sauté pan. “I have a spare...”

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Oh.

Well.

That answered that.

With the vent blowing over the stove, I hadn't noticed part of the noise came from Sloane. She had fallen asleep with her chin resting on her plate, sucking in great snorts of air that whistled past her lips.

There was no moving an unconscious wolf, not unless I wanted a hernia for my trouble.

A yawn caught me by surprise, adrenaline fading to exhaustion, and I switched off the stove. I put up the food for tomorrow, figuring Sloane could help me eat it. I padded to the hall closet, took a blanket off the stack, and tossed it over the wolf.

Nice. This was nice. Having company.

With a bag of sweet-chili-flavored edamame and a smile, I went to bed.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

For a blurry second, as sleep evaporated, I couldn't figure out what had woken me.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Then the events of last night rushed back to me, and I shot upright in bed, whipping my head toward the wolf at the door pounding a hole in it with the side of their fist. A wolf, it was safe to assume, because it must be a sentinel. This had to be about the vampire. I was shocked they hadn't barged in yet.

"Sloane," I whisper-screamed. "Are you still here?"

No answer.

I moved to throw back the covers and found red fingerprints on the duvet from the freeze-dried snack that I had decided would make a good meal. Dinner for one sometimes took a grim, and spicy, turn for the worst.

"Sloane," I tried again, soft but urgent, sliding my legs over the edge of the mattress.

Nothing.

Had it all been one big preservative-fueled dream after a long day of work and a longer night alone?

The naked dog on my couch? The vampire in the potting shed? The wolf sleeping in my kitchen?

Had any of it been real? There was only one way to find out, and it required getting my butt in gear.

Ignoring the banging noises, I hustled into the living room, caught a whiff of urine, spotted the used pee pad, and wrinkled my nose. I took that to mean Myrtle was real, but I didn't stop to toss the couch for confirmation.

On socked feet, I skidded into the kitchen. There was no sign of Sloane, woman or

wolf. But there was a clean dish in the sink and a folded blanket on the counter. Those two things proved last night happened as I remembered it.

Which meant there really and truly had been a vampire bleeding out in the potting shed.

And I, the poster child for daddy issues, had covered for him.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Stuffing the panic down deep, I jogged to the front door and swung it open. “Morning.”

Dad stood front and center, his nostrils flaring. Fatherly visits twice in two days? Oh yeah. This was about the vampire. No other explanation fit him rearranging his schedule. Mercer was behind him. Then Zoe. And then Tai. No Bowie, so yesterday must have been an all-paws-on-deck situation.

“What took so long to answer the door?” Dad leaned in, sniffing the air. “You were bouncing around like a pinball in a machine.” He scanned the room behind me. “Do you have company?”

“Yes.” I posted up on the threshold. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Then I can’t wait to meet them.” He lifted me up and set me aside, inviting himself in. “We have to talk. There was another incident at GSG last night.”

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Mercer stood on the doormat, waiting for me to wave him in, but I didn't see the point when he and the others would only give me until the count of ten before welcoming themselves into my home. Even here they worried assassins would leap out of my cabinets or climb out of the sink drains to reach Dad.

"Careful." I rushed ahead of Dad. "Myrtle spent the night." I dug around in the blanket on the couch, but I couldn't find her. "She's in here somewhere."

"Myrtle?" Dad turned a slow circle. "Who's that?"

"The dog." I heard crunching and darted into the kitchen to find her eating. "From yesterday?"

"You brought that thing home with you?" He stepped into the entryway. "What were you thinking?"

"That I wasn't going to toss an innocent animal out on the street to fend for itself? Her toenails are pink, for pity's sake. This is someone's pampered pet. We're booked solid at GSG, so she had nowhere else to go." I shooed him out before his aggression spooked her away from her meal. "Did you find her owner?"

"We have reason to believe he returned to GSG last night."

"Oh?"

With a flick of Dad's wrist, Mercer claimed the floor, reading stats off his tablet.

“Around eight o’clock, about an hour after you left for the night, Tai startled a gray wolf while he was on patrol. He pursued it on two legs while calling in the incident. It was too fast for him to catch, and it kept to the shadows to make identifying any markings on its coat impossible.”

“What about their scent?” Knees wobbling, I sank on the couch. “Can you tell which pack they’re from?”

“The only scent in the area belonged to Sloane.” Muscles twitched in Tai’s jaw. “She texted me she forgot her keys, so she circled back to GSG for them. I never saw her, but she must have come by while I was chasing the wolf a few blocks away.”

“She’s okay?” I dragged a pillow onto my lap. “She wasn’t hurt?”

“I interviewed her this morning.” Mercer dug in his pocket and produced a lollipop for me. “She’s fine.”

Since there was no escaping it, I accepted the treat, hating how he trivialized my feelings by acting like a disc of flavored sugar fixed everything. “Did she see anything unusual?”

“No.” Tai growled, his hands tight at his sides. “Nothing.”

Thank God. “Then what did you want to talk about, Dad?”

“For your safety, we should close GSG for the next week.” He sat beside me, reaching for my hand. “The dog appearing in a kennel was one thing, but a strange wolf prowling the streets?”

Oh, no. No, no, no. Last night was coming back to bite me in record time.

“I have clients.” I kept my hands in my lap so he wouldn’t feel them tremble. “I have responsibilities.”

“You’re being unreasonable, Peanut.” He pulled a hurt face. “I’m only trying to protect you.”

“You’ve always been a helicopter parent, but this is a lot even for you.” I did what few would dare to do. I locked gazes with him. “What’s going on?” I watched him for any tells. “What are you hiding from me?”

The best defense is a good offense, right?

“Maybe we should tell her—” Mercer began.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Dad gritted out as he rose. “Peanut has nothing to do with pack business.”

Zoe recoiled, her gaze finding mine, but the others didn’t bat an eye. To react that way, she must not have been with the pack long. Most everyone else was used to how I existed on the fringes, pack but not. Living at home, in the house I was forbidden to leave without an escort, I had felt like the plastic ballerina in a music box, twirling when the lid was lifted but hunching in the dark the rest of the time.

“You’re right.” I smoothed my palms down my pajama shorts. “I have nothing to do with pack business, and pack business has nothing to do with me.” I saw the moment Dad realized he had misspoken bloom across his features, but it was too late to take the words back. “I am not closing my business. Not for the next week, the next day, or the next hour.” I smiled at him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get ready to open for the day.”

With a jaunty wave at the others, I strolled into my bedroom, shut the door, and

snatched up my phone.

>We're in the clear.

>>Thank God.

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>>I lost ten pounds in sweat this morning when Mercer started asking questions.

>Thanks for last night.

>>Would you think less of me if I admitted I had a blast?

>Ha. No. I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

>>I fell asleep with cow blood on my face, which is even better, imo.

Murmured conversation broke out in the living room, and a minute later, the front door opened.

>Dad just left, so I'm going to get ready for work.

>>See you soon.

Eager to check out the potting shed in daylight, I rushed through dressing in my embroidered scrubs and sleeked my hair back into a bun. Once I had my sneakers on, I scooped Myrtle under my arm then hit the sidewalk. I reached GSG in record time, let myself in, a smile for Sloane on my lips, but she wasn't the one who strolled in from the kennels.

No.

I wasn't that lucky.

Bowie, not Sloane, gave me a wink and a grin, offering me a cup of coffee and a donut.

Sidestepping him, I dug out a collar and leash for Myrtle from a cabinet. “What are you doing here?”

“Just checking in to let you know I’ve been assigned to your security detail.”

“Congrats.” I fastened Myrtle’s leash to the stainless pad eye mounted on the counter for that purpose. “Welcome to the mostboring job you’ll have in your entire life.” I selected a dog bed from storage, and I don’t think I imagined Myrtle sniffing with disdain. “Look, the fancy-pants bed from yesterday belongs to someone else. You’re going to be stuck out front, with me, on a perfectly nice store-bought bed.”

Unimpressed, Myrtle curled up on the cold floor rather than step paw on an off-the-rack bed.

“That dog is a diva.” Bowie thrust out his offerings. “What was her owner thinking, stashing her here?”

“That they only wanted the best for their beloved dog?” I accepted the bribe, set it aside, and began my half of the opening routine. “Where’s Sloane?” I kept the question casual. “I haven’t seen her yet.”

“That fat tabby got sick, so she’s cleaning up in the cat room.”

“Toblerone’s GERD always acts up when his owners leave him for longer than a week.”

“That’s...” Bowie tilted his head. “Cats get acid reflux?”

“Yep.” I blew out a breath. “I better go check on Sloane before I get started with my first groom.”

Dimple winking in one cheek, Bowie asked, “Do you have lunch plans?”

“I’ll probably work through lunch today. Nothing like expressing anal glands to ruin an appetite.”

A hard swallow later, he backed out the door with a subdued nod, and I went in search of Sloane.

“That was evil,” she said, slipping out of the cat room smelling like blood from the myriad scratches crosshatching her arms. “You could have just said no.”

“The only reason he asked was to obligate me into participating in a Q&A session.”

“Maybe he likes you.”

“Bowie is ambitious, and he stuck his foot in it with Dad with the sister-knocking-my-tooth-out thing.”

Concern pinched her features. “Are you still holding that grudge, though?”

“Life’s too short.”

“That’s very mature of you.”

“It’s not like Lyra was the only one who took a swing at me after her first shift. Once it became obvious I was a dud, the bullying was brutal among my peers. Our whole lives we’re taught to fight our own battles or we can kiss our ranking goodbye. The wolf in them wanted to pit itself against their alpha’s daughter.”

“The wolf had nothing to do with that.” She grated her jaw back and forth. “That was human behavior.”

“Well, anyway, I survived them, and now I have my own life.”

A twist of her lips warned she was about to hit me with more truth, but I couldn’t stand to hear it yet.

“I’m going to check on the owl situation.” I aimed for the side door. “You’re welcome to the breakfast on the counter. I’m not a big fan of the sausage and English muffin combo.” I stepped out. “Back in a few.”

Excited dogs barked or wagged hello as I passed, and I paused to scratch each of them.

None of them followed me to the end of their enclosures, and a few whined as I approached the potting shed. Part of me expected one of the sentinels had scoured the property before I arrived, probably while Dad kept me occupied, but I was careful in

case my guest had returned to sleep off the day in the dark.

Casual, as if I had every right to be there, which of course I did, since it was my business, I flipped on the overhead light and stepped in. Bleach swamped my senses, and I saw why a second later. The blood was gone. Not a trace left behind. Nothing remained to prove the vampire had ever been here.

Except for a long gold chain strung with a single charm.

Mycharm.

The one I placed on the vampire to conceal his scent until I figured out what to do with him.

I picked it up, brought it to my nose, but he had bleached it too.

“Hey.” Sloane shoved in. “Ms. Moretti wants to know if you can dye Lulu yellow and not green.”

“Yellow always reminds me of urine stains,” I said stiffly, as she stood right where the vampire had been.

“I’ll see what I can do to convince her green will bring out the blue in Lulu’s eyes.” She coughed into her shoulder. “Keep the door open if you’re going to be much longer. These fumes can’t be good for you.”

“Thanks.” I clenched my fingers over my find. “I’ll do that.”

Alone in the shed, I growled at myself for not confiding in her, but old habits died hard.

I wasn't even sure what I had hoped to accomplish in hiding the vampire, or the note.

But I was growing surer, intrigue aside, that I wanted to come clean to Sloane.

seven

Sloane met me at the side door with a basket of laundry. "You're not a huffer, are you?"

"Uh." The question cocked my eyebrow. "No?"

"Are you sure?" A teasing light entered her eyes, one I should have noticed before yesterday. "Two days in a row you've come in from the shed with a dazed look in your eyes and reeking of bleach."

"Ugh." I bent down and sniffed the top of my shirt. "Don't remind me."

"See?" She bumped the basket into me on her way to the dryer. "You couldn't resist taking another hit."

"Okay." Laughing, I held up my hands. "You got me. I'm a huffer. I can't get enough of that bleachy goodness."

"I thought the cool kids inhaled superglue," Bowie drawled, stepping around the corner with a bag of old chips he must have scavenged from the break room in his hand. "Are you too hip for that?"

"I am not, nor have I ever been, cool." I snorted at him. "And who says shipany more?"

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“I hang around with Mercer a lot,” he admitted, crunching away. “I’ve gained five pounds in lollipop.”

“You too?” I clucked my tongue. “And here I thought I was special.”

“Tai says he was a chain-smoker for decades. Candy was his replacement addiction.”

“Huh.” I thought about the oral-fixation angle. “Makes sense.” I waited for him to get to the point. “Can we help you?”

“Just making the rounds.” He flashed me a grin. “I didn’t expect to walk in on such juicy gossip.”

“The great thing about rounds are they’re essentially circles. They begin and end in the same place. And your place—” I shoved him toward the front door, “—is out there somewhere.”

Snacking away, he ambled out of the building, and I breathed a sigh of relief to be rid of him.

“Do you think we should have told him those chips are a year out of date?”

“No.” I didn’t have to think about it. “He stole them, so he gets what he gets.”

“He stole them from the basket where we put chip flavors we don’t eat but also don’t get rid of because it makes it look like we have more options than we really do as long as they’re in there.”

“Fiiine.” I flipped my wrist. “We’ll warn him about the chip basket the next time he passes through.”

“Hey.” She lingered on the threshold. “Did you find what you were looking for last night?”

Warm metal pooled in my hand where I held the chain and the charm. “I’m not sure.”

That she didn’t push for more made me double down on the urge to tell her everything. But not here. As much as I wanted to believe there were lines Dad wouldn’t cross, I couldn’t help wondering what else he had monitoring me.

Screwing up my courage, I tightened my fist, grateful Bowie was out on his rounds. “Do you have plans for lunch?”

“Just the usual. Sandwich from home. Maybe some expired chips...”

“Do you want to grab something out with me?” I kept my expectations low. “My treat.”

A delicate flare of her nostrils betrayed her instinct to check my emotional barometer.

“Yeah.” A genuine smile crinkled her eyes. “I’d like that.”

“Good.” I saluted her, like a dork. “See you at noon.”

Back at the register, Myrtle regarded me with pity, but she had deigned to use the subpar dog bed.

“You don’t have any room to talk,” I grumbled at her. “You’re not great with people either.”

As I was grabbing the tablet where I kept my to-do list for the pups here for makeovers, the phone rang, and I gave myself a cheer injection. “Gwinnett Street Groomers. This is Ana. How can I help you?”

The line click, click, clicked before disconnecting, which wasn’t creepy at all.

“Everything okay?” Sloane set aside the towels she was folding. “You’re all flush.”

I checked the caller ID log, but it was blank and hitting redial didn’t get me anywhere either.

“How serious were you about the friendship thing?”

“I did run interference for you last night and cover for you this morning.”

“What if I said that was only the beginning?”

“Are you asking me to be your friend or your partner in crime?”

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Plastic from the phone casing bit into my palm. “Both?”

“In for a penny, in for a pound.” Her smile was infectious. “How do you feel about pizza?”

To lessen the odds of us being overheard, Sloane suggested we eat at The Pie Shop on Pillory. Human owned and always with a line out the door, the bustling pizza parlor was the ideal spot to grab lunch and some privacy. And, since the owner was a client, she made sure I always got a table.

Ms. Putnam’s schnauzer, Bonnie, was fourteen and too old for popping Trazodone before nail trims, but she also wanted to strike the match that let her watch the world burn. Not a great combo.

Honestly, she would probably get along with Myrtle like a house afire.

Anyway, I earned Bonnie’s tolerance if not trust, and it won me a client for life in Ms. Putnam.

The restaurateur and her spicy pup formed yet another brick in the wall I was building between the business my last name raked in and the treasured clients I acquired for myself.

Seated at my favorite booth, prime real estate for people-watching, Sloane and I put in our orders.

Two of the large three cheese caprese calzones for her and a small pesto prosciutto

pizza for me.

“Remember when the dogs went nuts?” I twisted my straw wrapper into a ring. “And I blamed an owl?”

“Yes.” Her lips quirked to one side. “Are you going to tell me what really spooked them?”

“I found a vampire.” I crumpled the paper. “In the potting shed.”

“What was he doing?” She tilted her head. “There’s nothing in there worth stealing.” Her eyes shot wide as they landed on me. “Do you think he was there for the dog? Or for you?”

“If he was, someone got to him first.” I thought back to how I found him. “There was blood everywhere.”

“Are you sure it was his?” She chewed on the end of her straw. “Heisa vampire.”

“I saw the wound.” I had no doubt if I had looked closer, I would have determined wolf teeth were to blame. “I told him I would call for help, but he didn’t want that. Then I heard you, panicked, and covered my tracks.”

“That’s why you went back.” She nodded along. “You were going to check on him.”

“I couldn’t just leave him.” I puffed out my cheeks. “But when I got there, he was gone.”

“No one who lost that much blood would be that spry.” She rapped the table with her knuckle. “The bleach?”

“That wasn’t me.” I held up my hands. “I went to see the shed in daylight and found it spotless.”

“None of this makes sense.” She rested her chin on her fist. “And that’s before you mix in the dog.”

“There’s one more thing.” I winced as I fished the card from my purse. “He left this under the register.”

“You hid this?” The color drained from her cheeks. “From your father?”

“Yep.” I felt a tad woozy admitting it. “I did.”

“Why?” She dropped the paper like it had burned her. “Why would you cover for some random guy?”

“I don’t know.” I tipped my head back like the answers were etched into the wood beams on the ceiling. “I felt violated when Myrtle appeared at GSG, but then Dad showed up with his sentinels, and I felt even more violated. Then I got mad because he always makes such a big deal out of everything, and I wanted, I don’t know, to do one thing for myself.” I thumped my head on the back of the booth. “And then I found the vampire, and I thought he was dying—or whatever—and needed my help.”

“This is...a lot.” Sloane raised an arm, and our waitress popped in. “We need a pitcher of beer.”

Alcohol didn’t do much for shifters unless we drank copious amounts of it, but it could take the edge off our mutual anxiety.

“I understand if you don’t want any part of this mess.” I shoved my water glass back and forth, unable to look at her. “My mess. I am a hot mess, and I made a mess, and

I'm sorry I dragged you into it."

"Ana." She gripped my hand. "I'm not going anywhere."

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“You could get in so much trouble for this, and it was such a stupid thing for me to do.”

“A wolf with its paw in a trap will chew off its own leg to get free,” she said softly.

“That’s grim.”

“Look, the way I see it, your dad knows the important parts. The break-in. Myrtle. The footage of the guy who may or may not be the vampire from the potting shed. With his resources, he’ll figure out the rest.”

“You’re really not going to tell him,” I realized, barely trusting my instincts that I had read her right.

“Clearly, we have work to do on the trust front, but I get it.” She smiled when the waitress returned with the pitcher of beer and two full glasses. “How about I give you leverage on me?”

“No.” I took a long drink. “I’m not going to hold you hostage.”

Even I knew that a friendship built on tit for tat didn’t have much hope for success.

“Okay.” A faint smile twitched in her cheek as she lifted her glass. “Here’s to not taking hostages.”

“No hostages,” I repeated, clinking my glass against hers.

Soon after we refilled our drinks, the waitress arrived with our lunch, and we dug into our meals.

I had a healthy appetite, but I didn't require nearly the calories as a shifter who could, you know, shift. A small pizza hit the spot most days, but nerves had me shoving my plate away at the halfway mark. There was one more detail I ought to share with her, but I couldn't quite bring myself to own up to the charm.

That bit of magic had been my escape hatch every time I reached a point where I couldn't breathe, and I wasn't sure I was quite ready to fully cut off my emergency oxygen supply.

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No sooner had we tipped our waitress and stepped onto the sidewalk, ready to burn off the yummy carbs on the walk back to GSG, than a familiar voice snarled into his phone several yards to our left.

"Stalker." I wasn't surprised Bowie had followed me, someone did every single day, so I elected to ignore his outburst. "No wonder he wanted me to eat with him if he's under orders to shadow me everywhere I go."

"We're downwind," Sloane murmured. "I don't think he's noticed us yet."

"Hmm." Curious what, other than me, would have lured him from his post, I strained to hear anything damning he had to say to the person on the other end of the line. "Care to eavesdrop?"

Sloane, God help her, grinned at me and tuned in while I struggled to locate the on switch in myself.

Most of the time, I kept my senses dulled to avoid overstimulation from the barking, whining, and general chaos of working among animals. I missed a few things that way, but I had never been allowed to rely on myself for protection, so I didn't see the point in suffering eight hours a day for nothing.

"...still there..." Bowie dragged a hand through his hair. "...Sartori can't know I..."

About to follow to find out just what he didn't want Dad knowing about, Sloane gripped my arm. She held me back as a sleek black car pulled up to the curb. Bowie, still on the phone, got in, not missing a beat.

"I only caught the tail end of that." I sagged as he drove out of sight. "What did you hear?"

"The Walsh situation is heating up, whatever that is, and time is running out. Bowie has done something he doesn't want your dad to know about, but he didn't say what." She turned thoughtful. "I can tell you the guy in that car wasn't pack. I caught a whiff of him when Bowie opened the door. I've never smelled anything like it."

Another problem with leashing my senses was I got so tuned in to whichever one I was amplifying, I lost track of the others. If I had the driver's scent, I could have filed it away in case I ever ran across it again. But I had missed that chance for a few words that lacked any true context.

"I have an appointment at one." I frowned down the street. "We should get back to work."

"Yeah." Sloane fell in step with me. "I need to walk Bailey and clean her suite."

A text chime had me reaching for my phone, but I already had a good idea of who it would be.

Mercer.

>>Bowie had a family emergency.

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>>Zoe will be filling in for him the rest of the day.

>Thanks for the update.

“Mercer says Bowie had a family emergency. Zoe will be here soon to fill in for him.”

“Does it ever drive you crazy not knowing what’s going on?”

“I grew up shielded from pack business, and then outright excluded, so it’s never interested me. Dad put too much effort into keeping me apart from the drama for it to feel relevant to me.” I kicked an acorn skittering down the sidewalk. “If Myrtle hadn’t shown up at GSG, I would have ignored this dustup too.” I felt my shoulders inching up around my ears. “And that is how I earned a reputation as a self-centered pack princess.”

“Animals are the best judges of character.” Sloane bumped her shoulder into mine. “All the pets love you, so you can’t be that bad.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Do you think your vampire will come back?”

“He’s not mine.” I ignored the burn in my cheeks. “He was mighty pretty, though.”

Only after I had played our encounter over and over in my head, searching for clues about the Walsh situation everyone was buzzing about, had I let my focus shift enough to remember the sharp cut of his jaw, the gentle curve of his lips, and his intoxicating scent.

“You left out that part.” Sloane flushed too. “Spill, spill, spill.”

Shamelessly, I dished on the way to work, and we were still red-faced when Zoe emerged with a wave.

“Hey.” I resisted the urge to fan myself. “I heard Bowie had to leave early.”

Sloane, doing her best to cool her cheeks too, cleared her throat. “I hope everything’s okay.”

“They called me in to sub,” Zoe hedged, shoulders tight, “but I don’t have any details.”

“No worries.” I was quick to reassure her no digging was necessary. “I’ll check in with Dad about it later.”

With a firm nod, she set out to begin her patrol while Sloane and I returned to GSG with matching grins.

Glass shattering shot my heart into my throat, and I secured Francis the bulldog on the grooming table then sprinted into the lobby. Someone had broken the far left panel of the bay window with a hunk of granite stolen from the landscaping, and shards glinted across the floor right up to Myrtle’s bed.

“Stay,” I ordered Myrtle, who hadn’t done more than lift her head at the commotion. “I’ll come to you.”

“Ana?” Sloane skidded in behind me. “What in the...?”

The front door banged open to reveal Zoe, teeth bared, blood trickling down her throat. For a second, I thought the vampire had come back and taken a bite out of her,

but no. There was a gash under her jaw.

“Are you okay?” I scooped up Myrtle, unfastened her leash, and carried her with me to Zoe. “What happened?”

“I’m fine.” She touched her wound, already healing with shifter swiftness. “I noticed the intruder before he finished throwing the rock at your window. I intercepted him, but he was faster than I anticipated. He slashed at my throat then ran while I radioed for help.”

“I’ll secure Francis,” Sloane volunteered, aiming a stern look at me. “Stick with Zoe until I get back.”

Faster than I could answer, she sprinted off to ensure the safety of our client.

“Zoe,” I began, leading her into the break room. “What’s going on here?”

“You’re being targeted, Ana, that’s all I know.” Her gaze dipped to Myrtle. “None of this makes sense.”

“You’re working with Bowie on the Walsh situation.” I was risking my neck by bringing this up to her, but neither she nor Bowie were regulars. I figured Dad was roping in heavy hitters after all the commotion, but it didn’t sit right with me how Bowie had sped off while Zoe got tapped to fill in for him. Just in time for her to witness yet another incident at GSG. “Does this have anything to do with that?”

“I need you to wait here until reinforcements arrive.” Her face shut down as she smacked into the brick wall of loyalty to Dad, who wanted me kept in the dark. “Sloane, don’t let her out of your sight.”

“I won’t.” Sloane, back from her errand, planted herself behind me. “Go.” She jerked

her chin. “Secure the perimeter.”

Heartened by the order, Zoe prowled out the front door into the oncoming night.

The second I quit hearing her crunching footsteps, I darted back into the lobby, Myrtle grunting when I tucked her under my arm.

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“What are you doing?” Sloane scanned the room. “Get away from there.”

“Anytime someone throws a rock through a window in the movies, there’s a note attached to it.”

“This isn’t a movie, and your dad will skin us alive if we’re caught in here.”

“This won’t take but a second.” I bent and lifted the hunk of landscaping, turning it over carefully. Myrtle wiggled against me, unimpressed with my investigation. “Crap.” I put it back right where I found it. “It was worth a shot.” With my Myrtle-free hand, I grabbed Sloane and hauled butt returning to the break room. “Well, that was disappointing.” I sank into a chair. “I was so sure there would be a clue.”

“The only thing I picked up on was Zoe’s blood, but I’m guessing she inspected the rock on her way out.”

Less than five minutes later, Mercer barreled through the door, aiming straight for me.

“Your dad wants to speak with you.” He nodded to Sloane. “You’re coming too.”

“He’s not here?” I stepped around him, but no one else was there. “He sent you to fetch me?”

“We can’t have this conversation here.” Mercer swept the room. “This is an unsecured location.”

“I’m not going home.” I cuddled Myrtle against my chest. “To Dad’s home, I mean.”

“You don’t get a choice.” He offered me a lollipop I wanted to crush under my heel. “Come on, kiddo.”

“We’ll go,” Sloane said frostily. “But after Ana talks to her dad, I’m taking her home. To her home.”

A low growl rose up Mercer’s throat, his wolf unhappy with the challenge, but he swallowed it down.

No one stood up to Mercer. No one. Yet there was Sloane, ready to throw down with him.

Earning that kind of loyalty in such a short period of time convinced me Sloane had been as lonely as me and just as desperate to forge a connection with someone. Too bad she chose me. I was grateful, don’t get me wrong, but it would cause her no end of trouble if she stood up to the wrong wolf. And Mercer was far from the right one to let raise her hackles.

“I can’t make that promise.” His brow pinched as he glanced between us. “Neither can you.”

Hooking my arm through hers in a show of solidarity, one that left Myrtle grumbling about my dog-holding technique, I marched out to Mercer’s waiting SUV.

For a heartbeat, I thought he would demand I leave Myrtle, but he swallowed those words too.

With two sentinels left to guard my animals and board up my window, I got in with Sloane.

And the whole way there, I held the gold chain in my hand, the charm cutting into my palm like a promise.

A shiver rippled down my spine as I entered the house where I grew up on miles of forested land. I had fallen asleep to howling wolves most nights, my own personal lullaby. I hadn't minded their songs, even when they woke me, or the flashes of fur as they raced each other through the trees.

Truthfully, I had loved their wildness, had felt it echoing in my soul. Right up until I understood it would never be me out there. I would never sing with my packmates. I would never tussle with friends or hunt. I would never stop feeling like a disappointment. A failure. Aliability.

Then Dad locked me down for my own good, so it was hard to say how much of my bitterness stemmed from the forced isolation—as if I had turned from flesh and blood to a wraith in a window overnight—and how much of the blame could be laid at the paws of those who made sure I never forgot I wasn't one of them and never would be. That not even having an alpha father could make me a wolf.

“Peanut.” Dad greeted me in the foyer, and I set Myrtle down, holding tight to her leash. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come in person, but I’m here now.”

Sloane was a warm reassurance one step behind me as Dad embraced me.

“Sloane.” His eyes tightened at their corners. “You came too?”

“I was nervous,” I blurted, wiping the unreadable expression from his face. “She came as a favor to me.”

“I didn’t realize you two were so close.” He glanced toward Mercer. “Well, Sloane, I’m sure you know the way to the kitchen. Help yourself to some of the oatmeal

cookies Nina baked earlier.” He draped his arm across my shoulders. “I need a moment alone with my Peanut.”

“That sounds great.” She ducked her head, avoiding eye contact. “Thank you, sir.”

As much as obedience was part of the routine, tonight I found it grated on me to watch Sloane bow.

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“I notice you didn’t bring a bag, but you have plenty of things here.” He guided me into his office, where I was only ever brought if I was in trouble. But I had a feeling if he knew about the note, or the vampire, I wouldn’t have received such a warm reception. “Have a seat, Peanut, and let’s talk this through.”

Lowering myself into the chair across from his desk, I played the role of dutiful daughter to the hilt.

“The incidents at GSG are escalating, and I can’t, in good conscience, allow you to remain there alone.”

“I have Sloane,” I cut in, “and there’s always one sentinel on the property.”

“I’m glad to see you and Sloane are getting along so well, but she’s not enough protection for you.” He sat on the edge of his desk, clasping his hands in his lap. “The sentinels are a limited resource, and right now they’re needed here.”

“What’s going on?” I was starting to feel like Harvey as often as I repeated those words. “The truth.”

“There’s a new pack moving into the area,” he said slowly, picking and choosing what to share. As usual. “The alpha wants to claim Brentwood as their territory. The Sartoris have a strong presence in the town because of you, but I can’t very well tell them no since it’s not mine.”

Heart crumpling, I struggled to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “I see.”

“This new pack—the Walshes—are the ones targeting you. They don’t take kindly to us having a sentinel presence in what will soon be their town, which is understandable. They’ve given us thirty days to settle your affairs and vacate the premises. Though they’re willing to allow you to return for signing legal documents to offload GSG and the house your aunt left you.”

“Sell my...?” I shoved to my feet. “You’re asking me to sell my house?”

“Either we honor the Walshes’ requests and make room for our new neighbors, or we fight them for it. We hadn’t planned on an expansion, not so soon, and not in that direction, but if it’s what you want...”

The burden of making a decision that could get my packmates killed slammed down on my shoulders. As a latent, I couldn’t be alpha. Any standing I held within the pack was due to my father’s position. I hadn’t been raised to make these kinds of decisions, or any decisions for myself period. “Can I have tonight to think about it?”

There was no choice, not really, but I wanted the time to mourn what I had and what I was losing.

“Why don’t you and Sloane stay in your old room?” He brought me in for a tight hug that smelled like frost and pine, like my childhood. “The trundle is still tucked under your bed, so there’s plenty of room.”

“Sure,” I mumbled against his shoulder. “That sounds...”

...like the end of my world as I knew it.

nine

Sloane brought oatmeal raisin cookies the size of my hands and two glasses of milk

upstairs, but I was too depressed to move from where I had dropped face- first into my pillow to enjoy the treat. Sloane, who I was learning was a nervous snacker, nibbled and gulped until I wanted to burrow under the pillow to avoid hearing her chew.

“Myrtle has to pee.”

A muffled grunt was the best I had to offer.

“She’s doing a cute little gotta godance.”

More grunts with a grumble for spice was my answer.

“She’s squatting over your boy band rug.” She hummed. “Good choice, Myrtle. I never liked Nick either.”

Growling, I shoved onto my knees and then clambered off the bed, ready to tear into them both for ganging up on the clearly superior member of my favorite singing group from my teenage years.

Except Myrtle was curled in a ball on my ratty beanbag chair, and Sloane was smirking at me.

“Wallowing never fixed anything.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“Whatever.” I scooped Myrtle against my side, snarling at the guards flanking my door, and pounded down the stairs. I locked gazes with the sentinel on duty and bared my teeth. “Keep out of my sight.”

Usually, I was more polite, but tonight I wasn’t feeling nice.

Not when the world had cocked its leg and kicked me square in the lady bits yet again.

We took a winding path meant to give humans a safe trek through the woods, and I stuck to it until the house was lost in the trees. I waited until we hit a small creek then walked through it, muddying our scents, and hit a slope that led up to my favorite vantage point of the property.

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Myrtle, who had curled her lip when she spied the great outdoors looming, insisted on being carried the whole way. I wasn't sure if I was impressed she was that spoiled or annoyed that I was stuck playing her chauffeur. Either way, she didn't otherwise complain as I lugged her up to the flat strip of rocky earth and plopped on my butt, legs dangling from the overhang.

That was, apparently, her limit. She wasn't interested in heights or maybe it was the cuddling that did it. I let her go, and she walked to the end of her leash before sitting while Sloane joined me with a sigh.

"What are you going to do?"

"I have no idea." I tipped my head back to admire the stars. "I loved that Brentwood wasn't in pack territory. That alone limited the sentinels' presence in the area. Now that's bitten me on the butt."

"Your aunt gave you the house," she said slowly, considering. "And you bought the Victorian later?"

"Yeah." I wasn't sure I had ever told her, but downstairs would have been humming with the news. "The whole thing had felt like divine intervention. I turned twenty-one, got the news my mysterious aunt had left me a house in an area just far enough away from Dad I could breathe but still close enough he didn't push back as hard as I expected since no one had formally claimed the territory, and I thought I was set."

"You own the house and GSG. They're legally yours. He can't twist your arm and force you to sell them."

“The new pack in town—aka the Walsh situation—doesn’t want me in Brentwood. So, either I bow out gracefully and rebuild somewhere else, or Dad throws down with our new neighbors and a lot of people get hurt because I didn’t want to give up my slice of freedom.”

Magic, thick and pungent, stung my nose, and I twisted around in time to see Myrtle explode into light.

About to lunge for her, to try to save her from whatever powers were at work, the brightness flicked off like a thrown switch, leaving us to gawk at the naked elderly woman sitting where Myrtle had been.

“You see this too, right?” I blinked a few times. “I didn’t have a stress-induced stroke?”

“I don’t have long,” the woman, who must have been in her sixties, shimmered with a dull glow.

Sloane palmed the charm that would allow her to shift in a blink if required to defend me.

“Who are you?” I kept my seat to give Sloane room to maneuver. “I’ve never seen a shift like that.”

“I’m Fayne Walsh.” She rubbed at her shiny arms. “I’m not a dog, usually. That just seemed like the best way in without attracting undue attention. People can be...intimidated...by my natural form, so I wove a spell to give me an alternate animal temporarily.”

“Wove a spell? But you’re a shifter.” I couldn’t wrap my head around it. “Shifters can’t cast spells.”

“Casting is for witches, darling,” she demurred, “and I’m not that.”

“What do you want?” Sloane clenched her fist over her own charm. “Why not shift before now?”

“I came to give you a message, but the wards on the town would have prevented me from shifting, and I couldn’t risk it where your guardians might see anyway. That would be as good as a declaration of war. No. It was safer to come in on four legs than two.”

“What are you talking about?” She had already lost me. “What wards?”

The Sartoris worked closely with witches, Dad was a big believer in using any advantage, but wards?

“Oh, Ana.” A slight pinch of her features betrayed her distress. “Of course you didn’t know.”

Cheeks prickling from being called out on my ignorance, I couldn’t find my voice to request the message.

“And that dog...” Sloane cocked her head. “You could have been anything and chose that?”

“Hey.” I popped her arm out of habit. “No dog shaming.”

“Forget about the damn dog and listen to me.” Fayne’s eyes flashed icy blue. “Your father is not?—”

Warmth splattered across my face as Fayne slumped forward, almost landing in my lap.

Sloane got there first, not reaching for Fayne, but knocking me down and covering my body with hers.

“Someone shot her.” I pushed on Sloane’s shoulder, desperate to reach Fayne. “Forget about me?—”

“They could have been aiming for you.” She pinned me harder. “She was across from you.”

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Within seconds, growls filled the air as wolves reached us, their fur bristling with menace.

Not a minute later, a half-dozen sentinels on two legs burst into the opening, Mercer and Bowie among them.

Aiming straight for Fayne, Bowie knelt beside her, checked her pulse, and spoke into his radio. “DOA.”

Dead on arrival.

“Anie.” He left her to examine me, but Sloane didn’t budge. “Are you okay?”

A rumbling threat poured from her throat as he got close enough to touch, her protective instincts too keyed up to allow him nearer, so he kept his hands to himself.

“The blood’s not mine.” I shoved at Sloane until she let me sit upright. “Who fired that shot?”

“They could have killed Ana,” Sloane rumbled at him. “The bullet could have gone straight through.”

A sour taste rose up the back of my throat, a reminder I had never witnessed this side of pack life.

“We need to get you inside.” Mercer cuffed my upper arm in an uncompromising grip. “It’s not safe out in the open.” He gritted his teeth. “I don’t know how that

woman made it onto the property, but you're lucky one of the sentinels noticed the flash of light before she attacked you."

"How do you know she meant me harm? She was just sitting there, talking to me."

Sloane caught my eye and shook her head once.

Far off in the distance, a mighty roar thundered across the skies, and the earth trembled underfoot.

"What was that?" I stumbled along as he half dragged me. "It sounded like..."

Vengeance.

Like no shifter I had ever heard or seen or could name.

As soon as we cleared the woods, Dad met me on the path, scooping me into his arms in a bridal carry.

"We have to get you to the panic room." His breath didn't so much as hitch as he carried me at a run the whole way to the house. "The others are waiting for you before they seal themselves in."

By the others, he meant those who couldn't fight. He might as well have pulled out a chair for me at the kids' table at Thanksgiving. He was going to cram me in that space with some BS speech about how I had to protect those weaker than me, but that line quit working on me after age ten.

"What's going on?" I twisted in his arms, but I couldn't see a thing. "What was that roar?"

A sentinel I didn't recognize held the front door open, and Dad rushed us through. A second one waited by the stairs leading down into the basement, and Dad shoved past him to fit us both in the tight space.

"Protect the others." He didn't miss a beat. "Keep them calm until Mercer texts you the all-clear."

"Sloane is coming too." I reached over his shoulder to take her hand. "She can help me."

Behind me, Sloane rolled her eyes, but she didn't complain as I dragged her with me.

They expected weakness from me, so why not exploit their bias for my benefit?

The safe room was a long white rectangle built into the slab of the house and doubled as a storm shelter during tornado season. With built-in benches, we could fit fifty people in this one, but there were others scattered across the property. There was enough food and water for everyone, at maximum capacity, to survive for a week. Thankfully, we had never put it to the test.

"I love you, Peanut." Dad kissed my forehead. "Stay safe."

"You're not going to tell me anything, are you?"

"Everything will be okay." He cupped my cheek in his large palm. "I'll be back soon."

"Yeah." I withdrew from his touch and turned away. "Happy hunting."

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The door shut with a hiss behind us, and I found myself facing more than a dozen kids, a few babies, and the elders unfortunate enough to be stuck entertaining them while the action happened without us. The vast majority of them didn't twitch at the blood flecking my face and clothes. They were too used to that aspect of their shifter natures to be bothered, but I hadn't built up a callus over my heart like them.

Back flush against the smooth wall, I slid until I was sitting and rested my forehead on my knees.

Try as I might, I kept replaying the moment when Fayne...

"Your father is not?—"

Not what? What had she been about to tell me? Who had she been to the Walshes?

And what had unleashed the roar that left my bones vibrating?

I didn't know, but as soon as I got out of there, I was going to find out.

ten

Four hours later, I got the text from Mercer okaying me to punch in the code to unlock the panic room. I didn't waste any time getting out of there. I also didn't make it far. A wall of sentinels awaited me, and it came as no surprise that Bowie was the one to grip my shoulder and blaze a path through the others.

One guy was too slow to avoid bumping into me, which solved one of my problems

as I threw my weight into him. Hands falling to his waist, I apologized as I thumbed the release on the dagger sheathed on his belt. I drew it as I shoved off him, tucking it into my waistband under my shirt with rusty sleight of hand.

Sadly, my weapon of choice was at home. Even if it had been at work for me to grab, I couldn't risk bringing it to Dad's attention. He would have kittens if he knew I fought with silver.

Sloane hustled behind us, not letting me out of her sight, and I was grateful for it as Bowie nudged me up the stairs and out the front door into a waiting SUV. With both rear doors standing open, I missed the copper tang of blood until I was locked in with the scent that stung my nose.

Instinct nudged me to keep on scooting across the bench until I could let myself out and run.

"Child locks are on," Sloane said softly from beside me as Bowie got behind the wheel.

Once he got comfy, I drew the stolen dagger and held it to his throat, counting on Sloane to subdue the front passenger if they got any ideas. "What's happening?"

"Do you really want to do this?" His eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. "Right here? Right now?"

"Are you guys required to complete a training course on how to answer questions with questions before you get that pay bump to sentinel?" I pressed the blade deeper. "Tell me what the fuck is going on."

"Let us...get you..." a ragged voice panted from the front passenger seat, "...somewhere...safe first."

The blade wobbled in my hand as I whipped my head toward the speaker. “Fayne?”

“Hello again, darling.”

“You’re working with her?” I gaped at the back of Bowie’s head. “With the Walshes?”

Apparently she wasn’t as DOA as I had been led to believe on that bluff.

And the mystery pet owner? I was willing to bet it had been Bowie who got caught on camera making the drop. But if he was posing as her owner, who was the vampire in the potting shed? What was his role in all of this?

“It’s complicated.” He tapped my wrist. “It’ll get more complicated if we don’t get out of here now.”

During the time I spent locked in the panic room, I had berated myself for not getting to the point with Fayne faster. She had been sitting there, about to enlighten me, then bang. Gone in a blink. Along with my answers. Or so I had thought. Now that I was getting a second chance, I wanted Fayne to finish what she risked her life to tell me.

And maybe, just maybe, I could talk to the Walsh alpha and plead my case to stay in Brentwood.

“Fine.” I released Bowie and sat back, staring at Fayne, marveling that she survived the shot. “Let’s go.”

Not wasting a moment, Bowie threw the SUV into gear and spun out toward the gate and the highway.

“You’re going to let him kidnap you?” Sloane looked primed to snatch the dagger.
“Are you crazy?”

“I’m starting to feel that way.” I rested my head on the back of the seat. “Someone start talking.”

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Surprise, surprise. Neither of them did. Though I gave Fayne a pass, after almost dying in front of me.

“Stop the SUV at the next gas station.” Sloane made it an order. “I’ll get Ana home myself.”

“That’s not happening.” Bowie cut Fayne a glance. “It’s up to you, Gran.”

“Gran?” I choked on the word. “What do you mean Gran?”

“Tell...her...” Fayne leaned her head against the glass and shut her eyes. “About Rían.”

“Rían.” A shiver prickled down my arms as the name struck home. “Rían’s alive?”

Cranking his head around, Bowie gawked at me. “How do you know about Rían?”

“I found him.” I sat back when Fayne twisted in her seat toward me. “In the potting shed.”

“You’re the one who protected him?” She pressed a hand over her heart. “Oh, darling, thank you.”

“You saved his life.” Bowie’s tone held real gratitude. “I didn’t know how I was going to get him out.”

Well, that explained how the sentinels on patrol had missed the copious amount of

blood.

Bowie discovered it and hid it from the others. Not that I had any room to talk.

“He’s a vampire,” I grumbled, fidgeting with the dagger’s worn hilt. “He’s already dead.”

Wheezing laughter burst from Fayne until tears streaked down her face, and she had to clutch her belly.

“He’s not a vampire.” Her eyes twinkled at me. “He’s far more interesting than that.”

“He was cold as ice when I found him.” I curled my fingers into my palm. “And he flashed a fang at me.”

“Blood loss,” Fayne mused, her eyes slipping shut again. “We don’t run hot like wolves do, but we’re not corpse-like.” A delicate snort blasted out her nose as she elbowed Bowie. “Well, not most of us anyway.”

Bowie shared the laugh, but he sobered after catching the annoyance pinching my face.

“As to what he is,” Fayne said, noticing my expression too, “I imagine he’ll want to show you himself.”

“Anything to avoid giving an answer.” I considered using the knife handle to smash the window. “You and Dad have a lot in common.” I stared at the back of Bowie’s head. “He’ll kill you for betraying him.”

“He’ll have to catch me first.” He flashed a broad smile at the open road. “I’ve spent the last year in this form, and as of tonight, I’m free of it.” He slid a glance at Fayne.

“As soon as Gran is up to unraveling me anyway.”

“This form?” Sloane scooted closer to me. “What does that mean?”

“Bowie Ferguson—the boy you grew up with—died in a collision. He flew to Los Angeles to race in an invitation-only event on Mulholland Drive. Bowie took Dead Man’s Curve too fast and flipped his Maserati GT2 Stradale at two hundred miles per hour.”

“And you let everyone think...?” The moisture dried from my mouth. “What about his parents?”

“He and Lyra are estranged from their parents, who sought to keep Sartori’s favor after the tooth incident.”

Unsticking my tongue from the roof of my mouth, I snarled, “You’re trying to say this is my fault?”

“Not at all, darling.” Fayne reached back and patted my knee. “Not one bit of this is your fault.”

“Does that mean,” Sloane asked, “their parents don’t know Bowie is dead?”

“They’re aware of the wreck, but they believe Bowie survived.” His hands flexed on the wheel, betraying his discomfort with the topic. “Any inconsistencies in my behavior, including gaps in my memory, have been chalked up to a catastrophic head injury even shifter healing couldn’t entirely fix.”

“That worked out well for you,” I said coolly, hating that Bowie’s parents were about to lose him again. For good this time.

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Far too soon, Bowie—or whatever his name was—cut the wheel, putting us on Main Street in Brentwood.

“As happy as I am to have Ana one step closer to home, you can’t think stopping here is a good idea.” Sloane scoffed a disbelieving laugh. “We’re forty-five minutes away from pack lands. Sentinels will be here in minutes if not sooner. You sure you’re good with making your stand here?”

“Brentwood is now Walsh territory.” Blue light kindled in Fayne’s eyes. “Let him try to cross our borders.”

As soon as Bowie patted the brakes, angling into a parking spot at GSG, a man wearing a hoodie prowled from beneath one of the many flowering magnolia trees lining both sides of the quaint street, right up to my window. Shadows concealed his face, but they couldn’t hide the size of him.

Tall. Stupidly tall. Ridiculously tall.

No one needed that much leg. Except maybe a giraffe. Giraffe shifters weren’t a thing, right?

The guy tested the handle then knocked on the glass.

“Oh.” Bowie laughed to himself. “Forgot the locks.”

Then the door was open, and the hood was shoved back, revealing a rugged face sprinkled with old scars and a chiseled jaw with a scab pulling his cheek down. His

lips, the bottom one uneven thanks to a faded injury, twitched in the promise of a smile. But his eyes... They held me in thrall.

I had been wrong about them before. I hadn't seen the whites of his eyes that night. No. They were pure white, almost glowing, from corner to corner. And when Sloane opened her door and suction dragged a burst of his scent to me, I recalled its warmth with unnerving certainty.

"Hello again," he rumbled, almost a purr. "I've been waiting for you."

Promise twisted the words until I heard one thing but felt certain he meant another.

"You didn't die," I stated the obvious, flaunting my keen observational skills.

"You protected me." His gaze lowered to my collarbones. "You're not wearing your necklace."

"Beware strange vampires who come bearing gifts." I fought down the burn in my cheeks as he chuckled at the joke. "Thanks for returning the charm, but you can have the chain."

"The necklace is yours." He studied me with those liminal eyes. "Consider it as a thank you."

"Thank you for...thanking me...?" I fumbled behind me for Sloane's hand. "Is my friend safe here?"

"For now," he allowed, nodding to Sloane. "Come,mo chuisle, I'm sure you have questions, right?"

"Do you plan to answer them?"

“Talk about answering a question with a question,” Bowie huffed, killing the engine.

“Shut up, body snatcher,” I bit out then returned my attention to Rían. “Let’s go inside.”

Predators felt safest in their dens. I wasn’t sure I qualified as a predator, but I would feel better on home turf. The knife helped too. Bonus point to Rían for not demanding I fork it over to him.

Most of the pack would have smirked, snatched it away to prove they could, or ignored me outright.

For him to allow me to keep it, to give me an opening to use it, felt...respectful somehow.

Always a nice trait in a kidnapper.

As soon as my feet hit concrete, I missed the slight advantage the SUV had given me height-wise.

“Freaking giraffe,” I mumbled, waiting for Sloane before heading into GSG. “Dad left sentinels to...”

Upon hearing voices, three women exited the kennel area dressed in GSG scrubs from the laundry room. I wasn’t sure what kind of reaction I expected when they caught sight of me, but the way they each bent a knee wasn’t it. I glanced over my shoulder, expecting Fayne to walk in, but they kept staring. At me.

The knee thing was odd, but maybe it was the Walshes’ way of showing respect? As an alpha’s daughter, I had seen my fair share of peculiar shows of deference, but this one took the cake.

“Let’s not overwhelm her,” Rían chided them, ruffling his hair as he soaked in my discomfort.

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“These aren’t Dad’s people.” I didn’t miss the flex of his jaw at the mention of my dad. “Who are they?”

“Jess, Mindy, and Rochele.” He ducked his head. “Jess is a vet tech, and Mindy and Rochele are both dog trainers for the police in Abbeville.” He stuffed his hands into his jeans. “Are you comfortable with them, just for tonight, or would you rather have your own people put in place?”

“You just happened to have them on speed dial in the event of a hostile grooming takeover?”

“I’ve been in talks with your father for the right to claim Brentwood for the past year. I’m familiar with the town, and your business.” He rolled a shoulder. “I had concerns that the transition might go sideways, so I took the necessary steps to ensure your animals wouldn’t pay the price.”

The forethought set my skin prickling, but I couldn’t tell if I liked the sensation or not. I wasn’t sure what to make of him or how he had known it would come down to this, to me. And why he had been ready to take such extreme measures to accommodate someone he was booting out of town.

All the ways I could have used that year to prepare for this moment, to nail down my contingency plans, spun through my head. But I hadn’t known. No one had told me. Dad hadn’t told me.

“I appreciate it,” I murmured, still uncertain. “They can stay.” I glanced back at Sloane. “For tonight.”

With a cautious smile for me, the woman on the end, Jess, I think, herded the others back to the kennels where soon the comforting sounds of the closing routine rang out as if they had done it a hundred times before.

“We can use my office,” I decided, aware shifter ears would hear every word through its door anyway.

Gentleman kidnapper that he was, Rían said, “That works for me.”

“Freaking giraffe,” I grumbled again, ceding my chair to Rían. Not out of respect or deferment or any of those other polite reasons. No. I wasn’t sure the three of us would fit into the small room otherwise.

“Okay.” Wood groaned as he sat, and even the desk complained when he leaned forward, resting his forearms across it, as if that might lighten the load on the poor chair. “That’s twice now you’ve called me a giraffe.” He cocked his head, curious but not insulted. “Are you trying to guess my animal or...?”

“Have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately?” I claimed one of the client seats, and Sloane sat next to me. “You’re stupidly tall.” I gestured toward him. “You have a ridiculous amount of leg.”

A snort at my elbow turned into a cough, but Sloane was losing the battle against laughter.

Rían glanced down at his lap, at his tree-trunk thighs, and pushed out a sigh.

“I like being tall, my mom was tall, so I’m not going to apologize for hereditary traits.”

All of a sudden, I tasted foot in my mouth. Which was insane. Bowie kidnapped me.

Brought me here to meet with this stranger. A stranger who was about to cost me my home and business.

“But—” he continued before I found a way to remove said foot, “—as someone who routinely bumps his head half a dozen times a day on doors, ceilings, and the interiors of cars, I will admit my height can be a lot.” His slow grin revealed bright-white teeth. “I like that you’ve already given me a pet name.”

“Um...”

“Here’s the thing.” He laced his fingers. “I don’t know how you feel about giraffes, sexually, but...” His moonlight eyes drifted toward the ceiling. “That came out wrong.”

“Thank God.” I laughed, and yeah, it sounded atadmanic. “I have no feelings about giraffes, sexually or otherwise. I would, quite frankly, be concerned for myself if I did.”

“Um.”

“That’s my line,” I prompted him, when he only examined the light fixture which could have done with a good dusting. “What’s yours? You do have non-giraffe reasons for bringing me here, right?”

“Yes.” He drew out the word, which wasn’t comforting whatsoever.

“Can you get to the point?” Sloane perched on the edge of her seat. “What do you want with Ana?”

That, at least, brought his attention swinging back to her, and the weight of his stare made her squirm.

“Ana and I are betrothed.” His shoulders bowed with the relief of getting out the words. “We have been since before we were born.” He spread his hands. “That’s why I wanted Brentwood.” He cleared his throat and held my widening stare. “And that’s why I want...you.”

“Sloane.” I fumbled for her hand. “I need you to dial 911. I’ve had a stroke. I wasn’t sure before, but it’s the real deal this time.” I dug my nails in. “I just hallucinated an entire conversation with a giraffe.”

“I don’t think sympathetic strokes are a thing, so unless I also need an ambulance, I think he’s serious.”

“Dad would have told me if he sold me off for a pack alliance.”

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Beside me, Sloane grew pale, and a frown pleated her forehead as she stared off into space.

Not the most reassuring gestures, but hey. I was hitting my stride. I could rationalize myself out of this.

“And Dad wouldn’t have told me to pack up and get out of Brentwood if he had engaged us.”

“Ana...”

“Therefore, we are not getting married, and I am going to go home to...”

...start boxing up my things.

That was what I meant to say, since the Walsh occupation of Brentwood was fact given the numbers I had witnessed since my arrival. But it gutted me knowing I would be required to move to my childhood home until I talked Dad into letting me purchase another house in another town.

How was this my life? I was an adult. I shouldn’t have to ask my dad to let me do anything.

“You don’t have to leave.” Rían coiled like he was seconds from springing across the desk to grab me before I walked out. “Brentwood is your home. You’re the only reason I’m here. The betrothal is a lot, I get it, but it’s not like I’m slapping you with an ultimatum. There’s no timeline. No rush. All I’m asking is for you to please stay.”

His hesitant smile tugged on his scarred lip. “Get to know me and the rest of the clan before abandoning the life you worked so hard to build here.”

This was too big. I couldn’t hold it all in my head without it exploding. But I had to start somewhere.

He was giving me what I wanted, what had gotten me in that SUV, without my having asked for it.

“Explain how you ended up in my shed.” I started off easy. “Who did that to you?”

“Mercer Bates caught up to me after a heated meeting with your father. He decided I should be taught a lesson in respect.” He spread his hands. “I couldn’t shift within Brentwood city limits, not then, but Mercer didn’t have that problem. I can hold my own, giraffe legs and all, but not against a wolf with the element of surprise and three sentinels to back him up if he started losing.”

I wish I could say I was shocked Mercer would stoop so low, but where I was concerned, Dad placed few limits on what his second could do to protect me. Even if it was dishonorable to attack someone unable to defend themselves with tooth and claw. Or whatever Rían had aside from his great height.

“Why couldn’t you shift?” I found myself curious what his answer might reveal about his character. “Part of the bargain for the meeting? To remain on two legs for the duration?”

“You really don’t know?” He raised his eyebrows at Sloane. “You have a token, I’m sure.”

“I have a charm that allows for instantaneous shifting,” she admitted after I nodded my permission.

“Can I see it?” He extended a hand, and Sloane, to her credit, only hesitated for a second before she placed her charm on his wide palm. “This engraving on the front?” He indicated the wolf’s head. “It’s the rune for instantaneous shifting.” He flipped it over. “This one?” He showed us a magnolia blossom. “This one grants the bearer the ability to shift within the city limits. Otherwise, you’re locked in whatever form you enter in until you leave. Though we’ll be tweaking that soon.”

“That’s what Fayne meant by wards.” I had trouble wrapping my head around it. “I had no idea.”

“I had no idea it was possible.” Sloane accepted her charm. “A whole town on magical lockdown?”

“I imagine there are several aspects of life in Brentwood you weren’t privy to,” Rían said with a frown. “Sartori didn’t want to chance Ana smelling a lie on you or suspecting you of being complicit. Anyone he thought was getting too curious he got rid of before they could voice any concerns to her.” The chair hit its breaking point, crunching under Rían, who grimaced but appeared confident it wouldn’t outright dump him onto the floor. A man his size was probably a better judge of such things than me. “Bowie had reason to believe you were next. Not for asking questions, but from concerns raised by your behavior.”

A growl tickling the back of her throat, she leaned forward, into his space. “What behavior?”

“That behavior.” His peculiar eyes crinkled at their corners. “Your loyalty to Ana was growing too deep.”

“From where I’m sitting, that’s a plus. Not a minus.” Sloane’s upper lip quivered. “She’s my friend.”

“I think...” I swallowed hard, “...he might be right.” I curled into myself. “You’re the first person who ever pushed me to be open, to trust them. Everyone else kept their distance, and that was fine with me. I had gotten used to the revolving door.”

I told myself I didn’t need them. That I didn’t need friends. Never had I considered the sentinels who wound up in my employ might have wanted to forge a connection, or that Dad might have warned them away from forming an attachment.

Why would he do that? Isolate me? Force me to be so alone?

More than once I had fallen asleep in his lap as a child, crying because no one liked me. I had shed more than a few tears in high school too, when I got dumped for not being enough. Not being arealshifter.

“Can I take her home?” Sloane started rubbing my back, as if sensing I was near my breaking point. “She’s had enough for one day.” I started to protest, but she cut me a glare. “You need food and sleep.”

“Today was a lot to take in.” He rose with caution, but the poor chair had given up on life and toppled on its side. “Today’s not looking any easier.” He pointed at the wreckage. “I’ll, uh, replace that.”

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“I have more questions. More every minute.” I let Sloane tug me to my feet. “I don’t want to walk out that door and lose my one chance at getting answers.”

“I would like to spend the rest of my life with you, which is a lot, I know, but that means you’ve got all the time in the world to ask me anything you can think of. If I don’t know the answer, I’ll find someone who does.” He hesitated. “I won’t make you beg or bargain or buy the truth from me. Ever. That’s not who I am, and it’s not what I want for us.”

Too good to be true. No one was this transparent. This open. There had to be a catch.

“What if I decide I don’t want there to be anus?”

“Then there won’t be anus.” He massaged the base of his neck. “But I’m hoping I can convince you that I have more than a pair of stupidly long legs to offer you.” He inclined his head. “Sweet dreams.”

“Are you sure her father can’t breach the town?”

“Sartori can’t get in, but no one is getting out either. Cell towers and internet are blocked too. We notified residents who will be affected by the outage to expect a disruption in services. They’ll be compensated for the inconvenience, and we’ve gently encouraged human residents to spend a few days out of town until the matter is resolved.”

“No one notified me.”

“A strategic decision, for your safety and ours.”

Well, I had wanted to stay in Brentwood. It looked like I was getting my wish, just not on my terms.

“From one cage to another,” I murmured, ignoring his flinch. “Let’s go, Sloane.”

Life might be a dumpster fire, but at least I had a friend willing to brave the flames with me.

eleven

Early-morning sunlight heated the golden planks as I padded into the living room in search of Sloane. I found her standing at the window overlooking the street in front of the house wearing a peculiar smile. I squirmed to find her beneath the silver cascade of delicate chains most people mistook for a windchime, but she didn’t spare it, or its peculiar design, a second glance.

“What put that look on your face?”

A laugh huffed out of her as she turned, holding the curtain back to give me a view of the sidewalk.

“See for yourself.”

The invitation was too good to ignore, since it meant I could pretend yesterday didn’t happen for a while longer. Happy for the distraction, I swept my gaze down the row of very short people lined up in front of my house until I hit a small lemonade-like stand made of cardboard boxes on my doorstep.

A small girl with flame-red hair stood behind the counter, accepting candy, toys, and

cash for...

“What is she selling?” I couldn’t see a product. “And why is she peddling it at my house?”

“Tickets.” Sloane bit her bottom lip to hold in a laugh. “I was her first customer.”

The rectangular paper Sloane offered me wasn’t some crayon scrawl but must have been generated by an app. That, or the girl, who was around eight or nine, was a graphic design prodigy I might hire to refresh my old logo.

“Be the first to meet my sister,” I read aloud. “For an extra dollar, watch her shift into a real, live wolf.”

For a second, I thought she meant Sloane, but nope. There was a photo of me. A candid shot taken from about her height at some point last night, based on the bloody clothes and the shell-shocked expression I wore. I looked feral. I could see why the other kids believed I could wolf out with my lip snarled like that. The kid must not realize I was a latent. That the Walshes weren’t advertising it offered some relief.

“I hope her parents know where she is and what she’s doing, and that they’re standing by with refunds.” I had no siblings. I couldn’t shift. I couldn’t deliver on either of her promises. “And I hope you didn’t pay extra to see the wolf, unless you’re planning to supply it the fur and the fangs.”

“I’m surprised your man let me keep my charm—token—whatever.”

“He’s not my man.” I rested my shoulder against the door. “He’s a very tall, very delusional man.” I let my head rest against it too. “Whatever this is, I’m sorry I dragged you into it with me.”

“I chose to come with you, not just to protect you but support you.” She resumed her people-watching. “You’re safe here.” She shook her head. “Otherwise, these kids would be on lockdown and not outside.”

“But are you?” I shoved off and padded into the kitchen. “I don’t care how safe I am if you’re at risk.”

“He let me keep my charm,” she said again. “He’s allowing me the means to protect you, and myself, if it comes down to it.” She followed me to the stove. “Do you need any help?”

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“Cooking is my therapy.” I waved away her offer. “It’s how I destress.”

The whole truth was more humbling. Food was life to shifters. I taught myself the basics so I could whip up cookies, cakes, and pies that obligated the pack to spend time with me in the kitchen if they wanted a treat. But I had grown to love it. Especially baking for my four-legged customers.

“That’s probably for the best.” She retreated a safe distance. “I can burn water.”

“Impressive.” I aimed for the fridge, digging through the contents. “How about eggs Benedict?” A check of my supplies had me shifting gears to use what I had that was freshest. “Make that Tex-Mex. I can grill some potato slabs and whip up some avocado-lime hollandaise.”

“I’m willing to cross the cuisine border with you.”

While I heated the built-in griddle on my gas cooktop, I checked my phone. “Still no service.”

“At least he warned us.” She plunked down at the table. “Our inboxes aren’t going to be fun places to visit when we have internet access again.”

“I’m a terrible daughter for enjoying the calm before the storm, but it’s nice to have quiet to think.”

As soon as phones came online again, I was going to get an earful. Which suited me just fine. I had a few choice words for Dad too. All these years, he never said a word

about a betrothal. He let me date, let me think my life partner was one choice I could make for myself when he had already handpicked a guy for me. Before I was born. The odds of a latent having a mate were zero. I had no wolf. I could fall in love with a packmate, but the wilder half of him would never be mine.

“You don’t get a say in the blackout, so enjoy it while you can.”

“What will your family think? Will they be worried about you?” I began slicing a red onion in neat slivers. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask sooner. I’m rusty on my reciprocation, since it’s mostly clients who talk to me.”

And those interactions, even years later, after I earned their loyalty, were surface level.

“You’re fine.” She plucked at her bottom lip. “I lost my parents about two years ago. I’m an only child, so without them, I didn’t have anything worth staying for. That’s when I applied with your dad for this job.”

“No aunts or uncles?”

“Dad was a healer, a good one, but his pack already had one. To establish himself, he and my mom left. I wasn’t born yet, so I never met their families. They didn’t visit after the big cross-country move, and we didn’t have the money to go back, so we all drifted apart.” She rubbed her thumb across the old tabletop. “You know how it goes.”

“Yeah. I do. I don’t remember my mom. Just the stories Dad told me. Which didn’t match up to what the parents at my school said when they thought I couldn’t hear. Things their kids repeated later to my face like it was a contest to see who could make me cry.” I got to whisking my eggs. “She wrote to me when I was younger. Actual letters. On paper. Nice paper. Like they were meant to be keepsakes. Like she

knew she was never coming back and wanted me to have something to remember her by. And there I go again dominating the conversation.”

Halfway done with my potatoes, I wiped my damp fingers on a towel when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it.” Sloane shot to her feet. “You’ve got your hands full already.”

“Are you worried the kids are coming to cash in their tickets?”

“If that happens, I’ll be forced to trip and accidentally fall against the door, slamming it in their faces.”

“Brutal.” I reclaimed my tongs, clicked them. “I like it.”

While she dealt with the problem outside, I finished up with breakfast, curious what was taking so long. I had started plating us up when she returned with Rían in tow, who whipped a faded ballcap off his head as he entered the house.

“Morning, Ana.” He dusted the hat across his palm. “I came to apologize for Marigold.”

“The front porch entrepreneur?”

“That’s her.” He raked his fingers through his short hair. “Marigold—Goldie for short—is my little sister.”

“That explains them meeting my sister on her tickets.” Sloane grinned as a flush tingled in my cheeks. “She must be excited for Ana to join the family.”

“More like excited for the opportunity to cash in on Ana potentially joining the

family.” His nostrils flared as he zeroed in on the plate in my hands. “She’s atadobsessed with building an empire, but it’s a girl empire, so I’m not allowed to know the details. Just that it requires a lot of startup capital.”

After settling Sloane with her breakfast, I returned to the stove and lifted the other plate. “Hungry?”

“Always.” He did the math, and his excitement dimmed. “I won’t take food out of your mouth, though.”

“I wouldn’t give you food out of my mouth. That would be gross. Probably soggy too.” I thrust the steaming food toward him. “Take it. I cooked plenty. I can fix another plate.”

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“Thank you.” He darted a glance at the table then back at me. “Do you mind if I...?”

“Have a seat.” I heaped the leftovers meant for second helpings into a serving for myself then joined the two of them. “Have you heard from my dad yet?”

“Many times.” He dug into his plate like someone might snatch it away if he didn’t eat fast enough. “The town is on lockdown as a security measure, so he’s barred entry, but I’ve met with him outside the boundaries twice. Until he cools off, I don’t have anything left to say to him. He was made aware of the timeline for occupation months ago. He just didn’t expect you to be on this side of the line when the clock ran out.”

“That makes two of us.” I picked at my food. “This isn’t how I expected to spend my weekend.”

As the last smear of sauce disappeared from his plate, he stared at the dish like it had wronged him.

“Here.” I nudged mine toward him. “I’m not hungry.”

“Do you want to see your dad?” He nudged it back to me. “Talk to him?”

“You would let me do that?” I paused with my finger midair. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“I don’t want to pluck you out of one cage and cram you into another.” Oh, yeah. I struck a nerve last night. “If he had honored his word—” He bit down on his criticism. “This isn’t how I wanted us to meet.”

“To be fair, our meet-cute was kind of ruined by the bleeding-out-in-my-potting-shed thing.”

“Not my finest moment, but you...” He shook his head. “I still can’t believe you protected me.”

“Because I’m a Sartori or...?”

“I was a stranger. A wounded predator. And you helped me.”

“Yes, well, I’ve always had a soft spot for strays.” I gave up on our game, afraid I was enjoying myself too much, and set my plate on top of his, leaving him no choice but to eat. “That reminds me—” I sat back in my chair. “How’s Fayne?”

Reluctant to surrender the perfect bite on his fork, Rían gulped it down before answering.

I shrugged off the tingle of pride at his open enjoyment of my cooking.

“The bullet passed right through her, so she was able to heal the critical damage on her own. Our healer, Burdock, handled the rest. An inch to the right, and she wouldn’t be with us.” He swallowed hard. “She was curled up with a book when I checked on her this morning, so she’ll be ready for visitors if you want to drop in.”

“What was so important she risked her life to tell me?”

“You’ll have to ask her.” He stabbed his next bite with more force than necessary. “I didn’t tell her to go. I wouldn’t have approved of her plan. She’s too vital to our family, to our clan, to risk on a whim. I planned to tell her that, and drag her home kicking and screaming if necessary, but then the potting shed happened.”

Before I could muster up the courage to apologize on Mercer's behalf, a knock on the door brought Rían to his feet. He growled softly as the aptly nicknamed Goldie let herself in.

"You told me to find you," she grumbled at his scowl, "when I was done paying everyone back."

"This isn't our house." He crossed to her and thumped her ear. "You have to wait to be invited in."

"But Ana is family, so..." Goldie drifted her gaze over to me. "You are my sister, right?"

"Goldie."

"Everyone knows you're going to marry her." She mimed gagging. "She's all you ever talk about."

"Oh, really?" I speared him with a curious look. "What does he say about me?"

"You don't want to know," she decided for me. "You might not want to marry him then."

Thinking back on her morning's efforts, I tossed out, "I'll pay you five dollars."

"Deal." She passed me a card with a barcode. "Scan that on your phone to make your payment."

A snort blasted out of Sloane's nose while Rían exhaled through his teeth.

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Impressed by her industriousness, I did as she asked and then sat back. “Well?”

A few seconds later, a ping sounded in her pocket, and she checked her phone to confirm receipt.

“Okay, I’ll tell you, but it’s bad. Super gross. He told everyone that he would tear the world apart with his bare hands to find his mate. He says he can feel you in here.” She pounded a small fist against her chest. “And he can tell you’re sad and lonely without us and that’s why I had to change elementary schools and lose the steady revenue stream from selling twenty-five sheets of wide ruled paper for a dollar?—”

Mate.

The word clanged through me like a bell, but I was quick to pinch the clapper.

With him being her older brother, I could see Rían selling her the fairy tale of fated mates to explain his drive to find me. A practical soul like her might not fully invest in the story, but she clearly believed the high points if she accepted me—a total stranger—as her sister at face value.

“Thank you for breakfast, Ana. I must go die of embarrassment now.” Rían caught Goldie around the middle and tossed her over his shoulder. “And I’m taking this with me.”

Careful not to bump his head on the ceiling fan, he ducked out the front door, leaving us alone.

“I want to be Goldie when I grow up.” I flipped the card between my fingers. “She’s got it all figured out.”

“Do you believe what she said about him?”

“Yeah.” I considered his quick exit. “I think I do.”

“Next question.”

“Hmm?”

Hand drifting to her stomach, she patted it. “If you and Rían don’t work out, will you marry me?”

Laughter spluttered out of me, and I rose to clear off the table, but she beat me to it.

“That wasn’t ano,” she pointed out when I didn’t strike down her proposal, “but Rían does seem nice.” Her snicker sent me into a fit of giggles. “For a giraffe.”

twelve

To test the length of my invisible leash, I loaned Sloane a set of my scrubs then I dressed for work like this was any other day. I expected to be met at the door with an escort, maybe by Rían himself, but no one was there. Not as far as I could tell, anyway.

Aside from the magnolia leaves tumbling down the sidewalk, there was no movement on the street.

Where had the kids gone? To school? Or had Rían sent them on their way to give me privacy?

“This is weird, right?” I might have backed into the house if I hadn’t bumped into Sloane. “It’s so...calm.”

For a town held hostage under shifter occupation, I would expect more sentinels and more...just...more.

Unless, and I was just spitballing here, the only people left in Brentwood were the shifters. Had that many humans taken the bribe to get out of town for a few days until the Walshes settled in? It would certainly explain how chill Rían had been about the line of kids itching to see a wolf shifter.

“Brentwood is always calm,” she countered, “but it’s not usually cut off from the outside world either.”

At the end of my walkway, when no one appeared, I hovered a leg above the sidewalk. “Here we go.”

Slowly, I stepped foot off the property, expecting an alarm to blare or sirens to wail.

“Huh.” I anchored my fists on my hips. “That was anticlimactic.”

“What did you expect to happen?” She crossed the invisible line without blinking. “That you would step on a pile of leaves, a cleverly hidden rope would haul you upside down, and you would dangle from the tree until someone came to cut you free?”

“How should I know?” I spread my hands in a helpless gesture. “This is my first time being kidnapped.”

“Rían isn’t a cartoon villain.” She nudged me ahead of her. “I think you’re safe from ACME props.”

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“Safe isn’t a word I would use lightly at the moment.”

Though, oddly enough, I was coping well with being cut off from my dad and my pack.

Had I been a wolf, able to manifest a pack bond, I might have struggled when that link winked out. But I wasn’t, and I hadn’t, and I was fine. Even Sloane had only popped a few ibuprofen to take the edge off her headache.

“Looks like we’re open for business.” Sloane tipped her head to one side. “The lights are already on.”

“The window has been fixed.” I rushed to inspect it. “I haven’t even filed a claim yet.”

“You can thank Rían for that,” a soft voice drifted from the side yard. “He replaced it himself.”

“Any idea who broke it?” Sloane scanned the landscaping for the rock, which had been returned to its spot, as one of the women from last night came into view. “Our side or yours?”

The dividing line her words had drawn caused the woman to clam up tighter than a dog after hearing drop it.

“Oh. Hey.” I crossed to the chain link fence. “We met last night.” I trawled my memory. “Jessica?”

“Close.” A hesitant smile spread across her face. “Jess.”

The name clicked the rest into place. “You’re the vet tech.”

“I am.” Pink stained her cheeks. “I hope it’s okay I’m here.” Her chin drooped to bump her chest. “I know you said for one night, last night, but it’s not like I’ve got anywhere to be.”

“You’re trapped too,” I realized, kicking myself for not considering how this impacted everyone else.

“No.” Her head jerked up, and her eyes sprang wide. “I’m not—” She tugged on her collar. “I mean that I don’t have a job lined up in Brentwood yet, and my stuff hasn’t arrived for my new apartment. I still had the keys to GSG, so I thought I would make myself useful.”

“You’re moving here?”

“Yeah.” A hint of pride warmed her voice. “Rían requested me specifically.”

“He uprooted you from your life...” I mentally swatted the buzzing in my head, “...forme?”

“Yes?” She shrank back. “I thought you knew?”

The urge to touch her hand, just a brief reassurance, the way shifters soothed one another, floored me. I hadn’t experienced that tug in my gut in... I wasn’t sure I ever had. I learned to avoid my peers so young, I hadn’t adopted those animalistic bonding habits. Without a wolf craving reaffirmation from packmates, I hadn’t sought that comfort for myself either. Except for the occasional baking spree to force proximity, I had learned to do without it.

For it to sneak up was unsettling, and I curled my fingers into my palm to keep my hands to myself.

A stranger would be even more put off than my own pack if I touched her.

“I didn’t know,” I said, gentling my tone, “but thanks for telling me.”

“You’re welcome?”

Sloane elbowed me in the ribs, her eyebrows winging higher, but her facial gymnastics confused me.

“I appreciate you coming in, Jess.” I looked at Sloane to see if I guessed right. “Yesterday was chaotic. I’m glad someone with your background was here in case the animals reacted badly to the scents of new predators in their midst. They’re used to wolves, well, me, but you can’t predict how even small changes in their environment will affect them when they’re already in a foreign place.”

“Yes,” she gusted out, relief sagging her frame.

“I’m going to do my morning walk-through.” I backed up a step. “See you in there.”

“Um, Ana?” She worried the edge of her thumbnail. “I think I maybe heard a Sartori sentinel threw the rock and broke the window. Her blood was on it when Rían returned it to the yard. She must have cut herself on its edge.”

As soon as she resumed her duties, whatever task she had assigned herself, I exhaled through my teeth.

“Do you think Zoe did it?” I would have laughed at the notion yesterday, but today I was feeling more open-minded, and Sloane had scented her blood on the projectile.

“Threw the rock and cut herself in the process?”

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“Or cut herself on purpose to cover her tracks.”

“And give her a reason to call Dad, who sent Mercer, yanking me out of town in the nick of time.” Under the cover of three strikes, you’re out, I was safely hustled onto Sartori territory and away from the danger the pack helped manufacture. “This is all so messed up, and now Jess...”

“What’s wrong?” Sloane cocked her head, wolflike, studying me. “You don’t want her here?”

“Rían uprooted these people for my benefit. Like I’m a sure thing.”

A snort ripped out of her, and she slapped a hand over her face. “Pollen allergy.”

“Liar.” I pivoted toward the front door. “But seriously.”

“Are we to the point in our friendship where I can tease you about sex?”

“You’re the only friend I’ve got,” I said baldly, “so I would say yes.”

“Just checking.” She bounded next to me. “I’m your friend.”

“We just established that, yes.” Wariness prickled my nape. “What am I missing?”

“I’m your best friend.”

“You’re my only friend.” I relaxed as a silly grin swept over her face. “So, yes?”

“Cool. Cool.” She quit bouncing like an excited puppy. “It’s just that I’ve never had a best friend.”

“Me neither.” That same stupid urge struck me, and I flung myself at her. “Thank you.”

“Oof.”

Mortification stung my cheeks, and I leapt back, hands in the air. “I am sorry.”

“Never apologize for hugs.” She slung her arms around me, locking me against her. “Bestie.”

Tears pricked my eyes, blurring everything, and I wanted to believe this was real so badly.

But the wounded parts of me whispered Sloane was only being nice because it was her job. That she had followed me out of a sense of duty to my father. That she didn’t care one way or another about me.

Fear that she would exploit this weakness of mine, this miserable loneliness, left me tasting bile.

But even if this was pretend, Sloane was putting more effort in than anyone else ever had.

She would deserve a promotion, and maybe an Oscar.

Before my glum outlook spoiled our moment, Sloane started jumping and whooping and spinning us.

I let it happen to me, unsure if I wanted to join in, but the impact must have shaken those grim thoughts out of my head. The next thing I knew, we were crashing into the side of the house. We bounced off, not letting go, giggling like children.

From the sidewalk, a woman called, “Is this a team building exercise?”

The woman beside her grinned at us. “Or a best friend mosh pit?”

Sloane and I broke apart, my brain still bouncing in my skull, and I almost face-planted in front of the newcomers.

“The second one,” Sloane told them, giddy from the fun. “Rochele and Mindy, right?”

“The dog trainers,” I supplied, impressed I remembered them too. “What brings you by this morning?”

“We’re in a group chat with Jess. She mentioned volunteering here today, and we thought we would ask if we could pitch in too.” Mindy linked her hands behind her back. “We’re all waiting on furniture, so our apartments are white walls and blow-up mattresses. Frankly, it’s depressing. Very mental institution.”

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“Mindy.” Rochele kicked her in the ankle. “What she means is, we could use the fresh air.”

The word volunteering stuck between my teeth like a bite of tough steak.

It smacked of charity, and having been called a charity case one too many times, usually when a boy was involved, it was triggering.

“That would be great.” Sloane pinched the back of my arm. “Go on in.”

As soon as they entered GSG, she tugged me back around to the side fence. She whistled loud enough to wake the dead then waved Jess over when she popped her head out of the run she had been cleaning.

“Follow my lead,” she whispered to me. “Hey, Jess, can you hold down the fort for a little bit?”

“Oh.” Her shoulders bowed inward until I worried they would meet in the middle. “Sure.”

“Mindy and Rochele are here.” I noticed the skin tightening around her eyes. “Can you manage them?”

That same urge to comfort her itched the skin of my palm, but I balled my hands into fists at my sides.

“Me?” She whipped her head toward the door. “I can try?”

The way her sentences all tipped up at the end toward a question reminded me so much of Sloane when she worked in the kennel and lost the self-confidence she wore as a sentinel. And, it seemed, as a friend.

“Here.” I thumbed one of the business cards I was never without, wrote my number on it, then groaned. “I was going to say you could call if you run into any problems, but I forgot phones aren’t working.”

“Can I still have it?” Had it been dipped in gold, she couldn’t have coveted it more. “For later?”

“Yeah.” I handed it over. “Of course.”

“We’re going to visit Fayne,” Sloane told her, which was news to me. “We’ll be back soon.”

With a dip of her chin, Jess returned to cleaning the runs, and I let Sloane haul me onto the sidewalk.

Curious what had lit a fire under her, I stumbled after her. “Are you going to let me in on the plan?”

“You want answers, and Fayne’s got them.”

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable leaving three strangers unsupervised with my animals.”

“They’re qualified, and we won’t be gone long. Besides, Rían has gone through too much trouble to get this chance with you to let anyone in his clan ruin it for him.”

“You just had to mention theRword.” I exhaled slowly. “We don’t even know where

to find Fayne.”

“I can help with that.”

A low groan poured out of me, and I glanced over my shoulder to find Rían jogging to catch up to us.

“Are you stalking me?” I linked arms with Sloane like he might snatch me off the street and toss me into an idling black van. “And who said you could listen in on our conversation?”

“Stalking implies malicious intent,” he said, which wasn’t an answer.

“What are your intentions?”

“To get to know you.” He fell in step with me. “To let you get to know me.”

“And you think following her,” Sloane said, “eavesdropping on private conversations is the way to go?”

“I just left the clinic.” He lifted a clear plastic bag holding three orange prescription bottles. “I was on my way to see Fayne when I spotted Ana and came to say hello.” He flicked his ear. “I can’t help my hearing, but I shouldn’t have invited myself into your conversation. I’m sorry if you’re feeling...”

Unable to resist the opening, I supplied, “Stalked?”

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“Fine. Yes. I’m an evil stalker who stalks beautiful women. Happy?”

“Not really, no.” I stared up and up at him. “No one feels good about learning their kidnapper is evil.”

“Or that he’ll go after any beautiful woman,” Sloane added, a smile threatening to overtake her.

“I knew I was rusty with the whole flirting thing, but I’m embarrassing myself here.” He pointed to a blue cottage on the corner, one with a carpet of wildflowers instead of the usual manicured lawn. “You’ll find Fayne there.” He offered me the bag. “Would you mind bringing this to her?”

Our fingers brushed, and a tingle I blamed on static electricity shot down my arm. “You’re not coming?”

“I’ve intruded on your morning enough.” He stared where our skin touched. “See you later, maybe?”

“Yeah.” I broke contact first, almost dropping the pills in the process. “Maybe.”

Walking backward, he grinned at me, his peculiar eyes almost glowing.

A tug on my arm got me moving again, and Sloane and I went to visit Fayne.

And hopefully get answers.

thirteen

Knuckles poised to knock, I almost punched Fayne in the face when she swung open the door.

“Oh.” She cut her eyes left to right. “Good.” She stepped back, waving us in. “I thought you were Rían.”

“We bumped into him outside.” I shook the bag at her. “He sent us ahead with these.”

“I appreciate the delivery service.” She scooped up her meds. “And sparing me from another lecture.”

Turquoise and white furniture with occasional pops of mustard yellow in the pillows made the space feel artsy and fresh. Bright. Thrown together in the effortless manner of people born with great natural style.

“Sit.” She indicated a love seat with plenty of room for two. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Plopping down next to Sloane, I forced myself to recall my manners. “Do you feel up to talking?”

“This has been a long time coming.” She sank into an armchair across from us. “Ask your questions.”

“How long have you lived here?” I hadn’t meant to lead with that, but curiosity got the better of me. “Jess mentioned she’s still waiting on her furniture to arrive. Mindy and Rochele are too. But you’ve settled in nicely.” A perk of seniority, perhaps. “Your home is lovely, by the way.”

“Thank you, but I can’t take credit for the décor. Rían made a cash offer on this house and his home. He bought them as is, from the wreaths on the doors to the furniture to the spoons in the drawers. We’ve only been in town for two days, and we’ve been cautious to keep out of Sartori’s crosshairs while we get our people settled into their apartments and rentals. It’s taken some planning, and some bribes, but four square blocks on this side of town will act as our new clan home. For the time being.”

Four square blocks? Sheesh. How had I been so oblivious as to miss a mass exodus of townsfolk?

Then again, between the break-in, the mysterious Myrtle, and the “vampire” in the potting shed, it had been a hectic few days for me. “Does that mean only the residential side of Brentwood is warded?”

“The entire town is under Walsh protection, but we’re accommodating humans who own businesses or work in town to make this transition as seamless for them as possible. That means spreading our manpower thin until we settle things with Sartori. So, for the time being, yes, only the clan home, which is a human-free zone, is on total lockdown.”

That included GSG. The Victorian, though zoned for commercial use, had been built in a residential area. To keep up my mortgage payments, I would have to convince Rían to lift the restricted access zone soon.

“Why did you risk your life getting to me?” I meshed my fingers on my lap. “What was so important?”

“There are two things I must tell you to give you context.” She lifted a finger. “Rían is my grandson, and I would do anything for him.” A second joined the first. “Rían is also my magnus.” She rotated her wrist in a circle. “What wolves would call their alpha.”

“That explains why he can order people to uproot their lives and follow him on a whim.” I huffed a laugh that came out sharp. “I’m surprised he didn’t lead with that.”

“Rían doesn’t flaunt his power.”

That tidbit cast the bowing incident in a whole new light. They had been showing him respect. Not me.

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“The alphas I’ve met want to make sure everyone knows that’s who and what they are.”

“Sartori is one of those alphas, and you’ve done everything in your power to get out from under his thumb.” Her eyes filled with things that didn’t make it out of her mouth. “Knowing Rían, he didn’t want to spook you. He wants to get to know you, and you him, without the pressure of his title.”

Pity. That was pity in her tone. Pity that I had been raised in a bubble.

“You make it sound like Dad is the bad guy here, when he’s only ever protected me.”

“Then why didn’t you put up a fight?” Fayne stared into her lap. “Why did you come with us that night?” She toyed with the label on one of her medications. “You could have leapt from the SUV, screamed for a sentinel, and gotten us all killed before we left Sartori land. But you chose us. You chose escape.”

The truth bomb she dropped on my head detonated in an explosion of confusion and bitterness.

“What was worth risking your life?” I needed my answers, then I needed to get out of here. “Tell me.”

“Carmichael Sartori isn’t your father.”

The earlier percussive blast must have shattered my ability to hear. “What did you say?”

A low growl poured out of Sloane, and she reached for my hand, providing me with an anchor.

“He took you when you were six weeks old.”

“No.” I shot to my feet. “You’re lying.”

“I knew your parents.” An ache throbbed in her voice. “Sartori killed them.”

“He killed her parents?” Sloane’s words scraped like gravel in her throat. “Just to take her?”

I had stood too quickly, and the room was spinning. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t get enough air.

I wanted to run. I wanted to scream. But I couldn’t move. I was frozen to the spot.

“We never stopped searching for you.” Fayne wiped tears off her cheeks. “Rían never gave up hope.”

“How long ago did Rían find her?” Sloane handled the questions while shock paralyzed my tongue. “Why not introduce himself to her like a normal person? Why jump the gun to claiming Brentwood?”

“About a year ago.” Fayne pushed her hair out of her face, directing her answers to me. “He tried to meet you, many times, but Sartori always has guards on you. They wouldn’t let Rían near you, and that was before Sartori realized who he was to you.” She exhaled softly. “Rían wasn’t left with many good options to get close to you, so this is what he chose. To claim a territory where you would be comfortable, where those you think of as your family would be nearby.”

“But it didn’t work out that way.” Sloane stated the obvious.

“Sartori was never going to allow the Walshes to live in peace. Not in this town—yourtown. But this was unclaimed territory. So, he had to get creative. He forged alliances with neighboring packs and clans and created an impenetrable wall around Brentwood. He forbade those new allies from granting permission for us to cross their land to reach the town. He thought that would keep us from you.” Cold light ignited in her eyes. “But he forgot a simple fact.”

As much as I wanted to turn tail and flee, back to my house, to sanity, I couldn’t unroot my feet.

Unfurling her fingers, she summoned a tongue of flame in her palm. “Dragons can fly.”

“Dragons,” Sloane gasped out, her grip on me painful. “The Walshes are dragons?”

The roar. That was what I heard after Fayne was shot. Rían. Good Lord he had been fierce.

“Not all of us. Not even most of us.” She crushed the fire in her hand. “We’re a dying breed.”

“Does that mean...?” Sloane bounced on her cushion. “Is Ana a dragon too?”

No. Not possible. I wasn’t even a wolf. I was nothing.

“I can’t be one,” I rasped, my throat tight and sore like I had been screaming.

“You’re certainly not a wolf.” Fayne rubbed a thumb between her brows. “You’re not a latent either.”

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“Stop.” I slashed a hand through the air, ignoring how it trembled. “Why are you saying these things?”

“Because you asked,” she said simply, “and because they’re true.”

Finally, she had given me a reason I could sink my teeth into, one explaining his determination to find me. “Is that why Rían wants me so badly?” The words cut their way free. “To play brood mare?”

As hard as Dad had held on to the hope I would shift into a wolf, to the point his tough love almost got me killed, Rían could prove equally fanatical in his belief I would sprout wings and scales. Until I let him down too, proving I wasn’t anything special, he might not give up his vision of a scaley ever after with me.

“Come on, Ana.” Sloane tugged me toward the front door. “Let’s get you home.”

Home? I didn’t have one. Not anymore.

“Mind if I come in?” Sloane pounded on my bedroom door. “You’ve been in there for hours.”

The sheet fluttered above my face with every hitching inhale and hiccupping exhale as I hid in bed under the blankets and wished the world outside would just go away. Including Sloane.

“Jess stopped by to check in when we didn’t make it back by closing,” she called through the wood. “She has a plan for getting the pets transferred to Pampered

Pooches in Springvale tomorrow. Just until the sanctions are lifted on the town.” She paused, waiting for an answer, but I was struggling to find one. “We could send her with a master list, let her call the owners and tell them where to pick up their animals.” Some were locals, but most of our clientele drove a few towns over for our services. “I thought she could use the old plumbing-leak excuse for the humans. It’s benign compared to fire, black mold, or asbestos. And it will allow us to open as soon as clients can come and go freely again.”

“Thanks,” I rasped, my throat raw. “That sounds great.”

“What was that?” Metal rattled as she twisted the knob. “I couldn’t hear you.”

The door whined open, but I couldn’t summon the energy to push back the covers.

“Thanks,” I tried again. “That sounds great.”

“Nope.” Floorboards groaned under her feet. “Still couldn’t quite make it out.”

“Thanks.” I strained to hear her next move. “That sounds?—”

“Cannonball.”

She landed across my stomach, knocking the air from my lungs, and I wheezed like a deflating balloon.

“Ouch.” I would have curled into the fetal position, but she was pinning me. “Really ouch.”

The fabric disappeared from my field of vision, leaving Sloane grinning down at me. “Feel better?”

“Ribs,” I whistled through my teeth. “Broken.”

“Rude.” She rolled until she lay beside me. “I’m not that heavy.”

“It’s not your weight.” I sucked in sweet, sweet oxygen. “It was the force of impact that got me.”

A sharp thud rang out from the living room, and I shot upright in bed. “Is someone else here?”

“No.” Sloane had leapt to her feet so fast, I hadn’t seen her move. “It’s just us.”

We held our breaths, straining our ears, but it didn’t happen again.

“Maybe someone knocked on the door?” I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. “Goldie?”

“Stay put.” Sloane, confident as always in her element, didn’t verify that I obeyed. “I’ll check it out.”

Usually, I was content to sit back and be protected, but I felt drawn to investigate for myself.

As soon as she exited the room, I lowered my toes to the cool oak floor. I rose as quietly as my bedsprings allowed before following her. The closer I got to the source of the noise, the colder I felt. Dread, maybe?

“You little rebel,” Sloane murmured, proving I hadn’t been in danger of sneaking up on her.

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“It must have been a one-off.” I walked the living room, checking that no framed photos had fallen. That would have explained the thud. But nothing was missing from its place. “Or maybe an outside noise?”

“Maybe,” she allowed, sounding unconvinced that was the case.

Aiming for the kitchen, I couldn’t hide the rumble in my stomach. “Do you want a snack?—?”

Thump.

I jumped back, certain the sound had come from...under the floor.

“Ana.” Sloane lunged for me. “Get back?—”

The thick tan rug where I had been standing flipped back like a self-folding pancake. As Sloane herded me away, I watched a freaking trapdoor built into my floor—my hundred-year-old oak floors—swing open.

“I scrubbed this place from top to bottom before moving in, and I swear that wasn’t here.”

Which meant it had been added after I was living here.

“We’re getting you out of here.” Sloane herded me toward the kitchen. “We’ll leave through the back.”

“Wait.”

The familiar voice locked us both in place, and we watched as light bloomed, illuminating a small tunnel I had been living above all this time.

And Mercer’s haggard face.

“Anie.” His weathered face crinkled at me. “Thank God you’re all right.”

The relief I probably should have felt at seeing him, at knowing I had a way home, was shattered by the cataclysmic breach of trust he was emerging from. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to save you from these beasts.” He laughed like I was being ridiculous. “Come on, Anie, let’s go.”

A boom shook the floor under my feet, and Mercer growled a curse at someone behind him.

“What was that?” I rushed to the front window. “There’s smoke in the direction of Main Street.”

Not inside the ward, I didn’t think, but down toward the curve leading to Springvale.

“That’s our distraction, and it’s only going to last for so long.” Mercer climbed higher on what must be a ladder, revealing him up to his waist. “We need to get you out of here.”

“Ana?” Sloane, having followed me, watched my back. “What do you want to do?”

“What do you mean what does she want to do?” Mercer barked a laugh. “She wants to

go home.”

“It’s your call.” Sloane cuffed my upper arm. “I’m with you, no matter what you decide.”

Deep down in the pit of my stomach, I knew without asking Mercer that Dad would snatch her away from me. She had defied his orders in letting me choose to come. Even now, with her superior a few yards away, she was giving me the choice that would define the rest of our lives.

Impact rattled the front door to my right, the hinges screaming, and Sloane yanked me away before I got a look at who was responsible. But I knew. Ifelthim.

“Ana,” Rían bellowed through the door. “Are you okay?”

I had no idea how to answer him. I wasn’t okay. Not by a long shot. But I wasn’t sure he could fix that.

“Sloane, get her over here.” Mercer held out his arms. “Bring her to me.”

Teeth grinding, she fought the compulsion to obey him, buying me precious seconds to choose.

Wood splintered as Rían exploded through the door, his eerie eyes settling on me with naked relief. His chest rumbled when he pivoted toward Mercer, but he didn’t advance on him. He flexed and relaxed his hands, preventing them from forming fists, but stood his ground. Next to me.

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I should have felt cornered with his frame blocking the exit, but with him there, I stood my ground too.

“Tell me the truth, Mercer.” I linked hands with Sloane. “Is Carmichael Sartori my father?”

“He raised you.” Mercer darted wary glances at Rían. “Of course he’s your father.”

“Biologically.” I barely choked out the word. “Is he my father?”

“Come with me, and we’ll get this sorted at home. Your dad will answer all of your questions.”

“Except he never does, does he?” I held tight to Sloane. “He talks over and around but never to me.”

Sweat dampened her palms, but she remained beside me, even as tremors shook her inner wolf.

“Answer her,” Rían said quietly, coldly. “Do that, and I’ll forget what I’m seeing.”

“You took Sartori’s daughter,” Mercer snarled. “You’re lucky I only came for the girl.”

“This is my town now.” Rían rolled his shoulders. “And the token that saved your ass last time? That let you come at me as a wolf while I was trapped as a man? It won’t save you now.” He held out a wide hand, as Fayne had earlier, and golden fire bathed

his palm. “Tell her what she wants to know.”

Adrenaline dumped into my veins for no good reason as I stared at him, at his flame, and I couldn’t get a single question out. I had so many, too many, but the roar in my ears was like falling into the ocean, like water was closing over my head, like that hand was the only one strong enough to haul me out and that fire the only thing warm enough to thaw me.

Staring into that glow, I found my voice. “Am I a wolf?”

“The pack has always seen you as one of its own despite?—”

“So, no.” I let myself be mesmerized by the reds and golds. “Am I a latent?”

“Wolf pups can shift at any time, but after puberty it’s rare?—”

“You’re saying I’m not a wolf.” Pain splintered my chest, hurting and yet freeing.
“Then what am I?”

“Your father should be the one to?—”

A flicker of inspiration spiraled my brain down a different path, and I asked, “Who left me this house?”

Sloane angled her head toward me, keeping an eye on Mercer, but a frown gathered across her brow.

“Your aunt,” he rushed out, relieved for an easy answer. “Your mother’s sister.”

“Do you mean my birth mother or the one Dad invented for me with a few letters and bedtime stories?”

“Ana...”

“Or did this aunt I never met, the sister of a mother I don’t remember, ever exist?”

Had the mother who wrote those letters been real? Or had she been invented, a hired author with good penmanship and the ability to say the right things to a child starving for acceptance? Just how many lies had he fed me?

“You have to understand?—”

“How long did it take to dig that tunnel before you turned over the keys?” I wiped my damp cheeks, hating I was crying, but I was unraveling. Everything I thought I knew about myself was being turned on its head. I didn’t know what to believe—who to believe—or even what I wanted to be true. “Or are you going to try and convince me the house came with a giant hole in the floor?”

“Brentwood was open territory when you moved here, which made it safe, but it was bound to be claimed eventually. Potentially by an enemy of the Sartoris. The tunnel was a precaution in case we ever had to extract you.” He gestured to Rían. “Clearly, your father was right to build it.”

Click, click, click went the facts as they snicked into place in my brain.

“He knew someone would come for me one day. That’s why he’s always been so paranoid about where I am, what I’m doing, who I’m with. That’s why he let things spiral out of hand when I couldn’t shift.” Each word cast grim shadows over my childhood, so why did it feel like sunlight was finally piercing through the clouds? “He couldn’t afford to have taken me, to have risked so much, with no payoff.”

“Your father would do anything to keep you safe.”

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“Anything but come for me himself?” I coughed up a bitter laugh. “He knew what the Walshes would tell me, and he didn’t want to face me. He didn’t want to be where you are now, forced to answer questions I wouldn’t have known to ask if not for the Walshes. You’re his right hand, but this is bigger than you. You can’t fix this with a lollipop.”

As my attention drifted away from him, Rían closed his fingers over his flame, extinguishing it.

“The choice is yours.” Rían swung his gaze to mine. “I won’t stop you if you want to go.”

When I inherited this house, and Dad gave me his blessing to move to Brentwood, I thought he had finally released me from my cage. But he had simply replaced the bars with plexiglass. No. This was more like I had been living behind a two-way mirror, so he could always watch me from the other side while I remained blissfully unaware.

“I...” Tears salting my lips, I held his bright gaze. “I don’t know what I want anymore.”

Beside me, Sloane shored up my courage to face the decision ahead of me.

Another boom vibrated through the floor, and Mercer grimaced as he checked his watch.

“I didn’t want to do it this way.” He hauled himself out of the tunnel in one fluid motion. “But you’re not giving me a choice.” He hurled himself toward me, but

Sloane intercepted him, and they went down in a snarling tangle of limbs. “Stand down, girl.”

“Don’t call me girl.” She snapped her teeth at his throat. “And don’t put hands on Ana.”

Balancing on the balls of his feet, Rían was clearly itching to get in on the action. But he remained glued to the same spot, his jaw grinding with the drive to act. His breathing grew choppy, his animal clawing to get out, but he reined himself in. For me.

“Stop.”

Mercer did no such thing, and Sloane couldn’t unless she wanted her throat ripped out.

Nothing human existed in Rían’s voice when he rumbled, “Do you want me to makethem stop?”

“I’ll handle it.”

I might have gotten the snot kicked out of me often when I was younger, but I hadn’t always lost those fights. And taking that many hits had taught me a few things.

Like if you’re born without claws, you can always make your own.

Turning back to the window, I unhooked the chime and slid the chains over my hands, fastening the claw tips often mistaken for charms at the ends of my fingers. I tested them, ensuring the clasps fastened tight over my knuckles.

“Stop,” I said again, watching Mercer for any flicker of hesitation.

When he kept coming for Sloane, when he made it clear his inner wolf wouldn't stop pushing the man in him until they tasted her blood, I got his attention the only way I knew how.

I caught Sloane's eye, and she relented, allowing him to pin her to the floor.

And then I walked up behind him, where he straddled her ribs in anticipation of a killing blow, and threw every ounce of my strength behind raking my claws down his spine. The tips cut deep, bumping over his vertebrae. He bellowed and rolled aside to escape me, landing in a crouch near Sloane's head.

His jaw went slack when he saw it was me—not Rían—who had attacked him.

"Anie?" He swayed as crimson pooled underneath him. "Why...?"

Shoulder braced against the wall, Sloane levered herself back on her feet and inched away from him, her smile for me tinged red with blood from a lucky punch. And a little awe.

Holding up my hand, flexing so my claws glinted, I informed him, "These are silver."

Understanding pinched his features as he grappled with the fact he wasn't healing.

"Those wounds aren't going to clot without help," I continued, a lump in my throat. "Tell my dad I'm not choosing a side—yet—but I'm not leaving Brentwood until he agrees to meet with me. Either he tells me the truth, the whole truth, or I have no reason not to believe what the Walshes are telling me."

And what they had to say...changed everything.

If it was true.

But that was a bigif.

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“All right, Anie.” Mercer staggered to the trapdoor. “I’ll relay your message.”

“Call off the distraction while you’re at it.” The chains tinkled where they bumped together like the chimes they often pretended to be. “There are children living here.”

Without another word, Mercer heaved himself down into the tunnel. He landed with a hard thump, and I didn’t look down before kicking the trapdoor shut above his head. I stood there, a sharp pain radiating through my chest, and knew I would never feel safe here again.

The sense of home, of comfort, of freedom, had been stolen from me.

A split-second later, before my pity party got rocking, Sloane crashed into me, hugging me tight.

“That was badass.” She whooped in my ear. “You are a badass.”

Tacky blood congealing between my fingers said otherwise, but I couldn’t help smiling back. “Thanks.”

“She’s right.” Rían’s cheeks were ruddy. “That was...”

“Hot,” Sloane supplied, pulling back to wink at me. “You can say it.”

Rían dragged a hand over his mouth to wipe away whatever else he might have said with a groan.

“Thank you.” I locked gazes with him. “For letting me handle that my way.”

“Anything for you,” he said so softly I wasn’t sure he meant for me to hear.

Withdrawing from Sloane, I began unfastening the latches on my claws. I had to clean them soon, before the blood dried in the cracks and forced me to scrub them with a toothbrush when a quick soak in water hot enough to boil away the gory bits usually did the trick.

Testing the edges of the trapdoor with her toe, Sloane asked, “What do we do now?”

“Pack an overnight bag, ladies.” Rían made it a gentle order. “You’re staying with me tonight.”

“That’s her call.” Sloane interrupted her inspection. “Not yours.”

“It’s not safe for my people to leave this open and unguarded when the tunnel runs deep enough to allow passage beneath the wards. I’ll send Bowie down to explore it for any other branches into homes or businesses in town, and then we can discuss our next steps.” He lifted his hands in a peacekeeping gesture. “You won’t be alone in a strange man’s house. I’m Marigold’s guardian. She lives with me. Fayne has her own room too, for visits. She could stay over, if you want.”

“I don’t want to impose on anyone else.” I checked with Sloane. “Are you good staying there?”

“After what I just saw, yeah, I’m confident you can keep me safe from any fire-breathing giraffes.”

“Fire-breathing...” Rían ducked his head, rubbing his nape. “I’ll never live down the giraffe thing.”

“Nope,” Sloane said cheerfully then brushed past me. “Let’s grab our stuff.”

“You go ahead.” I gestured to her face. “You should probably wash up too.”

Shifter kids grew up around violence, but that didn’t mean we had to expose them to more of it.

“Mind if I borrow a few things?” She plucked at her scrub top. “Just until I can do laundry?”

“Help yourself.” I headed for the kitchen. “There’s a bag you can use in the closet too.”

While she rooted through my things for clothes to fit her shorter, more muscular frame, I grabbed a retired mixing bowl and filled it with scalding water and an antiseptic solution. I put my claws in and gave them a swirl with my hand, not minding the temperature. Heat had never bothered me. I had always chalked it up to being a shifter thing, and maybe it was, just not a wolfshifter thing.

A warm presence moved behind me, and I knew without looking over my shoulder it was Rían.

“A dragon, huh?” I watched the water pinken. “Do you blow fire or only summon it?”

“A little of both.” He leaned his hip against the counter. “I’m happy to give a demonstration.”

“You mean shift.” I craned my head toward him. “I...” I continued stirring. “I don’t think I’m ready for that.” I braced my hands on the sink. “Do you really believe...?” I scoffed at myself, at my hope. “So what if I’m a dragon? What does it change?”

Nothing. You heard Mercer. I would have shifted by now if I could, but I can't because I'm a latent. Sartori or Walsh doesn't matter, that's all I'll ever be."

“Mercer said wolf pups.”

A pang struck me dead center, a longing so sharp it cut deeper than my claws could ever dream.

“What are you saying?”

“Dragons can’t shift without help the first time. Fayne says it’s evolution. That there are so few of us left, if a child is separated from the clan, it can pass as human. Only those within the clan, those who are safe and protected by their kin, will fledge.” He scratched his stubbled cheek with a finger. “Fayne guided me through my first shift. Most everyone else too. Females tend to fly within four to six weeks after they get their wings. Males require more time. About eight to twelve weeks. Sometimes longer.”

Curious despite myself, I dried off my hands. “How long did it take you?”

“I required private lessons for an entire year to get in the air.”

“A year?”

“Say it louder why don’t you?” His wince confirmed he was telling the truth. “I’m sure there are one or two people left who don’t know I was a total klutz who broke a wing twice—twice—in crash landings.”

“I didn’t mean to poke a sore spot.” I twisted my towel in my hands. “It sucks to be left behind by your peers.”

“I can’t imagine what you must have gone through.” He slid his hand closer to mine, curled his fingers in, then withdrew, tucking his hands into his pockets. “How alone you must have felt.”

How alone I still feel I thought but didn’t say.

“Ready to go?” Sloane walked in with a bag slung over each shoulder. “I packed for both of us.”

“Thanks.” I turned away from Rían. “I appreciate it.”

“Least I could do since you’re sharing with me.”

Untangling the silver chains, I inspected the claws then returned them to the window to dry. “Rían?”

“I hope you don’t mind.” He glanced up from his phone. “I texted Marigold.”

“Why would I?” I stepped over the shattered door onto the walkway. “It’s her house too.”

“Because she might have mistaken my joke about throwing a slumber party tonight with you and Sloane to mean an actual slumber party.” He ruffled his hair. “I hope you like getting pedicures.” He toed off his shoe and wiggled his toes, flashing bright-pink nails that resembled the same shade Myrtle—er, Fayne—wore. “She’s very into providing self-care services.” He slid his shoe back on. “She’ll even wave the fee on a basic package for first-time customers.”

“Self-care,” I had to admit, “sounds good right about now.”

As much as my heart ached from the brutal hits it had taken, I could go for a distraction until I heard whether Dad would honor my terms. Alphas didn’t take

kindly to ultimatums, but this was my life. I wanted answers. I deserved them.

And if the Walshes were telling the truth? If I really had my own wings?

Then I wanted to learn how to spread them and fly.