



Beckett's Fate (Silver Falls Shifters #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She sought independence... but fate had other plans. Can she risk her heart to embrace love?

Irene Blakiston arrives in Silver Falls pretending to be a hiker, her true purpose hidden: to find a legendary silver treasure that could secure a future for her pack. The last thing she expects is to cross paths with Beckett Grey, the town's enigmatic sheriff and alpha wolf-shifter whose piercing gaze sees right through her facade.

Beckett senses something unusual about the captivating newcomer. His protective instincts awaken, and she stirs feelings he thought he'd never experience. Recognizing her as his fated mate, he's determined to uncover her secrets.

When Irene is attacked while hunting for the treasure, Beckett refuses to let her face the dangers alone. Forced to trust each other, they journey deep into the wilderness, uncovering not only the hidden treasure but also secrets that bind their pasts. As they navigate the treacherous quest, their connection intensifies, igniting a passion neither can resist.

With hunters closing in, Irene must choose between her duty to her pack and the profound bond she shares with Beckett. Can they protect their people and embrace the love that destiny has woven, or will their secrets destroy their chance at happiness?

Beckett's Fate is the enthralling second book in the Silver Falls Shifter series, a tale of courage and destiny. Lose yourself in a world of resilient heroines, powerful alphas, and a journey where love and fate collide.

Total Pages (Source): 19

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BECK

Seven Years Ago

Somewhere in the Middle East

The oppressive heat of the desert wrapped around Beckett Grey like a vice, the arid wind doing little to alleviate the relentless sun beating down on the parched earth. The mission had brought his Delta Force team deep into the Middle East—coordinates unmarked on any map, a land both desolate and deadly.

Beck crouched low behind a crumbling stone wall, his M4 carbine resting steady against his shoulder. His sharp gaze swept across the expanse of the village sprawled below, the jumble of sunbaked buildings casting long shadows in the fading twilight. His wolf senses—suppressed but never gone—itched beneath his skin, whispering warnings he didn't need his training to interpret.

“Target confirmed,” whispered Sergeant Lopez over the comms, his voice crackling through Beck's earpiece. “Second building on the right. Movement in the northeast corner. Looks like they're arming up.”

Beck's jaw tightened. They had intel that the high-value target—a terrorist leader known only as the Viper—was holed up here, surrounded by loyal fighters and a stockpile of weapons that could destabilize an entire region. They'd been tracking him for months, the trail always cold until now.

“Eyes on the prize,” Beck murmured, his voice calm but commanding. “Alpha team, hold position. Bravo, take the east flank. I’ll lead entry.”

A chorus of acknowledgments followed, his men trusting his word as absolute. Beck checked his watch. Twelve minutes until the village guard shift changed—just enough time to infiltrate, neutralize, and extract. Quick and clean.

Or as clean as things got out here.

He gave the signal, and the team moved like wraiths, shadows slipping between crumbling alleys and stacks of old crates. Beck’s wolf bristled, his senses hyperaware of the faint scent of sweat and gun oil on the wind, the distant shuffle of boots on stone. It was always like this before the action—a dance between his human precision and the primal instincts of his animal side.

“Clear,” came Lopez’s voice again, confirming the perimeter was secure.

Beck raised a fist, signaling his team to hold. He peered through his scope, catching sight of the target’s silhouette in a dimly lit room. The Viper paced with restless energy, gesturing sharply to a group of armed men. His voice carried faintly through the cracked window—foreign, furious, unmistakably dangerous.

“Bravo, set your charges,” Beck ordered. “Make it loud.”

A flash of white teeth split his face—a predator’s grin. The loud approach would rattle the guards, drive them straight into the kill zone. Chaos was a language Beck spoke fluently.

Seconds later, the sharp crack of an explosion split the desert air, a plume of dust and debris spiraling skyward. The Viper’s men scrambled, shouting as they ran to assess the breach.

Beck and his team surged forward.

The next moments were a blur of precision and violence. Beck breached the door with a single, powerful kick, his carbine barking as he dropped two guards before they could raise their weapons. His movements were fluid, each step calculated. A third man lunged at him, and Beck met him with a blow to the temple, sending the attacker crumpling to the floor.

“Commander, left flank!” Lopez called out.

Beck spun, raising his weapon just in time to fire a single, silencing shot into another combatant. His team poured into the room behind him, the sounds of controlled and suppressed gunfire blending with shouted commands. Dust and gunpowder choked the air, but Beck’s focus never wavered.

His eyes locked on the target—the Viper, frozen in place with a pistol half-drawn. For a split second, the room went still, the chaos receding into the background.

“End of the line,” Beck said coldly, his finger tightening on the trigger.

The Viper sneered, raising his weapon in defiance. Beck didn’t give him the chance to fire. A single shot rang out, and the Viper crumpled to the floor, the fight draining from his body in an instant as his blood stained the ground beneath him.

“Target neutralized,” Beck said into his comm, his voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through him. “Alpha, Bravo—status report.”

“All clear, Commander,” Lopez confirmed.

The team regrouped outside the estate, their extraction vehicle rumbling up the dusty road under the cover of the encroaching night. Beck stood watch as his men loaded

up, scanning the horizon for any signs of movement. His wolf stirred again beneath his skin, its restless energy not yet sated.

This was the life he'd chosen—danger, duty, and the constant pull of the hunt. But even as the desert stretched out before him, Beck couldn't shake the faint, lingering sense that something else—something deeper—awaited him beyond the battlefield.

With a final glance at the horizon, Beck climbed into the vehicle, the shadows of the past already beginning to close in.

Two Years Ago

The steady hum of the transport plane filled Beck's ears, blending with the rhythmic thrum of his pulse. The team was in transit, heading back to base after another mission in a string of brutal assignments. The kind that left you questioning the thin line between duty and survival.

Beck leaned against the cold metal wall of the plane, his sharp blue eyes scanning the faces of his teammates. They were relaxed, their banter easy as they swapped stories to kill the hours. He envied their ability to decompress. For him, there was no such thing.

He reached into the pocket of his tactical vest and pulled out the envelope that had been burning a hole there since it arrived. It had been handed to him back at the forward operating base, the familiar handwriting stopping him cold.

His cousin. Desmond.

Beck stared at the name on the front for a long moment before finally tearing it open. The faint scent of pine and pack hit him immediately, stirring the wolf that always lingered just beneath his human surface. He unfolded the letter, his black hair falling

over his forehead as his eyes traced the hurried words.

Beck,

I don't know how else to say this, so I'll just get to the point. Dad's dying. The doctors say there's nothing they can do. It's a matter of weeks now, maybe less.

The pack is in chaos. They've been barely holding together, but without a strong alpha, I don't know how much longer that will last. You know what this means. You were always meant to take Dad's place. Not me. You.

I've tried to step up, but I'm not you, Beck. The pack doesn't follow me the way they followed Dad. He keeps asking for you, Beck. Whatever happened between you two, he wants to make it right. You need to come back. Silver Falls needs you.

I know you're out there saving the world or whatever, but this is our family, our people. If there's anything left of the wolf who used to care about that, come home.

Des

Beck closed his eyes, the words hitting harder than any enemy fire he'd faced in the field. His uncle—the alpha of the Silver Falls pack—was dying. The man who had raised him like a second father, and the one he'd walked away from when the burden of responsibility became too much.

A pang of guilt twisted in his gut. He'd thought leaving the pack, the expectations, the politics, would make his life simpler. But the wolf in him had never stopped feeling the pull of home. Of his pack.

"Bad news, Commander?" came a voice beside him. Lopez, his second-in-command, leaned over with a look of concern.

Beck folded the letter and shoved it back into his pocket, his jaw tightening. “Something like that.”

Lopez didn’t push, sensing the shift in Beck’s mood. He returned to his seat, but Beck could feel the letter burning him like a brand.

His thoughts churned. He couldn’t just walk away from his team, his mission. They were in the middle of operations that required precision, leadership, and focus. Yet the part of him that was more wolf than man growled in protest. Pack came first. Always.

The plane jolted as they hit turbulence, but Beck barely noticed. He was already thousands of miles away, picturing the sprawling forests of Silver Falls, the familiar howl of the pack carried on the wind. He thought of Desmond, struggling to hold everything together. And his uncle, the man who had shaped him into the wolf he was today, lying on his deathbed.

Beck clenched his fists, the decision weighing heavy. Duty had always defined him—whether it was to his team or his pack. But this? This was different. This was blood.

As the plane began its descent, Beck stared out the window at the endless desert below, knowing the call to return home wasn’t just a request. It was an order. One he couldn’t ignore.

“Lopez,” he said, his voice rough.

His second looked up from across the aisle. “What’s up?”

“My enlistment is up in a month. Once we’re back on base, I need to let them know I won’t be re-upping.”

Lopez's eyebrows shot up. "You're quitting? I never thought I'd live to see that day. Everything okay?"

Beck nodded tightly, though his gaze remained distant. "It's family."

Lopez didn't ask more. Beck knew he wouldn't. Trust was built into their bond, just like the bond of the pack he'd left behind.

The wolf inside him stirred again, restless and eager. Silver Falls was calling, and this time, there was no running from it.

Present Day

The morning air in Silver Falls was crisp and clean, carrying the faint tang of pine and damp earth. Beck stood at the edge of the forest, where the pack's land stretched endlessly before him—a sanctuary of untamed wilderness. He had already been up for hours, the duties of being sheriff stirring him awake before dawn. But now, with the first hints of sunlight piercing through the treetops, it was time to let go.

To run. To feel alive.

He shrugged off his shirt, the cool air teasing across his bare skin as he toed off his boots and shed the rest of his clothing. He folded them neatly and set them inside one of the containers strewn throughout their territory for just that purpose. The wolf inside him stirred, eager and impatient, clawing for release. A deep breath steadied him, and then, with practiced ease, he let the shift take over.

His body tensed, muscles rippling as the swirling mist encompassed him—lightning, thunder and shards of color all resulting in his wolf coming forward with a rush of primal energy. The familiar burn of transformation was fleeting, replaced by the exhilaration of the wolf's power taking hold. When it was over, Beck stood on four

legs, his sleek black fur blending into the shadows. His eyes caught the glimmer of sunlight filtering through the trees, his senses alive with the forest's symphony.

Without hesitation, he surged forward, paws digging into the soft earth as he raced into the woods. The freedom of the run was intoxicating, a rare escape from the weight of his responsibilities. The forest blurred around him, the wind rushing past his ears as his wolf reveled in the primal joy of movement.

Here, he wasn't the sheriff of Silver Falls or the alpha of the pack. He wasn't the man burdened with decisions, laws, and the delicate balance of peace in a town brimming with shifters and secrets. Here, he was simply a wolf—wild, unrestrained, and utterly free.

Beck's run took him through familiar trails, his paws instinctively finding paths he had walked most of his life. The scents of the forest filled his nose—pine resin, damp moss, the faint trace of deer nearby. His ears twitched at the rustle of leaves, the flutter of wings overhead. Everything felt sharper, more alive in this form.

He slowed as he reached a ridge that overlooked the valley, the town of Silver Falls nestled below like a hidden gem among the trees. From here, he could see the sleepy streets, the rooftops of buildings just beginning to catch the light of the rising sun. His wolf huffed softly, the sound almost like a sigh.

This was his home now. For better or worse, he had returned.

As the sheriff, he had a duty to protect this place, to ensure its safety not just for the humans who might venture to visit here, but for the shifters who called it their home. It had been that way for more than a century. The balance was fragile, and the people of Silver Falls trusted Beck to maintain and protect it.

But for now, at least, the town was quiet. The wolf within him could sense it—the

peace of the morning, the stillness before the day began. Beck let himself soak in the moment, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat grounding him.

He turned and began the run back, his pace easy but deliberate, savoring the simple joy of running free. By the time he reached the clearing where his clothes waited, the sun had climbed higher, its warmth cutting through the lingering chill. Beck shifted back, the wolf retreating as the man resumed his form. The transformation left him breathless, his skin tingling as he stood under the open sky.

Dressing quickly, he let his senses linger on the forest for a moment longer before turning toward his SUV. Responsibility waited for him back in Silver Falls—laws to enforce, people to protect, and the ever-present undercurrent of pack and clan politics to navigate. But after the run, he felt ready. Grounded. Alive.

He strode toward his truck, the demands of the day ahead already settling on his shoulders. But deep down, the wolf inside him remained steady and strong, a reminder of the wild freedom that would always be waiting for him in the woods.

IRENE

The jagged peaks of the Superstition Mountains loomed high above the small village Irene Blakiston called home. There were no permanent buildings per se, but the pack had set up semi-permanent yurts and had installed the infrastructure to give them running water and sanitation, as well as a meeting hall of sorts.

Beneath the fading light of the setting sun, she sat on a boulder at the edge of the clearing, a map spread across her lap. The tattered parchment was a mess of faded lines and cryptic notes—clues to the legendary Lost Dutchman’s mine. But her green eyes were fixed on a different piece of paper. A newer map, its edges crumpled from time and marked with carefully drawn notations and a single, tantalizing word: Silver Falls . It was the handwriting of her ancestor, Isaiah Blakiston.

“Irene!” A sharp voice snapped her out of her thoughts.

Irene looked up as Sophie strode into the clearing, her blonde hair catching the last rays of sunlight. Sophie was the pack’s unofficial second-in-command, her sharp instincts and sharper tongue keeping everyone in line.

“What is it, Sophie?” Irene asked, folding the map before the other woman could get a good look.

Sophie crossed her arms, arching a brow. “The others are waiting. You said you had news.”

Irene stood, brushing dirt off her jeans. “I do.” Her tone carried enough of an edge to draw a flicker of curiosity from Sophie’s otherwise skeptical expression.

The two women made their way to the heart of the camp, where the rest of their pack had gathered around the fire. Five women, each with her own scars and stories, each bound by the unspoken bond of survival. The mingling scents of smoke, pine, and she-wolf filled the air.

Irene stepped into the circle, her heart pounding. She’d thought long and hard about this, but now that the moment had come, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was making the right call.

“I’ve found something,” she began, holding up the map she’d folded moments before. “A new lead. A better one.”

The women exchanged glances, their expressions ranging from cautious curiosity to outright skepticism.

Sophie broke the silence first. “Better than the ones we’ve been following? That’s a bold claim.”

“It is,” Irene agreed, her eyes steady as she met Sophie’s gaze. “But the Dutchman’s mine has been a dead end for years. We, and thousands of others, have combed these mountains, followed every clue, and come up empty-handed every time.”

“That’s because we’re close,” Gwen interjected, her tone defensive. “You can’t just give up now.”

“I’m not giving up,” Irene said firmly. “But I’ve found something more promising. I was looking in some family mementos—things left to me by my ancestors. There are clues to a cache of silver hidden in Colorado, up near Silver Falls. The research is

solid—better than anything we’ve ever had from the Dutchman. If we find it, it could be the answer we’ve been looking for. Enough to secure all of us, to give us real safety.”

“You’re really going to go through with this?” asked Gwen.

“I have to,” Irene replied firmly. “Don’t you see? If this silver is real, and I believe it is,” she said gently shaking the map, “it could change everything. We wouldn’t have to scrape by anymore. We’d have resources. Safety.”

Sophie snorted, shaking her head. “And you think it’s worth walking into a town full of shifters? A town where the sheriff is the alpha of the local wolf pack? If they figure out what you are, what you’re doing, they’ll never let you leave.”

“I know the risks,” Irene said, her voice calm but unyielding. “That’s why I’m going alone and taking precautions.” She reached into her jacket pocket, pulling out a small vial filled with an amber-colored liquid. “This will mask my scent. As far as anyone in Silver Falls is concerned, I’m just a visiting human there to hike in the wilderness.”

The pack exchanged uneasy glances. Gwen, always the skeptic, scoffed. “You trust that stuff? What if it doesn’t work?”

“It will work,” Irene said, meeting her gaze with quiet confidence. “I’ve tested it. And I’ll be careful.”

“You better be,” Sophie interjected. “Because if you’re caught, it won’t just be you who pays the price. It’ll be all of us.”

“I would never betray you,” Irene said, her voice fierce. “You’re my family. But this is our best chance, and I’m not going to sit here and let fear hold us back.”

There was an undeniable disquiet among those in the circle, but no one spoke against her. Finally, Sophie sighed, stepping closer to place a hand on Irene's shoulder.

"Don't get yourself into trouble, okay?"

"I'll do my best," Irene said with a small smile, though her heart was heavy with the weight of their trust. She pocketed the vial and turned toward the shadows of the forest contemplating her journey to Silver Falls.

Later that night, Irene sat alone by the fire, the camp quiet save for the occasional rustle of the wind. Her packmates had gone to their yurts, leaving her to her thoughts.

She unfolded the map again, tracing her fingers over the carefully marked routes and notes. Silver Falls. The name pulsed in her mind, a symbol of hope and danger in equal measure.

"You're really going through with this?" Sophie's voice startled her.

Irene looked up to see the black-haired wolf standing at the edge of the firelight, arms crossed. She hadn't heard her approach—a testament to Sophie's skill.

"I am," Irene said simply.

Sophie sat down across from her, studying her with an intensity that made Irene shift under her gaze. "You're braver than I'd be," she admitted. "Or maybe just crazier."

"Probably both," Irene said with a small laugh. "But it's not just about the silver. It's about something more. A future. A real future."

Sophie nodded slowly. "Then I hope you find it."

The two women sat in silence for a moment, the fire crackling between them. When Sophie finally stood, she placed a hand on Irene's shoulder.

"Take care of yourself out there."

"I will," Irene promised.

As Sophie disappeared into the shadows, Irene stared into the fire, the flames reflecting in her eyes. Tomorrow, she would leave the only home she had known for years, stepping into the unknown with nothing but her wits and her will. Danger loomed ahead, but so did possibility.

She would find the silver. For her pack. For herself. And she wouldn't look back.

The dawn broke over the jagged peaks of the Superstition Mountains, casting long shadows over the rocky terrain. Irene stretched, the desert air cool against her skin despite the sun's early glow. The ground beneath her boots was dry and gritty, scattered with sharp stones and sparse patches of hardy vegetation.

Removing her clothes, she slipped them into her pack before shifting easily into her wolf form, her red coat catching the light as she shook out her fur. The arid scent of the desert filled her nose—dust, mesquite, and the faint, lingering traces of coyote from the night before. With a deep breath, she took off, her paws kicking up small clouds of dust as she ran. This might be the last time she could run in safety for quite a while.

The terrain was unforgiving, requiring careful steps over loose gravel and sharp rocks, but Irene relished the challenge. Her muscles flexed as she leapt over a cluster of prickly pear cacti, the rising sun warming her coat as she climbed a ridge. From the top, she paused, scanning the sprawling expanse of desert below, painted in streaks of gold. This land was harsh, raw, and relentless, but it was also home.

The thought gave her pause. Would Silver Falls feel the same? She'd seen photos and read descriptions in the journals—forests dense with towering evergreens, the air thick with the scent of pine and damp moss. The rocky terrain would be familiar, but the woods were a different world, a place where the ground would be soft and cool beneath her paws, the shadows deeper and the trails quieter.

Here, every step was exposed. Every movement visible against the open sky. In the forests of Silver Falls, she would be hidden, her scent concealed by the natural dampness of the land. Both places were wild in their own way, but she already knew the transition would feel like stepping into another life entirely.

Irene bounded down the ridge, the wind rushing past her ears as she let the terrain blur beneath her. This was her final run in the Superstitions before she left, and she intended to savor every moment. When she reached the bottom, she slowed, her paws leaving prints in the dust as she padded toward the edge of the pack's territory.

She shifted back, brushing her fingers through her red hair as she gazed toward the horizon. Pulling her clothes from her pack, she redressed. The sun was higher now, casting the mountains in sharp relief. She was leaving this place, trading its arid openness for the shadowed woods of Silver Falls. It was a necessary step—a chance to secure her pack's future—but she wasn't about to let the uncertainty of the unknown stop her.

Adjusting her pack on her shoulders, she imagined she could feel the cool glass of the scent-masking vial pressing against her palm.

"Time to go," she murmured to herself, turning away from the mountains she'd called home for so long.

The Bristlecone Bed & Breakfast was as quaint as Irene had expected—rustic and charming, with flower boxes beneath the windows and a warm glow spilling from the

front porch light. The air smelled of fresh rain, the nearby woods humming with nocturnal life.

Irene adjusted her pack on her shoulders, allowing its familiar weight to ground her and remind her why she was here. She glanced around the quiet street before stepping inside.

“Evening!” the voice of the woman she suspected was Ruby Wilder greeted her as she entered. The woman’s sharp eyes took Irene in with a quick once-over. “You must be Irene.”

“That’s me,” Irene said with a practiced smile.

“I’m Ruby. Welcome to the Bristlecone.”

She shifted her weight just enough to appear relaxed, hiding the strain of the unknown coiled beneath her skin. “Thanks for having me.”

Ruby nodded, sliding a key across the counter. “Room three’s all set for you. Breakfast is at eight sharp, and there’s a map of hiking trails in your welcome packet. You’re here for the views, I take it?”

“Something like that,” Irene replied smoothly. “I’ve heard the trails here are incredible.”

Ruby beamed. “They are. Best in the Rockies. Just make sure you check in with me when you head out. I like to keep track of my guests—you wouldn’t believe how many people underestimate these woods.”

“I’m pretty experienced, but I’ll be sure to do that,” Irene promised, pocketing the key and turning toward the stairs. “Thanks again.”

She climbed to the second floor, the old wooden steps creaking beneath her boots. Once inside her room, she locked the door and leaned against it, letting out a slow breath. She'd detected that Ruby was a shifter and reminded herself that so was everyone else in Silver Falls. The vial of scent-masking solution was tucked safely in her pack, its effects already in place. To Ruby—or anyone else she encountered—she was just another human passing through.

But that didn't make her completely safe.

Heading over to the bed, she removed her pack and pulled out a worn journal. Written in a barely legible scrawl was the legend of the lost silver. She reviewed the pages that led to the description of where the silver was. The diary was a mix of history and folklore, but Irene had sifted through the embellishments, focusing on the details that matched her research.

Her eyes traced the notes she'd scrawled in the margins, her heart racing with the thrill of the hunt. The trails surrounding Silver Falls aligned perfectly with the descriptions in the book. If the silver was here, she would find it.

But first, she needed to blend in, stay unnoticed. Silver Falls might seem like a sleepy mountain town, but she knew better. This was shifter territory, and the alphas of various packs and clans were not people to cross lightly.

She looked over to a chair by the window. Next to it was a small table with a tray. Irene walked over and looked at the note:

Thought you might like something to eat. Let me know if you need anything.

Ruby

Her hostess seemed to be kind and gracious. On the tray was a variety of protein bars

and a sandwich on a plate with tomatoes, lettuce, and chips covered in cling wrap. Pulling it open, she inhaled what she thought was the scent of homemade bread with thick slabs of roast beef, cheddar cheese, mustard, and horseradish. Lifting half of it to her mouth, she took a bite and moaned— heaven . Pure heaven.

The next morning, Irene laced up her hiking boots, pocketed the protein bars and adjusted the straps of her pack. Ruby was bustling around the dining room, pouring coffee and chatting with other guests as Irene slipped out the door.

The air was crisp, the forest alive with the scent of dew and wildflowers. She unfolded the map from her pocket, tracing a route that would take her deep into the woods, where the trails intersected with the landmarks described in the journal. If her calculations were right, this was where she'd find her first clue.

Hours passed as she moved through the dense forest, her senses on high alert. Every rustle of leaves and snap of a twig set her nerves on edge. She wasn't afraid of the wilderness. It was the other shifters she was worried about.

Finally, she reached a clearing. A cluster of boulders jutted out of the earth, their surfaces weathered and cracked. Irene knelt, brushing away dirt and debris to reveal faint markings etched into the stone. Her breath caught. This was it—just as the diary had described it.

But as she leaned closer to study the carvings, a faint sound reached her ears. A low growl, barely audible but unmistakable.

Her heart thundered. She straightened slowly, her eyes scanning the trees. She was alone—or so she'd thought.

The growl came again, closer this time. Irene's pulse raced as she slipped her hand into her jacket, fingers closing around the small knife she always carried. Her scent

might be masked, but that wouldn't protect her if a wolf decided she was prey.

"I'm not here to hurt anyone," she said aloud, her voice steady despite the fear clawing at her chest. "Just passing through."

The forest remained silent, but Irene could feel eyes on her, watching, waiting.

Swallowing hard, she backed away from the boulders and returned to the trail, her every sense tuned to the possibility of pursuit. This was only the beginning, and already the danger felt all too real.

BECK

The forest was quiet, the kind of stillness that set Beck's senses on high alert. He moved through the trees with practiced ease, his steps soundless against the soft, mossy ground. The crisp mountain air filled his lungs, tinged with the faint and familiar scents.

And something else. Something unfamiliar.

A stranger—female—had arrived at the Bristlecone Bed her steps were deliberate, her gaze sharp as she studied her surroundings.

When he spotted her in a clearing, Beck stopped, slipping into the cover of the trees. She was kneeling by a group of boulders, her fingers brushing over the weathered carvings etched into the stone. The sight sent a jolt through him. Those carvings weren't common knowledge, known only to locals—or to those who knew what to look for.

What's she doing? Beck's eyes narrowed.

The sun broke through the canopy above, casting golden light over her red hair as it fell in loose waves from a high-set ponytail down her back. Her eyes were focused, her expression a mixture of determination and fascination. Something about her drew his gaze and refused to let go. The way she moved, the way her lips pressed together in concentration—it stirred something deep within him, a primal pull he had never

felt before and had never expected to feel. But what he was feeling—mild disorientation and dizziness—were the same ones Knox had described when he'd met Ruby.

Beck shook his head, forcing himself to look away. Human. She was human. And as beautiful as she was, the strange pull he felt had to be a fluke, an anomaly he couldn't afford to entertain. Not when he had a town full of shifters to protect and questions about who she was and what she was up to, to answer.

Still, he couldn't stop himself from watching. There was an energy about her, a confidence that didn't align with her supposed reason for being here. She wasn't just hiking—she was searching for something.

The realization sent a flicker of unease through him.

This is going to be trouble, he thought grimly, but the wolf in him growled in disagreement, urging him closer to the mysterious woman. In fact, the wolf inside him stirred, restless and intrigued. His instincts told him she didn't belong here, but something about her—the way she moved, the way her hair caught the dappled sunlight—pulled at him in a way that had nothing to do with being sheriff.

He shouldn't have followed her this far. She was human. A visitor. Nothing more. But the way her scent felt... muted, like she was hiding something, set him on edge.

She hadn't just stumbled onto those carvings, Beck thought. She had to have been searching for them.

He shifted his weight, the forest floor soft beneath his boots. She was too calm, too deliberate for a casual hiker. If she was lying about why she was in Silver Falls, he needed to know why—and what danger she might bring to those for whom he was responsible.

A growl rumbled low in his throat, unbidden but deliberate. The sound was deep, guttural, and unmistakably more wolf than human. He wanted to see her reaction, to test her nerves.

The effect was immediate. She froze, her fingers pausing mid-trace on the stone. Slowly, she rose to her full height, her head tilting slightly as she scanned the trees. As he stepped closer, the snap of a twig beneath his boot broke the silence. Her head snapped up, her eyes scanning the trees with an expression of wariness and alarm. Beck froze, holding his breath as she rose to her feet, turned from the boulders, her hand slipping into her jacket.

His sharp gaze caught the glint of metal—a knife—as she withdrew it. His wolf stirred, growling softly in approval at her readiness. And the pull he felt toward her—that strange, undeniable magnetism—only grew stronger.

“I’m not here to hurt anyone,” she said, her voice steady and calm despite the tension in her posture. “Just passing through.”

Beck blinked, caught off guard. That wasn’t the kind of thing a human would say to a purebred wolf. Most people would panic, scream, or try to run. But she didn’t flinch. She didn’t plead. She spoke like someone who knew what they were dealing with.

His wolf bristled with curiosity, pushing against his control. How does she know?

The seconds stretched as he studied her, his mind racing. Her body language wasn’t defensive or overtly fearful—it was measured. Controlled. If she was human, she had no reason to choose those words. And if she wasn’t...

The thought sent a jolt through him. He wanted to believe she was nothing more than an odd tourist with an unsettling scent and a bad sense of direction. But her calm response, her steady voice—they painted a very different picture.

She took a cautious step back, her eyes scanning the tree line with a sharpness that belied her seemingly casual demeanor.

The wolf growled again, but this time Beck silenced it with sheer force of will. She was armed. Smart, considering the woods. He couldn't decide if he was impressed or frustrated by how well-prepared she seemed for someone who had supposedly come to hike.

She took another step back, then turned and started toward the trail, her movements careful but quick. Beck let her go, his instincts warring with his reason. Everything about her screamed caution, mystery, and trouble—a combination that should've set him on edge but instead ignited a deeper, far more primal interest.

He waited until she was out of sight before stepping into the clearing. The scent of her lingered, faint and faintly... wrong. He couldn't place it, but it gnawed at him, pushing him toward a truth he wasn't sure he wanted to face.

Kneeling by the boulders, he brushed his hand over the carvings, frowning. They were old, cryptic, and deeply tied to the town's history. Only someone with specific knowledge would know to look for them.

"She's not just here to hike," he muttered, his voice low.

The wolf inside him growled in agreement, eager for answers. Beck stood, staring in the direction she'd gone. She was far more than she seemed. He didn't know what her game was, but he was damn sure going to find out.

And if she was a threat to Silver Falls—or to him—he'd handle her. No matter how beautiful or intriguing she was.

The bell above the Rusty Forks'—the local diner—door jingled, a cheerful sound that

clashed with Beck's tightly wound mood. Sitting at the corner booth, his back to the wall, he had a clear view of the door and the counter beyond. As sheriff of Silver Falls—and the alpha of his pack—it was second nature to keep his senses tuned to every shift in his surroundings.

When the stranger walked in, though, everything else faded.

She wasn't like the usual hikers who passed through town, all bright smiles and loud chatter. Irene carried herself differently—like someone used to being watched. Her every move was calculated and deliberate. Her red hair, loosed from her ponytail, fell wild around her face and shoulders. It caught the light streaming through the windows, and her eyes swept the room like a predator sizing up its prey.

Beck's wolf stirred again as he felt his cock tighten behind his fly.

She didn't seem to notice him at first, her focus on the chalkboard menu above the counter. But Beck's gaze lingered. He had to know more about her—the woman who had wandered into his town, poking around places she had no business being, with a scent that didn't add up.

When Irene stepped up to the counter, the chatter of the diner hushed for a moment. Even small towns like Silver Falls had their fair share of curious eyes and wagging tongues, and strangers were a novelty. Ruby's description of her had been dead-on: beautiful, with an edge that hinted at secrets.

He didn't have to wait long to catch her attention.

"Coffee, black," Irene said to the waitress, her voice low and smooth. "And the roast beef with horseradish sauce sandwich, to go."

"To go?" Beck's voice cut through the quiet. He leaned back in his seat, his eyes

meeting hers as a slow smile curved his lips. “Shame to waste a good meal by not staying to enjoy it.”

Her gaze flicked to him, sharp and assessing. There was no mistaking the way her body tensed, a flash of something unreadable crossing her face before she settled into a polite, neutral expression.

“I’m on a schedule,” she replied evenly, her tone guarded but not unkind.

Beck raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. “Busy day hiking?”

“You could say that.”

Her short answer didn’t bother him. If anything, it intrigued him more. She was cautious—guarded in a way that spoke of someone who had been through enough to know better than to let her guard down.

“Silver Falls has some of the best trails in the Rockies,” he said casually, standing and strolling toward her. He didn’t miss the way her eyes flicked between him and the exit as he approached, her stance shifting slightly, as if preparing for... what? Flight? Fight?

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve heard,” she said, brushing a loose strand of red hair behind her ear. She held her ground, her shoulders squared despite the undercurrent simmering between them.

He extended a hand, his wolf humming in the back of his mind, urging him closer. “Beckett Grey. Sheriff.”

“Irene,” she replied, shaking his hand briefly before releasing it. “Just passing through.”

“Passing through,” Beck repeated, his tone light but probing. “That’s a shame. You seem like someone who’d appreciate what this place has to offer.”

Her lips quirked in a faint smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Do I? I guess I’m just one of those people who blend into a crowd and make myself at home.”

Before he could say more, the waitress returned with Irene’s coffee and sandwich. She handed over a few bills, her movements deliberate, as if calculating how to escape the conversation without drawing attention.

“Sure you won’t sit down?” Beck asked, tilting his head toward his booth. “I don’t bite.”

She laughed softly, a sound that sent a thrill down his spine. “Appreciate the offer, Sheriff, but I’ve got plans.”

She turned and headed for the door, her scent lingering in her wake—a maddening mix of something familiar and just out of reach. Beck watched her go, a slow growl rumbling low in his throat as he fought the urge to follow.

The bell above the door jingled again as she left, and the chatter of the diner returned. Beck watched her with narrowed eyes, his wolf pacing restlessly in his mind.

Knox sidled up to him, his sharp eyes following Irene’s retreating figure. “That’s her. Irene Blakiston. Ruby said she was a mystery. I think she might be right.”

Beck didn’t answer, his mind replaying every detail of their brief interaction. The way she moved, the way she deflected questions without giving too much away. And the way his instincts—both as a wolf and a man—refused to let him dismiss her as just another passerby.

He nodded to Knox, tossing a few bills on the counter. “Let me know if she comes back to the B&B.”

“Planning to scare her off or keep her close, Sheriff?” Knox asked with a knowing grin.

Beck’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Knock it off. I just want to make sure she’s not here to cause trouble. That is, after all, part of my job.”

Trouble. That’s exactly what Irene Blakiston felt like. Beautiful, intriguing trouble.

As he stepped outside into the crisp mountain air, Beck scanned the street, but Irene was already gone. The wolf inside him growled in frustration. She was hiding something—he could feel it—and he wasn’t about to let it slip through his fingers.

This wasn’t the last time they’d cross paths. He’d make certain of that.

The wolf in him snarled, his suspicions solidifying into certainty. Whatever Irene was hiding, Beck was willing to bet it wasn’t just innocent secrets. It was something far more dangerous.

IRENE

Irene stepped out of the diner, the bell above the door chiming softly behind her. The cold mountain air hit her like a slap, doing little to quell the nausea churning in her stomach. It might not feel cold to the locals, but to someone who'd lived her life in Arizona, it was frigid. She paused on the sidewalk, gripping the paper bag containing her sandwich, and closed her eyes briefly.

It wasn't the first time she'd felt this way since arriving in Silver Falls. The disoriented, queasy sensation had started near the boulders with the carvings, a dull thrum of unease that had only worsened when she walked into the diner. And running into Sheriff Beckett Grey had only amplified it.

His presence had been overwhelming in every sense of the word. The way his piercing blue eyes had pinned her in place, the way his deep voice had wrapped around her like a velvet snare... It was as if the man carried the responsibility for everyone in Silver Falls on his very broad, very muscular shoulders—not that she'd noticed and had wondered what it might be like to run her fingers over said shoulders. He wasn't shy about letting everyone know about that sense of responsibility, either. He was the man in charge. The man everyone turned to. He was, in her mind, everything a good alpha or good sheriff would be.

"Damn it," she muttered to herself, taking a deep, steadying breath.

She hadn't wanted to spend any more time than necessary with him. Every second in

his presence had been like standing too close to a flame—intense, consuming, and impossible to ignore. That was why she'd made her excuse, grabbing her lunch to go instead of sitting down like she'd planned.

Now, the sandwich in her hand felt more like a taunt than a reprieve. Eating on the go wasn't ideal, but the idea of returning to the Bristlecone Bed & Breakfast didn't appeal, either. Ruby Wilder's knowing eyes had a way of appearing to see through her defenses, and Irene wasn't ready for another round of polite-but-pointed questions.

Her boots echoed softly on the sidewalk as she headed toward the trailhead on the outskirts of town. The wilderness had always been her sanctuary—a place where she could think, regroup, and plan her next steps. The wilds of Silver Falls didn't feel nearly as benign as Arizona, but the wilderness was far less dangerous than lingering in the sheriff's shadow.

As the forest closed in around her, she followed the winding trail deeper into the woods. The crisp air carried the scent of the outdoors with it, and the leaves beneath her boots weren't the only sound breaking the stillness—the call of a bird, something moving in the underbrush. Irene let out a slow breath, trying to shake the uneasy feeling that had been gripping her since she'd left the diner.

She wasn't foolish enough to believe she was alone. Not in this town. The sheriff had watched her like a hawk back at the diner—or perhaps more like a predator sizing up its prey—his interest far too sharp to dismiss as casual. And if he was watching her, it was likely someone—or something—else might be, too.

The thought made her grip the sandwich bag tighter, her pace quickening. She told herself she was just being paranoid, but her instincts said otherwise. Maybe Sophie had been right. Maybe it would have been better to stay where she belonged.

Stopping at a fallen log near the edge of a small clearing, she perched on its mossy surface and unwrapped the sandwich. The rich scent of roast beef, cheddar, and horseradish filled the air, and her stomach growled in protest despite her lingering queasiness.

“Just eat,” she muttered to herself. “You’ll need the energy.”

As she bit into the sandwich, her thoughts drifted back to the sheriff. His presence in the diner had been almost magnetic, pulling her toward him even as her instincts screamed to keep her distance. The way he’d spoken to her—calm, probing, and laced with an authority that wasn’t just human—had rattled her more than she wanted to admit.

He knows. Or at least, he suspects something.

The thought made her heart race. She’d been careful, masking her scent, blending in as much as possible. But he wasn’t just anyone. He was a sheriff and an alpha, and his instincts were probably sharper than most. If she wasn’t careful, she’d draw more attention than she could handle.

The sound of a twig snapping pulled her from her thoughts. Irene froze, her senses sharpening as she scanned the clearing. The forest had gone silent—too silent.

“Not again,” she whispered, placing the sandwich into her pack and slipping her hand into her jacket. Her fingers closed around the hilt of her knife, the comfortable grip grounding her as she rose to her feet.

“Who’s there?” she called, her voice steady despite the fear knotting her stomach.

The silence stretched, but the feeling of being watched was unmistakable. Irene’s heart pounded as she turned in a slow circle, her grip on the knife tightening. She’d

been careful since arriving in Silver Falls, but it seemed her precautions hadn't been enough.

"Show yourself," she said, louder this time.

A low growl rumbled through the trees, deep and guttural. It sent a chill down her spine, the sound far too close for comfort. She turned toward the source, her eyes narrowing as she scanned the shadows.

"Damn it," she muttered, her pulse racing. She didn't know if it was a wolf or something else, but she wasn't sticking around to find out.

Irene took a cautious step back, then another, her senses on high alert. The growl came again, closer this time, and her instincts screamed at her to run. But before she could move, a familiar voice broke through the charged silence.

"You have a habit of finding trouble, don't you?"

She spun, her knife still raised and found herself face-to-face with none other than Beckett Grey. He stood at the edge of the clearing, his tall, broad frame blending seamlessly with the shadows. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes burned with intensity.

"What are you doing here?" Irene demanded, her voice sharper than she intended.

Beckett tilted his head, his lips quirking in a faint smile. "I could ask you the same thing. I could also point out that these lands are public, and as I'm the one who is a public servant, my questions are probably more pertinent. Want to answer them?"

Her grip on the knife faltered, and she quickly lowered it, tucking it back into the pocket of her jacket. "Not particularly. I didn't realize hiking was a crime."

“It’s not,” he said, stepping closer. His presence was overwhelming, and the air between them seemed to hum with unspoken energy. “But you don’t exactly look like someone out for a casual stroll.”

“I just like being prepared,” she shot back, crossing her arms.

He chuckled softly, the sound low and rough. “Prepared for what, exactly?”

Her stomach churned, a mix of frustration and something far more dangerous. The pull she felt toward him was undeniable, and it was taking everything she had to keep her guard up.

“Look,” she said, her voice firm. “I don’t need a babysitter, Sheriff. So, if you’re here to lecture me, save it.”

Beckett’s smile faded, his expression turning serious. “I’m not here to lecture you, Irene. But you should know—these woods aren’t as empty as they seem.”

The warning sent a shiver down her spine, and she fought to keep her expression neutral. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

As she turned to leave, his voice stopped her cold.

“Be careful out there,” he said, his tone softer now, almost... protective. “There are things in these woods that don’t take kindly to strangers.”

She didn’t look back, but his words echoed in her mind as she disappeared into the trees. The nausea was gone now, replaced by a different kind of unease.

As Irene ventured deeper into the forest, the shadows seemed to stretch and shift all around her. She told herself she was imagining things—that the growl she’d heard

had just been a warning from the sheriff, staged to keep her in line.

But when she stopped to catch her breath, the sensation of being watched returned, stronger than before.

When she'd put some distance between herself and the sheriff, Irene pulled her sandwich out of her pack and began to munch on it as she adjusted the straps of her pack before stepping back onto the trail leading away from Silver Falls. The crisp mountain air was invigorating, but it did little to soothe the unease lingering in her chest. Her meeting with Grey still loomed in her mind, his intense eyes and quiet authority haunting her thoughts like a specter.

She located the boulders, marking them on her map and drawing out a grid search pattern. Irene stood, brushing dirt from her knees as she scanned the clearing. Using the boulders as her starting point, she began scouting the surrounding area, marking off the grid areas searched with an X. Her eyes were keen for any sign of a hidden entrance, more symbols or a change in the terrain. The mountainside felt alive around her, every rustle of leaves and snap of a twig sending a jolt through her senses.

She moved methodically, her training keeping her grounded even as her thoughts strayed. There were too many unknowns here—too many risks. Beck was watching her, of that she was certain. And if she wasn't careful, he'd figure out that she was more than just a hiker passing through.

As she climbed a steep incline, a faint sound reached her ears. She froze, her heart pounding as she turned, scanning the trees. It was subtle—a whisper of movement, a shift in the air—but it was enough to set her nerves on edge.

"Beck?" she muttered, her voice barely audible.

There was no response, but the forest seemed to hold its breath. Irene exhaled slowly,

forcing herself to focus. If he was out here, she'd need to be careful. The last thing she needed was to run into him again, especially not when she was in the middle of her search.

But as she turned back to her task, the feeling of being watched persisted, a prickling awareness that sent shivers down her spine. She tightened her grip on the strap of her pack, her eyes narrowing as she scanned the tree line.

"If you're out there," she said softly, "you're going to have to try harder than that."

Her words hung in the air, a challenge she wasn't sure she wanted him to accept. But as the forest remained silent, she wondered if the sheriff might be closer than she realized.

Kneeling, she traced the markings, her heart pounding. They were faded but deliberate, a language of symbols she recognized from her research. Her stomach churned as the faint musk of fur and metal reached her nose. Someone had been here recently, and it wasn't a hiker.

Irene crouched beside a rocky outcrop, her fingers brushing against a faint indentation in the ground. Her heart leapt as she realized it wasn't natural—it was man-made. As she began to clear away the dirt and debris, a deep voice rumbled behind her, sending a chill down her spine.

"Looking for something?"

She spun to find Beck standing a few feet away, his tall frame blending into the shadows. His eyes held hers, and her breath hitched.

"How do you do that?" she asked, her voice sharper than she intended.

“Do what?” he asked, stepping closer.

“Appear out of nowhere,” she snapped. “It’s unsettling.”

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, his tone calm but probing. “You just looked... concerned.”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly, forcing a smile. “Just scouting trails.”

Beck tilted his head, his gaze unrelenting. “Most hikers don’t walk around like they’re searching for something or stop to examine scratches on the rocks—unless they mean something to you.”

“Maybe I’m just thorough,” she deflected, her tone clipped.

Beck stepped closer, his presence impossibly large in a space that was starting to feel suffocating. “Or maybe you’re looking for something you don’t want anyone else to know about.”

She really wanted to punch him in his arrogant face but then wanted to kiss it to make it better. It was the most maddening feeling in the world. She tried to keep her expression neutral, forcing a smile, lifting her eyes to meet his. “I’m looking for good hiking spots. Isn’t that what everyone comes to Silver Falls for?”

“Most people, sure,” Beck said, his gaze sharp and unrelenting. “But you’re not like most people, are you?”

The air between them seemed to hum with tension, his words laden with meaning. Irene forced herself to hold his gaze, even as her heart pounded in her chest.

His lips quirked in a faint smile. “Or maybe you’re looking for something specific.”

Her body went stiff. “Thanks for the concern, Sheriff.”

His gaze lingered before he stepped back. “Just be careful,” he said, his voice low. “These mountains and this wilderness are ancient. There are things out here that don’t take kindly to strangers.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied, turning away before he could say more.

As Irene turned and walked away, her pulse raced, and her senses stayed on high alert. But it wasn’t just his words that lingered—it was the way he looked at her, as if he could see through every carefully constructed lie.

And the worst part? A small, reckless part of her wanted him to.

IRENE

The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows over the forest as Irene crouched near a rocky outcrop, brushing dirt and leaves away from a faint indentation in the ground. Her heart thudded dully in her chest, but her focus was fraying, splintering into a hundred thoughts that had nothing to do with treasure.

She swore under her breath, forcing herself to refocus. She had to. Her pack back in the Superstitions was counting on her. The markings on the boulders had pointed her here, to this exact spot. If she could just...

Her mind betrayed her again, drifting back to the man with bulging biceps, and what she was sure was a pair of cut pecs and a six or eight-pack you could bounce a quarter off of—if you were so inclined. Despite her uneasiness around him, she was definitely inclined. He also had a face that looked as if it had been sculpted out of the granite that made up most of Colorado's mountains, with piercing blue eyes and an infuriatingly commanding presence. Beckett Grey.

The sheriff had been maddeningly persistent, his questions digging just deep enough to unsettle her without giving her the satisfaction of knowing what he was really after. And that smile—that faint, knowing curve of his lips that seemed to promise he could see through her every carefully constructed facade and make her beg for mercy if he ever got them on her skin. Only she wasn't sure it was mercy she would be begging for.

Her hand clenched around the small trowel she was using to dig. “Focus,” she muttered sharply.

But it was no use. Beck was everywhere—etched into her thoughts as surely as the symbols had been etched into the rocks, pulling her focus away from the task at hand. His voice, smooth and deep, still rang in her ears. The way his presence filled a space, commanding attention and leaving no room to breathe. And the way her body reacted to him, that maddening pull that felt as much like a challenge as it did an invitation.

Frustrated, she stood, brushing dirt from her knees. The forest felt suddenly suffocating, the gravity of her thoughts pressing in from all sides. She needed to get out, to regroup, to eat something that didn’t come from her pack.

The familiar chime of the Rusty Fork’s bell greeted her as she stepped inside, her boots leaving faint prints on the well-worn floor. The warmth of the diner wrapped around her like a blanket, carrying the comforting scent of smoked meats and freshly baked bread.

Irene’s stomach growled loudly, reminding her she hadn’t eaten much since lunch. She slid onto a stool at the counter, scanning the menu posted on the chalkboard above. Her eyes landed on the special of the day—smoked BBQ ribs.

Perfect.

When the waitress approached, Irene smiled. “I’ll take the ribs, a side salad, and a sweet tea. To go, please.”

The woman nodded, jotting down her order with quick efficiency. Irene’s gaze flicked briefly around the room, half-expecting to see Beck somewhere in the shadows, watching her with that unnervingly perceptive gaze. But the sheriff was nowhere to be seen, and she exhaled a small sigh of relief.

Still, the thought of him lingered, the memory of his voice wrapping around her like velvet as she waited for her order.

When the waitress returned, she handed over her meal, the scent of smoked ribs wafting from the bag. “Ruby says you’re staying at the B that much was clear. But his presence was no less unsettling.

Irene turned sharply, darting toward the rocky hills that loomed in the distance. She could hear him following, his heavy paws pounding the earth behind her. No matter how hard she pushed herself, he matched her stride for stride, his size and strength evident in every movement as he caught up to her.

He ran beside her for a few strides and then pulled ahead, expecting her to follow, no doubt. Well, the arrogant alpha was in for a surprise.

She darted up a narrow ravine, her claws scraping against the rocks as she climbed higher. The black wolf changed directions and followed, his powerful frame moving with an ease that made her curse under her breath. She zigzagged through the boulders, leaping over crevices and sliding down slopes, determined to lose him.

Finally, she spotted a narrow crevice between two large rocks and squeezed herself into it, her breath coming in shallow pants as she pressed her body against the cool stone. The black wolf appeared moments later, his head swiveling as he searched for her.

When he didn’t find her, he stopped, throwing his head back and letting out a long, mournful howl—calling to her. The sound echoed through the hills, vibrating in her chest and sending a shiver down her spine.

Why does he care, she wondered, her heart twisting with something she didn’t want to name. She waited until his howl faded and his footsteps receded before slipping

out of her hiding place.

Circling back toward the pastures, Irene moved cautiously, her senses attuned to every sound and scent. As she neared the spot where she'd left her clothes, a flicker of orange light caught her attention. She froze, her ears swiveling toward the source.

A campfire.

Creeping closer, she crouched low, peering through the underbrush. Three men sat around the fire, their voices low but distinct. The metallic tang of weapons and the acrid scent of gun oil hit her nose, making her stomach twist.

Hunters.

They were laughing, their voices carrying snippets of words that made her blood run cold.

"... saw tracks up by the ridge. Bigger than normal..."

"... told you these woods aren't just full of deer..."

"... worth a fortune if we bag one..."

Irene's heart pounded as she slowly backed away, her paws silent against the damp ground. She needed to get out of here—now. These men weren't just a threat to her but to everyone in Silver Falls. If they were tracking shifters, they'd already crossed a dangerous line.

Her retreat was painstakingly slow, every nerve on edge as she moved away from the fire. A sudden crack of a branch made her freeze, her breath hitching as one of the men stood, his head swiveling toward the sound.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Probably just a raccoon,” another man muttered, but the first didn’t look convinced.

Irene held her breath, her body coiled and ready to bolt if necessary. After what felt like an eternity, the man sat back down, and she continued her retreat, her heart hammering in her chest.

She made a wide circle, ensuring she hadn’t been followed. By the time Irene reached the pastures, the first hints of dawn were coloring the horizon. She shifted back, her body aching with the strain of the night, and quickly pulled on her clothes. Slinging the gear bag over her shoulder, she started back toward the B&B, her mind racing.

The hunters were a threat she couldn’t ignore. But more than that, the black wolf’s mournful howl echoed in her mind, refusing to be silenced.

As she reached the Bristlecone’s front door, she hesitated, glancing back toward the forest. The danger in these woods was growing, and she wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep running—from the hunters, from Beck, or from herself.

BECK

The moon hung low in the night sky, its silver glow casting long shadows across the forest as Beck sprinted through the trees. The cold shower hadn't worked. He hoped that a long run would allow him to sleep without picturing how Irene would look naked on her back, her legs spread and the scent of her pussy filling his nostrils.

Well, that kind of thinking wasn't going to help. His paws dug into the soft earth, his sleek black coat blending seamlessly with the darkness around him. The cool mountain air filled his lungs, carrying with it the scents of the forest—and something else.

Something that stopped him cold.

The scent hit him like a lightning bolt, sharp and intoxicating, a mix of wild musk and something faintly sweet, almost floral. It was unfamiliar, foreign, and deeply, maddeningly provocative. Beck's wolf bristled, a low growl rumbling in his chest as he lifted his nose to the wind.

A she-wolf. Not just any she-wolf. His. His mate. His fated mate.

He scanned the forest as he shifted his weight, torn between following the scent and continuing his patrol. Earlier that day, word had reached him of hunters spotted in the area. He'd spread the warning throughout Silver Falls, ensuring everyone knew to stay alert and close to home. Hunters were a threat they couldn't afford to take

lightly—not with the town’s secret hanging in the balance.

But now, this scent—this unfamiliar presence—tugged at him in a way he couldn’t ignore. His wolf rumbled restlessly in his mind, urging him to follow, to find the source of the tantalizing trail.

Growling softly to himself, Beck took off, his powerful body moving effortlessly through the underbrush. The scent grew stronger as he ran, weaving between trees and leaping over fallen logs with practiced ease. It was faintly disjointed, as if the wolf had taken a circuitous route through the forest, but it was unmistakable. She was close.

As he crested a ridge, the sharp tang of gun oil cut through the enticing scent, snapping him back to reality. Beck slowed, his ears swiveling as he scanned the area. The faint glow of a fire flickered in the distance, accompanied by the low murmur of voices.

Hunters.

His lips pulled back in a silent snarl as he moved closer, keeping low to the ground. From his vantage point, he could see them—three men gathered around a fire, their rifles leaning against a nearby log. They were relaxed, laughing quietly, but their words carried the unmistakable edge of predatory intent.

“... tracks down by the creek. Fresh ones.”

“Big, too. Bigger than a normal wolf.”

Beck’s wolf growled low in his chest, his hackles rising. They were tracking something—or someone—and he had a sickening suspicion of who their real target was.

Forcing himself to stay calm, he backed away, careful to keep silent as he retreated. He'd deal with the hunters soon enough, but first, he needed to find Irene. If she was unfamiliar with the area—or worse, unaware of the danger—she could be walking straight into a trap.

The scent led him to a rocky outcrop overlooking the valley, the moonlight casting silver streaks across the uneven terrain. Beck stood, his breath coming in steady pants as he scanned the area. His sharp gaze caught a flash of movement—a streak of red fur disappearing behind a cluster of boulders.

His heart thundered in his chest as he stepped closer. Gotcha.

Her scent wafted back to him, a maddening mix of wild and elusive. She was fast—faster than he'd expected—and her movements were deliberate, calculated. His wolf growled with approval as he surged forward, closing the distance between them.

When he finally reached her, the she-wolf slowed, her powerful strides matching his as they ran side by side. Her red coat gleamed in the moonlight, and the rhythmic cadence of her paws against the ground sent a strange sense of satisfaction through him. For a moment, it felt like they were in sync, moving as one through the dense forest.

But then, as they approached a rocky incline, Beck pulled ahead, his instincts urging her to follow. He reached the crest of the hill and paused, glancing back, but she was gone. He growled softly, scanning the area. Her scent lingered, faint but tantalizing, teasing him as it twisted away into the darkness.

She'd veered off, he realized, his eyes narrowing.

Beck prowled the area, his nose to the ground as he followed the faint trail she'd left behind. But the further he went, the more erratic the trail became. Her scent grew

faint, scattered, until it disappeared entirely.

She's masking her trail. His wolf growled in frustration, its pride stung by her evasion.

Beck straightened, his sharp gaze sweeping the trees. He'd underestimated her cunning, her ability to evade even him. His protective instincts flared, mingling with the primal pull that drew him to her.

Tilting his head back, he let out a long, mournful howl, the sound carrying through the forest. It was a call, a demand for her to return.

When no response came, he snarled softly, pacing restlessly. The silence was deafening, her absence a challenge he couldn't ignore.

Frustrated but unwilling to waste more time chasing shadows, Beck started toward the pack's estate. As he crossed the river, the sharp tang of gun oil reached his nose again, cutting through his irritation like a blade. He stopped, his ears swiveling toward the source of the scent.

Beck growled softly, his lips pulling back in a silent snarl. The hunters weren't close enough to pose an immediate threat, but their continued presence was too close for comfort. He backed away carefully, retreating into the shadows before turning and sprinting toward the estate.

The estate was quiet when Beck arrived, the soft glow of the moon casting long shadows across the open yard. He shifted back into his human form, striding toward the main house where his beta, Desmond, lived. Beck rapped sharply on the door, his knuckles echoing in the stillness.

It opened moments later, revealing Desmond's groggy face. "What's going on?" he

asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

“The hunters are still here,” Beck said, his voice clipped. “A group of them are camping on the far side of the river. Not close enough to be an immediate threat, but close enough to watch.”

Desmond’s expression hardened, his exhaustion replaced by alertness. “What else?”

“A she-wolf. Not one of ours. She’s out there,” Beck growled, letting his frustration and concern show. “I caught up with her, but she slipped away. Masked her trail.”

Desmond’s brows shot up. “Masked her trail? Clever.”

“Too clever,” Beck growled. “But she’s alone, and the hunters are a problem. Make sure the pack knows to stay on high alert. I’ll deal with whoever she is.”

Desmond nodded, already pulling on a jacket. “I’ll send out patrols. You think she’s connected to the hunters?”

Beck shook his head. “No way. But she’s drawing attention, and I have no idea if she knows what she’s dealing with. That makes her a problem.”

As Desmond moved off to rouse the pack, Beck turned back toward the forest, his gaze hard. The she-wolf was more than a mystery. She was a complication, a temptation, and a danger all wrapped into one. And no matter how infuriatingly elusive she was, he wasn’t about to let her slip away again.

Beck pushed open the door to his room, the soft creak of the hinges sounding very much like the groan he made. There were times he felt older than Methuselah—tonight was one of them. The run had done little to ease the tightness coiled in his chest. His muscles ached pleasantly, the remnants of his shift lingering

as a dull thrum beneath his skin, but his mind refused to settle. Thoughts of Irene, with her fiery red hair and piercing green eyes, danced through his head, tantalizing and relentless.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it for a moment, letting out a long, slow exhale. The faint scent of the wilderness clung to his skin, mingling with the musk of exertion. His wolf stirred, restless and unsatisfied, but Beck ignored it, peeling off his clothes and leaving them in a heap by the door.

The shower beckoned, and he stepped into the large ensuite bathroom and into the shower, twisting the knob until steam billowed around him. The hot water cascaded over his body, washing away the grit and exertion from his run. Beck tilted his head back, letting the heat loosen his muscles as his hands braced against the cool tile.

But even here, alone in the stillness of his room, he couldn't escape her. Irene's scent—wild, alluring, and maddeningly elusive—lingered in his thoughts. The way she moved, her sharp tongue and guarded expression, the pull she seemed to have over him despite his better judgment. It was infuriating. And intoxicating.

"Damn it," he muttered, running a hand through his wet hair.

After a long moment, he shut off the water and stepped out, wrapping a towel around his waist. The cool air hit his damp skin, but he barely noticed as he padded back into the bedroom. The sheets of his bed looked inviting, and exhaustion tugged at him, urging him to surrender to sleep.

He slid beneath the covers, the crisp fabric cool against his bare skin. His body sank into the mattress, his eyes closing as the madness of the day finally began to fade. But sleep wasn't the escape he'd hoped for.

The forest surrounded him, its shadows deep and endless, but there was no danger

here, only anticipation. The air was filled with her scent—wildflowers and something darker, more primal. He turned, and there she was, standing in a clearing bathed in moonlight.

Irene.

She was breathtaking. Her fiery red hair tumbled over her shoulders, her green eyes smoldering as they locked onto his. She wore nothing but the faint glow of the moonlight, her bare skin gleaming like polished ivory. Beck's breath caught as his gaze roamed over her, the sharp tug of desire anchoring him to the spot.

"You've been following me," she said, her voice low and teasing, a smile playing at her lips.

"Can you blame me?" he replied, his voice rough with arousal.

She stepped closer, her movements slow and deliberate, her hips swaying with each step. When she reached him, she placed a hand on his chest, her touch searing his skin. Beck's pulse thundered as her fingers trailed downward, her nails grazing lightly against the hard planes of his abdomen.

"I've been waiting for you," she whispered, her lips brushing against his ear.

His hands found her waist, pulling her closer as her body pressed against his. The heat of her skin, the softness of her curves, the way her breath became erratic as he held her—it was almost too much. Beck's control slipped, his wolf growling low and possessive as he lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was explosive, a collision of need and hunger. Her hands tangled in his hair, her body arching against his as his lips moved over hers, claiming, devouring. When her nails raked down his back, a shudder tore through him, the pain sharp and

delicious.

“You’re mine,” he growled against her lips, his voice rough and raw.

Irene laughed softly, a sound that sent a jolt of electricity through him. “We’ll see about that.”

And then, she was gone—evaporating into nothingness, as if she’d never been there.

Beck woke with a start, his body slick with sweat, his breathing ragged. The dream clung to him, vivid and visceral, the phantom sensations of her touch still tingling against his skin. He ran a hand over his face, trying to shake the lingering haze of desire.

“Damn it,” he muttered, his voice hoarse.

The bed felt too empty, too cold without her. He sat up, raking a hand through his hair as his wolf stirred restlessly in the back of his mind. The dream had been too real, too raw, and it left him aching in ways he wasn’t prepared to confront.

Irene was under his skin, a temptation he couldn’t ignore. And the worst part? He wasn’t sure he wanted to.

IRENE

The morning air was crisp and cool, the forest alive with the scent of dew and evergreens. Irene moved through the underbrush with purpose, scanning the terrain for signs of her next clue. The boulders with the markings had led her here, to a stretch of forest that felt older, untouched. She was certain she was close.

Her boots moved softly over the ground, the faint rustle of leaves underfoot blending with the gentle whisper of the wind. She adjusted the strap of her pack, her thoughts focused on the map she'd sketched the night before. If her calculations were correct, the next set of clues had to be somewhere near the base of the ridge ahead.

But her instincts were on edge, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. The forest felt too quiet, the usual symphony of birds and insects conspicuously absent. She paused, her heart thudding in her chest as she listened.

That's when she heard it—the faint snap of a twig.

Irene froze, her breath catching as she scanned the trees. The shadows seemed to shift and stretch, as the faint smell of human sweat mixed with gun oil reached her nose. Her stomach churned. Hunters.

Before she could react, a voice rang out, sharp and commanding. "Don't move."

She turned slowly, her eyes locking onto the group of men emerging from the

shadows. There were three of them, their rifles slung over their shoulders, their expressions cold and predatory.

“Well, what do we have here?” one of them drawled, his lips curling into a cruel smile. “A little lost hiker?”

Irene’s heart pounded as her gaze darted between them. They didn’t look like casual outdoorsmen. Their movements were too deliberate, their eyes too sharp. And the way they looked at her sent a chill down her spine.

“I’m just a hiker. If you’re hunting in this area, I’ll choose somewhere else to hike. This trail was recommended to me by the owner of the B it was a summons, pulling her toward it with an intensity she couldn’t resist. Her heart raced, her instincts screaming that she needed to go, now.

The hunters were in her way, an immovable barrier between her and whatever was calling her. She didn’t think—there wasn’t time to think. The knife was in her hand before she even realized it, glinting in the dim light as she lunged at the nearest man.

Chaos exploded around her. Shouts and curses tore through the forest, mingling with the sharp crack of gunfire. Irene moved like a predator unleashed, her body reacting faster than her thoughts as she fought with a ferocity that surprised even her. The world around her blurred into a storm of movement and sound, her singular focus on survival—and the inexplicable pull that refused to let her go.

BECK

The end of a long day was approaching. Beck snorted—long day. Breaking up an argument between two of the older alphas in the village, catching a couple of kids skipping school, writing a speeding ticket to Knox—well, that was actually kind of fun. Not much of real significance or crime happened in Silver Falls, and Beck often wondered if the salary he was paid was justified.

Beck leaned back in his chair, the faint hum of the radio filling the silence as he scanned through reports from the past few days. Minor infractions, the occasional dispute—nothing out of the ordinary. He wanted to write it off as same ole, same ole, but the nagging feeling in his gut told him something was coming.

The sharp trill of his desk phone broke the quiet, and he grabbed it on the second ring. “Grey,” he said, his voice clipped.

“It’s Ruby,” came the familiar voice from the other end, tinged with unease.

Beck sat up straighter. Ruby Wilder didn’t rattle easily, but there was an edge to her tone that set him on alert. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Irene,” Ruby said, her words rushed. “She went out hiking this morning, and said she’d be back by noon at the latest. We were going to have lunch. It’s past two now, and there’s no sign of her.”

Beck's growled low in his throat. Irene. The woman had been a thorn in his side—and a constant distraction—since the first time their paths had crossed. He'd observed some of her 'hiking,' which appeared far more like a search. She was looking for something. A lot of hikers came looking for the lost treasure, but Irene had seemed to have information the others hadn't. And now, she was late coming back from a hike. Ruby's worry wasn't something he could easily brush off.

"Ruby, you know we can't consider someone officially missing until they've been gone at least forty-eight hours. It's only been a couple of hours. I'm not sure it's time to call in the cavalry," he said, leaning back in his chair. His tone was measured, friendly, professional, but even as he said the words, the unease in his gut twisted tighter.

"I know, I know," Ruby said, frustration lacing her words. "But she's not from around here. These woods?—"

"Are dangerous," Beck finished for her.

"Exactly," Ruby said. "Please, Beck. Can you just... check? Make sure she's okay?"

He didn't need convincing. The thought of Irene lost—or worse—in his wilderness sent a surge of protective anger through him, sharp and hot. But he kept his tone calm. "I'll go look for her. Do you have any idea where she was heading?"

"She mentioned a ridge near the south trailhead," Ruby said. "But she didn't say much else. She's pretty secretive. I don't think she's just here to hike."

Beck exhaled sharply through his nose. "Neither do I." He paused, the wheels in his mind turning. "Do you have something of hers? An article of clothing, maybe? Something she's worn recently."

There was a moment of silence on the other end, and then Ruby said, “I can get something from her room. Give me a few minutes.”

“Bring it to the office,” Beck said, already standing and grabbing his jacket. “I’ll head out as soon as I have it.”

“Thank you, Beck,” Ruby said, the relief in her voice palpable.

He hung up and shrugged into his jacket, the familiar weight settling over his shoulders. His wolf stirred restlessly in the back of his mind, eager and impatient. This wasn’t just another search-and-rescue mission. This was Irene.

He didn’t bother to examine why that mattered so much.

Fifteen minutes later, Ruby arrived, her face pale but determined as she handed over a scarf. “She wore this yesterday,” she said. “It should help.”

Beck nodded, taking the scarf and catching the faintest trace of Irene’s scent—wild and sweet, with that maddeningly elusive undercurrent he couldn’t quite place. It sent a jolt through him, his wolf growling softly in approval and concern.

“I’ll find her,” he said, meeting Ruby’s worried gaze.

Ruby hesitated, then nodded. “Be careful out there, Beck. If the hunters are still around...”

“I’ll handle them,” he said firmly.

With that, he stepped outside, the cool mountain air biting against his skin as he headed toward his SUV. His wolf stirred again, a low growl rumbling in his chest as he raised the scarf to his nose. Irene’s scent was strong enough to guide him, and he

set off toward the south trailhead with a single-minded focus.

The drive was short, but the tension in his chest only grew. By the time he reached the trailhead, the sun was beginning to dip, the shadows beginning to stretch along the ground. He parked and stepped out, the forest alive with life and something else, something more sinister.

Beck took the garment, his fingers brushing the fabric as he raised it to his nose. The scent hit him like a bolt of lightning—wildflowers, earth after rain, and something deeper, richer, that spoke to the most primal part of him. It was uniquely Irene, and his wolf stirred immediately, growling low in his chest.

The recognition slammed into him with a force that left him momentarily breathless. His fated mate. There was no mistaking it now. The undeniable pull, the way her scent seemed to weave itself into his very being. The protective instincts of his wolf surged, a sharp, possessive growl rumbling deep within him.

Fated mate. No doubt about it.

“I’ve got you,” he muttered, his voice low and rough.

With sure steps, he followed her trail, his senses on high alert. The deeper he went, the more the forest seemed to shift around him, the air growing heavier, the shadows more pronounced. He picked up his pace, the primal pull of his wolf urging him forward.

Irene was out here. And no matter what—or who—was standing in his way, he was going to bring her back.

He picked up his pace, the scent of Irene clinging to him like a beacon. His wolf paced restlessly in his mind, eager and impatient. She was out there—his mate—and

she was in trouble. He could feel it. Beck wasted no time, his powerful strides taking him up the trail where he paused, inhaling deeply. Her scent lingered faintly on the breeze, leading him on.

Deciding he could make better time as his wolf, Beck removed his clothes, bundled them up with his sidearm and called forth his more primal self. The familiar mist swirled up around him and he shifted effortlessly into his wolf form, the transformation quick and seamless. His powerful black coat gleamed in the dappled sunlight as he sniffed the air again, his eyes scanning the dense trees ahead. The scent was stronger now, guiding him like a thread through the wilderness.

Lifting his head, Beck let out a powerful howl, the sound reverberating through the trees. It was a call, a summons for her to come to him, to let him know where she was. The howl carried his urgency, his need, his promise to protect her.

The forest fell silent in its wake, the air thick with anticipation. He strained to hear a response, but none came.

Beck's growl rumbled low and dangerous in his throat, his wolf bristling with frustration. She wasn't answering, but he could feel her presence like a faint hum in his chest, a connection that told him she was still out there—and in trouble.

His wolf instincts sharpened, directing him toward the ridge Ruby had mentioned. Her scent grew fainter as he moved, interspersed with other, sharper smells—gun oil, sweat, the sweet pungent smell of fear. His hackles rose. Hunters.

Beck's protective instincts surged, and picking up his bundle, his powerful legs propelled him forward as he followed the faint trail. Every muscle in his body was coiled, ready for action. His mind raced with possibilities, each one more troubling than the last.

When he reached the base of the ridge, he paused, his ears swiveling as he scanned the area. The faint crack of a branch to his left had him spinning, his nose lifting to catch the scent. It wasn't Irene, but it wasn't far from her trail, either.

Beck let out another howl, this time raw and urgent, pouring every ounce of his determination into the sound. It echoed through the wilderness, a promise and a warning to anyone who dared to stand in his way.

He shifted back into his human form, his breath coming fast as he stood at the edge of the ridge. His eyes swept the dense trees. Somewhere out there, Irene was fighting for her life—or running for it.

Again, silence followed, but Beck's connection to her pulsed faintly in his chest, pulling him toward her like a magnet. She was out there, and she needed him. With a snarl, Beck started up the ridge, his steps purposeful and his senses on high alert. The hunters might have found her first, but if they had, they'd made the biggest mistake of their lives.

No one touched his mate and lived to tell the tale.

The ridge loomed before him, its rocky terrain bathed in the fading light of the evening. Beck moved with purpose, every sense tuned to the forest around him. Irene's scent was stronger here, tangled with the bitter scent of gun oil and human sweat. His wolf growled, the sound vibrating low in his chest as he quickened his pace.

Then he heard it—a sharp voice, edged with malice. He moved toward the sound and saw her facing them—afraid perhaps, but refusing to give into it.

“Why don't you make this easy on yourself? Come with us, and no one has to get hurt.”

Her lips curled into a defiant snarl. “Not a chance.”

The man’s smile faded, his expression hardening. “Suit yourself.”

Beck didn’t wait for the situation to escalate further. In a blur of motion, he shifted, his powerful black wolf form emerging with a rush of energy. The hunters barely had time to react before both he and Irene launched themselves at the men, a deep, guttural snarl tearing from his throat.

The nearest man turned, his eyes wide with shock as Beck barreled into him. His rifle clattered to the ground as a shot rang out, going wide. Beck’s claws raked across his chest, sending him sprawling. The other two shouted, scrambling to aim their weapons.

Irene didn’t hesitate. She lunged at the second man, her movements swift and precise, knocking the gun out of the way as he pulled the trigger. Beck caught a glimpse of the blade in her hand as she slashed at the attacker’s arm, forcing him to drop his gun.

The third hunter raised his rifle, his hands shaking as he took aim at Beck. A single, lethal second stretched between them, but Beck was faster than the hunter’s ability to take aim and shoot. He darted forward, his powerful jaws snapping around the barrel of the weapon and wrenching it from the man’s grip.

The hunter stumbled back, his face pale as Beck’s snarl echoed through the clearing. He turned and ran, his retreating footsteps fading into the forest, as the other men clambered after him.

The clearing fell silent, save for the ragged breathing of Irene and Beck. Beck turned to Irene, his wolf’s keen eyes sweeping over her for any sign of injury. Her face was pale, but her eyes burned with a feral energy as she straightened, clutching her knife.

“You’re late,” she said, her voice trembling just enough to betray her fear.

She spoke to him not as one would a wild animal but as one shifter to another. Beck trotted back to where he’d dropped his bundle of clothes and shifted back into his human form, pulling on his clothes. He returned to the clearing, his tall, broad, muscular frame towering over her. His chest heaved as he caught his breath, his sharp eyes locking onto hers. “You’re welcome,” he said, his voice rough.

Irene scowled, but there was no mistaking the relief in her eyes. “I had it handled.”

“You’re bleeding,” Beck said, his gaze dropping to the shallow cut on her shoulder. “That’s not what I’d call handled. And they had guns. What’s the line from the movies about bring a knife to a gunfight?”

She glanced at the wound, as if noticing it for the first time. “It’s nothing.”

“Come on,” he said, stepping closer. The magnetic pull between them crackled in the air, something neither of them could easily ignore. “Let me take you back to the B&B.”

“I’m fine,” Irene said, her voice tight.

Beck’s eyes darkened, his wolf growling softly in the back of his mind. “You’re not. And these woods aren’t safe,” he said nodding toward where the hunters had retreated. “Let me help you.”

For a moment, she hesitated, her eyes searching his face. The defiance in her gaze wavered, replaced by something softer, more vulnerable. Finally, she nodded, her shoulders sagging with reluctant acceptance.

“Fine,” she muttered. “But I don’t need an escort.”

“Too bad,” Beck said, his voice firm but with a humorous edge. “You’re getting one.”

The walk back was filled with a charged silence. Irene kept her distance, her steps quick and purposeful, but Beck stayed close, his protective instincts refusing to let her out of his sight.

The scent of her filled his senses, intoxicating and maddening. Every glance she shot his way, every subtle movement, sent a jolt of awareness through him. She was fire and steel, a force he couldn’t ignore.

When they reached the edge of the woods, Irene turned to him, her expression guarded. “You don’t need to follow me any further.”

Beck crossed his arms, his gaze steady. “You’re hurt. You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, but she didn’t argue. Instead, she turned and headed toward the Bristlecone Bed & Breakfast, her fiery hair catching the soft glow of the setting sun.

When they arrived at the B&B, Ruby and Knox were standing on the porch waiting. Irene pushed past them and disappeared with Ruby close behind.

“She’s going to be trouble,” said Knox as he came to stand beside him.

“I can handle her.”

“I hope so.”

Beck chuckled. “I don’t have a choice. She’s my fated mate.”

“Ah,” replied Knox. “I completely understand. Ruby and I will stay here tonight.”

Beck nodded and then turned away, lingering in the shadows, his wolf pacing restlessly within. The danger wasn't over—not for her, not for anyone in Silver Falls. Somewhere out there, the hunters were regrouping, and the battle was far from over.

The thought sent a surge of determination through him. Irene was his to protect—whether she liked it or not.

And he'd be damned if he let anyone take her from him.

BECK

The wind whistled through the towering pines as Beck strode toward the pack's estate, his mind a storm of thoughts. Irene's scent still lingered on his skin, faint and maddeningly distracting, stirring his wolf and keeping his instincts on edge. Her words replayed in his mind like a broken record, each one adding to the puzzle she'd dropped in his lap.

A runaway. From a pack in New Mexico. The details she'd provided were thin, almost deliberately so, but enough to set his mind racing.

'She's lying,' his wolf growled, restless and agitated.

"Not lying," Beck muttered under his breath. "Not completely."

The estate loomed ahead, its sturdy wooden structures nestled within the protective embrace of the forest. The scent of his pack—familiar, grounding—enveloped him as he crossed into their territory. But it did little to ease the tight knot coiling in his gut.

He stepped inside the main building, heading straight for his office. The warmth of the room greeted him, the faint scents of leather, baking, fresh flowers, and pack life mingling and calming his senses. Beck sank into his chair, running a hand through his hair as he stared at the map spread across his desk. His fingers traced the southern boundary, his mind drifting back to where he'd encountered the hunters and reports of other sightings.

They had walked in virtual silence until Beck had finally broken it.

“Start talking,” Beck had said, his tone having left no room for argument.

Irene’s eyes had flashed at his as she continued to walk. “I don’t know what it is you want to know.”

Beck had grabbed her upper arm and whipped her around to face him. “I think you do. You’re no ordinary hiker...”

“I hate to break it to you, but even shifters like to hike in their human form,” she’d said, jerking her arm away.

“What are you doing here?” he’d asked pointedly.

“I’ve already told you everything you need to know.”

“Not even close.” Beck’s gaze had been sharp, unrelenting. “You’ve got hunters on your trail...”

“No. You have hunters in your valley. They’re your problem, not mine.”

“If I hadn’t shown up, they would have been your death or worse.”

“I was handling things.”

“Bullshit. But putting that aside, you’re not just taking random trails. It looks to me like you’re looking for something. Want to tell me what it is?”

“You seem to know so much, why don’t you tell me?” She’d deflated for a moment but then straightened her shoulders and looked him square in the eye. “If you must

know, I'm from New Mexico. I left my pack."

"Why?"

"Because I was ordered to mate with a wolf I had no interest in or attraction to. I didn't trust my alpha not to force me, so I left," she'd ended with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I don't believe you."

"It's the truth."

"Is it?" Beck had leaned towards her. To her credit, she hadn't given ground. "I know most of the alphas in New Mexico, and none of them would pull a stunt like that. You're hiding something."

Irene's lips had pressed into a thin line, her silence speaking volumes.

Beck had exhaled sharply, staring down into her. "If you don't want me reaching out to the packs in New Mexico to check out your story, then you'd better start talking. Right now, you're a danger to yourself and everyone else in Silver Falls."

Her gaze had wavered, her hands balling into fists. "You can't call them."

"Why not?" Beck had pressed, his voice low and dangerous.

"Because it'll put me in danger," she'd said, her voice trembling slightly before she'd caught herself and straightened. "And you're just going to have to trust me on that."

Beck had stared at her. His wolf had growled in frustration, the primal urge to protect her warring with his need for answers. She was hiding something—something

big—but the fear beneath her stubborn exterior was real. That much, he couldn't ignore.

“Fine,” he'd said finally, his tone clipped. “But if you're lying, I'll find out. And if it puts my pack at risk, you'll wish the hunters had finished you off.”

She hadn't responded. She hadn't had to. About that time, they'd arrived at the B you don't know better,” Beck growled, his tone warning.

Des chuckled, pushing off the doorframe. “Just saying. Be careful, Beck. If she is what we're not saying she is, then she's not the only one hiding something.”

Beck didn't respond as Des left, the door clicking softly shut behind him. He stared out the window, the wilderness with its vast forest, mountains and rivers stretching endlessly beyond the glass. Somewhere out there, Irene's secrets lurked, tangled with danger and the undeniable pull that tied her to him.

His wolf growled low in his chest, the sound a promise: he would protect her, and he would uncover the truth—no matter the cost.

The steady crackle of the fire in his office hearth did little to soothe the storm brewing in Beck's chest. He stood and leaned against the edge of his desk, arms crossed, his eyes fixed on the scarf draped over the chair across from him where he'd tossed it. Irene's scent lingered faintly in the air—a maddening, intoxicating reminder of the woman who had upended his careful balance.

Her words echoed in his mind, clipped and cautious, laced with both fear and defiance.

‘You can't call them—Because it'll put me in danger.’

Beck's instincts screamed at him to ignore her plea, to reach out to the alphas in New Mexico and demand answers. He couldn't imagine any of them forcing a bond on a she-wolf. That kind of behavior went against the very principles of leadership he'd always respected in them. But there'd been a fire in her eyes, a raw honesty in her fear that made him hesitate.

"She's hiding something," Beck muttered under his breath, his wolf growling in agreement.

The question was what. Her story had contained enough truth woven into it to make him pause. He could sense the pain beneath her words, the vulnerability she fought to keep buried. But it wasn't just her past that she was guarding so fiercely.

Why is she here?

Beck pushed away from the desk, pacing the room with long, deliberate strides. His boots echoed softly on the wooden floor as he tried to piece together the puzzle Irene had become.

She wasn't just here to hike. That much was obvious. Her movements, her searches, the way she lingered in certain parts of the forest—it all pointed to a purpose she wasn't willing to share.

His gaze flicked to the corner of the room where a detailed map of Silver Falls and its surrounding wilderness was pinned to the wall. The marked trails, the hidden paths—he knew them all by heart. And yet, Irene seemed to have her own map, one he couldn't see.

The treasure. It had to be. It was the only thing that made sense.

The thought settled heavily in his mind. Silver Falls had always been shrouded in the

stories of the lost/haunted/cursed treasure as well as whispered tales of silver veins hidden deep within the mountains. Most visitors dismissed the legends as nothing more than folklore, but a few treasure hunters had come and gone over the years, their hopes dashed against the unforgiving wilderness.

Was that why Irene was here?

The idea both irritated and intrigued him. He couldn't shake the feeling that, for Irene, the search was personal—that perhaps she knew something the others had not.

Beck stilled, his wolf pacing restlessly in the back of his mind. What would drive someone like Irene—a runaway, a woman clearly capable of surviving on her own—to chase a legend?

The fire crackled again, snapping him out of his thoughts. He exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. His instincts urged him to act, to dig deeper, to demand the truth from her. But he had given her his word—reluctantly—that he wouldn't contact her pack. He chuckled. Come to think of it, she hadn't told him which pack it was supposed to be.

For now, he would honor that promise, but that didn't mean he wouldn't find answers.

The next morning, Beck stood at the edge of the ridge Irene had glanced at several times on their walk back to the B&B. The crisp mountain air filled his lungs as he scanned the landscape, his mind replaying the fragmented pieces of Irene's story.

He crouched near the base of a rocky outcrop, brushing his fingers over a faint carving etched into the stone. It was weathered, almost invisible to the untrained eye, but he knew it well—a mark left by those who had come before, seeking the treasure that had remained elusive for generations.

Is that what she's looking for?

Beck's fingers curled into a fist as his jaw tightened. If Irene was chasing the treasure, she wasn't just putting herself in danger. She was stirring up interest in a secret the town had worked hard to bury.

The wind shifted, carrying with it a faint trace of her scent. Beck straightened, his wolf stirring at the familiar pull. She was close—closer than she should have been.

His gaze swept the tree line, sharp and searching. Irene had a knack for slipping away unnoticed, for keeping herself just out of reach. But she wouldn't stay hidden forever.

Beck's lips curved into a faint, wry smile as he turned back toward the trail.

You can run, Irene. But I'll find you. And when I do, we're going to have a real conversation about why you're here.

The thought sent a surge of fierce intent through him, his wolf growling low and possessive in the back of his mind. Whatever Irene was hiding, Beck would uncover it. And when the truth came to light, he had a feeling neither of their lives would ever be the same.

The morning sun dappled the trail ahead of him as he headed back toward town. His wolf paced within him, restless and uneasy, its instincts sharpening as his mind churned over everything Irene had told him—and everything she hadn't.

Her secrets were like smoke, elusive and impossible to grasp. But he was now certain that she was here for the treasure. It was the only thing that made sense. She was searching with purpose, following trails and patterns that most hikers wouldn't notice. Her movements betrayed her intent, even if her words remained carefully guarded.

And if it's the treasure she's after, Beck thought grimly, she could be walking into trouble. Beck didn't believe in the treasure per se, he just knew it had brought grief to a lot of people—many of whom had never been heard from again.

The stories about the cache of silver up above the falls had been around for almost as long as the town itself. There were legends about it and a lost silver vein hidden deep in the mountains, guarded by a curse that had claimed the lives of more than one would-be fortune seeker. It was a tale told to children to keep them from wandering too far into the woods—but Beck had seen enough over the years to know the curse might be more than a story.

He couldn't shake the image of Irene, defiant and fierce, standing in the clearing surrounded by hunters. The thought of her facing danger alone—whether from men with guns or the supposed curse—set his teeth on edge. He couldn't let her continue down this path, not without understanding why she was so determined to find the treasure.

And not without protecting her from whatever threats might be lurking in the shadows.

Beck reached the pack estate as the sun climbed high in the sky. The place was quiet, the stillness punctuated by the occasional rustle of leaves in the breeze. Most of his men were out on patrol, keeping an eye on the hunters who had yet to leave the valley.

His beta, Des, was leaning against the porch railing when Beck approached, his sharp eyes scanning the woods.

“You look like a man with too many thoughts in his head,” Des said, his tone light but knowing.

Beck grunted in response, stepping onto the porch and folding his arms across his chest. “Irene.”

Des raised an eyebrow. “Figured. What’s the latest?”

“She’s after the treasure,” Beck said bluntly, his voice edged with frustration. “Or at least, I’m almost certain she is. And if that’s true, she’s going to bring a hell of a lot of trouble with her.”

Des tilted his head, studying Beck carefully. “You worried about the curse?”

Beck shot him a sharp look. “I’m worried about her safety. The treasure’s been nothing but a myth for decades, but the hunters are real. And if they think she knows something that would help them find it, they won’t hesitate to use force to get it out of her.”

Des nodded slowly. “You’ve got a point. And if she actually finds it...”

“It won’t stay secret for long,” Beck finished grimly. “We’ve kept Silver Falls off the radar for decades. That treasure’s not just silver—it’s a beacon. The kind of find that would bring people in droves, poking around where they don’t belong.”

“And putting everyone here at risk,” Des said, his tone darkening.

Beck’s wolf growled softly in agreement, the protective instincts flaring at the thought of Irene in danger.

“I’m not letting anyone hurt her,” Beck said, his voice low and firm.

Des’s expression shifted, his mouth twitching into a faint smile. “You sound like a man with a personal stake in this.” Beck shot him a warning glare, but Des only

chuckled. “Hey, I get it. She’s... unique.”

“She’s my fated mate, asshole, and you know it,” Beck admitted after a pause, his voice quiet but resolute.

Des blinked, and the grin widened. “Well, shit. That does explain a lot.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that she’s hiding something,” Beck said, his jaw tightening. “I don’t know what brought her here, what’s driving her to risk her life for a legend—but I’m going to find out. And I’m going to make damn sure she stays alive long enough to tell me.”

That evening, Beck followed Irene’s trail back toward the ridge she’d mentioned. He moved silently through the trees, his senses tuned to every sound, every shift in the air. Her scent lingered faintly on the breeze, drawing him onward like a thread woven into the fabric of the forest.

When he reached the ridge, he paused, crouching to examine a patch of disturbed earth. Footprints—hers—led away from the main trail, cutting a deliberate path toward the base of a rocky outcrop.

What are you looking for, Irene?

The wind shifted, carrying with it a faint, metallic tang. Beck stilled, his wolf bristling at the scent. Gun oil. Scanning the terrain, his body tensed as he rose to his full height.

Then he heard it—a faint murmur of voices, carried on the wind.

The hunters.

His muscles coiled as he moved closer, his steps silent against the forest floor. The voices grew clearer, their words low and clipped, filled with intent that made his blood boil.

“...been tracking her. She was here earlier, I’m sure of it.”

“She’s got to be close. Spread out.”

Beck’s wolf growled low in his chest, the sound barely audible but filled with menace. His sharp gaze swept the area, searching for any sign of Irene.

A flicker of movement caught his attention—a flash of fiery red hair disappearing behind a boulder. Relief surged through him, but it was quickly drowned out by a wave of anger.

You’re in way over your head, Irene.

The hunters began to spread out, their weapons gleaming faintly in the fading light. Beck’s wolf pushed against his control, eager to unleash its fury on the men who dared to threaten what was his.

But he held back, pulling off his clothing, and waiting for the right moment.

As the lead hunter stepped closer to Irene’s hiding spot, Beck let out a low, guttural growl that stopped the man in his tracks.

The hunter turned, his eyes widening as Beck emerged from the shadows, his black wolf form towering and bristling with fury.

This wasn’t over—not by a long shot.

10

IRENE

Irene stayed low behind the jagged boulder, her breath shallow and her muscles coiled. The hunters' voices echoed faintly through the trees, growing louder. They were getting closer.

Dizziness swept over her again, a wave of nausea rising from deep in her gut. She clenched her fists against the ground, willing herself to focus, to push through it. But the sensation was all too familiar, the same disoriented unease she'd felt at the boulders and back in the diner.

What the hell is wrong with me? she thought, squeezing her eyes shut against the spinning world.

The hunters' voices drew nearer, their movements punctuated by the occasional snap of a branch or the crunch of leaves underfoot. Irene's pulse quickened. She pressed her back against the cool stone, her mind racing. Why did they keep finding her? She'd been careful, masking her scent, choosing obscure trails, avoiding patterns. And yet, here they were again, closing in.

Are they hunting me? Or is it something else?

The thought churned uneasily in her mind. What if they weren't just tracking her scent? What if they were after the same thing she was? If the markings she'd found earlier were correct, she was getting closer to the treasure—or at least another clue to

its location. Was it possible the hunters had caught wind of it, too?

The men's voices sharpened, and the nauseating dizziness surged again, making her vision blur. She shook her head, her hands gripping the edge of the boulder to steady herself. She didn't have time for this.

She listened as they separated. It sounded as if one of them was returning to their camp, with another moving off in a different direction, and the remaining one heading straight for her. Steeling herself, she reached for the hem of her jacket, preparing to remove her clothes. If she had to fight, it would be as her wolf. Her human form was no match for even a single rifle, and she was faster and could outmaneuver them as her wolf.

She was halfway through unzipping her jacket when a familiar, electric charge rippled through the air, brushing against her senses.

Beck.

The sensation was unmistakable—an almost tangible presence that sent a shiver racing down her spine. Irene's head snapped up, her gaze darting toward the tree line. And there he was, stepping silently through the shadows.

Her breath caught as she watched him, her wolf stirring restlessly within her. He moved with the grace and stealth of a predator, scanning the area with lethal focus. The set of his mouth, the sharp cut of his cheekbones, the sheer power in his broad shoulders—it was impossible not to notice how finely made he was.

Stop it , she scolded herself, tearing her gaze away.

But her traitorous eyes refused to listen, drawn back to him as he reached for the hem of his shirt.

Oh, for God's sake.

Beck stripped off his shirt in one smooth motion, revealing a chest that was all muscle and sinew, his bronzed skin catching the faint light filtering through the trees. Irene swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry as he unfastened his belt, his movements unhurried, deliberate.

You're in danger, she reminded herself fiercely. This is not the time to ogle the sheriff.

But even as she chastised herself, her gaze lingered, following the subtle ripple of muscle as he stepped out of his jeans. His body was a study in strength, every line and curve carved with precision. He had strong, muscled thighs and the cock that stirred between them was impressive.

Stop staring. Just stop.

As if sensing her attention, Beck's head turned slightly in her direction. For one breathless moment, their eyes met. His gaze was intense, searching, but she thought she detected a faint grin as his cock began to become engorged.

Irene tore her eyes away, heat creeping up her neck as she ducked back behind the boulder.

Focus, she commanded herself. The hunters were still out there, their movements growing more deliberate. And now Beck was here, too, complicating everything.

She risked another glance just in time to see the mist swirl around him, his powerful form shifting seamlessly into that of a massive black wolf. The sight stole her breath. Even in his wolf form, Beck was a force to be reckoned with—towering, commanding, and utterly lethal.

The black wolf raised his head, scanning the trail as his ears swiveled toward the approaching hunter. His growl was low, almost imperceptible, but it sent a shiver down Irene's spine.

For a fleeting moment, she felt a pang of guilt. Beck was risking himself for her, stepping into danger without hesitation. And yet, she couldn't shake the frustration bubbling beneath the surface. She didn't need saving. She didn't need him.

So why couldn't she look away? Or better yet, run?

The hunter drew closer still, and Irene forced herself to focus. Beck was here now, and that changed everything. Together, they had a chance—if she could keep her head clear and her heart from racing every time his eyes met hers.

The charge in the air crackled as the hunter entered the clearing, his rifle gleaming faintly in the fading light. Beck's wolf seemed to bristle, his growl deepening as he prepared to strike.

Irene crouched lower, her body coiled and ready, her gaze darting between the hunter and the black wolf who had claimed her attention—and her thoughts.

This was it. The storm was coming, and there was no turning back. Her fingers itched to shift, to let her wolf take over and fight her way out of this, but something held her back.

That something emerged from the trees, silent and lethal. His growl was low, a warning that rumbled through the clearing like a distant storm.

The hunter froze, his head whipping around to locate the source of the sound. His rifle lifted instinctively, but he was too slow.

In a blur of motion, Beck launched himself forward, his powerful body slamming into the man and knocking the weapon from his grasp. The hunter hit the ground with a grunt, his hand scrabbling for the knife at his belt, but Beck was faster.

Irene watched, her heart pounding as the black wolf made short work of his opponent, Teeth bared, Beck sank his jaws into the man's throat, ripping out his windpipe with lethal accuracy.

But the commotion hadn't gone unnoticed. The faint sound of voices reached her ears.

"Beck," she whispered urgently, her pulse racing.

The black wolf turned toward her, his sharp eyes locking onto hers for a brief moment before his gaze shifted to the sound of the approaching hunters. He growled again, his powerful form tense and ready.

Without thinking, Irene darted from her hiding spot, snatching up Beck's discarded clothes. He turned toward her, his massive frame radiating both power and protectiveness.

"Come on," she urged, her voice low but steady.

Beck trotted toward her, his movements fluid despite the tension in the air. As he reached her, he lowered himself slightly, his sharp eyes meeting hers in a silent command.

"Are you serious?" she hissed, glancing at the approaching shadows in the trees.

He growled softly, a sound that left no room for argument.

With a muttered curse, Irene climbed onto his back, gripping his thick fur tightly with one hand while holding his clothes with the other.

The moment she was settled, Beck surged forward, his powerful legs propelling them through the forest with a speed that left her breathless. The wind rushed past her, and she clung to him as he darted through the trees, his movements sure and unyielding.

The shouts of the hunters faded into the distance, replaced by the rhythmic thud of Beck's paws against the ground. Irene's heart pounded as the adrenaline surged through her veins, her mind racing to keep up with the whirlwind of events.

By the time they reached the edge of town, the knot in her chest had eased slightly. Beck slowed, his breathing steady as he came to a halt near a secluded clearing.

Irene slid off his back, her legs unsteady as she caught her breath. She held out his clothes, avoiding his piercing gaze as the mist swirled around him. Moments later, Beck stood before her in his human form, his expression a mixture of frustration and concern.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice rough.

"I'm fine," she said quickly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Thanks to you."

Beck's jaw tightened, his eyes narrowing. "This isn't over, Irene."

She hesitated, then forced a smile. "How about we discuss it over dinner?"

His brows shot up, surprise flickering across his face before he gave a curt nod. "Fine. Let's go."

The Rusty Fork was quiet when they arrived, the familiar chime of the doorbell

announcing their entrance. Irene slid into a booth, her pulse still racing as Beck joined her.

A waitress approached, her pen poised over her notepad. Beck's voice was calm, but the intensity in his eyes didn't waver.

"Two burgers. Medium rare. Fries on the side. And water."

The waitress nodded, her gaze darting nervously between them before she hurried away.

Beck leaned back in the booth, his eyes locked onto Irene. "Now," he said, his voice low and commanding. "Tell me what the hell is going on."

Irene swallowed hard, the intensity of his gaze pinning her in place. She glanced at the door, then back at Beck, her mind racing for the right words. But the truth was, she didn't have a ready-made lie or evasion—not one that would satisfy him, anyway, and judging by the fire in his eyes, he had no intention of letting her off the hook.

The Rusty Fork was quieter than usual, the din of conversation from earlier replaced by the low hum of refrigerated cases where they kept things people could grab on the go. Irene fiddled with the edge of her napkin, her thoughts a tangle of caution and reluctant trust. Beck sat across from her, his eyes never wavering, his presence filling the space like a thundercloud on the horizon.

The waitress set their plates down with a nervous smile before retreating quickly, leaving them alone in their booth. The smell of grilled meat and fried potatoes filled the air, but Irene's appetite was nonexistent.

Beck leaned back, his arms crossed, the tension in his shoulders evident even as he appeared relaxed. "So," he said, his deep voice cutting through the silence. "Are you

going to tell me what's really going on?"

Irene hesitated, her fingers tightening on the napkin. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"You already know the answer to that," Beck replied, his gaze steady.

A wry smile tugged at her lips despite herself. "I suppose I do." She sighed, leaning forward slightly. "You've saved my life twice now. I suppose that earns you some honesty."

Beck arched a brow but didn't interrupt, his silence as commanding as any words.

"My name is Irene Blakiston," she began, her voice low but steady. "I have a degree in archaeology from the University of Arizona. For the past five years, I've lived with a small group of she-wolves who've either left or been cast out of their packs. Most of them were survivors of... bad situations."

Beck's expression softened slightly, though his sharp gaze remained unyielding. "A pack of women," he said, his tone contemplative. "Not something you see every day."

"No," Irene agreed. "It's not. But it works for us. We've built a kind of hidden life..."

"In the Superstitions?"

"I'm not going to answer that."

A faint smile touched Beck's lips, and he inclined his head. "You just did, but fair enough; I won't push the point... at least not for now. But you're confirming what I've suspected. The rumors of an all-female pack in the Superstitions are true."

Irene frowned. “I didn’t confirm anything specific.”

“Close enough,” Beck said, his voice carrying a note of admiration. “Takes strength to build something like that. Resourcefulness, too.”

Surprise flickered across her face before she masked it, her fingers tracing the edge of her plate. “We didn’t have much of a choice. It was either survive or... don’t.”

Beck’s eyes darkened, a flicker of understanding passing through them. “I respect that,” he said quietly.

Irene allowed herself to relax, the intensity of his steady gaze feeling less suffocating than before. She hadn’t expected him to react this way—not with respect and curiosity rather than suspicion or judgment.

“But that still doesn’t explain why you’re here,” Beck said, his tone soft but probing. “Or why the hunters are after you.”

Irene exhaled slowly, her mind racing. “The hunters aren’t after me specifically,” she said carefully. “At least I don’t think so. I think they may be looking for the same thing I am.”

Beck leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. “The treasure.”

Irene hesitated, stress creeping back into her shoulders. “It’s not just a treasure,” she said slowly. “It’s a piece of history—something that could change everything for my pack.”

“Change everything how?” Beck pressed.

“I can’t say,” Irene admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “Not yet.”

Beck's jaw tightened, his frustration evident. "You're playing a dangerous game, Irene. That treasure—if it even exists—has drawn more than its fair share of trouble over the years. People have died looking for it."

"I know the risks," Irene said sharply. "I'm not doing this on a whim."

"Then why not tell me what you know?" Beck asked, his tone firm but not unkind. "You don't have to do this alone."

Irene looked away, her fingers tightening on the edge of the table. "Because if I tell you, it puts you and everyone in Silver Falls in danger. It's better if I handle this myself."

Beck's hand came down on the table, not hard, but enough to draw her attention. "You're not handling this alone," he said, his voice low and fierce. "Not anymore. Whether you like it or not, you're in my territory. That makes this my problem, too."

Irene's heart twisted at the conviction in his voice, the protective edge that sent a shiver down her spine. "You don't understand," she said quietly. "If I fail... if they find it first..."

"I won't let that happen," Beck said firmly.

The certainty in his words made her chest ache, the walls she'd built around herself threatening to crack under the force of his conviction. But she couldn't afford to let them fall—not yet.

"Thank you," she said, her voice barely audible. "For everything. But I can't let you take this risk for me."

Beck leaned back, his sharp gaze never leaving hers. "I think you underestimate me,

Irene.”

The air between them was charged with a simmering sexual attraction and tension, the pull she’d tried so hard to ignore tugging at her. Beck was more than she’d expected—stronger, sharper, and far more relentless.

And as she looked into his eyes, she realized she was in more trouble than she’d ever imagined.

The sound of the doorbell broke the spell, signaling another customer entering the diner. Irene glanced toward the door, her heart racing as the familiar scent of gun oil and sweat reached her nose.

Beck’s sharp gaze followed hers, his posture stiffening as he caught the same scent.

“We’re not alone,” he muttered. “And I’m the sheriff. This is my town.”

Irene’s pulse quickened, her breath catching as she met his gaze. The storm brewing in his eyes mirrored her own. Beck slid out of the booth and approached the hunters.

BECK

The sharp chime of the Rusty Fork's doorbell cut through the diner's low hum of conversation. Beck's sharp gaze followed Irene's to the two men stepping through the doorway. They weren't locals and he couldn't be sure they were the same men he'd seen before. Their stiff postures and predatory energy marked them as hunters. Their clothes, worn and stained with dirt, told him they'd spent time in the woods. The faint but unmistakable tang of gun oil and sweat followed them like a warning.

Hunters.

Beck felt his wolf stir, a low growl rumbling in the back of his mind. He glanced at Irene. Her face was a careful mask, but the stiffness in her shoulders spoke volumes. She smelled them, too. Knew exactly who they were—and so did Beck.

Beck slid out of the booth and rose to his full height, his imposing frame drawing the hunters' attention almost immediately. He strode toward them, his steps measured and deliberate. The two men exchanged a glance, their conversation halting as they turned to face him.

"I'm Sheriff Grey. Can I help you gentlemen?"

The taller of the two, a man with a scruffy beard and hard eyes, gave him a once-over. His lips curved into a thin, humorless smile. "Just grabbing something to eat," he said, his tone casual but guarded.

Beck crossed his arms, his sharp gaze flicking between them. “You boys aren’t from around here. I don’t think I’ve seen you here in town,” he observed. “Where you boys coming from?”

The second man, stockier and younger, shifted uncomfortably under Beck’s scrutiny. “Just passing through,” he muttered.

Beck’s wolf bristled, sensing the lie. He stepped closer, his presence filling the small space between them. “Passing through, huh? That’s interesting. Not many folks ‘passing through’ this area make it this far into the valley. Silver Falls tends to be a destination spot because it ain’t on the way to anywhere.”

The taller man’s smile faltered, his hand twitching toward the strap of the bag slung over his shoulder. Beck’s sharp eyes didn’t miss the motion.

“Careful,” Beck said, his voice dropping into a warning growl. “I react badly to surprises, as do my friends and my deputy, who’s right across the street.”

The man hesitated, his jaw tightening. “You always harass customers like this?”

Beck’s lips curved into a faint smile, but there was no humor in it. “You’re not my customers. And when someone comes in stinking of trouble, I try to let them know I can visit a whole lot more trouble on them than they can on me and mine.”

The stocky man glanced nervously at his companion. “We’re just here for some food,” he said quickly. “Ain’t looking for any trouble.”

Beck’s gaze didn’t waver. “Good. Because you won’t find much patience for your bullshit here. Best take what you came for and leave.”

The taller man held Beck’s gaze for a beat too long before finally looking away.

“We’ll grab something to go,” he said, his tone clipped.

Beck didn’t move as they walked to the refrigerated case near the counter, their movements tense and deliberate. He could feel Irene’s eyes on him, her presence steady and grounding even as his wolf growled with the urge to do more than just talk.

The hunters grabbed a few pre-packaged sandwiches and drinks, shoving them into their bag with hurried motions. As they turned to leave, Beck stepped into their path, his arms still crossed.

“Not so fast,” he said, his voice cutting through the air like a blade. “You forgot to pay. I wouldn’t want to have to arrest you for shoplifting.”

The stocky man fumbled for his wallet, his hands trembling slightly as he pulled out a few bills and tossed them onto the counter. The taller man’s jaw clenched, but he followed suit, his glare promising retribution he wasn’t bold enough to voice.

“Thanks,” Beck said, his tone sharp and dismissive. “Now, if you’re smart, you’ll keep moving. Don’t let me catch you wandering around where you don’t belong. We take trespassing seriously around here.”

The taller man opened his mouth, but his companion grabbed his arm, muttering something under his breath. With a final glance at Beck—and a quick, nervous one at Irene—they pushed through the door and disappeared into the night.

Beck stood still, listening to their retreating footsteps fade into the distance before removing his cell phone from his pocket. “Trap, two guys just left the Rusty Fork. Keep your eye on them until my people get to you; then head back to the office.” Turning back to the booth, he saw Irene watching him, her expression unreadable.

“They’re not just passing through,” she said quietly.

“No,” Beck agreed, sliding back into the booth across from her. “They’re looking for something.”

“And you think it’s me?”

Beck nodded. “I think it might be. But it could also be the treasure—or both. Either way, they’re not done. And neither am I.”

Irene’s breath seemed to catch, the charged silence between them stretching as she struggled to hold his gaze. Beck leaned forward, his voice low and firm.

“Whatever you’re hiding, Irene, it’s drawing them here. We’ve had hunters here before and they always move on. These guys look like they’re settling in. I’m not about to let them put you—or this town—in danger.”

Her whole body stiffened, but she didn’t look away. “I didn’t ask for them to target me, nor did I ask for your help, Beck.”

“Tough,” he said, his voice a quiet growl. “You’re getting my help whether you like it or not.”

The storm brewing in his eyes sent a shiver racing down her spine. Irene’s hands tightened into fists on the top of the table, the vein in her neck pounding as she fought to find her voice.

“Fine,” she said finally, her tone clipped. “But don’t expect me to make it easy.”

Beck’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smile, his wolf growling softly in agreement. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The hunters might have left the Rusty Fork, but the unease they'd left behind lingered in the air, heavy and suffocating. Beck could feel it like a storm building on the horizon, and he knew that Irene's secrets were wrapped up with it.

Beck slid back into the booth, rolling his shoulders to alleviate their tenseness as the hunters disappeared from view. He picked up his glass of water, taking a slow sip while keeping his eyes on Irene.

She stared at him for a beat before a small, incredulous laugh escaped her. "You enjoyed that," she accused, her voice laced with a mix of amusement and disbelief.

Beck arched a brow, setting his glass down. "I wouldn't say I enjoyed it," he said, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward. "But having them a little intimidated? That's not the worst thing I can do."

Irene shook her head, a reluctant smile tugging at her lips. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Only when the situation calls for it," Beck replied smoothly. His eyes softened as he leaned forward, his tone shifting. "I meant what I said earlier, though. I appreciate you telling me as much as you did. I know it wasn't easy."

Irene's smile faded slightly, her gaze dropping to the table. "It wasn't," she admitted. "But I figured you deserved something for saving my life... twice."

"You mean three times," Beck said with a faint smile.

Her head snapped up. "Three?"

"Counting tonight," he said. "I'm keeping track, in case you're wondering."

Irene rolled her eyes but couldn't hide the faint flush creeping up her cheeks. "Don't push your luck."

Beck chuckled softly, the sound low and warm, but his expression turned serious. "I get your need for secrecy about your pack. I do. And I'll honor it as long as it doesn't put this town—or you—in danger. But the treasure?" He shook his head. "That's a different story."

Irene stiffened, her shoulders tensing as she picked at her fries. "I told you, it's not about the treasure."

"It's always about the treasure," Beck said firmly, his gaze holding hers. "Whether it's you, the hunters, or some fool stumbling across your trail—it doesn't matter. That thing has been nothing but trouble for more than a century, and I don't intend to let it claim anyone else."

She opened her mouth to argue, but Beck held up a hand. "Before you say anything, let me make one thing clear. If you're looking for it, I'll help you. But I'm not doing it for money or for anyone else in Silver Falls. Whatever you find, it's yours. No strings attached."

Irene stared at him, her lips parting slightly in surprise. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I don't want to see you get hurt," Beck said simply. "And because I'm tired of people coming to my town chasing legends and leaving devastation in their wake. If helping you puts an end to this once and for all, then so be it."

Her gaze softened, a flicker of something unspoken passing between them. For a moment, the air between them felt lighter, less charged, and she nodded. "Thank you," she said quietly.

“You’re welcome,” Beck replied. “But don’t think this means I’m going easy on you. I’ll still expect answers—and honesty.”

Irene’s lips quirked into a wry smile. “I’ll do my best. But I make no promises.”

“Not good enough. If you answer me, you answer me honestly. Otherwise, don’t answer,” Beck said with a small grin.

“But that might give you the answer,” she countered.

“I know,” he grinned.

Irene began to relax, picking up her burger and taking a tentative bite. Her expression softened further as the flavors hit her tongue, and she let out a soft, appreciative hum.

“Okay,” she said, her tone lighter now. “This might be the best burger I’ve ever had. I know the ribs I got the other night were.”

Beck chuckled. “Welcome to the Rusty Fork. Glad to see you’re finally enjoying yourself.”

Irene grinned, wiping a bit of sauce from the corner of her mouth. “Don’t get used to it.”

Beck watched her as she settled into the meal, the parts of her personality she tried so hard to shield softening with every bite. It was a rare glimpse of her letting her guard down, and he found himself captivated by the change in her demeanor.

“Tell me about your time at the university,” he said, his tone casual but curious. “You mentioned archaeology earlier.”

Her eyes lit up, and she launched into a story about her first fieldwork assignment in the Arizona desert, her voice animated as she described the thrill of unearthing artifacts and the camaraderie of working with her team. Beck listened intently, a small smile tugging at his lips as she shared her experiences.

“You sound like you really loved it,” he said when she paused to take a sip of her drink.

“I did,” Irene admitted, a touch of wistfulness in her tone. “It was my escape, my way of finding something tangible in a world that felt... uncertain.”

Beck leaned forward slightly, his expression softening. “And yet, you left it behind.”

Her gaze flicked to his, and for a moment, she looked as though she might deflect the question. But then she sighed, her shoulders relaxing slightly. “Life has a way of pulling you in unexpected directions,” she said simply.

Beck studied her, his sharp gaze searching her face. “I think there’s more to it than that.”

Irene arched a brow, her smile returning. “What happened to not pushing for answers?”

“I said I’d honor your secrets about your pack,” Beck said, his voice low and even. “But I never said I wouldn’t ask questions.”

She laughed softly, shaking her head. “You’re relentless, you know that?”

“Always,” Beck said, his smile widening.

The comfortable rhythm of their conversation was interrupted by a faint sound

outside the diner—a low rumble of voices and the sound of boots on gravel. Beck’s wolf stirred, his senses sharpening as his gaze flicked to the window.

Irene noticed the shift in his posture, her expression tightening. “What is it?”

“Stay here,” Beck said, his tone firm.

Before she could protest, he rose from the booth and headed out the door.

“Trap?”

“Des came with a couple of your guys. He said they’d put them under surveillance.”

“Any trouble?”

“Not yet, but...”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks, Trap.”

Trap nodded and then headed back to the sheriff’s office. The storm brewing outside wasn’t over yet. Beck returned to the booth, forcing his body to look calm and composed. He slid back into his seat.

“Everything okay?” she asked, her voice steady but laced with curiosity.

“For now,” Beck replied, his tone low. “But I wouldn’t put it past them to keep sniffing around.”

Irene nodded, her fingers tracing the rim of her glass. The guarded look was back in her eyes, but there was a flicker of something else—something softer.

Beck leaned forward, his gaze unwavering. “Irene,” he began, his voice quieter now, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

She stilled, her eyes narrowing slightly. “What is it?”

“I know what you are to me,” he said, his tone steady, yet laced with an underlying vulnerability. “You’re my fated mate.”

The words hung in the air between them, charged and undeniable.

Irene’s lips parted slightly, her expression shifting from guarded to something that looked dangerously close to shaken. “Beck...” she began, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m not saying this to pressure you,” he continued, his eyes never leaving hers. “I just... I need you to know. I’ve known since the moment I caught your scent. And I think you know it, too.”

Irene opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again, her fingers tightening around her glass. Her gaze flicked to the table, then back to him, and for a moment, Beck thought she might bolt.

But she didn’t.

Instead, she leaned back slightly, her eyes searching his face as if trying to find the words. “I... I don’t know what to say,” she admitted finally.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Beck said gently. “I’m not asking for answers or promises. But I need you to understand that—to know you can trust me to protect you and your damn secrets, and to know I won’t back off. Earlier you called me relentless. There are folks in town who will tell you that when you look up that word

in the dictionary, you'll find my picture."

Irene looked stunned for a moment and then laughed, the merriment glistening in her eyes. "You know, I think I believe that."

"Good. I didn't want it to surprise you," Beck said. "This connection between us—it's real. And it's not something I'm willing to ignore."

Neither of them said anything, but his confession settled over both of them like a tangible force. Irene looked away briefly, her lips pressing into a thin line, but she didn't look repulsed. If anything, she looked... tempted.

Beck rose from the booth, holding out a hand. "Come on, I'll walk you back to the B&B," he said softly.

"Would it do me any good to decline?"

"None whatsoever."

Irene hesitated, then placed her hand in his, her touch sending a jolt of electricity through him.

The walk back to the Bristlecone Bed & Breakfast was quiet, the night air cool and crisp around them. Beck stayed close, scanning the shadows for any signs of danger, his protective instincts on high alert.

When they reached the porch, Irene paused, turning to face him. The soft glow of the porch light cast a warm hue over her features, highlighting the hint of uncertainty in her eyes.

"Thank you," she said softly, her voice carrying more weight than the simple words

implied.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Beck replied, his voice equally soft. “It’s my job to keep you safe.”

“And you’re not just talking about being sheriff, are you?” she asked, her gaze steady now.

“I like that you’re smart,” he said as he stepped closer, his towering frame blocking out the rest of the world as he looked down at her. “It’s so much more than that.”

Before she could respond, he leaned down, capturing her lips in a kiss that was both tender and possessive. For a moment, Irene froze, her breath hitching, but then she melted against him, her hands coming up to grip his shoulders.

The kiss deepened quickly, the simmering attraction between them igniting into a blazing fire. Beck’s arms wrapped around her, pulling her flush against him as his lips moved over hers with a hunger he couldn’t contain.

Irene’s fingers tangled in his hair, her body arching into him as a soft moan escaped her lips. The sound sent a bolt of desire through Beck, his wolf growling in approval as he backed her against the porch railing.

The world around them faded, leaving only the heat between them, the intoxicating pull that bound them together. Beck’s hands slid down her back, his touch firm and deliberate as he explored the curve of her waist, the softness of her skin.

“Beck,” Irene murmured against his lips, her voice breathless and filled with a mix of desire and hesitation.

“I’ve got you,” he said, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down her spine.

The intensity of the moment threatened to consume them, their connection deeper and more electrifying than either of them had anticipated. But just as Beck's hand slid to the small of her back, the faint sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears, snapping him back to reality.

Beck pulled back slightly, his breathing ragged as he scanned the darkness. Irene's eyes widened, her own breath coming in shallow pants as she followed his gaze.

"We're not alone," Beck muttered, his sharp gaze cutting through the shadows.

Irene stiffened, her hands gripping his arms. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," Beck said, his voice low and dangerous.

The sound grew closer, and Beck's wolf bristled, every instinct screaming to protect her. He stepped in front of Irene, his body a shield as he prepared for whatever—or whoever—was coming.

The night seemed to hold its breath, the tension thick and suffocating, but the sound evaporated as if it had never been there.

IRENE

The door to the Bristlecone Bed didn't ask for permission; he just took what he wanted, and what he wanted was her. He rammed into her repeatedly, causing her to climax more than once. She could feel his cock twitching and swelling and knew that his release was imminent.

He gripped the top of her shoulder as he gave her a final, ruthless thrust and began to spill his seed inside her.

"Next time, I will knot you as I claim you as my mate."

She wasn't sure if it was the intensity of the dream or his final words which caused her to wake with a start. She shook her head as she got out of bed and headed to the mini fridge for a bottle of cold water. She took a long drink and got back into bed.

But no matter how many times she woke and told herself she would not repeat the dream, she did. By morning, she was exhausted and felt as if Beck had been in her bed all night, and not just in her head.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon wafted through the Bristlecone's dining room as she made her way down the stairs. Irene sat at one of the small, rustic tables near the window, cradling a steaming mug of coffee between her hands. The sunlight streaming through the curtains should have felt comforting, but her thoughts were anything but.

She picked at the edge of her toast, her appetite dulled by the swirling conflict in her mind. The events of the previous night— both real and dreamt—replayed like a reel of film. She banished the eroticism and brought her conversation with Beck and his confession to the forefront.

You're my fated mate.

Her stomach twisted, and not from hunger. She knew he was right—she had felt it, too, the moment his presence had first enveloped her. That undeniable pull, the connection that seemed to go deeper than mere attraction. Her wolf recognized him as hers, as the other half of a bond she had spent her life doubting she'd ever find.

But what did it mean?

Her life had been built around independence, around survival on her terms. A mate—especially one as commanding and protective as Beckett Grey—wasn't part of that equation. She couldn't deny the appeal of his strength, his steadfastness, or the way his eyes seemed to pierce straight through her defenses. But could she let herself be bound to someone like that? Did she even want to?

Her gaze drifted out the window to the forested mountains in the distance. They called to her, as they always did, but this time the pull felt more like an escape. The treasure had always been her focus, her purpose—but now, with Beck in the equation, everything felt tangled.

Do I even want this anymore? But if I don't, don't I owe it to my pack? And what about them?

The thought startled her. She'd spent years searching for clues—first to the location of the Lost Dutchman and now to the treasure of Silver Falls, chasing a dream that could change everything for her pack. But Beck's words lingered in her mind, a quiet

echo of doubt. Was the treasure worth the risks it carried? Worth putting her pack—and herself—in danger?

She sipped her coffee, the bitterness grounding her, and made a decision.

Distance. She needed distance. From Beck, from his words, from the intensity that seemed to follow him wherever he went. A day in the mountains would clear her head, help her focus on what mattered.

Pushing her plate aside, Irene stood and headed for the door.

The mountain air was crisp and cool against her skin as Irene moved along a narrow trail, her boots moving softly over the rocky ground. The forest enveloped her, its familiar sights and sounds offering a semblance of comfort.

But even here, her thoughts were restless. She couldn't escape the nagging awareness of Beck, of the way he looked at her, the way he seemed to see right through her. And she couldn't shake the suspicion that he was nearby, watching, ensuring she was safe.

The thought should have irritated her. Instead, it warmed her in a way she wasn't ready to admit.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, quickening her pace.

The trail opened into a small clearing, the perfect spot to stop and review her map. She crouched near a cluster of rocks, unrolling the worn parchment and tracing her finger along the faded lines and markings. If her calculations were right, the next clue was close.

"I thought I'd find you here," came a familiar voice, low and steady.

Irene startled, whipping around to find Beck standing at the edge of the clearing, his hands resting casually at his sides. He looked every bit as commanding as he always did, his eyes fixed on her with a mix of exasperation and something softer—something that made her pulse quicken.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her tone sharper than she intended.

“Checking on you,” he said simply, stepping closer.

“I don’t need checking on,” Irene said, rolling up her map and shoving it into her pack. “I’m perfectly capable of handling myself.”

“I know you are,” Beck said, his voice calm but firm. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to worry.”

Her jaw tightened, and she rose to her full height, squaring her shoulders. “I don’t need a babysitter, Beck.”

“I’m not here to babysit,” he countered, his gaze steady. “I’m here because I care. But if you want me to back off, I will.”

The sincerity in his tone caught her off guard. She searched his face, expecting to find a hint of the stubbornness she’d come to associate with him. But instead, she found only understanding—and a flicker of something that looked suspiciously like pain.

“You mean that?” she asked cautiously.

“I do,” Beck said. “I’ll respect your independence, Irene. But don’t mistake that for indifference. I’ll still keep an eye on things, one way or another. It’s who I am.”

Irene crossed her arms, her emotions warring within her. She wanted to push him

away, to reclaim the space she needed to think clearly. But a part of her—small, but insistent—didn't want him to leave.

“Fine,” she said finally, her tone clipped. “But don't expect me to check in or ask for help.”

Beck's lips curved into a faint smile. “Wouldn't dream of it.”

With that, he turned and began walking back toward the trail, his stride confident and unhurried. Irene watched him go, a strange mix of relief and disappointment settling in her chest.

As he disappeared into the trees, she shook her head. Damn the man . She turned back to her map. She needed to refocus her energy. But even as she plotted her next move, the warmth of Beck's presence lingered, refusing to be ignored.

As the day wore on, Irene found herself moving deeper into the mountains, the terrain growing more rugged and remote. But no matter how far she went, Beck's words—and his absence—remained paramount in her mind.

When she paused to catch her breath, she scanned the tree line, half-expecting to catch a glimpse of him in the shadows. The thought made her lips twitch into a faint smile.

He wasn't following her. Not directly, at least. But she knew him well enough to suspect that he'd made arrangements to keep her in his orbit. And for all her protests, the idea wasn't as irritating as she wanted it to be.

It was comforting. Damn it.

As the sun began its slow descent, casting long shadows across the trail, Irene's

thoughts returned to the treasure—and the man who had complicated her search in ways she hadn't anticipated.

She tightened the straps of her pack and continued on, her steps full of confidence but her heart uncertain. Whatever lay ahead, she knew one thing for certain: Beck wasn't done with her.

And, she realized with a jolt of both excitement and trepidation, she wasn't done with him, either.

BECK

Sitting in his office, Beck watched the tiny dust particles illuminated by the sun as they danced in the light. The day had started as uneventfully as most mornings in Silver Falls did—quiet streets, the hum of life stirring in the small town, people going about their business. But Beck’s instincts were on edge, his wolf pacing restlessly within him.

It could be Irene, or it could be something more.

He was sorting through routine paperwork when his phone buzzed, breaking the silence. Knox’s name lit up on the screen. Beck picked up immediately, his tone clipped. “What’s up?”

Knox’s voice came through, low and tense. “We’ve got movement. My men spotted the hunters about thirty minutes ago. They’re grouped up—six of them—and they’re packing more than just rifles. Looks like they’ve got heavier firepower.”

Beck straightened in his chair, his grip tightening on the phone. “Location?”

“South ridge, near the old mine trails,” Knox said. “They’re moving deliberately, not like they’re hunting game. Looks more like a patrol.”

A low growl rumbled in Beck’s throat. “Anything else?”

Knox hesitated, then added, “They’re working as a unit. Coordinated. This isn’t some group of backwoods hicks on a hunting trip, Beck. They’re after something—or someone.”

Beck didn’t need to ask who. He already knew. “I’ll head out. Keep your men close but don’t engage unless necessary.”

“You got it,” Knox said, his tone grim. “Be careful out there.”

Beck hung up and immediately dialed the Bristlecone Bed I don’t believe them. What is important to you is important to me,” Beck said, his voice dropping to a low rumble. “I’m not walking into this blind. If I thought I could make you tell me and then keep you safe somewhere else, I would, but in the long run that’s not the way to overcome your distrust of the pack structure. I will say the more you tell me, the better I’ll be able to help.”

“And if I refuse to tell you anything?”

“Then you’ll find yourself being held at the pack’s estate while we search for the treasure ourselves.”

“You do know you have to sleep with your eyes closed, right?”

“That’s good to hear,” Beck chuckled. “Sounds like you’re planning to sleep in my bed.”

“It’s the only bed I’ll be using at your estate. The question is whether or not you’ll be sharing it with me.”

Beck laughed out loud. “I think the pack is going to enjoy your spirit... and our arguments.”

“You think we will argue?”

“I know we will, and so do you. The difference is you think you’ll win all of them. Hot news flash, you won’t.”

Irene grinned and nodded. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

They continued walking, their pace slower now as Irene began to speak. Her voice was quieter, more subdued, as though she were sharing a secret she’d carried for far too long.

“My connection to the treasure isn’t just about my pack,” she began. “It’s personal. One of my ancestors was Isaiah Blakiston, one of the first to search for it after Old Garvin told the tale. He and three others—what they called the ‘Iron Four’—set out to find the treasure.”

Beck’s brow furrowed as he listened, his wolf making sympathetic noises at the undercurrent of pain in her voice.

“They spent months in these mountains,” Irene continued, her gaze distant. “Hunting for clues, following leads that most people thought were just myths. And they found something. Something big. But whatever it was, it cost them everything. Only Isaiah made it back. The others—” Her voice caught, and she swallowed hard. “They never returned.”

“What happened to Isaiah?” Beck asked, his voice gentler now.

Irene shook her head. “No one really knows. He came back to town, raving about what he’d found, but before anyone could get the full story, he disappeared too. Some people thought he went back for the treasure. Others said he was silenced—by someone who didn’t want the truth to come out.”

“You believe this treasure is real?” Beck asked, his sharp gaze studying her face.

“Absolutely,” she said. “Because I have his journal. It’s fragmented, damaged by time, but the entries I’ve been able to decipher point to something. And if there’s even a chance it’s still out there, I have to find it.”

Beck exhaled slowly, his mind racing. He’d heard plenty of stories about the treasure over the years, but this was the first time he’d encountered someone with a direct connection to its history.

“Let me see the journal,” he said.

Irene hesitated, her fingers brushing against the strap of her pack. “Not yet,” she said finally. “It’s... fragile. And honestly, I’m not sure it would make much sense to anyone but me.”

“Fair enough,” Beck said, though his curiosity burned brighter. “But if this journal is as important as you say, the hunters must know about it, too.”

“They do,” Irene admitted, her voice tight. “At least, I think they do. It’s why they’re after me. They think I have answers they don’t. And the truth is... I might.”

Beck’s protective instincts roared to the surface. “Then we need to move carefully. If they’re looking for you, they won’t stop until they’ve either caught you or gotten what they want.”

“Which is why we need to stay ahead of them,” Irene said. “I’m not going to let them take this from me, Beck. I can’t.”

Beck stepped closer, his towering frame casting a shadow over her. “I’m not going to let them take anything from you,” he said, his voice low and fierce. “Not while I’m

here.”

Before he could say more, he heard a faint sound—a distant rustling, too deliberate to be the wind. His gaze snapped to the tree line, his body tensing.

“We’re not alone,” he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper.

Irene stiffened, her hand moving to the hilt of her knife as she followed his gaze. The forest seemed to hold its breath, the stillness almost oppressive.

Beck motioned for her to stay close, his senses on high alert as he scanned the shadows. The hunters were near—he could feel it. And if they were smart, they were watching, waiting for the right moment to strike.

“Stay with me,” Beck said, his voice a quiet command. “And don’t let your guard down.”

Irene nodded, her jaw set as she gripped her knife tightly. Together, they moved deeper into the forest, but even as they pressed on, Beck couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched—and that the danger was closer than either of them realized.

BECK

The narrow, almost overgrown trail twisted through the dense forest, the faint outline of what had once been a well-worn path now barely visible beneath layers of fallen leaves and tangled underbrush. Beck crouched down, brushing his fingers against the faint impressions in the dirt—a sign that this path had seen traffic recently, even if not by hikers.

“This is it,” Irene said quietly, her voice steady despite the rigidity in her shoulders. She glanced at Beck. “The journal mentioned a hidden trail leading to another set of markings. If we’re right, they should be just ahead.”

Beck nodded, his gaze sweeping the surrounding trees. “Let’s move, but carefully. If we found this, there’s a chance the hunters did too.”

Irene didn’t argue, her silence speaking volumes as she adjusted the strap of her pack and followed his lead. Her steps were light, deliberate, but Beck couldn’t miss that she was on edge, and he didn’t blame her. The deeper they went, the quieter the wilderness became, the usual chorus of birds and insects replaced by an eerie stillness. Beck’s wolf stirred restlessly in the back of his mind, its instincts prickling at the sense of being watched.

“I don’t like this,” Beck murmured, his voice low as he glanced back at Irene. “Stay close.”

“Wasn’t planning on wandering off,” she replied, sarcastically. But the way she moved a step closer to him told him she felt it, too—the unseen eyes, the creeping threat that seemed to follow them.

The trail led them to a small clearing, the sunlight that filtered through the canopy above casting dappled patterns on the ground. At the center of the clearing stood a jagged rock formation, its surface marked with faint carvings that were almost lost to time. Irene dropped to her knees beside the formation, her fingers tracing the faint symbols etched into the stone. She reached into her pack, pulling out the small, worn, leather journal. Opening it, her eyes scanned the pages as she skimmed through them. Finally, she looked from the page to the rock and back again. Her expression lit up with a mix of excitement and trepidation.

“This is it,” she said softly, her voice reverent. “The markings match the journal. This confirms it.”

Beck crouched beside her, his sharp gaze scanning the carvings. He couldn’t make sense of the symbols, but he watched as Irene’s expressions indicated the pieces of the puzzle were falling together.

“What does it say?” he asked, his voice quiet but firm.

Irene frowned, her brow furrowing as she studied the markings. “It’s another clue. Directions, almost. It points to a ridge further north, near the falls. If the journal’s right, the next set of markings should be there.”

“Can’t they just mark your map and the spot with a big X and be done with it?”

“Where would the fun in that be?” she quipped.

“We need to have a long talk about what does and does not fall under the definition

of the word fun,” Beck’s wolf growled softly, a low rumble that made her glance at him. “You think the hunters know about this?”

“I hope not,” she said, though her tone lacked conviction.

Before Beck could respond, the faint sound of rustling reached his ears. He stiffened, his body tensing as his sharp gaze darted toward the tree line.

“We’re not alone,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Irene froze, her hand moving instinctively to the hilt of her knife. “How many?”

“Two, maybe three,” Beck replied, his tone grim. “Stay low.”

The rustling grew louder, the sound of footsteps and hushed voices drawing closer. Beck motioned for Irene to stay behind the rocks as he moved toward the edge of the clearing, his movements silent and deliberate.

He caught sight of them first—a smaller group of hunters, their rifles slung over their shoulders as they moved cautiously through the underbrush. They hadn’t seen him or Irene yet, but they were closing in fast. He fell back to Irene’s position, his protective instincts surging.

“We need to move,” he said quietly. “Now.”

Irene didn’t argue, quickly gathering her things as Beck pulled out his phone and dialed Knox.

“They’re closing in,” Beck said as soon as Knox answered. “Smaller group, heavily armed. GPS coordinates are coming your way.”

“Got it,” Knox replied. “We’re on our way. Sit tight, and keep her safe.”

Beck ended the call and turned to find Irene watching him, her expression a mix of anger and disbelief.

“You told Knox?” she hissed, her voice low but heated.

“Yeah, I did,” Beck said, his tone unapologetic. “Because we need someone to watch our backs. These hunters aren’t playing games, Irene. If we don’t have allies, we’re done for.”

“You had no right to share this with him,” she snarled. “This is my search, my treasure?—”

“And you’re not doing it alone,” Beck interrupted, his voice firm but not unkind. “I know this is important to you, but this isn’t just about you anymore. Those hunters will kill us if they have the chance. Knox and the others can make sure that doesn’t happen.”

He could see Irene’s anger warring with reluctant acceptance. Finally, she let out a sharp exhale, her shoulders sagging slightly.

“Fine,” she muttered. “But next time, you tell me before you make a call like that.”

“Deal,” Beck said, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Now let’s get moving.”

They slipped back onto the trail, moving swiftly but cautiously toward the ridge Irene had mentioned. The air between them was charged, heavy with knowledge of the danger they were in and the consequences their failure might bring.

As they climbed higher, the forest grew denser, the trees closing in around them like

silent sentinels. Beck's wolf remained on edge, every sound and shadow a potential threat. But even as his instincts screamed to protect her, he couldn't ignore the quiet admiration he felt for Irene. Her fortitude, her courage—it was impossible not to respect her for it, even if it drove him crazy sometimes.

“We're getting close,” Irene said, her voice breaking the tense silence.

Beck nodded, his sharp gaze scanning the trail ahead. “Then let's make sure we get there first.”

The thought of what lay ahead—the treasure, the hunters, and the secrets Irene still carried—kept his mind racing as they continued on. He was mindful of the danger that loomed larger with each step, but he also knew he now shared her determination to find the treasure and get it to her pack. If anyone deserved it, it was Isaiah Blakiston's descendant.

As the shadows deepened around them, the promise of what they might uncover—and what it might cost—set his pulse racing with equal parts anticipation and dread.

The hidden cavern revealed itself as they pushed through a dense thicket, the mouth of the opening almost completely concealed by thick vines and moss-covered rocks. Beck froze as he took in the sight, his wolf growling softly in the back of his mind. It looked untouched, the kind of place that had kept its secrets for centuries.

“I think this is it,” Irene said, her voice hushed with awe as she crouched near the opening. Her eyes sparkled with determination, and despite everything else going on, Beck couldn't help but feel pride in her.

“Let's see what's inside,” Beck said, his tone low and steady. He motioned for her to stay close as they moved into the darkness.

The air inside the cavern was cool and damp, carrying the faint metallic tang of mineral deposits. Irene flicked on her flashlight—he had to give it to her, she'd come prepared—the beam cutting through the gloom to reveal the cavern walls adorned with faint traces of silver markings.

“This is incredible,” Irene murmured, stepping closer to one of the markings. She reached out, her fingers stopping just shy of the wall as she studied the intricate patterns. “These aren’t just markings—they’re symbols and they’re manmade. Look at the detail. This matches the descriptions in the journal exactly.”

Beck scanned the cavern, noting the way the symbols seemed to guide them deeper inside. “So, this is proof?” he asked, his voice echoing softly.

“More than proof,” Irene replied, her excitement evident. She squatted down near a cluster of artifacts partially buried in the dirt. She pulled a small, soft paintbrush out of her pack and began to remove the loose dirt covering them.

“These are tools—old ones. They could date back to the 1800s, maybe even earlier. If the journal’s right, Isaiah and his group might have left these behind.”

She worked quickly but methodically, brushing away dirt and debris with careful precision. Beck watched her, impressed by the way her hands moved with practiced ease, her focus unshakable.

“You’ve done this before,” he said, a hint of admiration in his tone.

“Plenty of times,” Irene said, glancing up at him with a faint smile. “Fieldwork was my favorite part of archaeology. Nothing beats the feeling of uncovering something no one’s touched in centuries.”

Beck crouched beside her, taking her flashlight and illuminating a faint etching on the

ground. “You’re good at this,” he said, his voice quieter now. “Careful. Patient. Not many people would take the time.”

Irene’s smile widened slightly, but she didn’t look up from her work. “Thanks. It’s not just about finding the treasure. It’s about respecting the history that comes with it. People have died for this treasure. Respect needs to be paid.”

Beck watched her for a moment longer, a strange warmth settling in his chest. He’d known Irene was determined, resourceful—but seeing her like this, completely in her element, made him realize just how much he respected her.

And cared for her.

The realization hit him like a freight train, and for a moment, he couldn’t breathe. She wasn’t just a stubborn, enigmatic woman dragging him into a dangerous chase. She was brilliant, capable, and more than he’d ever expected.

And she was his.

“Beck,” Irene said, pulling him from his thoughts. She pointed to a series of faint carvings on the wall ahead of them. “These symbols—they’re pointing to something deeper in the cavern. We need to follow them.”

He nodded, rising to his full height and shining his flashlight toward the markings. “Lead the way.”

Together, they moved deeper into the cavern, their steps careful and deliberate. The air grew colder, the walls narrowing as the symbols became more intricate, more deliberate.

“We’re close,” Irene whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of their

footsteps.

But just as they rounded a corner, a faint noise reached Beck's ears—a muffled scuffle, the unmistakable sound of boots moving over the cave floor.

He froze, his body tense as his wolf's growl reverberated in the air between them. "We've got company," he said, his voice a barely restrained whisper.

Irene's eyes widened, her hand tightening around the flashlight. "Hunters?"

Beck nodded, his sharp gaze sweeping the shadows. "Stay here," he said, his voice firm. "Don't make a sound."

Irene opened her mouth to argue but seemed to think better of it, her mouth closing as she pressed herself against the cavern wall.

The scuffling grew louder, the sound echoing through the narrow space. Beck strained to pick out details—the number of footsteps, the direction they were coming from.

"They're close," Irene whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

"Too close," Beck muttered, his hand moving to the knife at his belt.

The danger in the air was suffocating, every second stretching into an eternity as they waited. Beck's wolf snarled within, a fierce need to protect her surging through him.

But as the footsteps stopped just around the bend in the cavern, Beck's heart hammered in his chest.

They'd been found.

And now, there was no way out.

IRENE

A faint scuffle came as the boots cautiously made their way inside—the sound sending a chill racing down Irene’s spine. The hunters were wearing headlamps on their hats, projecting light on the wall that seemed to dance with the shadows in a kind of macabre waltz. Irene’s grip on her flashlight tightened, her knuckles white as the shadows seemed to come closer. She looked to Beck, his imposing figure tense and ready, every muscle coiled with the promise of violence if it came to that.

“They’re here,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of her own heartbeat.

Beck looked at her, his gaze sharp and steady. Beneath the surface, Irene knew, his wolf raged as did hers. “We’re going to need to move fast and to fight. They’re coming this way, and they’re not going to want to chat. If you can get past them and head back the way we came. Knox should be coming.”

Irene said nothing but punched him in his bicep. “Your plan sucks. We stay together. Aren’t you the guy who wants me to believe that a pack is always stronger than the individual? Well at least for today, I’m your pack.”

He started to argue and then must have realized how useless that would be. Irene swallowed hard, her mind racing. She wasn’t afraid to fight, but she wasn’t naive enough to think they could take on a group of armed hunters in human form. Their wolves, though—that was a different story.

Beck must have read her mind, his hand already moving to the buttons of his shirt. “Strip,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Her cheeks flared, but she nodded, unzipping her jacket and yanking it off as Beck pulled his shirt over his head. They worked quickly, stripping down to bare skin, the urgency of the moment leaving no time for modesty. She stuffed their clothes into her pack, tightening the straps with quick, efficient motions before leaning it up against the cave wall—out of the way, but easy to get to.

The scuffling grew louder, echoing down the narrow passageway that led to the chamber they’d been exploring.

Irene risked a glance at Beck. His expression was grim, his eyes glowing faintly as his wolf pushed to the surface. She could feel the raw power radiating off him, a force that made her own wolf stir with anticipation.

“We do this together,” Beck said, his voice a low growl as he crouched beside her. “Stay close, no matter what happens.”

She nodded, her heart pounding as the familiar heat of her shift began to build beneath her skin. The air around her shimmered, the cavern’s dim light bending and crackling as her body gave way to the primal power within.

The swirling mist of her shift was warm and electric, sparking faintly as it enveloped her. Beside her, Beck’s mist swirled dark and thick, the crackle of his energy sending a ripple through her own. Their wolves emerged side by side, two massive forms that filled the cavern with their presence.

Irene shook her head, clearing the last vestiges of her human thoughts as her wolf senses sharpened. She could feel Beck’s presence like a steady drumbeat, his protective instincts wrapping around her like a shield.

The hunters rounded the corner, their flashlights cutting through the dim chamber.

“What the hell—” one of them started, his voice faltering as the dual mists crackled and melted away completely, the air thick with an almost tangible charge.

Beck’s black wolf stood tall and formidable, his fierce blue eyes glowing with feral intensity. Irene’s red wolf was smaller but no less imposing, her sleek frame coiled with power, her eyes locked on the intruders.

For a moment, the hunters froze, their weapons half-raised as they stared at the wolves before them. Irene knew it was one thing to know wolf-shifters existed, but to be trapped in a small cavern with them was another thing entirely. The primal energy radiating from the pair seemed to fill the chamber, a warning that sent a shiver down the spine of even the boldest hunter.

“Shifters,” one of the men muttered, his voice trembling.

“No kidding,” another snapped, his hands fumbling with his rifle. “Take them out before they?—”

Irene moved first, her wolf lunging forward with a ferocious snarl. Beck was right beside her, his powerful frame slamming into the nearest hunter with the force of a freight train. The man went down hard, his weapon clattering to the ground as Beck’s massive jaws snapped perilously close to his face.

Irene darted toward the second hunter, her claws raking across his chest as he stumbled back, his flashlight tumbling to the floor and plunging the chamber into near darkness.

The hunters shouted, their movements frantic as they scrambled to regroup. But the wolves were faster, their combined strength and ferocity overwhelming the intruders

with an efficiency that left no room for recovery.

One of the men managed to raise his rifle, but Beck was on him in an instant, his powerful jaws clamping down on the barrel and wrenching it from his grip. The man screamed, his voice echoing through the cavern as he stumbled back, his weapon now a useless piece of scrap.

Irene turned her attention to the last hunter, her wolf circling him with a low, guttural growl that made him freeze in place. His hands shook as he raised them in surrender, his wide eyes darting between her and Beck.

Beck's wolf snarled, the sound a low rumble that reverberated through the chamber.

The hunter didn't need to be told twice. He turned and bolted, his footsteps echoing wildly as he disappeared into the darkness.

Irene's wolf let out a satisfied huff, her gaze flicking to Beck as the primal energy in the chamber began to ease. But even as the immediate danger passed, she knew it was far from over.

Beck padded over to her, his black fur brushing against hers as he nudged her shoulder with his snout. She met his gaze, the connection between them stronger than ever.

But as they turned toward the deeper recesses of the cavern, a faint sound reached their ears.

Voices. More hunters.

Irene's wolf stiffened, her body tensing as the realization hit her like a punch to the gut. They weren't alone—and the next wave was already on its way.

The faint sound of approaching footsteps echoed ominously through the cavern, each muffled thud sending a jolt of adrenaline through Irene's veins. Her red wolf bristled, her eyes darting to Beck. His black wolf stood tall and imposing beside her, his eyes glowing with feral intensity.

The second wave of hunters was closing in. There was no time to regroup, no time to plan. All they had was each other—and the unrelenting resolve to survive.

The first hunter appeared at the edge of the chamber, his flashlight casting jagged shadows on the walls. He froze for a split second when his beam illuminated the two wolves, but he recovered quickly, barking orders to the others behind him.

“Spread out! Don't let them escape!”

Irene didn't wait for them to make the first move. With a guttural snarl, she launched herself at the closest hunter, her powerful legs propelling her across the cavern. Her claws raked against his arm, knocking his weapon aside as he staggered back with a yell.

Chaos erupted in an instant.

Beck lunged at another hunter, his massive frame colliding with the man like a battering ram. The hunter went down hard, his rifle skittering across the floor as Beck's teeth snapped dangerously close to his throat.

But the hunters weren't amateurs. They regrouped quickly, their weapons raised as they shouted to each other, their movements coordinated and deliberate. Irene twisted out of the way as a shot rang out, the bullet sparking against the cavern wall behind her.

The confined space turned every sound into a deafening roar, every movement into a

frantic dance of survival.

Irene darted to Beck's side, her wolf growling fiercely as she joined him in fending off two hunters who had managed to corner them. Her jaws clamped down on the strap of one man's rifle, yanking it away as Beck knocked the other to the ground with a powerful swipe of his paw.

The acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air, mingling with the coppery tang of blood.

Beck roared in pain as a bullet grazed his flank, the scent of his blood igniting a fire within Irene. Her mate was injured. No one was going to hurt him. Not while she was still breathing. Her wolf snarled, her vision narrowing as rage surged through her.

With a feral cry, she turned on the hunter who had fired the shot, her claws slashing across his midsection in a blur of movement. He stumbled back, his weapon falling from his hands as he clutched at the deep gashes, his face pale with shock.

The fight became a blur of motion and instinct, the two wolves moving as one. Beck's injury slowed him slightly, but he fought with a relentless brutality, his strength a beacon that drew Irene closer. Together, they pushed the hunters back, their ferocity overwhelming even the most hardened of their attackers.

When the last hunter turned and bolted, his curses echoing behind him, Irene stood panting in the center of the chamber, her red fur matted with sweat and dirt. Beck limped toward her, his body language a mixture of gratitude and pain.

Her wolf whined softly, nudging him with her nose as she circled him protectively. The wound on his flank wasn't deep, but the sight of his blood made her stomach twist.

They shifted almost simultaneously, the mists swirling around them in a cacophony

of lightning, thunder and shards of color and energy. Irene emerged first, the cool air against her bare skin doing little to calm the fire still burning in her veins.

Beck stood before her, his tall, muscular frame glistening with sweat and streaked with dirt. The wound on his side trickled blood, the sharp red stark against his bronzed skin. Bloodied and dirty with sweat and things she'd rather not think about, he was still gorgeous—even better than the dream.

“You’re hurt,” she said, her voice trembling with a mix of worry and anger.

“It’s nothing,” Beck replied, his tone rough as he stepped closer. “You fought like hell, Irene. That was incredible.”

She shook her head. “Don’t,” she snapped. “Don’t act like this is normal. You’re bleeding, Beck. You could’ve been killed.”

He reached out, his fingers brushing her arm in a gesture meant to soothe. “So could you,” he said softly. “But we’re both alive, and that’s all that matters.”

The tension between them was palpable, the adrenaline of the fight still coursing through their bodies. Irene looked up at him, her chest heaving as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

“I thought I was going to lose you,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” Beck said, a faint smile curving his lips.

Before she could think, before she could stop herself, she closed the distance between them. Her hands found his shoulders, her fingers digging into his skin as she pulled him down toward her.

Their lips met in a fierce, desperate kiss, the heat between them igniting like a wildfire. Beck's arms wrapped around her, pulling her flush against him as he deepened the kiss, his mouth moving over hers with a hunger that mirrored her own.

Irene felt herself melting into him, her body responding to the intensity of his touch, the sheer power of his presence. The world around them faded, the echoes of the battle replaced by the pounding of their hearts and the heat of their desire.

Their lips tangled together, dueling for supremacy as they clung to one another. His cock hardened against her, and she knew if he chose to claim her, she would never be able to say she hadn't wanted it. He pushed her back into the wall—his body pressing against hers in a primal, dominant possession.

He hesitated for a moment, waiting, she thought, to see if she would object, but she didn't. She knew she might regret this down the line, but in this moment the only thing she wanted was to be the claimed, fated mate of Beckett Grey. And she didn't want to wait for some ceremony where someone she didn't know proclaimed what she did. She was his, and he was hers.

When she offered him no resistance and arched into his body, Beck lowered his head, groaning as he took her pebbled nipple into his mouth and sucking. Irene felt arousal surge through her body, and she moaned. With one hand he teased and played with the nipple that he didn't have in his mouth, where he swirled his tongue around it before nipping it.

The other hand slid down her body, tracing her curves until it came to rest on her sex. He cupped her mound before sliding his hand down and parting her lower lips with his fingers, tracing the outline of her pussy before plunging two fingers in and out of her sheath.

She had never been so aroused in her life. The minute he curled his fingers up inside

her, pinched her nipple and sucked hard, her body responded with an explosive orgasm. She would have cried out, but he brought his mouth up to hers to swallow her scream of ecstasy.

His cock throbbed between her legs and the last part of her brain that was still capable of rational thought said she should protest. The combination of his fondling made words or any physical response that was less than encouraging impossible.

“Mine,” he growled provocatively.

“Beck, I...”

He fastened his mouth to hers, plunging his tongue into the recesses of her mouth as he kissed her possessively. Irene found she had no resistance or defense against the onslaught of his need and gave up any pretense that she did. What was worse, in spite of what her claiming might mean for her pack, she didn’t want to resist.

16

IRENE

Beck's eyes flashed with a primal hunger as he turned Irene and pushed her against the wall, his hands forcefully pinning hers to the slick surface.

"You're mine," he growled possessively, nuzzling her neck and trailing his hands down her trembling body. One hand caressed her nipples, while the other explored the heat between her thighs. Irene's mind raced with fractured thoughts, telling herself to resist but unable to deny the desire coursing through her.

With a swift kick, Beck spread her legs wider. Feeling his engorged cock nudging the cleft of her buttocks made her heart race even faster. Beck was not some tender lover who would take her gently the first time. No, he was a primal wolf taking and claiming what was his. This was far more like her dream than she had ever imagined, and it thrilled her in a way that she never could have imagined. Steadying her hips, he entered her with a powerful thrust; she cried out in surrender and ecstasy.

The intensity of his pounding and the rough grip on her hips left no room for coherent thought. All she could feel were the raw physical sensations and emotions overwhelming her. His grunts and groans echoed in her ear as he claimed her body and soul.

"You belong to me," Beck seethed, driving himself deeper inside her.

Irene could only nod in agreement, lost in a world of pleasure and surrender to his

relentless assault. Her body bumped against the cold wall as Beck's grip tightened, marking her skin with bruises that would remind her of this moment for days to come.

"Say it," he demanded.

"Yes, Beck... yours," she cried out, giving into his primal dominance.

She capitulated to his touch, her body igniting with a fierce desire that consumed her. A second climax overtook her in a wild frenzy, the ferocity and fever of it shocking even herself. But she had no time to recover before her insatiable body demanded more, craving the ultimate release she knew only he could provide.

Every inch of her responded to him. No part was left untouched by his powerful presence. Her nipples throbbed for his touch, her pussy ached for every hard stroke that rasped against its walls.

As another wave of pleasure crashed over her, Irene screamed and shook with an intense orgasm that rocked her to her core. But still, Beck remained motionless within her. She could feel his knot pressing against her entrance, and she wriggled back against it desperately, craving his ultimate possession.

"Please, Beck," she moaned breathlessly.

He chuckled and growled simultaneously, the sounds blending together like thunder and lightning in a turbulent sky. Beck nuzzled her neck and trailed a tantalizing finger down her body, leaving a trail of goosebumps and unbridled need in its wake.

"This is neither the time nor the place, but rest assured you will feel my knot lodged deep inside you," he crooned.

Slowly, he withdrew from her dripping core, causing Irene to whimper in frustrated need. Beck spun her around and devoured her mouth once more, his hands gripping her hips as he lifted one of her legs and drew it over his hip. Moving back between her legs, he rubbed against her intimately before plunging two fingers inside her, his lips trailing down her throat.

Irene had never experienced such complete and utter bliss with any man before. All she could do was give in to the pleasure he bestowed upon her, his skilled fingers bringing her to another mind-blowing orgasm that still left her craving more.

Beck lifted her effortlessly and mounted her, driving deep into her slick sheath as she moaned in ecstasy. He ravaged her mouth and body with equal intensity, growling and groaning in unbridled pleasure.

Then, suddenly, Irene felt Beck's hand cupping her face and pulling it away from him, exposing her throat. There was a sudden recognition of what he was about to do—mark her as his own.

"No, Beck," she gasped, trying to resist even as he continued to thrust into her relentlessly.

"And who is to stop me, Irene? The other she-wolves in your pack? You are mine, and you will bear evidence of that." Beck's voice was low and menacing, his grip on her chin tight and unrelenting.

With a primal growl, he claimed her lips in a forceful kiss, silencing any protests she may have had. Finally capable of rational thought, Irene knew that what he was about to do could never be undone. She began to push against him, trying to resist, but he was too strong, too dominant. As he lowered his head towards her neck, she knew what was coming.

She screamed as he entered her without hesitation, his powerful thrusts causing her body to respond with raw pleasure. He marked her neck with sharp teeth, claiming her as his mate in the most primal way possible. He bit down savagely, she knew to ensure the mark would be a prominent reminder to all that saw it that she was the mate to an alpha wolf.

There was no escape from the intense pleasure coursing through Irene's body as Beck continued to ravage her. With each thrust, she could feel his seed filling her, marking her as his forever. Her screams turned to moans as yet another orgasm ripped through her system, leaving her trembling and gasping for air.

Beck held onto her tightly as his own release overtook him, spilling everything he had into her. In that moment, they were one, bound together by their primal desire and need for each other. And as they stood there in a tangled mess of limbs and passion, all Irene could do was revel in the intensity of their connection.

They finally broke apart, their breath mingling in the narrow space between them. "Mine," he purred.

Her heart ached at the raw emotion in the word, the vulnerability that lay beneath his strength. "And you're mine," she whispered, her voice steady despite the storm raging within her.

But before the moment could settle, a distant noise reached their ears—the unmistakable sound of voices and footsteps echoing down the passageway. Beck and Irene swore in unison, the reality of their situation crashing back over her like a wave.

"They're coming back," Beck said, his tone grim as he pulled her close.

Irene nodded, her resolve hardening as she stepped back and grabbed her pack. "Then we keep moving," she said, her voice steady and determined.

Irene knelt beside Beck, her hands steady despite the chaos still crackling in the air around them. His blood glistened against the pale skin of her fingers as she worked to clean the wound on his flank. The gash wasn't as deep as she had feared, but the sight of it still made her heart twist painfully in her chest.

"Are you all right?" he asked, looking pointedly at the bite mark.

"I'm not the one who's bleeding," she muttered, reaching up to tentatively touch the wound on her neck. "Okay, so I've got a little blood, but you've got more." Her voice was softer than she'd intended. She knew she should be angry with him, but she couldn't muster the energy or the emotion.

Beck chuckled, the sound low and gravelly, though his eyes betrayed the weariness he was trying to hide. "Not going anywhere without you. But tell me something—what else is in that magic backpack of yours? Bandages, disinfectant, snacks... What are you, Mary Poppins?"

Irene shot him a look, though the corner of her mouth twitched despite herself. "That would make you what, exactly? My cocky, oversized chimney sweep?"

He grinned, his teeth gleaming even in the dim light of the cavern. "I prefer 'rugged and heroic partner,' but I can see why you'd settle for 'chimney sweep.'"

"Beck, if you don't stop talking, I'm going to accidentally pour antiseptic directly into this wound."

"Accidentally, huh?" he teased, though he winced when she applied pressure to the bandage.

"Hold still," Irene said again, but her voice was softer now, her gaze flickering to his. "I mean it."

The joking ebbed, replaced by an energy that hummed between them like a live wire. She finished wrapping the wound, knotting the fabric securely. For a moment, she let herself linger, her fingers brushing his skin as she pulled her hands away.

“Done,” she said quietly, straightening up and forcing herself to put some space between them.

Beck flexed his muscles, testing the bandage. “You’ve got a real talent for this, you know. If the whole treasure-hunting thing doesn’t work out, you could open a clinic.”

“Or,” she countered, standing and dusting off her hands, “I could not have to deal with reckless shifters who think they’re indestructible.”

Beck stood as well, towering over her in that infuriating, commanding way he always did. “I’m not reckless. I’m resourceful.”

“Debatable.”

After pulling on their clothes, Irene’s eyes turned to the carvings on the wall, the intricate symbols partially obscured by the damage left behind from the fight. Scorch marks from stray bullets and claw marks marred the surface, obliterating parts of the delicate patterns.

“This...” she murmured, stepping closer to the wall, her voice tight with frustration. “This is the next part of the clue, but some of it’s gone. The fight must’ve destroyed it.”

Beck stepped beside her, his blue eyes scanning the markings with a frown. “Can you make out anything?”

Irene bit her lip, her fingers tracing the faint lines still visible on the wall. “Some of

it,” she admitted, “but not enough. It’s like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces missing.”

They spent the next several minutes combing the chamber, searching for anything else the fight might have revealed—or hidden. Irene’s hands moved with practiced precision, brushing away dirt and debris, but frustration clawed at her the longer they searched without answers.

“This doesn’t make sense,” she muttered, shaking her head as she crouched near the base of the wall. “We should be closer. The journal—everything—led us here. This has to be it.”

Beck placed a steady hand on her shoulder, his touch grounding. “We’ll figure it out,” he said, his voice calm but resolute.

Irene looked up at him, her chest tight with a mixture of gratitude and anger—anger at herself for feeling so lost, for not being able to see the next step. “What if we’re too late?” she whispered. “What if the hunters already found it, and this was just... what’s left?”

Beck crouched beside her, his expression softening. “Then we’ll find another way,” he said simply. “But I don’t think they’ve found it yet. If they had, they wouldn’t still be sniffing around.”

She nodded, though the knot in her chest didn’t ease.

They continued searching for what felt like hours, the cavern growing colder as the night stretched on. They never encountered a reason for the voices or the sound of the footsteps they’d heard earlier. Irene’s flashlight began to dim, its beam flickering against the walls like a failing heartbeat.

“Let’s call it a day,” Beck said finally, his voice cutting through the oppressive silence. “We’re not going to get anywhere like this.”

Reluctantly, Irene nodded, standing and brushing the dirt from her hands. “We’ll come back,” she said, more to herself than to him. “There has to be something we missed.”

Beck didn’t argue, though the tension in his jaw told her he was just as frustrated as she was.

As they made their way out of the cavern, the air grew heavier, and the sense of being watched was like an omniscient presence. She glanced over her shoulder more than once, her hand instinctively moving to the hilt of her knife.

When they emerged into the open air, the cool breeze was a relief—but it did little to dispel the feeling of unease.

“We need to move,” Beck said, taking her hand and pulling her deeper into the forest.

Irene didn’t argue, her trust in him absolute as they disappeared into the shadows. But as they fled, her mind raced with unanswered questions, her determination burning brighter than ever. They were close—so close—but the treasure, and the danger that surrounded it, remained just out of reach.

And somewhere in the darkness, the hunters were closing in.

BECK

They navigated their way back to where Beck's SUV waited, the wilderness closing around them like a dark embrace. The energy between them was intense, and yet he couldn't regret anything that had happened. She had capitulated to his dominance with only a token resistance and didn't seem to be at all bothered by what had happened. In fact, as they'd set off for the SUV, she'd reached for his hand and he'd wrapped his fingers around hers as they walked, an unspoken acceptance of the change in her status.

He glanced at Irene, her jaw set and her expression guarded. He knew the argument was coming—it had been brewing since they left the cavern—but he wasn't in the mood to back down.

When they reached the clearing where his vehicle was parked, she spun to face him, her eyes flashing like embers in the fading twilight.

"Don't even think about it, Beck," Irene said sharply, crossing her arms over her chest. "I know what happened up in the cave..."

"Good. I'd hate to think it wasn't as memorable for you as it was for me," he said, trying to lighten the mood.

Irene rolled her eyes. "Of course, it was memorable. But I'm not ready to just join your pack at your estate. I want to go back to the B&B."

Beck sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Irene, this isn't up for debate."

Her brows shot up, and a sardonic laugh escaped her lips. "Excuse me? I think I just heard you say this isn't up for debate. Since when do I take orders from you?"

"Since you nearly got killed twice in one day," Beck shot back, his voice a low growl. She certainly knew how to kill a mood. "Since I claimed you as my mate? You think I can just let you wander around out here with hunters on your tail? What's your plan? To keep running and hope for the best?"

Her lips parted, but whatever retort she'd been about to fire died on her tongue. Instead, she looked away, her hands curling into fists at her sides. "I don't need saving," she said quietly.

"I never said you did," Beck countered, his tone softening. He stepped closer, his towering frame casting a shadow over her. "But this isn't just about you anymore. Everybody needs saving once in a while. Those hunters aren't going to stop, and the pack's estate is the safest place for us right now. My wolves will protect us while we figure out our next move."

Irene's shoulders sagged slightly, the fire in her gaze dimming. "I don't like feeling trapped," she admitted.

"I know," Beck said, his voice steady. "But this isn't a trap. It's a strategy. And the only way I'm going to get any sleep tonight is by knowing you're safe."

She let out a huff, her hands dropping to her sides. "You're really not giving me a choice, are you?"

"No," Beck said simply, his eyes crinkling with amusement.

For a moment, they stared at each other, the silence crackling with unspoken tension. Then Irene exhaled, her breath visible in the cool evening air. “Fine,” she said begrudgingly. “But if I hate it, you’re going to hear about it.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Beck said with a faint grin, opening the passenger door of his SUV for her. His mate—he hadn’t known how much he would like that word—could be prickly, but she was also, for the most part, practical.

She slid in without another word, her expression a mixture of defiance and resignation. Beck circled around to the driver’s side, climbing in and starting the engine. The roar of the vehicle shattered the quiet, but the strain between them lingered, filling the space like an unseen force.

As they drove toward the pack’s estate, the winding forest roads illuminated only by the headlights, Beck cast a quick glance at Irene. She stared out the window, her fingers drumming lightly against her thigh. He wanted to reach out, to touch her, to offer some reassurance—but he knew better than to push her when she was like this.

After several minutes of silence, Irene spoke, her voice cutting through the low hum of the engine. “What’s your pack like?”

Beck hesitated, surprised by the question. “Strong. Loyal. They’re family.”

Irene’s gaze flicked to him, her expression unreadable. “And you think they’ll welcome me? A stranger?”

“You’re not a stranger,” Beck said firmly. “You’re my mate.”

Her lips twitched, but the smile didn’t fully form. “That’s not an answer.”

“Yes it is, and they’d welcome the rest of your pack as well,” Beck said, his tone

leaving no room for doubt. “You’ll see.”

She didn’t respond, turning her attention back to the window. Beck tightened his grip on the wheel, his mind racing. He could feel her reluctance, her unease, but he also sensed something else—something deeper, something she wasn’t ready to share.

They drove in silence for the next half hour, the forest gradually giving way to rolling hills and the first glimpses of the pack’s territory. Beck felt a strange mix of relief and apprehension as they neared the estate. He knew his wolves would keep them safe, but he also knew the challenges that lay ahead—for both of them.

As the SUV rounded the final bend and the estate came into view, Beck glanced at Irene. Her eyes widened slightly as she took in the sprawling main grounds and the mansion built by money from silver and gold. It wasn’t overly fancy, but it was formidable in design blending seamlessly with the surrounding landscape.

“Welcome to my world,” Beck said quietly, pulling the SUV to a stop in front of the main building.

Irene didn’t respond, her gaze fixed on the estate as though it held the answers to questions she hadn’t yet asked.

Irene raised an eyebrow. “It’s... bigger than I expected.”

“It has to be,” Beck replied. “The pack’s grown over the years. We’ve got dormitories for unattached wolves, cottages for mated pairs, and a central dining hall where everyone can come together. The main house is for leadership and guests.”

She nodded, her lips pressing into a thin line. He could tell she was processing, trying to find her place in a world that was so different from her own.

As they stepped onto the porch, the door swung open, revealing Des. His gaze swept over Irene, taking note of the fresh claiming mark on her throat before landing on Beck. “You’re back late,” Des said gruffly, though his lips twitched in a faint smile.

“Got held up,” Beck replied, clapping a hand on Des’s shoulder. “Des, this is Irene. Irene, Des.”

Des nodded, his expression softening slightly. “Welcome to Silver Falls. If Beck’s brought you here, I’m guessing there’s trouble.”

“You could say that,” Irene said, her tone measured but polite.

Des’s eyes flicked to Beck, his brow furrowing. “We’ll talk later.”

Beck nodded. “Get the patrols doubled. I don’t want any gaps.”

“Already done.” With that, Des disappeared back into the shadows, his efficient stride carrying him toward the barracks.

Beck guided Irene into the main house, the warmth and bustle of activity a stark contrast to the level of energy outside. The scent of baking bread and roasted meat wafted through the air, mingling with the soft murmur of conversation.

A woman in her sixties appeared, her kind eyes lighting up as she saw Beck. “Alpha, it’s about time you showed up. We were starting to think you’d forgotten how to find your way home.”

“Not a chance, Delilah,” Beck said, his voice carrying a rare note of affection. “Irene, this is Delilah. She’s the housekeeper, but really, she runs the place.”

Delilah smiled warmly at Irene, her gaze sharp but not unkind. “Welcome, dear. You

must be special if Beck's brought you here."

Irene managed a faint smile, though Beck could sense her discomfort. "Thank you."

"I'll send up something for dinner," Delilah said, giving Beck a pointed look. "You both look like you could use a good meal."

Beck inclined his head. "Thanks, Delilah."

He led Irene up the stairs to his suite, the familiar surroundings offering him a sense of calm he hadn't realized he needed. The spacious room was both rustic and refined, with a stone fireplace, leather furniture, and large windows and a balcony that overlooked the surrounding forest.

"It's good to be alpha," Irene said, her tone neutral as she dropped her pack near the door.

"Most of the time," Beck replied, moving to light the fire.

They sat quietly at the small table by the window, the flickering fire casting warm light over the room. There was a knock on the door, and Delilah entered with a spread of roasted beef, vegetables, and freshly baked bread. Beck watched as Irene picked at her food, her thoughts clearly elsewhere.

"You're thinking about them, aren't you?" Beck asked softly.

Irene glanced up, her fork pausing mid-air. "Who?"

"The women you've been protecting," Beck said. "Your pack."

Her eyes softened, and she set her fork down. "Always," she admitted. "They've been

through so much. Abandoned, abused, cast out. We've built something together, but it's fragile. One wrong move, one mistake, and it could all fall apart."

Beck nodded, his expression thoughtful. "And the treasure? You think it's the answer?"

"It's a chance," Irene said, her voice steady but tinged with desperation. "A way to secure our future. To make sure we're safe."

Beck leaned forward, his gaze intent. "You could have that here. In Silver Falls."

Irene's lips parted, but no words came.

"The pack would welcome you," Beck continued, his voice low and earnest. "All of you. You'd have safety, resources, support. You wouldn't have to carry this alone anymore."

Irene shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping her. "You make it sound so simple. The hunters are following our every move. How is your pack going to feel about my having put them in danger?"

Beck reached across the table, his hand covering hers. "The hunters have already targeted us and some others in town. That's the beauty of being a part of a shifter community. We're not helpless, Irene. We've faced threats before, and we've come out stronger. Don't you want that for your women? None of you would be a burden—you'd be part of something bigger. And you might just find a place where you belong."

Her gaze met his, and for the tiniest fraction of a second, the guarded walls she'd built seemed to crack. "I don't know, Beck," she said quietly.

“Think about it,” Beck urged, his thumb brushing against her knuckles. “If not for yourself, then for them. And for us.”

Irene’s breath hitched, her eyes searching his face as though looking for answers he couldn’t give.

Before she could respond, a faint knock sounded at the door, followed by Des’s voice. “Beck? We’ve got something you need to see.”

Beck’s entire body tightened, the urgency in Des’s voice setting his nerves on edge. He stood, his hand lingering on Irene’s for a moment before he turned to the door.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, his voice firm.

As he stepped into the hallway, his heart pounded with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Whatever Des had found, Beck knew it was only the beginning of the storm.

IRENE

The fire crackled softly in the hearth, casting dancing shadows on the walls of Beck's suite. Irene paced the room, her mind a whirlwind of questions and emotions. She'd grown used to being the one with a plan, the one calling the shots. But here, surrounded by Beck's pack and his unwavering presence, she felt unmoored.

The door creaked open, and Beck stepped inside, his imposing frame filling the space. He searched her face, sharp and assessing. He shut the door behind him and leaned against it, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well?" Irene asked, her voice sharper than she intended. "What did Des want?"

Beck's lips twitched, but the faint smile was reflected nowhere else on his face. "Nothing to worry about. The pack's curious, that's all."

"Curious?" Irene arched a brow, stopping in her tracks. "About what?"

"About you," Beck said simply, his gaze steady. "And about what my plans are."

Irene's stomach twisted at his bluntness, though she kept her expression neutral. "Funny," she said dryly. "I'd like to know the answer to that, too."

Beck's eyes glinted with something unreadable as he pushed off the door and took a deliberate step toward her. "Would you now? I'd have thought that claiming bite

would have made it fairly obvious to anyone paying attention, especially you.”

“Don’t play coy,” she shot back, holding her ground even as her heart raced. “You brought me here, Beck. You dragged me into your world. So, what is it you want from me? Protection? Partnership? A pawn in whatever game you’re playing?”

His gaze darkened, the teasing edge disappearing as he closed the distance between them in a few long strides. Irene’s breath hitched as he stopped just inches away, his presence as overwhelming as always.

“I want you,” he said, his voice low and commanding. “All of you.”

The words sent a shiver down her spine, a heady mix of anticipation and defiance warring within her. She tilted her chin up, refusing to back down. “What does that even mean, Beck? You can’t just throw around declarations like that without?”

He cut her off with a hand on her waist, his grip firm but not forceful as he pulled her closer. “It means I don’t see you as a pawn, Irene. You’re not some piece on a board for me to move around. You’re my mate. My equal. And I’m done pretending otherwise.”

The intensity in his voice sent heat coursing through her veins, but she wasn’t about to let him off the hook so easily. “Equal?” she challenged. “Because so far, it feels like you’ve been calling all the shots.”

Beck’s lips twitched again, this time with a faint trace of amusement. “Fair enough,” he said. “But tell me this—if I hadn’t stepped in when I did, how much longer would you have lasted on your own? Between the hunters, the treasure, and your pack’s survival?”

Irene opened her mouth to argue but stopped short. The truth of his words was a bitter

pill to swallow, and he knew it.

“That’s what I thought,” Beck said, his tone softening slightly. “I’m not here to take over, Irene. I’m here to stand beside you.”

She looked up at him, her anger faltering as his sincerity broke through her defenses. “And what about you?” she asked quietly. “What matters to you?”

He didn’t hesitate. “You.”

The single word hung between them, heavy with meaning. Irene’s heart twisted, the gravity of his admission crashing over her.

“Beck...” she began, but he silenced her with a finger under her chin, tilting her face up to meet his.

“No more running,” he said, his voice firm but laced with a quiet vulnerability. “No more games. I want you to stay, Irene. Here. With me. We’ll figure out the rest together.”

Her breath caught, her body betraying her as it leaned into him, drawn by the gravity of his presence. “And if I say no?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Then I’ll fight for you,” he said simply. “Because that’s what fated mates do.”

The term fated mate sent a jolt through her, her wolf stirring restlessly within her. She searched his face, trying to find cracks in his resolve, but there were none. Beckett Grey was a force of nature, and he was looking at her like she was the only thing in his world.

The charged energy between them was electric, crackling like a live wire. Irene’s

chest heaved, her pulse racing as she weighed her next words. But before she could speak, Beck leaned down, his lips brushing against hers in a kiss that was equal parts gentle and commanding.

Her resolve crumbled. She kissed him back, her hands finding their way to his chest, her fingers curling against the hard planes of muscle beneath his shirt. Beck's arms tightened around her, pulling her flush against him as the kiss deepened, the heat between them flaring into an inferno.

When they finally broke apart, both of them were breathing hard, their foreheads touching as they stood tangled in each other's arms.

"This conversation isn't over," Irene murmured, her voice trembling with a mix of defiance and desire.

"Not by a long shot," Beck replied, his lips quirking into a wolfish grin as he swept her up in his arms and carried her to his bed—their bed now, she supposed.

He stripped her of her clothes and laid her down, when Irene reached for him to do the same, he wouldn't let her. He removed his clothes and then joined her on the bed, covering her body with his own. With both of her wrists in one of his huge hands, he pulled her arms over her head and held them tight. Her body was stretched out, naked and glistening with sweat and slick. Beck took advantage of her immobility to press his nose into the crook of her neck to inhale and gently kiss the claiming bite on her throat. After he filled his lungs with her scent, he growled softly, then marked her again with wet, open-mouthed kisses across her skin, drowning her in his own scent.

"Beck, please..."

Her labia were swollen and wet almost to the point of being painful, and Irene was too far gone to care about dignity or what would happen next. All she knew was that

she needed this man, this wolf, his knot, and she needed them more than she had ever needed anything. Her last coherent thought was that she would beg for his knot if he wanted her to. She knew at this point she'd beg for anything and everything if that's what it meant to be his.

"Don't worry, Irene. Everything I have—everything you need—is yours."

As he said it, he demonstrated by dragging the length of his cock down her crease. Still pinning her to the bed with one hand, he made a space between her thighs for himself, guiding his cock with the hand not holding her immobile. The hot, velvet skin of his crown teased her lips, making her cry out in frustration when he didn't just press or thrust in. Her body was on fire, and he was the only thing that could quench her need. Instead, he used himself to smear her slick over more of her skin, his chest rumbling with a pleased purr at the sight.

Irene bucked her hips up, begging for something more...anything more. But he held her still. He was immovable, and there was nothing she could do about it other than to lie there and take this exquisite torture he gave her. She tried to soothe herself with how he surrounded her: his scent, his touch, his body, all of it caging her in and holding her tight.

When he finally thrust inside her, all Irene could do was whimper. He was thick and long, but her body opened up to him greedily. She needed to be filled. Her inner muscles clenched around his shaft, attempting to pull him deeper, clutching at a knot she could feel just beyond her entrance.

As he began to stroke, Irene finally felt whole. There was no time to adjust as he began to thrust harder and faster, but she didn't care. She needed it... him. The knot continued to swell, and she could feel it bumping against her entrance. With a brutal thrust, Beck buried his knot inside her. Irene cried out as excruciating and exhilarating pain flashed through her—but only for a moment as feelings of

completion and need fulfilled washed over her. Everything around her faded into nothing as her body seemed to dissolve into a wave of heat and pleasure. She let herself go lax, safe in his hands.

Her eyes closed, and nothing existed outside of the jolt of her body every time he snapped his hips against her.

"Please, Beck..." She didn't even know what it was she was pleading for.

He hissed in her ear, and his cock swelled inside her at the words—he was getting close.

"Anything you want, my mate."

His thrusts became faster and more jarring, his knot tugging at her entrance until it finally caught. Her body tensed, bearing down around him and holding him tight as he pulsed inside her. The splash of hot seed filled her exactly the way she wanted it to, setting off a chain reaction of pleasure and rightness through every inch of her soul.

Irene didn't know how long they lay there, tied together. Her body continued to work on instinct, milking his knot for every drop of cum that she could drain from him. She took infinite pleasure in the soft groans that she was pulling from him, as well, while he continued to trace the curve of her neck with his tongue.

"I love you, Irene. We were destined to be together," he said as he rolled from her body several hours later.

"I never believed in the whole fated mate thing, and if it did exist, I thought it was for others, but never for me. Guess I was wrong about that. I love you, too, Beck,"

The sound of footsteps outside the door broke the spell, and Beck's expression darkened. He threw back the covers of the bed and pulled on his jeans, his protective instincts snapping into place.

"Stay here," he said, his voice low and serious.

Irene frowned. "What's going on?"

"Nothing good," Beck muttered, his eyes narrowing as the footsteps grew louder.

He moved toward the door, his body tense and ready. Irene's heart pounded as she watched him go, the sense of danger settling over her like a shroud.

The fire crackled softly in the hearth as Irene grabbed Beck's shirt and left their bed. It was too lonely without him. She wasn't sure exactly how long he'd been gone, but she'd begun to crave his presence. The fire's warm glow cast flickering shadows all over the walls. Irene crossed to the window, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she stared out at the darkened landscape that lay beyond the main grounds of the estate. The tension in her shoulders refused to ease, her mind spinning with the events that had led her to this time... to this place... to this man.

She heard the door open and close behind her. Knowing she was safe, she saw no reason to glance back over her shoulder. She could feel his presence; it was impossible to ignore. He'd been watching her in silence since he'd reentered the room, his calm, commanding energy filling the space between them.

"You're mine now," Beck said finally, his deep voice breaking the quiet.

Irene turned slowly, her eyes narrowing. "Possessive bastard, aren't you?"

He chuckled. "I would have thought you'd have figured that out by now," he said,

stepping closer. The firelight danced in his eyes, highlighting the sharp angles of his face. “You’re my mate, Irene. And you’ll remain here—with me.”

Her pulse quickened, a mix of anger and something far more dangerous coursing through her veins. “And if I refuse?” she challenged, tilting her chin up.

Beck’s lips curved into a slow, wolfish grin, the intensity of his gaze pinning her in place. “You know the answer to that.”

Her wolf stirred at his words, a primal response she couldn’t fully suppress. But Irene wasn’t about to let him win this battle so easily. “You think you can just decide that for me?” she asked, working up the level of defiance that laced her tone.

“I don’t need to decide,” Beck said, his voice low and firm. “You already have.”

The words hit her like a blow, and she took a step back, her wolf bristling. “You’re insufferable,” she growled, her hands curling into fists.

Beck chuckled, the sound rich and infuriatingly confident. “Relentless. But if you’d like to challenge my claim, you’re welcome to run from me,” he said, taking another step closer, “It won’t do you any good because I’ll just run you down, Irene. Every time.”

Her growl deepened, her wolf snarling just beneath the surface. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

His grin widened, a flicker of amusement dancing in his eyes. “More than I should, probably. But let’s not pretend, Irene—you have nowhere to run. And let’s not forget, you capitulated.”

Irene’s breath hitched, her cheeks flushing with equal parts anger and embarrassment.

“I didn’t capitulate,” she snapped. “I made a choice. There’s a difference.”

Beck raised a brow, his expression infuriatingly calm. “Call it what you want, sweetheart. The result’s the same.”

Her wolf rumbled with frustration, and she let out a low growl, the sound primal and fierce. But Beck didn’t flinch. Instead, he moved closer, his large hands reaching out to gently grip her arms.

“Easy,” he murmured, his voice softening as his thumbs brushed over her skin. “I’m not your enemy, Irene.”

Her growl faltered, the heat of his touch seeping into her, calming her despite herself. She hated how easily he affected her, how his presence seemed to strip away her defenses and leave her raw and exposed.

“You’re infuriating,” she muttered, her voice losing some of its bite.

Beck’s lips twitched into a faint smile. “And you’re stubborn,” he said. “Guess that makes us even.”

They stood like that for a moment, the tension between them shifting into something heavier, more complicated. Finally, Beck released her arms, stepping back and gesturing toward the couch by the fire.

“Sit with me,” he said, his tone leaving little room for argument.

Irene hesitated, her instincts screaming at her to keep her distance. But the pull of him was too strong, the need to understand him—and herself—overwhelming. With a sigh, she moved to the couch and sat down, her movements wary.

Beck joined her, his solid presence a comforting weight beside her. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the crackling fire filling the silence. Then Beck leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he turned his gaze to her.

“You’ve heard the stories about the silver,” he began, his voice low and steady.

Irene nodded slowly. “Enough to know there’s more truth to them than most people think,” she said cautiously. “What about it?”

“It’s more than just treasure,” Beck said, his expression serious. “It’s part of the history of Silver Falls—the entire town is wrapped up into its history. You know the legend that humans have been told, but there’s a separate legend that ties the shifters to the silver, a connection that’s deeper than most realize.”

Irene frowned, leaning in slightly. “Go on.”

Beck’s eyes met hers, the firelight casting shadows across his face. “The silver isn’t just valuable. It’s powerful. It was used to forge the first bonds between the packs and clans, to establish this town as a place all shifters can be safe. The silver—the bits and pieces we’ve found over the years—created the pacts that have kept our people united for generations.”

“You know where it is?”

He shook his, chuckling ruefully. No. Nobody does, but when one of the packs or clans or the whole town need it, it just kind of randomly shows up in places we know it wasn’t before. The problem became that as time went on, greed and betrayal tore the bonds between some of the packs and clans apart. We now believe the silver was scattered, hidden away to protect it and the power it represents.”

“And now?” Irene asked, her voice quieter.

“Now, it’s a symbol,” Beck said. “A reminder of what we’ve lost—and what we could regain. But in the wrong hands, it could be dangerous. That’s why the hunters want it. They don’t just see treasure—they see power. And they’ll do whatever it takes to get it.”

The impact of his words settled over her, the gravity of their situation sinking in. She stared into the fire, her mind racing.

“So, what do we do?” she asked finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

“We find it first,” Beck said, his tone resolute. “And we make sure it stays out of their hands. We restore it to its intended use.”

Irene nodded, a new spark of commitment igniting within her. But even as she met Beck’s gaze, a question lingered in the back of her mind—a question she wasn’t sure she wanted the answer to.

What would they do if they found it? And at what cost?

The sun was just beginning to lighten the sky. The morning air was crisp and cool, the kind of invigorating chill that brought everything into sharp focus. Irene stood at the edge of the clearing about halfway up the mountain, the faintest trace of dawn illuminating the dense canopy of trees. Beck was beside her, his towering frame a comforting presence as they prepared to follow the latest clue unearthed from Isaiah Blakiston’s journal.

“You sure about this spot?” Beck asked, his deep voice breaking the stillness.

Irene glanced at him, her grip tightening on the worn leather journal in her hands. “As sure as I can be,” she replied, her tone laced with determination. “Everything in the journal points to this area. If I’m right, the silver should be close.”

Beck nodded, his sharp gaze scanning the terrain. “Then let’s find it before anyone else does.”

They moved together through the forest, their steps careful but swift. The trail led them to a rocky outcrop partially concealed by dense underbrush. Irene knelt, brushing aside layers of dirt and leaves to reveal a faint engraving on the stone—symbols that matched the ones from the journal.

“This is it,” she murmured, her heart racing. “This has to be it.”

Beck crouched beside her, his hands brushing hers as he helped clear away more debris. “Good work,” he said, his tone filled with quiet pride.

The ground beneath the outcrop was loose, and Irene used a small spade from her pack to dig, the blade cutting into the earth with precise, steady strokes. Beck joined her, his strength making short work of the task.

After what felt like hours but was likely only minutes, the sound of metal thudding against wood echoed through the clearing. Irene’s breath hitched as she and Beck unearthed a wooden chest, its edges reinforced with tarnished iron. Her hands trembled as she reached for the latch, which gave way with surprising ease.

Inside, the chest gleamed with the unmistakable luster of silver coins and bars, their surfaces catching the soft morning light. Irene stared in awe, the weight of the discovery settling over her like a tangible force.

“We found it,” she whispered, barely able to believe the words.

Beck’s hand came to rest on her shoulder, his warmth grounding her. “You did it,” he said, his voice steady. “You proved it was real.”

Before she could respond, a distant sound reached her ears—a faint rustling, followed by the unmistakable crunch of boots on forest debris. Her heart sank as the scent of gun oil and sweat hit her nose.

“Hunters,” Beck growled, his body tensing as his sharp gaze darted toward the tree line.

Irene’s wolf stirred, the primal need to protect her claim surging through her. “We can’t let them take this,” she said, her voice low and fierce.

“We won’t,” Beck replied, his tone leaving no room for doubt. He moved swiftly, stepping between her and the encroaching danger as the first of the hunters emerged from the shadows.

“Well, well,” the lead hunter drawled, his rifle slung across his chest. “Looks like you two hit the jackpot.”

The other hunters fanned out behind him, their weapons gleaming ominously in the pale light.

“Back off,” Beck warned, his voice a low growl that sent a shiver down Irene’s spine.

The lead hunter smirked, his eyes narrowing. “Not a chance. That silver belongs to us now.”

“Over my dead body,” Irene snapped, her wolf’s growl rumbling in her throat.

“That can be arranged,” the hunter sneered, raising his rifle.

The air seemed to crackle with tension as Beck and Irene shifted almost simultaneously, their wolves bursting forth in a swirling mist of energy and power.

Beck's massive black wolf stood tall and imposing, while Irene's sleek red wolf snarled, her eyes locked on the enemy.

The hunters hesitated, their confidence faltering as the wolves charged. Irene's wolf lunged at the hunter standing in the front, her powerful jaws clamping down on his arm before he could fire. His scream echoed through the clearing as she dragged him to the ground and inflicted a fatal belly wound.

Beside her, Beck's wolf tackled another hunter, his massive frame knocking the man off his feet. Teeth bared, he snapped at the man's throat, tearing it out and killing him before he could scramble to escape.

The remaining hunters regrouped, their shouts filling the air as they fired wildly at the wolves. Irene just barely missed being struck more severely than the graze along her flank, the sharp sting fueling her fury. She turned on the nearest hunter, her jaws closing around his leg and pulling him to the ground.

The fight was chaotic, a brutal clash of primal strength and human weaponry. Irene and Beck moved as a unit, their bond driving their movements as they fought to protect the silver—and each other.

Beck's wolf growled in pain as a bullet struck his shoulder, but he didn't falter. Irene's wolf snarled, her ferocity unmatched as she drove the remaining hunters back. One by one, they retreated, their confidence shattered by the relentless assault.

When the last hunter disappeared into the trees, Beck shifted back into his human form, blood staining his shoulder. Irene followed suit, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she knelt beside him.

"Let me see," she said, her voice trembling as she reached for his wound.

“It’s nothing,” Beck said, though his wince betrayed him.

“It’s not nothing,” Irene snapped, her hands steady as she tore a strip of cloth to bandage the wound.

Beck’s eyes softened as he watched her work, a faint smile tugging at his lips despite the pain. “You’re as relentless as I am, you know that?”

“Stubborn, or so I’ve been told,” she muttered, tying the bandage tightly.

Their gazes met, the intensity between them momentarily eclipsing the chaos around them.

“You’re mine,” Beck said softly, his voice filled with quiet conviction.

Irene’s heart twisted, the weight of his words settling over her like a brand. “And you’re mine,” she whispered, her voice steady despite the storm raging within her.

Before either of them could say more, a faint sound reached their ears—the distant rumble of approaching footsteps and the crackle of radios.

“They’re coming back,” Irene said, her heart racing as she stood, her eyes scanning the forest.

Beck rose beside her, his expression grim. “As distasteful as it is, we need to use some of their clothing,” he said, his tone firm. Irene nodded. “We’re not losing this silver—or each other.”

As they grabbed what clothing they could use, they dressed and gathered what they could carry, disappearing into the forest, Irene couldn’t shake the feeling that this was only the beginning. The hunters wouldn’t stop, not now. And the silver they carried

was more than just a treasure—it was a target.

IRENE

All around tension sparked with a kind of energy that prickled at Irene's skin and set her wolf on edge. She could hear the hunters long before they broke through the trees—booted feet crashing through the underbrush, the occasional hissed order, the ominous clink of weapons being readied.

“They’re closing in,” Irene murmured, her voice barely audible over the sound of her pounding heart. She clutched one of the silver bars in her hands, its weight a tangible reminder of what was at stake.

Beck's tall, imposing form stood beside her, his sharp gaze fixed on the direction of the noise. His expression was calm, but she could feel the storm raging beneath the surface. His wolf was just as restless as hers, every instinct screaming to protect what they'd fought so hard to find.

“They’re not walking away this time,” Beck said, his voice low and dangerous.

Irene's wolf bristled in agreement, the primal need to defend her mate and their claim roaring through her. “Then let's finish this,” she replied, her eyes narrowing as she dropped the bar into her pack and flexed her fingers.

The hunters emerged moments later, their rifles raised and their expressions hard. The leader—a tall, scarred man with a cruel glint in his eye—stepped forward, his weapon trained on Beck.

“You should’ve walked away when you had the chance,” the leader said, his voice dripping with menace.

“And you should’ve stayed out of our territory,” Beck shot back, his voice a low growl.

The tension snapped like a taut wire as one of the hunters fired, the crack of the gunshot ringing through the clearing. Beck moved like lightning, grabbing Irene and pulling her behind him before the hunters could bring their guns to bear.

“That’s it,” Irene snarled, her wolf pushing to the surface as she bared her teeth. She stepped out from behind Beck, her hand moving to the hilt of her knife. “You’ve had your fun. Now it’s our turn.”

Irene and Beck split apart, causing the hunters to become disorganized and giving Irene and Beck time to strip out of their clothing before the hunters could reorganize and focus. In the blink of an eye, both called their wolves forward, the swirling mist enveloping them.

The ground beneath Beck’s bare feet trembled as he was encased in the eerie glow. Irene’s breath caught as the change overtook him, his form contorting with a primal grace. In moments, the mist dissipated, revealing a massive wolf with a thick coat of black fur and glowing blue eyes that locked onto the hunters with predatory intent.

As the mist curled around her legs and raced upward. Her heart pounded as the transformation gripped her, her bones shifting and lengthening, her senses sharpening. When the mist cleared, her crimson fur gleamed in the moonlight, her eyes blazing as her wolf emerged fully.

The hunters confidence faltered and their movements became uncoordinated as they took in the wolves before them. Then, their leader barked an order, the hunters raised their weapons and the forest erupted into chaos.

Beck moved first, launching himself at the nearest hunter with terrifying speed. His powerful jaws clamped onto the man's arm, forcing him to drop his weapon with a scream. Beck's claws raked across the hunter's chest, sending him sprawling into the dirt as he ripped the man's arm from his body.

Irene followed, her wolf relishing the fight as she lunged for another attacker. She dodged a wild swing of a rifle and leapt, her sharp teeth sinking into his shoulder. The hunter howled in pain, collapsing under her weight as she drove him to the ground. Blood slicked her muzzle as she turned, searching for the next threat.

The clearing became a battlefield—a savage, brutal dance of survival. Beck was relentless, tearing through the hunters with an efficiency born of both instinct and experience. Irene mirrored his ferocity, her wolf lending her the strength and agility to keep pace. Together, they were a whirlwind of claws and teeth, moving as one against the threat.

But the hunters were prepared, their numbers overwhelming. Gunshots rang out, the sharp crack of bullets tearing through the air. A bullet skinned Beck's flank, but she didn't see him falter. His wolf roared in fury, his glowing eyes locking on Irene as she fended off two hunters at once.

"Stay close!" he growled through their bond, his voice a low rumble in her mind.

"Duh! There's not a snowball's chance in hell I'm leaving," she snarled back, slamming her shoulder into an attacker and sending him sprawling. Her wolf's instincts flared as the hunters regrouped, closing in with renewed determination.

Beck's growl deepened, his muscles coiling as he leapt to her side. Then, he did something that made Irene's wolf still for a moment. He tilted his head back and let loose a howl—a long, deep, primal cry that echoed through the wilderness with a chilling resonance. The sound carried power, a call to his pack that sent a shiver down Irene's spine.

The hunters hesitated, their confidence giving way to uncertainty as the sound echoed through the trees. The forest seemed to hold its breath for a moment, and then shadows moved in the darkness. The mist rose again, swirling as more wolves emerged from the trees. The pack had arrived.

A dozen wolves, their eyes glowing with feral intensity, surrounded the clearing. The hunters shouted in panic, firing wildly as the pack closed in. It was futile. The wolves attacked with precision and savagery, their fangs flashing as they took down the hunters one by one.

Irene leapt into the fray beside Beck, her wolf surging with the thrill of the fight. She slammed into a hunter, her teeth tearing through his weapon strap before sinking into his arm. Beck was at her side, his massive form shielding her from an attacker's blade as he crushed the man beneath him with terrifying strength.

The clearing became a blur of fur, blood, and desperate cries. The pack worked as one, overwhelming the hunters with their coordinated assault. The problem with fighting the hunters was it seemed no matter how many fell, there were more to take their place. The leader tried to rally his men, but the effort was short-lived. A sleek black wolf lunged for him, dragging him to the ground as others closed in to finish him.

When the last hunter fell, the clearing fell eerily silent. The pack stood among the carnage, their collective breath heaving and their fur streaked with blood. Irene shifted first, the mist enveloping her as she returned to her human form. She stood barefoot and breathless, her red hair wild around her face as she took in the scene.

Beck shifted moments later, his powerful frame towering beside her. His chest heaved, as he scanned the clearing with a sharp intensity. The pack began to disperse, melting back into the trees, but Beck and Irene remained, their eyes meeting in the aftermath. A few remained behind and with practiced efficiency, began dragging the bodies of the fallen hunters into a haphazard pile.

“Stay with me,” Beck said, his voice rough but steady.

Irene nodded, her body trembling with adrenaline. The fight was over, but something deeper had been set in motion—something neither of them could ignore. They grabbed their clothes and redressed.

“It’s over,” she said softly, her voice barely audible.

Beck turned to her, his glowing eyes meeting hers. “For now,” he said, his tone grim. “But this isn’t the end. There’ll be more—there always are.”

Irene nodded, her hand finding his as she squeezed it tightly. “Then we’ll face them together,” she said, her voice filled with quiet determination.

Beck’s lips curved into a faint smile, his gaze softening as he looked at her. “Damn right we will.”

But as the pack began to disperse, their victory overshadowed by what lay ahead. Something told Irene that their fight was far from over. The silver—at least part of it—was safe—for now—but the danger it brought loomed larger than ever. The shadows were all around them, and she knew they held unknown threats and danger.

The air was thick with the aftermath of battle, the metallic tang of blood mingling with the earthy scent of the forest. Irene stood beside Beck, her breath still coming in short, ragged bursts.

Beck’s presence was a steadying force beside her, his sheer dominance radiating like a palpable aura. He turned to his second-in-command, Des, whose fierce eyes met Beck’s without question.

“Wrap the leader in cheesecloth,” Beck ordered, his voice low but commanding. “Send him to the address we pulled from their registration.”

Des gave a curt nod, his expression grim. “You want to leave a note?”

Beck’s lips curled into a sharp, humorless smile. “The message is clear enough. Stay out of Silver Falls.”

Irene shivered at the dark promise in his tone, but she felt no pity for the man or his crew. They had come for blood, and they’d gotten it—just not the way they’d expected. The pack’s loyalty to Beck and their seamless unity struck a chord deep within her. This wasn’t just a group of wolves; it was a family.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, his voice low, his gaze sweeping over her.

“I’m fine,” Irene replied, though her voice wavered slightly. The adrenaline of the fight was beginning to fade, leaving her body aching and her mind spinning. “Just a little... overwhelmed.”

Beck’s hand found her arm, his touch firm yet reassuring. “You did well,” he said, his voice carrying a quiet strength that steadied her racing thoughts. “You held your own. You fought as well as any warrior in my pack. If your women fight as well, they could add their strength to ours.”

His words hit her like a bolt of lightning, piercing through the walls she’d built around herself. For years, she’d lived by one rule: trust no one but herself. But Beck had shattered that belief with his unwavering support and his refusal to let her face the darkness alone.

“Let’s get back,” Beck said, his voice gentler now. “We’ve had enough of this place for one day.”

The pack began to disperse, leaving behind a group of wolves to continue disposing of the bodies. As they finished their work, the other wolves slipped back into the trees like shadows. Beck led the way, his hand steady on Irene’s lower back as they

walked. The warmth of his touch seeped into her, a grounding force amidst the chaos.

By the time they reached the mansion, the moon was high, casting a soft silver glow over the sprawling estate. The imposing structure loomed before them, its lights glowing warmly against the darkness. As they climbed the wide stone steps to the front porch, Irene's steps slowed.

She paused, her gaze sweeping over the mansion, then shifting to Beck. The realization hit her with startling clarity—a truth she hadn't allowed herself to fully acknowledge until this moment. This was home.

Not just the mansion, or Silver Falls, or even the pack. Beck was her home. He was her anchor in a storm she hadn't even realized she was weathering.

"Irene?" Beck's voice pulled her from her thoughts, his eyes focused on her.

She turned to him, her heart pounding. "I love you," she said, the words spilling from her lips before she could stop them. "I didn't think I'd ever find a place I belonged, or someone I could trust, but you..." She hesitated, her throat tightening. "You changed everything."

Beck's expression softened, his hand moving to cup her cheek. "You're mine, Irene," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down her spine. "I told you that from the beginning. And you're not just my mate—you're part of this pack now. You, and your group. You're family."

Her chest ached at the sincerity in his words, the promise that she no longer had to fight alone. "What about the hunters?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "They won't stop."

Beck shrugged. "Then as often as they come, we'll stop them," he said simply, his tone unyielding. "They'll learn what happens when they come after what's mine."

Irene swallowed hard, the weight of his conviction settling over her like a protective shield. For the first time in years, she allowed herself to believe in a future where she didn't have to run, didn't have to hide.

“And you'll take care of my pack as well?” she asked.

“They're welcome here,” Beck said without hesitation. “All of them. They'll have protection, resources, and a place to call home. If they're willing to trust us, we'll show them what it means to have a pack that stands together.”

Her breath hitched, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. She nodded, her voice steady despite the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. “I'll tell them. I'll convince them.”

Beck's lips curved into a faint smile, his thumb brushing against her cheek. “Good. Because this is just the beginning, Irene. For us. For all of us.”

The warmth of his words wrapped around her like a cocoon, banishing the lingering shadows of doubt and fear. As she looked into his eyes, she knew she was exactly where she was meant to be.

Irene's wolf stirred, her instincts sharpening as some of the familiar tension returned. The battle might not be over—there were hunters all over the world, but this time, she wasn't afraid.

She had Beck. She had a pack.

And she was ready.

The forest glowed with the light of the full moon, casting a silvery sheen over the clearing where Beck's pack and Irene's group of women stood together. Lanterns hung from the low branches of ancient trees, their soft light mingling with the

flickering glow of a bonfire at the center of the circle. The air was thick with anticipation, the hum of unity and hope an almost tangible force that wrapped around everyone present.

Irene stood at Beck's side, her hand clasped tightly in his. He was dressed in a tailored shirt and dark slacks, his usual rugged confidence softened by the warmth in his eyes as he glanced down at her. She'd chosen a simple white dress, its flowing fabric brushing her bare feet as the cool grass tickled her skin. She hadn't expected to feel nervous, but as the pack and her group of women gathered closer, her stomach fluttered.

"You're shaking," Beck murmured, his voice low and teasing.

"I'm not," Irene replied, though her voice betrayed her. She tilted her chin up. "It's the night air."

"Hmm," Beck hummed, his lips curving into a faint smile. He leaned down, his breath warm against her ear as he whispered, "You've faced hunters, uncovered lost treasure, and fought by my side, but this makes you nervous?"

She couldn't help but smile despite the nerves swirling in her chest. "It's different," she admitted, her voice soft. "This... this is real."

Beck squeezed her hand, his gaze steady and unwavering. "This is us, Irene. Our pack, our home. And it's just the beginning."

The sound of a low, rhythmic drumbeat pulled her attention to the center of the clearing. The ceremony was about to begin. Des stepped forward, his presence commanding as he lifted his voice to address the crowd.

"Tonight, we honor the bond of mates and the blending of packs," he said, his deep voice carrying over the clearing. "We welcome new sisters into our fold, and we

celebrate the strength of unity.”

Irene’s group of women stood to one side, their expressions a mix of awe and cautious hope. They had spent so long surviving on the fringes, trusting no one but themselves. Yet here they were, standing shoulder to shoulder with Beck’s pack, their collective strength a beacon of what was possible.

As the drumbeat continued, Beck turned to her, his expression softening. “Are you ready?”

Irene nodded, her pulse quickening as she met his gaze. “I am.”

Beck raised their joined hands, his voice steady as he spoke the ancient words of the shifter bonding ceremony. Irene repeated them, her voice gaining strength with each word. It felt as though the world around them faded, leaving only the two of them standing together, their bond sealing with every syllable.

When the final words were spoken, the clearing erupted into cheers and howls of celebration. Irene laughed, the sound light and unrestrained as Beck pulled her into his arms, his mouth claiming hers in a kiss that left no room for doubt. She was his, and he was hers—now and always.

As the celebration continued around them, Irene found herself pulled into a whirlwind of warmth and acceptance. The pack members she hadn’t met introduced themselves, their easy smiles and genuine welcomes easing the last remnants of her doubt. Her group of women mingled with the pack, their laughter and tentative camaraderie a sight that filled her chest with a quiet, overwhelming joy.

Much later, as the crowd began to disperse, Irene and Beck walked hand in hand back toward the mansion.

“This feels like a dream,” Irene said, her voice soft as she glanced at Beck. “Like it’s

too good to be true.”

“It’s real,” Beck replied, his tone steady and reassuring. “You don’t have to run anymore, Irene. You don’t have to fight alone. You have me, the pack, this town. You have a home.”

Her throat tightened, and she stopped, turning to face him. “Thank you,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “For everything. For not giving up on me, even when I made it hard.”

Beck cupped her face in his hands, his touch gentle but firm. “There was never a chance of that,” he said. “You’re my mate, Irene. My home. And I’ll spend the rest of my life proving that to you.”

The sincerity in his words undid her, and she leaned into him, her arms wrapping around his neck as she kissed him with all the love and gratitude she couldn’t put into words.

When they finally pulled apart, Beck smiled, his thumb brushing against her cheek. “Welcome home, Irene.”

She smiled back, her heart swelling as she took his hand once more. Together, they climbed the steps to the mansion, the future stretching out before them like a promise. Silver Falls was no longer just a place on a map—it was her home. And Beck? He was her forever.

As they stepped inside, the sound of a distant howl echoed through the night—a call of unity, of strength, of the new beginning they had forged together.

The moon hung low over Silver Falls, casting pale light over the clearing where the members of the Wildhaven Clan gathered. Flint Mercer stood tall, his muscular frame radiating strength and dominance, his tawny hair glinting like burnished gold in the

moonlight. His golden eyes scanned the assembled shifters, some glaring with distrust, others with the faintest flicker of hope.

“Silas,” Flint growled, his voice cutting through the tense silence. “You’ve led this clan into ruin. Young males exiled. She-cats used as bargaining chips for alliances they didn’t want. It ends now.”

Across the clearing, Silas stepped forward, a smirk twisting his lips. His broad shoulders and sinewy frame still bore the confidence of a seasoned alpha, though his dark eyes narrowed with the hint of unease. “You’ve been gone too long, Mercer,” Silas sneered. “The clan isn’t yours—it never was.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Flint countered, his voice steady, like the calm before a storm. “Step down, Silas. I won’t ask again.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd as Silas’s smirk fell. His claws extended, his body already beginning to shift. “If you want my place, you’ll have to take it. I’ll show everyone here why I’m still their alpha.”

Flint’s jaw clenched as he met Silas’s challenge head-on. “So be it.”

The shift was almost instantaneous. Flint’s powerful body transformed, his tawny hair replaced by a sleek, muscular coat of golden fur. Silas, smaller and slower, roared as he lunged, his claws slicing through the air with deadly intent.

The two mountain lions collided in a flurry of claws, fangs, and raw power. Flint dodged Silas’s strike and countered with a vicious swipe across the older male’s flank. Blood spattered the forest floor, and those gathered gasped, some stepping back, others leaning in with bated breath.

“You’ve grown soft, Silas!” called one of the others who surrounded them.

Flint snarled, his voice a guttural growl through his lion's throat. He leapt onto Silas's back, claws digging deep into muscle, forcing the older male to the ground.

Silas roared in rage, twisting to throw Flint off, but Flint was relentless. Years of Force Recon training, honed instincts, and pure determination gave him an edge. He sank his teeth into Silas's shoulder, his golden eyes blazing with dominance.

With a final, savage roar, Flint delivered the fatal blow, his claws raking across Silas's throat. The older lion collapsed, his body shifting back into human form, lifeless.

Flint shifted back, standing naked and bloodied, his chest heaving as he surveyed the clan. Silence blanketed the clearing as the shifters processed what they had witnessed.

"Those loyal to Silas," Flint said, his voice steady but unyielding, "have a choice. Accept me as your alpha or leave Wildhaven. There is no middle ground."

For a moment, no one moved. Then, one by one, heads bowed in submission. Flint exhaled, tension bleeding from his shoulders.

Wes, his younger brother, stepped forward. His wiry build and sharp features were a stark contrast to Flint's bulk, but the determination in his amber eyes mirrored Flint's. "We'll rebuild, Flint. I've already started. The ones Silas drove off—they've been waiting for this moment."

Flint's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Wes crossed his arms, his lips twitching into a grin. "They've got a camp up in the mountains. I've been keeping them informed, letting them know when you'd return. They're ready to come back."

Flint stared at his brother, admiration and pride swelling in his chest. "You've been

doing this all along? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were gone," Wes said simply. "But I knew you'd be back. I couldn't just stand by and watch this clan fall apart."

Flint clasped Wes's shoulder. "You've done good, kid." Wes was far from a kid, but Flint had always called him that. "Better than I could've asked for." As the clan began to disperse, whispers of uncertainty and hope filled the air. Flint turned to Wes. "Tomorrow, we head to the mountains. I want to see them."

Wes nodded, but his expression darkened as he glanced toward the tree line. "The sooner the better. Hunters and others have been lurking around. We might need to be ready to fight."

Flint followed his gaze. In the distance, barely visible against the shadows, a figure lingered, watching. Its eyes glinted eerily in the dark, and a low growl echoed through the trees.

"Who the hell is that?" Flint muttered.

Wes's voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't know, but whoever it is has been lurking around since the challenge started."

The figure stepped closer, the hooded cloak obscured everything about the person. The air was thick with menace. Flint's muscles tensed, ready for a fight. Whoever this was, they weren't here to submit. The person stood where it was before nodding and then withdrawing.

"Looks like your first test as alpha may be coming sooner than you thought," Wes said grimly.

Flint's golden eyes narrowed, his voice a low rumble. "Let them come."

Ready to read Flint's story? [Click here to read Flint's Fate.](#)