



Devoured (Tainted Fables #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: I want his head mounted on my wall and he wants a ring on my finger.

There's something very wrong in Grimm Groves.

The bodies pile.

The mountain soaks with blood.

And everyone in my small town acts like I'm insane.

They smile in line at the general store. People I've known all my life die by the dozen and I'm helpless to stop it.

Then I find the villian waiting in my bed and he's taken everything from me.

Since I've got nothing left, I've also got nothing to lose.

In this tiny town where nothing seems real maybe we can both get what we want.

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Page 1

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OCTOBER 15TH, 1969 WEST VIRGINIA

15 YEARS 351 DAYS OLD

“That’ll be a dollar fifty, Red,” Peter Jones, the old man who runs the diesel station, says over the counter between us.

“A dollar fifty?” I nearly shout. “I don’t have it!”

“Well, then you shouldn’t have pumped it, young lady.” He shrugs, not bothered by my problems. A mess of gray hair sits on top of his head, and not an ounce of pity shows on his wrinkly face even though he knows it’s just Granny and me up on top of the mountain.

“I’ll have to owe you.”

I stick my hands into my pockets, pull out my quarters, and hand him all five plus a dime I had earmarked for a candy bar. He rolls them around in his palm, looking at them too careful like he thinks they’re fake or something.

“This isn’t enough money, Redley. This isn’t a charity.” His thumb slides over one quarter in particular.

“A full tank was one twenty-five last week,” I complain, wondering if he isn’t just picking on me ’cause I’m a dumb girl. I’ll be sixteen in a little over a week, so I’m not that young, and I manage to take care of my granny all on my own without a man in our house. “How’s the same thing so much more now?”

I could do the math if he posted the price, but I don't see anything but how many gallons when I'm pumping.

"There's an oil crisis, Redley, because of that big spill out in Santa Barbara. Things are only going to go up."

I think that's in California, so I don't know what that has to do with us. And why is it going to get worse?

"How do you know all this?" I ask. "We don't even get the news in Grimm Groves."

He sighs and taps the counter.

"Sometimes you need to look further than your nose, but the Little family has never been good about that, have they?"

"Hey! I take offense to that," I say, my blood boiling just like it always does anytime someone brings up my family. The job falls on me since most of them aren't here to defend themselves, and whether that's true or not, it's bad manners to insult the dead.

"You were meant to." He gives me a nasty look. "Pay me back quick before I involve your granny and you get a whooping."

He seems a little too excited for that, and a shiver races down my spine as he stands up off his stool, but he just turns around and walks back into the office, not bothering with a goodbye as the door slams shut behind him.

"Thanks for the loan," I say as I head out the door and back to my truck, Penny.

My boots have seen better days, and the soles clap as I climb inside. Pop's old pipe tobacco never faded from the leather despite all the years, and no matter how much

trouble Penny gives me, driving her feels good. She complains as I turn the key over, and I have to try a few times before the engine starts. Once she's running, I put her in gear and hit the road. A strange vibration shimmies the cab, and I say a little curse I wouldn't dare repeat in front of Granny.

The engine sputters, and I slap the dash. It won't fix anything, but it also doesn't fix anything when Granny hits me, yet she keeps doing it. She can't drive anymore, so even though I don't have my license, I do all our running around. Good thing there's never been a cop in Grimm Groves.

Pop was the town mechanic before he died five years ago at the hands of a local legend and monster—the Wolf. Sadly, that was before I learned all the ins and outs of fixing Penny, but he was teaching me, and I know a thing or two. I've managed to keep her running, but I'm reaching the end of what I can do.

Those happier memories were during a time of peace when that demon stopped killing. Pop was the first person the Wolf killed in nearly twenty years. It'd been so long that people stopped believing, calling it a tall tale, but the rest of my family were killed shortly after. A lot of people have died in the five years since, and nobody has a good explanation for that either.

My mountain climbs into the sky to my left, another mountain sits to the right, and the town center waits down the graveled road ahead of me. As I enter the outskirts, my eyes stick to the schoolhouse. There have never been more than twenty kids at a time, and that was a big year. Grimm Groves is nothing more than a fire station, a schoolhouse, and Dr. Jones, who people suspect is neither a real doctor nor a Jones. An outpost where people sell the things they've grown themselves, built, or driven hours for comes next.

My tires crunch over the gravel as I roll into the parking lot for the post office. The mail doesn't come regular in Grimm Groves like it does in other places. Granny has

been saying every day this week will be mail day. She doesn't like being wrong or waiting, and each day I've had to come home empty-handed has only made her angrier. She hasn't beaten me for it yet, but she's not known for her patience.

I sigh in relief at the people lining up outside the door, stretching all the way down to Doc's medical office. The truck came. The crowd is normal. Mail day doesn't come around here often, so it's a production when it does, but something more is going on because there are too many pinched faces.

The full mood of the people doesn't reach me until I step out of the truck. Whispers and hushed voices all around. Bobby Crane stands up at the front of the line, blond hair and blue eyes shining in the bright afternoon sun as he talks to his daddy. He's one of the wealthier kids who live at the bottom of the mountain, and he looks it, always wearing nice new clothes. They've got a big house with all the modern amenities you can find this far out.

His daddy owns a business in the city and spends a week every month out there. People say he has another family, but Bobby wouldn't have any way of knowing, so he just plays dumb. He's an okay-looking guy and has helped me with the truck a couple of times, not that we made much progress.

We kissed out in his garage once with the thick summer air all around us, but I won't repeat that if I can avoid it. He's not much of a kisser or a mechanic. All he has is a Chevy manual, his dad's tools, and a pointy tongue. I shouldn't judge him, though, 'cause it's more than I have, and he's helped me far more than anyone else has.

I walk to the end of the line, not particularly trying to get his attention, but as soon as he sees me, he steps away to come and talk.

"Hey, Red. How's the truck?" he asks as he takes the place behind me in line. His eyes shift to the people around us, checking if anyone is listening to our conversation.

“Not too good, Bobby. What did your dad say about getting me the parts when he’s out of town next? Granny is getting real angry that I haven’t fixed her yet.”

Penny is going to be a garden statue soon. That will surely have Granny in an uproar. I’ve still got bruises on my backside from my last whooping, and I’m not too excited for another one. My birthday is coming, and even though I won’t have a party or anything, I want to be able to sit for it.

His gaze flickers nervously to his father at the front of the line. He knows how rough she is on me, so he wants to help, but he’s never been brave. He rubs the back of his collar, and I know I won’t like whatever he has to say.

“I didn’t actually get a chance to ask him yet.”

“Why the hell not, Bobby?” I try to whisper, but my third cousin, who insists I call her Mrs. Clyde, shoots me a dirty look that makes me real grateful that Granny doesn’t come to town often.

He shifts nervously, hands sliding into his pockets. “He’s been in a mood lately. Some things are happening over at work, I guess.”

What, is his other wife mad at him? I only just manage not to ask.

This is serious to me. Granny is going to kick my ass if I can’t fix the truck, and his dad’s going to be gone soon. He’s supposed to be leaving tomorrow morning.

“Can you please ask him now? Before he goes?” I try to sound nice. I don’t dare flirt because I don’t want to lead him on, but it was a much more effective bargaining tool.

“With everything happening, today isn’t a good day.” He shrugs, taking a step back

and getting ready to make his escape.

My hand shoots out and grabs his arm, stopping him from leaving before I get the story. I regret the action immediately when he smiles at me a little too friendly.

“What’s happening?” I ask, dropping my hand.

He leans in to me and presses his lips against my ear, making me shiver in discomfort. “They found Heather Murphy dead.”

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CHAPTER 2

REDLEY

I gasp, my hand flying to my mouth. Heather was a nasty thing who looked down her nose at me at school. We hated each other until her little sister died last year. Since then, I couldn't find anything in me other than pity for her. She still didn't like me much, though, and now she's gone.

"That makes number sixteen," I say, as fear and dread race through me. This is only getting worse.

The first encounters with the Wolf went back well over one hundred years, beginning when the Littles first settled on this mountain. The native people in the area had been forced west, but they never touched this land even before they went. My great-great-grandpappy saw that as an opportunity to hide his moonshine operation rather than what it was—a warning. We should have stayed the hell away.

"Damn that Wolf," I say, hating the sense of responsibility I have for what's happening. My family started this settlement, and it all comes down on me.

He doesn't quite roll his eyes, but they lift like he wants to. "You know I don't believe in that crud, Red."

Sometimes I think my neighbors are the biggest obstacle in finding that monster because none of them believe in him. The second is the police, who don't come to help even when people die bloody. And even if they did, the people here wouldn't

welcome them.

No one believes me. I take a deep breath and swallow hard. I'm used to it, but I'm tired too. I don't let his doubt or anyone else's affect what I know, though.

"Then what do you think is happening?" I ask, sure that he's about to tell me something that won't explain the injuries. The cause of death they claim never does match the corpse.

"It's a hard life out here, Redley. Sometimes people die hard too." He shrugs, and I would be shocked by how cruel he sounds, but he's just like everyone else.

"What exactly does that mean, Bobby?"

His dad waves for him, and he nods to me before heading back over to him.

People die hard around here far too often, I think to myself as I watch him go.

The line moves slow. Mail day is the worst day when people have something to talk about. I can practically hear the postmaster having the same conversation again and again from out here. I'm only getting angrier, though, because what the hell is the use of talking about things when you don't do anything to stop them? At least it's a sunny day and warm for April.

"They think she had a heart attack." Abby and Donna Mills stand two people ahead of me, chatting back and forth with no effort to keep quiet. They wear their hair in matching braids, though Donna is a blond and Abby is a brunette.

"Well, she had a weak heart. Everyone knew that." Donna's nasal tone has always irritated me. She sounds so sure of herself as if we were all waiting on Heather to drop dead. Heather liked to ski during the winter.

“I never heard that,” I say, unable to force myself to keep quiet when people are making things up.

Abby turns around and looks down her nose at me as she speaks. “I’m not surprised by that, Red. You always were so worried about yourself and your little ghost stories. When did you ever worry about Heather or anyone else?”

Since I was ten years old, that's all I’ve ever done. The Mills sisters and I were in school together for a few years, and much like the rest of the town, we didn’t get along. These girls have always been rude to me, but it got a lot worse after my parents died. I open and close my hands, deciding it wouldn’t be a good idea to start a brawl on mail day when Granny is waiting for a package.

“So they found her at home?” I ask through my teeth.

Abby looks at Donna, asking for permission to answer me. “No,” she finally decides. “She was going for a hike, and she fell down the cliff. You know, the one with the waterfall over by Pike’s Ridge?”

“I know it.” There isn’t any hiking over that way, though, or any reason for her to be on that property at all.

“Well, that’s what happened,” she says when I don’t take the bait. “Sorry there aren’t any monsters around for you to get worked up about.” She wants me to respond. These girls love nothing more than something to discuss, and I’ve given that to them plenty of times.

“What a shame,” I say, deciding they aren’t going to win today.

She sneers and gives me a nasty up-and-down look before turning around and pretending I don’t exist. The adults standing between us act like they didn’t hear

anything, and that's fine by me. I'm used to it. My mind turns the story over, trying to decide what it could mean. A fall down a cliff is a good way to cover injuries.

The line moves slowly but surely, and eventually, I make it up to the front. The postmaster pulls a small box and a few letters out from under the desk, and I thank God Granny's package is here. I go to grab it and the few letters, but he slaps his hand on top of them, holding them tight and stopping me from taking them.

"You hear about Heather?" he asks, and I don't know how he's not tired of this.

"Yeah, it's a real shame." I try to sound sad but busy.

"I know what you and your granny think," he says with a conspiratorial smile, trying to get me on a good rant about the Wolf so he has something new to tell the people standing in line behind me. He doesn't actually believe me, and I'm not interested in giving him more to gossip about.

"We don't think anything. I just heard about Heather having a heart attack outside." I try to deliver the lines convincingly, but I don't think I manage it when he flashes me a smile.

"Are you looking for him out there in the woods? That's what your daddy said he was doing before he passed."

I'm not sure if that's true or not. Daddy spent a lot of time in the woods, but he didn't tell me what he was up to. I've wanted to go looking before, but Granny won't let me. Says she can't afford to lose her only remaining kin.

"There's nothing out in the woods but the occasional bear," I lie with as straight of a face as I can manage.

The people behind me in line start to complain, so he gives up on pressuring me and releases my belongings. “Sure, sure. See you later, Redley.” The postmaster winks at me as I leave, and I try to smile politely despite the uncomfortable twist in my stomach. He’s the same age as my daddy would be, and I’m not looking at him that way.

Bobby and his dad stand at the edge of the parking lot talking to people. He stares at me as I get back in my truck. I don’t know if he wants me to yearn for him or something, but it’s not happening. I did what I needed to do today. Heather isn’t my problem, and it’s time to get Granny her package before she’s pissed. I pull out, taking the one road back up until it’s no longer gravel, just dirt winding slowly and steadily up the mountain.

Properties are big out here, and you don’t often spot houses through the trees, but as I pass the end of each dirt drive, I can tell you who lives there, how long they’ve been there, and who their daddy and granddaddy are. Quite a few people have moved here over the years, but very few of them leave. When I pass the driveway that used to belong to my family, I avoid looking with everything I have, holding my breath like ghosts are waiting to possess me. I breathe a sigh of relief once I’ve passed.

The mountain really is something special in the fall, though. Now that I’m driving a lot slower, and the wind isn’t so harsh, I crank the windows down. Even though I’m a little too cold, it’s incredible compared to all that blistering heat before it. The pine trees hang onto their needles, sturdy and strong like always, but the leafy trees are just starting to turn red and golden. The little pops of color remind me of fairies or some other kind of magic even though I’m sure the only mysticism around here is the evil kind.

With the truck sputtering along and begging to stop, it takes nearly two hours to reach our cabin at the top. It’s not too big or too small, just right for the two of us, though I imagine it was close quarters when my daddy and his two brothers were young. My

uncles died around the same time as my daddy, but we were never close.

Bringing Penny to a stop, I climb out and take a breath as I stare out over the vista. Grimm Groves may be drenched in blood and secrets, but it sure is beautiful.

“Goddammit, Redley!” my granny’s vicious shout comes from somewhere deep in the house. My stomach sinks. I had hoped running her errands and grabbing her package would put her in a good mood. Judging by the sun, I’m not even late. Taking the steps slowly, I try to keep my approach silent. Granny doesn’t like it when I’m loud, or quiet really, but she especially doesn’t like me loud.

“You better have my package, or you’ll regret it!” she shouts.

Just like I thought, her patience has run out.

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CHAPTER 3

REDLEY

“I know you're out there,” she shouts. “I heard that damn truck you still haven’t fixed!”

Sometimes when she’s yelling at me, I feel myself slipping out of my own head until she’s yelling at someone else. That happens when she’s beating me too, but it’s more helpful then. Right now, I’m just not sure what she wants me to say. I’ve been doing everything I can to keep it going, and she doesn’t even drive.

I push the screen door open and step inside before I really piss her off. Her package rests in my hands. “The mail came today,” I tell her as I set it down on the kitchen island. She doesn’t so much as look at me, and I swallow, sure I’m already in trouble, though I’m not sure for what.

“I heard. It took you long enough to get home. I’ve been waiting all week for that to come.”

“There was a line out the door.”

I have a strong urge to head to my bedroom, but I’m sure she’s working up to something. Granny bustles around the kitchen, her anger wafting off her like steam, and she’s not the type to let anything go. It’s better to see where this is going. That’s when I notice the bread I baked earlier sitting in the middle of the table instead of in the bread box like it’s on display.

“Something wrong with the bread, Granny?” I ask, feeling like I’m knowingly stepping on a landmine.

“You put enough salt in that?” she asks as she hikes her thumb over her shoulder. “We don’t have flour to waste. You know we have to eat that, don’t you?”

I had a piece for breakfast, and it was good. I don’t actually know what she’s talking about. We don’t have anything to waste, never have a day in my life, and I surely don’t act like it.

“Sorry, Granny,” I say quickly even though I’m almost certain I used the normal amount of salt.

I don’t know if her tastes are changing with age or she’s just getting meaner, but either way, there’s no use fighting her. I’m so worked up between Bobby and the Mills sisters, though, that I really wish I’d taken my frustrations out on someone I was allowed to hit before coming home.

“Yeah, sorry .” She laughs a mean and mocking sound. “You’ll be sorry when I’m dead. Doctor says to eat less salt, so you give me more. Trying to do the Wolf’s job for him, are you?”

Funny that she only follows those rules when I’m the one messing up. Granny ate bacon from Colette’s pig last week.

“The Wolf was doing his own job today,” I tell her, hoping to distract her.

“Don’t try to change the subject. Helen already stopped by.”

She and her friend are like clucking hens.

She slams the counter as she moves things around. She's not cleaning so much as reminding everything in her surroundings that they're going to behave exactly as she wants them to. If the woman asked baking soda not to rise, it would probably listen to her and call her ma'am.

"Can't do every damn thing myself, Red," she continues.

She doesn't do half of what she did five years ago when I moved in with her, so she's telling the truth, but does she even notice I'm the one picking up the slack and have been since I was a kid? She's always been mean, but things get worse as time passes. I don't know how much longer I can live out here with her.

"I'm sorry, Granny."

"You're not sorry, you're ungrateful, good for nothing."

Don't talk back. Don't make excuses. Keep your head down. I can't quite remember what Mama's voice sounded like even though it's only been five years, but I hold her advice close. It's the only way to survive Granny. My lips squeeze together like they're trying to become one, and I miss my parents and brother like a severed limb.

Granny turns to look me in the eye, and it takes everything in me to stand up straight, but without any defiance. She was a beautiful woman once, but we don't look anything alike. Her once blond hair is pure white now, while mine is a dark brown, thick and heavy. Little curls surround her head, and her eyes are an intense blue that matched my daddy's before he died. My eyes are green like Mama's.

Everything about her looks dainty. She stands a head below me now with the slump in her back, but you'd be stupid to believe that. Neither her size nor her age stops her.

She stomps over to me, and a weathered little hand raises before it slaps me squarely

across the cheek. Eons pass and I could move or stop her, but I don't. The slap echoes, filling the kitchen like an old tune. This is what I know, and truthfully, she's not as strong as she used to be. It doesn't hurt that bad, but it's whittling away at my dignity in a way I'm not sure I can stand.

She's lived too long and too hard to have her own granddaughter lay hands on her, but do I really deserve all of this? I can't imagine I do. My cheek burns, but my anger is hotter, and I stand there silently as I wait for her to hit me again for something I didn't actually do. Instead, she just stares me down with a bone-deep hate.

"Get out of my sight, Redley. I swear to God I wish every day the Wolf got your mama and you instead of my boys."

The words are her second slap, and they hurt that much worse. I fell asleep hiding in my brother's closet the night they died, or she would have gotten her wish. I should have died with them, and instead, I have to live with her. That stings worse than a whooping with Pop's razor strap, and I turn to go to my room with tears hanging in my eyes. Leaving her sight is a blessing.

The cabin consists of a main room, a kitchen, and then a short hallway leading to three bedrooms. Granddaddy built this cabin from trees he fell right here on this property, and the walls are deep brown stacks of logs finished with his own hands. I'm not sure if Granny loves or hates the constant reminder of him, but I like remembering there was a time I had a family.

I'm not paying much attention since I want to get away from her so badly, and I fly into my room, closing the door quickly behind me without slamming it, which would only make her angrier. This room used to be my uncle Lester's, and then it was Granny's sewing closet before I got dumped on her doorstep and ruined her life.

The remnants of that still take up most of the space, and I need to be careful not to

mess with her things. I look around, making sure I haven't knocked over any of the piles of thread and buttons I'm not allowed to touch. Everything seems to be okay, well, as okay as it can be, but then my gaze settles on my bed.

Because nothing ever goes right for me, rather than the made-up sheets I left this morning, someone is lying on top of my comforter.

“Who are you?” I ask.

CHAPTER 4

REDLEY

“I’m not here,” he whispers. “No one can know I’m here.”

My single bed is barely big enough for me, yet it overflows with a man three times my size. Booted feet hang over the edge, and his head lays propped against the headboard. I open my mouth to scream for help but hesitate with the hot shape of Granny’s hand still on my cheek.

What would it look like to her? The question runs through my mind, a self-preservation instinct I don’t plan to ignore. I’m not allowed to have boys in here, let alone whoever he is, so I can’t imagine she’ll believe me if I say he just showed up and climbed in.

He places one finger against his lips, asking for my silence, and mouths, “ Please. ” That’s what ultimately tips my decision in his favor, that or some deep sucker tendencies.

He’s definitely older than me, but I’m not sure how old, maybe nineteen or twenty. Muscles cover his body, long brown hair hangs to his chin, and his eyes shine the strangest shade of yellow. He’s very handsome, and I wish the fact that he was covered in blood took away from that, but it doesn’t. Apparently, I have a thing for beat-up-looking guys. A bag sits beside him on the bed, but it doesn’t look like it’s for hiking.

I pick out a few injuries and decide the blood is probably his, or enough of it, anyway, to consider him less of a threat. A bunch of injuries cover his huge body—bruises, cuts, and ripped clothes. Despite the fact they're ripped, they're expensive and fancy. Nothing like what we wear out here on the mountain, even nicer than Bobby's clothes.

"You need to leave before she finds you here," I tell him, praying to God he's just a nice man who will listen. Yeah, breaking and entering is bad, but there isn't much in the way of shelter out here, and he is hurt.

He shakes his head just once. "Can't."

"But you have to," I argue. He shakes his head again.

His features twist in pain, and my heart twists a little with them. I don't trust him for anything, but that doesn't mean I enjoy seeing something suffer. Keeping quiet seems like my safest bet in every direction. I'm afraid of what Granny will do to me, but what could this guy do to us both? My granny and I could wind up dead if I don't play my cards right.

The window sits open, his blood smeared over the ledge, which explains how he got in here. My heart pounds so loud it vibrates in my ears, and shots of adrenaline explode inside me. The fact Heather was killed today—or died, I guess, depending who you ask—sits on my mind, and I wonder if this could be him, the Wolf.

But why would the Wolf show up hurt in my bedroom? I don't know if that monster even can hurt.

"How did you make it in here if you can't make it back out?" I nod to the windowsill covered in his blood. "You must have climbed in."

My eyes slide over him as I frantically attempt to form a plan, but no answers occur to me, just questions and frightening possibilities. If he's not the Wolf, then who the hell is he?

"How are you letting a little old lady slap you stupid over a loaf of bread?" he asks with an attitude that seems out of place for someone making such an imposition of himself.

I'm surprised he heard all that and more surprised he would comment on it, but I don't disagree with him. It's hard to explain why I let Granny hit me when it's so clear she only does it for fun and to be mean. I can't remember the last time I did something wrong on purpose.

"Her house, her rules," I tell him without even a trace of bitterness in my tone.

She could have left me to fend for myself. After the rest of my family was killed, I walked up to Granny's all alone with nothing but a basket of my things, and she never turned me away. The Wolf may have even come back to finish the job, but I was already here with her. I can't think about things like fair or earned.

"From what I heard, she's just a mean old bitch," he says.

"Don't be an asshole. You're a guest," I tell him.

"I broke in," he groans as he slips down the headboard and lays a little heavier against the bed than before. "I think by virtue of my entrance, I'm free from having to be polite."

I laugh, and with that, some more of my fear subsides. He struggles to breathe as he pulls his knees up on the bed and rolls to his side in a position that will open his lungs. Did something crush him? Rockslides happen a lot around here, though most

of the time you hear the big ones. My hand involuntarily traces my cheek as he watches me from my own bed.

“Come here, let me see that.” He waves me over, and I just ignore him, an expression on my face like he’s crazy to think I would.

“Let me see how bad it is.” He makes a similar gesture with his chin, but I stay in place.

“It’s not bad. It’s one slap from an old lady. Someone should be looking at you .”

“Maybe.” He laughs, and his eyes roll right before he gives up and drops his head back against my pillow—one short groan of pain and the rustle of fabric, and then silence.

A minute passes before he reaches into his bag and starts sifting through the things inside it. As he moves, a black rectangle slides out. My interest immediately piques when I see the two holes through it. Despite what I just said, I step toward him.

“Is that a cassette?” I ask before I can think better of it. I slam my lips shut, stopping myself from letting my curiosity fully get the better of me.

“Do I have something you want now?” he asks as he holds it up for me to see.

Elvis’s Greatest Hits is written across the plastic, and I can’t believe it’s actually what I think it is.

“Never mind,” I lie, pretending I haven’t been dying to hear a cassette in action.

“You want me to play it for you?” He pats the bed beside him, but I don’t trust his intentions.

A few people around town have record players. Bobby's dad even brings him home the latest ones when he comes back from "working" in the city, but I've only heard rumors about these from Bobby and have seen a few pictures in magazines.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I tell him, instantly regretting not taking him up on it.

He seems surprised, but he hides his disappointment well. "Fine then."

A pinky slides into one of the holes, and he twists the plastic around it. He's taunting me, and it's working. I yield eventually, but instead of getting close to him like he requested, I decide to sit in the old chair near his feet. His eyes follow me as I move, not giving up until I fully sit and exhale. The contrast between the yellow iris and black pupil is beautiful and so bizarre. He holds up the little black plastic between us, his pinky still inside.

"Get me some water, and I'll play this for you. I know you're curious."

I shake my head sharp and quick instead of responding, but the temptation building inside me is hard as heck to deny. I can't, though. There's no way I'm going to risk Granny's wrath so soon, or leave this guy alone when I'm not sure what he's up to.

"Oh, come on," he tempts me. "You know you want to." I feel like he's the devil leading me straight into temptation, but dammit, I do want to hear that cassette.

"No, I'd rather not let a little old lady slap me over a glass of water too."

He snorts. "Consider it getting slapped for Elvis then if that helps."

That does help.

“We’re stuck with each other for the moment,” I tell him.

“I’ll need some water if you want me out, and you do want me out, more than I want to go,” he adds to the mix, sweetening the pot. I may be oddly enjoying myself, but who knows how abruptly that might end. I need to be careful.

“Maybe I don’t mind you being here as much as I thought I would,” I say.

“High praise.”

We’re both quiet after that. I planned to lie on that bed and think about what life might be like one day when I’m free, and now I’m having the strangest conversation of my life. Granny said I was trying to kill her, and while that’s very far from the truth, I can’t help but wonder what freedom might look like when she’s gone.

I don’t have illusions of leaving home at eighteen. She needs me here, but once she doesn’t? There has to be a big wide world outside of Grimm Groves. The cassette in his hand feels like well-timed proof that that’s true.

“So if you’re not going to leave, tell me what happened to you.” I wait for his answer, and nothing comes. Shaking my head at his rudeness, I decide to needle him just a little. “You look awfully big to lose a fight.”

“I didn’t.”

“Of course not.” Typical man. “Are you going to tell me what happened?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

I roll my eyes. This is getting me places.

“Are you going to hurt me?” I ask the question that weighs on me the most even though he’s practically allergic to answering questions.

This time, he laughs, and the sound carries a faint hint of evil. It makes me even more nervous.

“Sure, if I don’t get some water.”

My eyes meet his, and fear drips through me along with something else, but he’s not serious. He’s not going to hurt me right now. I’m not sure that he can with how badly he’s hurt.

“A no would have sufficed.” My eyes crinkle at the edge. Have I ever looked this closely at another person, even when I kissed Bobby?

No, I haven’t.

“Why should I lie?” he asks, and even the question feels like a lie.

“If you’re so honest, then who are you?” I ask with our eyes still searching one another.

“No one.” His deep voice reminds me of the rockslides I fear crushed him.

“Then why are you in my room, lying in the bed I was looking forward to?”

“I’m not.” His mouth kicks up at the side, and I realize he’s so handsome he’s making me crazy. That’s why I haven’t screamed. That’s why I’m sitting here instead of running.

“Is someone looking for you?”

The slyest smile turns up the side of his mouth. “Well, if they are, it’s in your best interest if they don’t find me.”

I think I want to kiss him.

CHAPTER 5

REDLEY

Granny's footsteps echo down the hall as she heads to her bedroom for the night, and it's my turn to put a finger over my mouth. I jump back from him when I see how close we've both gotten to the end of the bed. As she passes, I realize I'm more afraid of my granny than an intruder who won't tell me his name. I'm not sure how to feel about that.

Whoever he is stays silent, though, and when Granny's door closes, I sigh in relief. We're quiet for a little while after that, and eventually, the dying sun gives up. I grab the box of matches off my table and light my oil lamp to better watch his movements in the dark.

Even though Granny is in bed, I keep the flame dim. I don't need to draw any more of her notice. The glow only makes him more sinister but also softer somehow. The lighting makes this romantic, and my gut twists in opposing directions.

"I need water," he eventually tries again, and some of his snarkiness has died along with the light. The house sits quiet, and I'm pretty sure Granny is sleeping by now. I really do want to hear that cassette.

"Okay." I stand and hold up my hands. "Please stay here. She'd beat me senseless if she knew I let you stay."

"Afraid of a few more slaps?" he taunts me with a handsome smile.

“ No , I’m afraid of whatever heavy thing is lying around.”

I shake my head at him. There wouldn’t be a good reason to be scared if she wasn’t willing to hurt me. He nods, but his jaw tenses, and those yellow eyes seem a lot more serious than they were a second before.

“How badly does she beat you?” he asks, but there’s no way I’m going to answer that right now when I’m about to risk her wrath.

“Please, just be quiet,” I say as I turn to the door.

Fear slithers down my spine as I open it and slip out into the house. Keeping as quiet as I can, I pass Granny’s room. No light shows from beneath the door, and I assume she’s asleep inside, but I don’t dare stop to check. The dull sound of her snores doesn’t mean all that much either. She snores awake sometimes, and she’s a damn light sleeper.

I make it to the kitchen without issue. The main area of the cabin is really just one big room. The night is impossibly dark, and not even a stray bit of starlight shines through the many windows. I keep my hands in front of me as I move, aware of the space enough to get around but still worried I might knock something over.

A tank feeds our sink, and most of our water comes from the spring that opens nearby and forms a stream as it winds its way down the mountain. The same spring turns into the waterfall they claim Heather Murphy fell down when she had her “heart attack.”

The cupboard opens quietly, so I’m sure no one will hear, but my fingers slip on the knob, and the door thuds as it closes. My heart speeds up. I wasn’t kidding when I said Granny would beat me senseless if she caught me, and a whooping has never excused me from chores before. So that would make tomorrow an exceptionally bad day.

A few pumps to build the pressure, and I fill his glass, making sure not to waste a drop. Once finished, I walk back to my bedroom, one hand stretched out as I go. I'm more excited to get back to the nameless guy in my bedroom than I should be, and I know I can't encourage these feelings. He has to leave.

I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow. That will make getting my guest out all the more complicated, and I shake my head as I realize I've already decided to let him sleep in my bed tonight. I'm debating whether the chair or the floor will be better, but I'm suddenly stopped by my hand grazing soft, weathered skin.

"Granny," I shriek and jump. The cup goes flying, water splashes everywhere, and the glass shatters as it hits the ground, skittering shards across the floor and over our feet.

She flips on the one overhead light in the entire house, brightening up the kitchen and living area. From that one move, I know how badly I've screwed up. Our access to electricity is spotty at best up here, and we very rarely use it when we can avoid it. The one power line that runs up the mountain feeds our entire community, and here at the top, there isn't much left. She never wastes it to look at me.

My eyes struggle to adjust when it was pitch black a moment before. Rage twists her sagging cheeks, making her look older and more frightening all at once. She knows I wasted water and broke a glass, but does she know about the man in my room? That's what will really make the difference.

"I'm sorry. I'll clean it up," I tell her, my voice begging for some mercy that doesn't actually exist.

"You. Stupid. Little. Girl." Her voice twists with her anger, letting me know I'm no longer dealing with a rational person. This is the Granny who will beat me half to death and leave me in the woodshed to heal.

Granny's arm swings, and I expect her fist, but I don't see the razor strap. The leather collides with the side of my head, blunt force mixed with the snap of a whip. Its strike is so familiar I'd know it in my sleep—have known it in my sleep once or twice.

The hit jiggles my eyes and brain, leaving everything fuzzy. I cry as pain explodes in my eye. I've been beaten with this piece of leather more times than I can count. It used to belong to my grandfather, and I'm sure it blackened my daddy's behind a time or two, but this is different. She really wants to hurt me.

"Please," I beg, and I'm not sure if I'm asking her to forgive me, to stop hitting me, or both.

The second hit takes me off my feet. My hip connects with the hard, wet floor, and the sharp pain from the glass registers as it digs into my skin, but my pants take the worst of the damage. I look up at her from my spot on the floor, and I don't even have a chance to raise my hands as the strap connects with my head a third time.

Spots of colors swirl in my vision with the impact, and I fall the rest of the way, slamming my face against the floor. The shards of glass meet no resistance and slice my skin deeply. Blood spills, rolling down my cheek like tears.

"Please," I whisper, but I'm speaking into the floor, and I can't even hear myself over the ringing in my ears.

She still hasn't answered my pleas when the light finally goes out. I'm back surrounded by the darkness, but her actions speak loud enough. You don't deserve mercy. I shake through the pain, glad at least that she can't see me and I can hide my shame.

"Clean it up," she speaks into the dark. "You'll be getting a new glass in the morning, and you won't be using my money to do it."

Her feet pad softly away, and a dull thud tells me she's back in her room. A few minutes pass before my head stops spinning, and the ringing in my ears dulls enough to do as she says. My hands search across the floor until I find the island in the center of the kitchen and light the oil lamp, deciding her wrath will be worse in the morning if I miss some of the mess.

The broom takes care of the glass, and the mop gets the water. My head and hands don't feel like my own as they work, and I run out the door to throw up over the side of the cliff twice, desperate for her not to hear me and wake up again. About an hour later, I've cleaned up the glass and wiped up the bloody pink water. My face stings horribly. Bits of glass stick out of my skin, but I don't dare touch them before I'm hidden away.

I've forgotten why I went to get the water to begin with, and when I open the door to my bedroom, I'm shocked all over again to find that I'm not alone.

CHAPTER 6

REDLEY

He stands beside me, so tall my neck cranes to see him. Even with the way he filled my bed, I never could have imagined his height. Brown hair hangs to his jaw, and though his features appear hazy from getting hit in the head, that line is strong and handsome. His fingers dig into my flesh as he grips my upper arm and pulls me into my own space like he owns it.

The oil lamp still burns, and I'm amazed Granny didn't come in here herself to put it out. She must have been half or more drunk. She has a real taste for the moonshine, which isn't unusual in our family. She hits harder when she's drunk too.

His ferocious yellow eyes rove over my face. Murderous anger emanates from him, and the only thing that makes sense flies out of my mouth. "I'm really sorry. I dropped your water."

"Shut up," he grits. His muscles bunch and tense all over. It must hurt him to stand with whatever happened earlier, but here he is.

I do as he says, and his hands shake even harder as he squeezes me tighter. What is there to say? If Granny hears me, I think she might actually murder me this time. I don't know if he's going to hit me too or maybe rape me, but experience has taught me there isn't a gentle hand in the world. Granny has explained often enough what sex is and why I need to avoid it at all costs. She's also told me that certain men don't care if they take it. They don't care if they steal the only thing a girl has. Right now,

I'm too confused and afraid to understand his actions.

Tears start to form on my lashes, and harsh breaths pull through my lungs as I panic. Maybe I'm the problem thinking about sex right now, but I'm not thinking clearly. I've never been so close to a man and so vulnerable at the same time. What if he's here to hurt me too? His rough hands are hurting me, but they don't feel so bad compared to the other treatment I've endured tonight.

The room is so tiny he easily reaches over and grabs the lamp by the metal ring without stepping away from me. He's so large I think if he stretched out fully he wouldn't fit across the floor.

"This looks painful," he says, lifting the lamp to my injuries.

"I'll be fine," I say, fear and tears choking me.

The proximity of the fire makes me tremble. I've only been burned as a punishment once, but it was a miserable experience I'd rather not relive. His sharp eyes chastise me, and I don't know what he'll do now that I've failed him too. I've come to associate failure and pain. He touches my chin as he turns my head, checking both sides of my face. My vision is starting to obscure on the one side as my eye swells shut.

"It's going to scar."

"No one cares about that," I tell him. I'm not looking for sympathy, just speaking my truth as I know it. Granny won't regret her actions, and I'll have to live with my face all the same.

"Maybe I do."

“Now why would a stranger care about something stupid like marks left in my skin?”
I shoot back.

There’s nothing but serious consideration in his gaze as he leads me back to the chair I was sitting in. I stand there stupidly until he pushes my shoulders down, and then I sit while he places the lamp on the window ledge. He sits on the end of my bed and pulls the chair between his knees so he’s practically wrapped around me, then begins plucking out the shards with his bare fingers. I wince but manage not to make a sound as I let him work.

“Does that hurt?” he asks.

I shake my head as tears leak across the wounds. Some twisted part of me wonders if the glass is cutting him as he removes it, if we’re sharing blood. I hope we’re not. Letting myself be this vulnerable with him scares me as it is. I shake in his arms, and a part of me wants to scream for him to stop. This is too much, too raw. How will I ever survive someone treating me so gently when it will never happen again?

I keep quiet because the larger issue than my own feelings is that my head is too unsteady to remove the glass myself. I can’t fall asleep with it stuck in my skin or it may never come out, so I let him forge this tie with me. I’m halfway in love with him, and I remind myself it’s just the forming concussion.

He drops each shard on the floor. That will be for me to clean up later, I’m sure, just like the glass outside, but I’m thankful it’s not in my skin. A further whimper or two get free as he cleans me up, and I resent the hell out of them, but damn does this hurt. I need to lie down before I fall. His body around me is the only thing holding me up.

When he finishes, he gathers me into his arms and slides us both up and into the bed. He’s so warm, and I can’t help but cuddle into him. This softness is the same reason I let Bobby kiss me. I needed to be close to someone for once, but kissing him didn’t

feel like this. I'm suddenly sure I'd let this person do a whole lot more.

From his bag, he pulls out a smaller machine than I expected. They're usually made for sitting on desks, I think, but it must have a battery. How strange. He slides the Elvis cassette inside and presses a button.

"Hound Dog" fills the room at a gentle volume, and I'm afraid Granny will hear and get angry, but I'm too tired to pick my head up, let alone speak.

He gently pushes me off him and climbs out of the bed. One last look down at me, and he says, "Rest."

I close my eyes because the one is already swelling its way fully shut, and the other is bone-tired from the pain and the head injury. At least he's doing what I need of him and leaving. He helped me, and he's getting out of here. What more can I ask of him?

I might have a concussion, and according to Doc, I'm not supposed to sleep with one, but I don't have any chance of fighting it. As Elvis sings softly to me and the oil lamp goes out, I fall into a deeper sleep than I've ever experienced.

The Wolf never caught a rabbit, and he ain't no friend of mine.

CHAPTER 7

REDLEY

That night, I don't have nightmares. Not sure if it's Elvis singing to me or the worst beating of my life, but I see my mom in the old field where she and I used to pick flowers for the table in the late spring and summer. My brother runs toward me as we play tag, and a whole lot of memories I considered lost remind me of their presence.

When I wake in the morning, an unbearable sadness already sits on my heart. Then I look over and find him still sitting in the chair at the end of the bed, watching me. He's possibly more handsome than I remembered with the dark circles under his eyes, highlighting his cheekbones. He doesn't look like he slept. Blood still covers the same clothes he wore last night when I found him here. So, I don't believe he ever left either.

His presence is the strangest comfort. I wanted him gone so bad, but finding him here has my heart racing. "Why did you stay?" I ask, staring at him like he's my savior. Maybe falling half in love with him last night wasn't about the head injury so much as it was about him.

His gaze runs over me, making some kind of judgement before he answers. "Just wanted to make sure you woke up." He gestures to his head, reinforcing the feeling that he cares. He worried about me sleeping with a concussion.

"Why?" I ask, hoping he might say something as romantic as I'm feeling. Nothing would make this moment more perfect than some star-crossed confession, but why

would he want me that way? He's older and handsome. I'm just Red Little, and I know I look bad after what Granny did to me last night. My face is already burning.

"I owed you one, but it's paid up now," he says, and the seriousness in his tone makes the hairs stand up on my arms.

"From you watching me sleep?" I ask, forcing myself up in the bed.

My head spins, and as I look at him from this new angle, I notice something different. He looks better and worse than the night before. He seems to be breathing okay, like he wasn't actually that hurt. Even more strangely, he's got a lot more blood on him. Where the hell did all of that come from if he never left?

"No," he tells me with a slight smile.

My eyes search the room for an answer. The sun sits much higher in the sky than I expect when I look out the window. It's nearly noon. Panic rushes through me, second-guessing what I'm seeing, because there isn't a chance in hell Granny would let me sleep this long. Maybe my brain did bleed too much while I slept.

"Oh God!" I gasp as I jump out of bed to salvage what I can of the day. My head rotates with sick dizziness, but I keep myself upright. I refuse to acknowledge any of the evidence around me, or maybe I just can't make sense of it.

All I know is that I have so many chores that need to be done, and I'm already behind. I won't be surprised if I get the strap again today. I pray there's a glass down at the general store. There was last week, but no telling what they have now. My surprise guest will have to fend for himself while I'm out.

He stands in front of me with a patient expression. He holds his hands out, trying to slow my pace, but I've already lost more time than I can afford. "Calm down, you're

hurt.” His hand grazes mine as he continues to try to keep me in the room. Another surprising flash of gentleness that melts me. Who knew I was so weak for kindness? “You need to lie in bed and rest.” I very nearly listen to him, but I can’t.

“Granny,” I say as I push around him.

His hand slips off my arm, and I know from experience if he really wanted to stop me, he would. He’s an immense man, and I’m not stronger than him. I throw my bedroom door open and run out into the cabin, desperate to do damage control. I’m sure she’ll already be working on something in the kitchen, but she’s dead quiet this morning. That’s even worse than when she’s yelling. She’s meaner. He follows so close I can’t shut the door behind me.

I panic, thinking Granny might see him. I draw up short trying to prevent exactly that, but it’s unnecessary. His chest hits my back, and we both stand in the open. Blood covers the floors and walls, sprayed and speckled like someone played in it. It takes me a full minute to understand why the living room looks ripped from my nightmares. I count to sixty in my head, waiting for it to all disappear. I’ve had this bad dream so many times since my family was killed I don’t even scream. It’s never been Granny before, always my parents and brother, but it’s exactly the same.

I’m asleep, and if I’m very patient, I’ll wake up. I always wake up.

But this isn’t the same old dream, and it doesn’t go away.

The smell of metal is so thick my stomach roils. It’s worse than the sight in front of me. In the center of the floor, Granny’s body lies limp and lifeless. White curls stained red from the puddle of her own blood pooled beneath her. Oh god, oh no. She can’t be dead. But she is, blue eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling, mouth slack, hands up like she begged for her life.

From the color of her skin, it's clear she's been dead for hours. If there's one thing we know out here on this mountain, it's death. The final thing that convinces me I'm awake, and this is all a horrible reality, is the razor strap lying across her chest and the gaping hole in her neck. How did I sleep through all of this? She must have screamed? Why the hell didn't I notice? I look over and find her killer standing right beside me and I'm sick to be so close to him, sick that he helped me and I was grateful just a few short minutes ago.

"She died quick," he promises. "I sharpened up the razor for her with that strap before I used it."

Anger pours off him like he's still mad at her despite the fact he killed her. This wasn't an eye for an eye. It was one beating for her whole damn life. A scream rips out of my throat, so loud I know Mrs. Reed who lives down a ways will hear. How could he do this? I spin to face him, looking for some type of answer. Why the hell would he do this to her? Instead, I find him willing to fight me back. The extra blood on his clothes looks awfully different now, and I nearly vomit as I realize that's Granny's blood. She's dead. I'm all alone.

"Why? Why?" I scream, demanding he bring her back with my pain alone, but of course that's not possible.

My useless fists pound against his chest. My head is still messed up from the beating last night. My eye is swollen shut, and I can barely see straight. I have no chance of hurting him, yet I keep trying. He lets me continue for a while before stopping me. His giant hands wrap around my wrists with complete control, and I shake uselessly in his hold.

"You were kind to me, and she beat you worse than a dog." He speaks the words like they make perfect sense and this was the perfect response. "I enjoyed killing her for what she did."

CHAPTER 8

REDLEY

He enjoyed killing her for what she did to me ? The words repeat in my head, but they don't make any more sense the second, third, or fourth time.

No one has ever cared before. They've either not noticed or used Granny as a threat against me themselves, but instead, he kills her.

What else did he enjoy? Did he enjoy spending time with me? Lulling me into a false sense of safety just to rip it all away. My heart and stomach fight for which of them is sicker. Those same monstrous hands that carefully picked the glass out of my face cruelly stole my granny's life, and I enjoyed it too. I let him sleep in my bed and was happy to find him there still watching me.

When I first saw him yesterday, hurt and covered in blood, I assumed he was a young man, maybe only a couple of years older, but I realize now I must have been wrong about that too. Just like I've been so wrong about everything else, never bothering to ask the most important questions, assuming I could believe my eyes.

"Whose blood was all over you when you showed up here? Was it yours?" I cry, remembering Heather who died just yesterday, right before he came. "Were you even hurt?" I ask, my sense of reality falling apart right in front of me. I let him stay.

"Why ask now? You didn't care before," he says, that same anger still pouring off him, and I just don't get what he has to be angry about in the middle of the mess that

he created.

My mouth opens and closes. My heart tries to rip itself out of me to escape the truth of my new reality and my hand in it. My realization sinks like a stone. Him not aging, him looking human, they've never been part of the legend. But the truth is lying on the floor dead in front of me. This isn't a handsome, hurt young man who was gentle with me and played Elvis while I slept. I don't have soft feelings for him.

"You're the Wolf!" I shout. "You're a killer." This is the monster that took everything from me. My stomach roils, winning the battle with my heart, and I nearly puke with the thickness of my own betrayal. I caused this every bit as much as he did. I chose not to scream.

"And you are free now," he growls, confirming my worst fears. He takes one step toward me, and I step back, but the room isn't big, and there isn't anywhere to go. Within seconds, I'm against the wall, and he's nearly on top of me, still holding my wrists, but now pressing them to the wood above me.

"So what if she beat me?" I ask, my back against the logs, my mind unable to come to terms with how my pain could have caused such a reaction. "She's been beating me for five damn years. She didn't deserve to die for it!" I shout in his face, but he doesn't seem to care. Why would he? He's been killing on these mountains for generations. What the hell is one more death to him?

He stares at me with a fierceness that seems far too human for a monster. His eyes judge me on my deepest level, and I can't begin to guess what he sees. Why does he look and feel so damn human? Why do little zips of electricity still fire off between us like he hasn't ruined every damn thing? The stories spoke of claws and fangs and glowing eyes like flames, not irises like sunflowers. How was I supposed to be prepared for the devil to come disguised as a man?

“If you didn’t want someone to take care of it for you, you should have taken care of it yourself .” He leans into me so I’m forced to accept what he’s saying.

“What does that mean?” I ask, not getting how I could have changed how Granny treated me. Physically stopping her was never an option. Letting him in was my fault, but I couldn’t have kept Granny from beating me without destroying my entire life here.

“You could have stopped her. You didn’t,” he accuses with a harsh glare. “It’s not my fault you were too much of a coward to do what needed to be done.”

So what, I should have hurt her or left home in order to keep her safe from some murderous monster who thinks he’s a vigilante all of a sudden?

“What could I have done?” I shout.

“Anything but stand there while she kept beating you. Anything .” And it’s then I realize he’s angry with me too.

“So this is my fault?” My voice barely makes a sound as I speak, the truth breaking me down to the smallest pieces. This is my fault.

“As much yours as mine, Redley,” he agrees.

Tears, hot and fat, swell on my lashes, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t stop them. His words cut me to my core. Those ones at least are true.

“I have nothing now! No one! You did this to me!”

More tears spill, sobs catch in my throat, and I can’t breathe around them. I haven’t cried like this in five years. Not since I walked up the mountain looking for Granny’s

help, but there's no one here to tell me to stop or they'll give me something to cry about anymore, so they just keep falling.

"Come with me." His voice has dropped even deeper, and I'm so shocked by the suggestion that I gasp like he slapped me.

He pushes closer to me until I can feel the warmth of his chest pressing against me and holding me up against the wall behind me. He shuffles both my hands into one of his, then tips my chin up with the free one so I'm forced to look into his yellow eyes. The intimacy should repulse me, but that's only half of what I feel.

"I'll take care of you. No one will ever touch you again if you're mine," he promises, his voice much softer now.

I hate him so much for being soft with me again after all this. I like how it feels to touch him despite everything. The offer still tempts me.

"I would never. I hate you," I swear to him and myself at the same time.

"You could love me too, if you wanted. I could show you things you've never even dreamed of. That cassette in my bag? It's nothing compared to what I can give you."

I hate the way I believe him, and how his belongings speak to a world I've never seen and a life I could never live on my own. Even that tempts me, the idea that there is so much beyond Grimm Groves and that there might even be a place where I'm not so alone.

"I don't want it," I lie for my sense of dignity and whatever loyalty remains to my family after what I've allowed to happen.

"You don't even know what it is to know whether or not you want it. What the hell

do you know other than this mountain, Muffin?”

He drops my hands and takes one step back to spread his and demonstrate that we're on top of the world, but it's such a small world compared to the rest. I don't waste time. I swing my fist, dead set on at least hurting him, and once again, he snatches my hands in his before it lands. I pull my wrists trying to get free, lift my leg to kick him, but he just shoves me back against the wall.

My breath leaves me. I'm practically whispering when I say, “Do not call me that. You don't know anything about me.” My disgust and outrage burn in every part of my body, but the warmth of his chest still touches something empty deep inside my own. “You're just a killer. You're a monster. I hate you.”

“Let me keep you safe,” he insists, eyes blazing like he's my hero and not the monster that's taken everything from me.

“Never. I would never choose you.”

I slump between him and the wall. I'm still so hurt, not okay after last night, and feeling like I'm about to fall. I need to stand on my own, though. Choosing him would be a violation to every member of my family who's come before me, all of them dead by his hands. So why not me? Why not kill me too? It would be kinder.

He squeezes my hands even tighter, and my joints complain as they grind together. He's only a breath away from me when he says, “I saw that pitiful garden out there. I know you're poor. There wasn't enough food for both of you to survive this winter anyway. You'll live now. If you're going to spit on my offer, at least thank me for helping you not to starve.”

His words hurt more than any I've ever heard because they're true. We were going to struggle this winter, but we would have made it like always. “There's nothing you

could show me that I would want to see, and I will never thank you.”

“I promise you there are some things.” He comes closer, his lips softening, and I recognize his body language from the time I kissed Bobby.

Oh no. Oh, hell no.

And because I have absolutely nothing left in the world to lose but a couple of scraps of my own dignity, I headbutt him, but because Granny did such a number on me before she died, everything goes black, and I’m unconscious before I even know if I managed to hurt him.

CHAPTER 9

REDLEY

April 7th, 1974 West Virginia

20 years old

My cloak clings to my shoulders, billowing in the wind around me. A low, mournful howl fills the air. It's from a pack of wolves in the distance, not the monster I'm hunting. I'm not much of a seamstress, or I'd make myself a jacket, but Mama taught me what she could before she passed and at least it's sturdy and warm.

An owl hoots overhead as I stop in the center of the yard. I spin in a slow circle, looking for the source of the screams that pulled me out of bed.

"Wolf, I know you're out there!" With another victim, taunting me with his prey before he finishes it.

The oil lamp casts a warm glow, showing me no one's standing in the clearing other than me, but that doesn't say anything about the trees beyond. I turn the knob, dropping the flame low so I can hear better over the humming hiss.

"Then catch me, Muffin. If you even want to." His laughing voice comes from somewhere far away, and with the way the mountain sometimes distorts sound, I can't tell his direction for sure.

“Help me, please help me!” a male voice shouts after him.

Like usual, he’s having fun toying with me and his meal.

“Muffin can’t help you. She can’t hit the broad side of a barn,” he taunts.

Granddaddy’s old Smith and Wesson stays gripped in one hand, and a kerosene lamp swings in the other. I am not missing on purpose. I am going to shoot him tonight . But even I can’t explain why I can kill a deer to eat but can’t seem to hit the Wolf no matter how many shots I take. Bullets aren’t free, and it would be smart to stop wasting them.

If there's one thing I don't have, it's money to spare. Like Wolf said all those years ago, I'm poor . That was more obvious than it's ever been when I was living out in the big wide world for those three years. Wolf was right. The cassette was nothing compared to what he could show me. I should have stayed gone, and if I had, there's no telling where I'd be now. Maybe out in California like I wanted.

“This is going to end between us eventually,” I call back. “I won’t chase you forever.”

There’s a long-drawn-out scream of pain before the Wolf laughs. Having played this game before, I know it’s going to end soon, and I won’t find the screaming man fast enough to help him. I’ve been back in Grimm Groves for a year now, and this has happened so many times already. The Wolf’s kills have escalated in speed and frequency. Sometimes I think he’s doing these things just to get my attention.

“Things won’t end between us until we’re dead and buried, Muffin, maybe not even then.” He’s delusional or he’s messing with my head, I can’t be sure anymore.

“We’re not in a relationship. I’m going to kill you!” I shout as loud as his victim.

My frustration leaks from my skin. Extended screams follow my statement, like he's repaying me for what I said. His victim's pain reaches a fevered pitch as he shrieks and cries. They taper off as he floats closer to death, and I uselessly chase them, desperate to stop the inevitable.

"You're mine, Little Red," the Wolf singsongs.

More screaming.

"Goddammit, Wolf, stop this!" I beg, my stomach heavy and turning with sickness.

"You stop it. If you can." But he knows I'm too far away, I'm not capable of undoing fatal wounds.

Grimm Groves is a curse, and I should've stayed gone. The night the Wolf took Granny from me changed me forever, though, and it's the only place I'm suited for. I lived in Pennsylvania the longest, New York for a few weeks, Tennessee, and then Florida. I saw beaches, deserts, the kind of land I only ever saw pictures of in magazines. I even found a new engine for Penny, and while she's still slow, she'll last me a while longer.

The simple answer as to why I returned is I had to. The more complicated one is that my bones are made from the mountain beneath my feet, the stream runs in my blood, maybe I am where I came from and where my family died. I can't help caring about what happens to them, even if they all believe I'm crazy.

It's quiet now, too quiet, and I think it may be far too late.

Twigs snap, but I can't tell which direction they came from. My nerves tangle themselves in knots, and sweat breaks out on my back despite the cold. My breath steams in front of my face as I wait for anything to happen, and the tension builds

inside me until it threatens to snap like the quiver of my hunting bow. If he's already gone, I'm torturing myself for nothing, but I keep waiting.

The Wolf won't stop killing if I don't stop him, just like he told me about Granny . I'm equally responsible for letting him kill. Fifty-fifty.

I move slower now, and with my careful steps, I hear more. I'm suddenly sure I'm closing the distance between us. A whisper comes from a little way ahead.

"Don't do this, please."

"Wolf, stop this!" I shout.

"Don't, please, my daddy's got money!" he begs, and I know I'm on top of them now, but where are they?

"I don't need money," a growling voice answers.

A final frantic scream is cut off by a stream of gurgles and then the heavy thud of a body hitting the forest floor.

"You fucking killed him?!" I scream, my frustration turning me into something next to human. This obsession won't end, can't end until I get justice.

Wolf never answers, and the night feels strangely empty. The disappointment stings, but I can't lie to myself and pretend saving a life was my main objective tonight. Truthfully, it was ending one. His latest victim may be dead, but that doesn't mean the Wolf and I are done.

He isn't getting out of these woods alive if I can help it. I am not going to chicken out this time. If I can shoot a deer, I can shoot him. My cloak catches on branches as I

run, putting in a mess of tears I'll have to fix. My breath saws, and if he's hunting me I'm an obvious target. It's that fear and the knowledge I can't save a life that has me rethinking the idea of chasing him across the mountain tonight.

"Damn you!" I shout, just for a chance to piss him off before I call it a night.

Turning to head back to the cabin, I step, not onto the hard and crunching ground of the frozen mountain but into something soft and fleshy. My boot digs in deep, and the tissue breaks and ruptures beneath the tread and my weight.

Goddammit, that better be an animal.

CHAPTER 10

REDLEY

I swallow hard and gather my courage before looking down. The lantern may be turned low, but there's plenty of light to see the dead expression on the Murphy kid's face. He's about seventeen unless this is the fifteen-year-old. I can't really tell them apart, nor do I have a damn clue what he did to cross the Wolf. Whatever it was, he won't be repeating the mistake.

A deep gash separates the halves of his neck, nearly revealing bone. His blue eyes sit wide open in death, and blood dribbles out of his lips. He's not been gone long, but there sure as hell isn't any bringing him back. My heart cries for him, but my eyes don't. At a certain point, you've seen enough death that no matter how sad it is, it just doesn't affect you like that. Imagining his mom messes with me, though. Could I have stopped all this had I just gone with him when he asked?

Your fault as much as mine. My stomach turns with my guilt and the weight of that responsibility. This time, I don't manage to keep the bile down, and I puke a few feet away from the dead kid. After I've emptied the contents of my stomach, I remain doubled over to catch my breath.

Exhaustion swamps me as well as a sense of duty I can't possibly live up to. The kid is too heavy for me to carry out of here, but leaving him in the forest dead and alone where the animals can get to him feels wrong. There's no way I can move him on my own, though. Even if I didn't have the gun and lamp, he's nearly six feet tall and strong.

I need help, and I really don't have any other options but to ask. Someone will believe me this time. They have to. There's a body with a cut throat. Either that or they'll throw me in jail for the crime. Either way, they're not ignoring this one.

"I'm really sorry, kid. I'll be back," I tell the corpse at my feet as I turn to the cabin.

I've not gone more than ten feet when a sinister laugh tickles the back of my neck. I spin, looking for its source. The lamp swings as I move, and the swaying beam reveals a massive shape about fifteen feet away at the edge of the lamplight. He's nothing but a shadow, made bigger by a trick of the light. It's been a long time since he's let me see his face.

"Red," he calls. "When are you going to realize? I'm the one hunting you." He's enjoying all the carnage he's created.

I lift the gun and figure it doesn't really matter if this bastard dies hard. I'll shoot until the guns empty if that's what it takes. I get off a shot, and it goes a mile wide. I swear I want to hit him. The gun kicks back. It has too much power for me, but I don't break my wrist or anything.

"Redley, how are you so good with a bow and such a waste with a pistol?" He laughs. And how the hell does he know I'm good with a bow? Just how often is he watching me? "Maybe you should get yourself a smaller gun."

Goddammit. I'm just as afraid as I was the first time I found him in my room, and I hate that no matter how much time passes or how much I hunt him, I'm still afraid.

"I'll shoot you with the bow if you prefer, Wolf."

He laughs as he slips back into the darkness so my only chance of hitting him is the equivalent of closing my eyes and praying.

“I love the way you flirt, Muffin. I bet I’d prefer the way you fuck.”

My cheeks burn, and I can barely wrap my tongue around my own thoughts to form words. In my moment of shock, I miss the faint whizzing sound until something hard hits my hand, and the gun goes flying.

“Dammit!” I shout. My hand throbs, jarred down to the bone. That’s going to leave a bruise. I don’t know what it was, but I suspect a rock. I don’t get a chance to find out for sure because his massive hand grabs my upper arm. I’ve been wondering for a long time when he would lose his patience and kill me. Too bad for him, I have no intention of dying.

I swing the lamp over my head like an axe and crack it over his shoulder, his head too high for me to reach. The glass shatters, the kerosene douses him, and the lit wick immediately catches. Fierce hope fills me, and for a stupid moment, I think I’ve won.

“Fuck! Fuck, Redley!” he screams at the top of his lungs.

Big hands pat the flames out faster than I could have guessed. The lamp must have been about to run out anyway. My brief swell of hope crashes, and he’s left fine once again. My satisfaction turns to bitter disappointment, the type of hatred that makes you someone else.

“Fuck, god-fucking-dammit!” he curses like the devil, and that’s the least of his sins. “That shit hurt! You’re going to pay for it.”

“Then make me pay for it!” I shout in pure rage, ready to die if putting me out of my misery is his plan after all this time.

“Don’t tempt me. Not when I have so many filthy things planned for you.” His voice sounds every bit as wicked as his words.

I swing a fist and find the darkness ahead of me once again empty.

“I’m going to kill you,” I promise the space.

“You’ll have to mean it first,” he taunts, but from the sound of his voice, he’s moving farther away. “Have a good night, Muffin. You’re going to have a long walk back in the dark.” His feet pound against the earth as he runs away.

I sigh as I come to terms with how right he is. This will be one hell of a walk back. My heart sits in my throat, and I’m so scared my entire body shakes. I bend down, hands extended, and sightlessly search the forest floor until I find the gun. Sweaty, desperate fingers hold it, and I wipe off the bracken. Thankfully, it didn’t land in my vomit.

“Are you there, Wolf?” I ask the darkness, sounding oddly hopeful. Thank God I get no answer because the last thing I need is him knowing I sometimes wonder if I made the wrong choice. Should I have saved everyone the trouble and just gone with him, or would that ultimately not have changed anything?

And why the hell can’t I shoot him?

CHAPTER 11

REDLEY

The tension his presence brings is starkly missing, and I can breathe again.

I check the sky for signs of stars before starting my walk back. A faint round glow about the size of the moon helps me judge the direction. My hands stay out in front of me to protect my face and feel the way. A familiar frustration bubbles inside me as I go.

I'm well known for making my own problems. Like usual, throwing that lamp was wasteful and impulsive. Worse, it didn't do a damn thing to him. Cutting off my nose to spite my face at its finest. I hope to God the lamp by the front door didn't blow out. When I get back, I'll take Penny down the mountain and ask the fire chief for help. He won't believe me at first, but at least he'll be awake, and I'm almost positive Terry is on call tonight.

I need help, support, a way to fight back against a goddamn monster who's tearing people apart. Terry may not be all those things, but he's at least got one of those huge spotlights on his truck and is strong enough to lift a body. Hell, he might even believe me about the Wolf after this, and it would be amazing to have someone in a position of influence on my side.

As I walk, all I can think about is Wolf standing in the darkness watching me. Did he do the same before he killed my family? I imagine him inches from me, about to slit my throat too. The last of the Littles finally dying beneath his hands after all these

years. Usually, I can control my fear of the dark, put it out of my mind until I'm back in the light. But my terror grows with my defenselessness. A gun in the dark doesn't do me much good.

My fingers trail against what must be my uncle's old moonshine still, and that tells me exactly how close I am to home. After I crest the worst of the incline, the land immediately flattens. Fortunately, the lamp hanging by the front door still burns, and I can see again. I pull it down and leave the porch to check the back of the house too. The Wolf could still be nearby, and I'm not going to go inside with him sitting in my chicken coop. The girls are all fine for now, sleeping, and I check the sheds too and find them all empty.

I look over my shoulder repeatedly as I walk from the backyard to the front door. Wolf might not be here now, but I'm almost certain he was recently. Despite my better intentions, I can smell his sweetly masculine scent in the air. I don't know what kind of monster wears cologne, but I've got an awareness of him that feels supernatural. Years spent obsessing over killing him and what life would have been like with him have led to a sixth sense for his presence.

As I climb the steps, my fears are confirmed. A tiny red box sits on the mat with a bloody note attached. I'm not sure if this was here when I first got home, and I didn't notice it, or if he left his gift while I was checking the backyard. That would be a nice bit of proof that all my efforts to protect myself are meaningless.

The lamp meets the hook, and then I lean down and pick up the bloody offering, shivering at the splashes of Murphy on the envelope. The tiny box is heavier than I expected, and I worry it's a trap of some kind. He wouldn't give me a finger. Would he?

I carry the presents I didn't ask for and the pistol into the cabin, locking the door behind me. I place the Smith and Wesson on the table and trade it for the old double-

barrelled sawed-off. He made fun of my aim, but that won't matter with this. I'll finally kill him. I tell myself forcefully.

My hands close around the keys hanging by the door, and I turn off all the lamps except the one outside and head to my truck. Penny complains as I start her, but that's just what it's like driving a truck older than I am. Mementos of the years I spent free hang from my rearview mirror, and I find myself thinking about the ocean to calm my nerves as I stick to the narrow road.

The drive takes an hour during the day and quite a bit longer at night, with dark turns and steep drops all around. By the time I reach the bottom and pull into town, I'm exhausted and prepared for a fight. I'm the crazy lady who lives on the top of the mountain, obsessed with old ghost stories. I'm used to being made a fool of.

I didn't need to worry, though, because there is already a commotion in the Fire Department parking lot. The truck depot is nothing more than a garage, and the office is a popup shed next door. They keep a bed somewhere between the two since there's always one of the town volunteers here, but there's far more than that tonight. Just about every resident that lives in town rather than on the mountain is already here, gathered around for something.

They get better power access down here, and floodlights light the parking lot. Are they assembling a search party? Maybe the parents already noticed him gone. That makes my job easier, but also that much sadder to be the bearer of bad news.

There are no cop cars of course. A lot of things have changed in the years, but that hasn't; the cops don't care to help us out here, and the people don't care to ask them to come. I didn't leave Grimm Groves and forget all about it. I asked around at enough police stations over the years to know it's like we just don't exist anywhere. We're not in anyone's jurisdiction.

Blue lights flash over the scene, as do the white ones. The fire chief has the truck out to give the illusion of a crime scene or something important going on. I don't know why he's always doing something to make himself feel more important than he is. Hasn't he figured out there isn't a damn soul who cares what happens to Grimm Groves, not even its residents?

He and Doc stand together, both gray-haired men, though Doc is substantially taller and broader through the shoulders. He bends down so they can whisper to one another. I don't see at first what they're talking so seriously about until Doc points, and I follow the gesture. A body lays stretched out on a blanket at their feet. Did the Wolf get someone else down here too? He's a monster, but that's quick even for him.

I pull off the road and park about forty feet away from the center of the drama. From inside my truck, there wasn't anything to hear, but as soon as I get out, a terrible scream even worse than the death wail I heard earlier, rips up the night. I quickly jog over to the scene but stay back far enough not to intrude on whatever's going on.

A brunette woman sobs over the body, Mrs. Murphy. Her husband stands at her side, a hand on her shoulder, and tears pour down his cheeks. A hundred pounds of dread drops into my stomach when I finally realize who Chief and Doc are looking at.

The Murphy boy.

CHAPTER 12

REDLEY

This can't be right.

He couldn't have been dead in the forest two hours ago and be lying here now. The Wolf took off after the killing. He would have had to move fast and I don't think he'd beat me here by that much. Maybe it's the other brother. The thought that I'll have to tell the Murphys both kids are dead just about knocks me off my feet. I'm about to break their hearts and destroy their whole world, when their other son, who is very clearly not dead, steps up to put a hand on his sobbing mother.

"What the hell happened?" I ask, wondering how the fuck and why the Wolf managed to pull this off. It's a rhetorical question, but one of the older ladies my granny never cared for shushes me.

"Don't you curse now, Red. This is an awful enough night without you giving the devil a hand." Mrs. Crocker wears her curlers and her nightdress but still clutches her collar like she's wearing a set of pearls.

"What happened?" I correct my language, because I need to know more than I need to stand my ground.

"They're saying they found him just laying dead in the parking lot, mauled by a bear, they think. Not sure if he was alive when they found him, but he ain't now. Poor thing, God bless his soul."

My hands ball into fists around my cloak. It takes everything in me to simply breathe in and out. There isn't fairness or justice for me, my family, or this poor kid. And if he was found on the side of the road it's because someone tossed him there. Savage, monster—I can't think of a word bad enough for the Wolf.

"Who found him?" I ask.

"Doc. He was on his way to help out a patient, and Henry was just lying there." Henry. So it was the seventeen-year-old.

"How did his neck wind up like that?" I ask.

She gasps again, her face going pale and her mouth falling open. "Worry about things becoming a young lady, Red. Bears do all kinds of nasty things when they get their claws into you."

My eyebrows rise as I think about what kind of bears she's run into.

"I'm worried about all these people who keep dying," I tell her.

Yvette has been around long enough to know the truth, but she denies the Wolf as fiercely as anyone.

"You need to worry about finding a husband before a bear gets you all alone in that cabin of yours." She turns her nose up.

"I've got my own gun. I don't need a man to shoot for me."

"That talk won't attract a nice man either."

No, it won't, and unfortunately for me, the only man I've ever been interested in is a

monster and the opposite of nice.

“I’m going to go talk to Doc. You have a safe trip home,” I tell her as I step away and float a bit closer to the mayhem.

“Should just leave well enough alone,” she mutters to herself, but I don’t get to hear the rest.

“Yeah, just lying there, absolutely torn to shreds. Real shame,” Doc says, gesturing to the Murphy he found lying on the side of the road instead of deep in the forest where he actually died.

“Terrible shame, you know the mamas get this way coming out of hibernation. We’ll get him buried tomorrow,” Terry, the assumed fire chief, says.

“What about calling the authorities?” I ask, and they both turn to find me, irritated expressions already prepared.

“Redley, this is Grimm Groves business. We don’t need to bother anybody, especially over an accident,” Doc says.

“How do you know it was an accident?” I ask. “Looks pretty violent for that.”

Doc’s jaw hardens. “I’ve been the town doctor since before you were born. I think I know a bear attack when I see one.”

“It looks like his throat was cut.” My voice reveals my anger, and that’s my first mistake.

“And how would you know something like that?” Terry asks, a thread of suspicion raising but of course pointing in the wrong direction.

“She wouldn’t,” Doc insists, “She’s just a silly girl who’s heard a few too many ghost stories. Don’t pay her any mind.”

They both laugh, and my cheeks burn so hot they might melt off.

“Now, why don’t you run along home, Redley. You’ve had enough excitement for one night,” Doc says.

Doc has always disliked me, though I’m not sure why. A lot of the old-timers do, so I try not to take it too personally. Mostly, I think it’s because a lot of men don’t like a woman who thinks for herself.

“Sounds like a good plan, gentlemen. You seem to have this under control.” The words are polite, but thick sarcasm laces my tone. “Have a great night.”

My boot digs into the gravel as I turn and leave them all to their bullshit. A quick jog and then I climb back into the truck. Instead of causing a scene, I decide to handle things myself. That mother has enough to worry about without me adding to it. Despite knowing the truth, I head home with it tucked under my hat.

They’re down here crying about tragedies, and the Wolf is somewhere on this mountain planning which one of them to pick off next. I can’t help but think there’s a good chance it’s going to be me. When I get back to the cabin, I only check the inside for intruders. He could be out in the yard, but I just don’t care anymore. Tonight doesn’t seem like the night I’m going to end this.

The fire burns a little too low for the temperature, and I put in another log and stoke the flame before going to sit at the table. Granny’s bloodstain is still there, just as thick as the day she left it, but it’s grown nearly black with age and seeped so deeply into the wood it’ll never come clean.

It's the same for my parents' place down the mountain. Although Granny had different reasons for never dealing with the mess. I wasn't here to do it, and now it just feels wrong to try. It's usually easier to ignore, but it looks a little darker with the Wolf's gift sitting on the table. I've seen this type of box before, but I doubt he actually gave me a ring. I breathe through my nose as I open it, but instead of something gruesome and terrible, a fat and shining diamond ring sits nestled into the silky red fabric.

My eyebrows push together, and my anger and disgust turn to stark confusion. It's hard to stay angry when you're shocked and maybe even a little flattered. I haven't seen many diamonds in real life. A couple of the ladies in town have one, but my mama and Granny never did. Sure, I saw women wearing them in Pennsylvania and New York, but who knew if they were real or not?

I pull it out of the box and lay it flat on my hand like it's a bomb that might go off, then carefully inspect each angle. This looks surprisingly real, not that I would have any way to know, but it's not glass. The setting is simple, just a gold band, and lord, is it stunning. I can't imagine how much this thing is worth, and I can't begin to guess why he gave it to me. It might be just lovely, but it's the single most confusing gift I've ever received, and I can't accept it.

My name is written carefully on the envelope, and I don't dare to open that until I'm back in my bedroom. His fingerprints are in blood against the white, matching the ones still imprinted on my windowsill. He doesn't care. He knows no man can catch him. What does law enforcement mean to an immortal monster, especially when they won't come here or believe long enough to hunt him?

I open the envelope and spread the letter, taking a sharp breath at the neat script of his handwriting. He's more educated than I would have assumed for a creature that came out of the woods, but I should have learned a long time ago not to underestimate him. His clothes, the cassette, he's used to refinement too.

Muffin,

You should have said yes the first time I asked.

This is your last chance.

Marry me or else you won't enjoy the consequences.

Love,

Your Wolf

The ring he gave me shakes in my hand. I'm not sure why I didn't see it for anything but a taunt until now, but a shiver of intuition tells me that he might be serious. A man doesn't usually give you a ring like this unless he has a reason and means it. Does that logic translate for a monster?

His intentions don't really matter. This beautiful ring doesn't matter. I'm not playing his games anymore. I'm going to kill him.

The ring seems to place itself on my finger, and I stare at the way it looks on my hand for just a minute before I tuck it back away. The lid to the box slams shut, and I speak out loud just to drive the point home.

"There is no way in hell I'd marry the Wolf."

CHAPTER 13

WOLF

Redley Little is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life, but with that ring on her finger, she is beyond exquisite. She might not deserve a gift after shooting at me and cracking a kerosene lamp over me, but that doesn't change my timeline. I wasn't lying. This is her last chance to come to terms with the inevitable.

I think she's made the right choice, finally, as she slides the ring onto her finger. Green eyes widen with pretty interest as she stares. My heart speeds up. I've finally won, but she grunts to herself as she pulls it off. One more longing look before she puts the ring back in the box, and my fists tighten in anger. She'll get there eventually, but I'm not known for my patience.

I've been waiting too damn long for what's mine. Everything that's mine.

My shoulder burns, little slices from the glass cover my skin, as well as a light burn that's just deep enough to sting like a bitch. My shirt hangs off my body in tatters and it doesn't escape my notice that we'll have matching scars now. So I suppose she got a small taste of the revenge she wants so desperately, a little skin out of the game, but it doesn't hurt too much. I've had much worse. She'll get far more time to needle me when she's mine.

Blood still coats my hands from the oldest Murphy. He went creeping along in places he shouldn't have been, and those things he saw cost him his life. He should have stayed away and could have lived a long time, but that's not what fate had in store for

him. It's not my fault he wandered too far from home and got caught in a wolf's den. All animals have to pay the price for their missteps and humans are no exception. I've been killing for too long to be precious about it. I like what I do, and my own time will eventually come.

My cock aches with the excitement of ending his life, especially so close to my muffin. The picture of her in that ring too, how much is a man supposed to take? I was showing off, practically screaming for the pretty girl to look at me. It doesn't matter if it's good or bad, I thrive off her attention. She's going to be horrified repeatedly. That's just what life is like with a monster. That's what she calls me, so that's who I am, right? Whatever she needs me to be.

Redley is my wife and has been since the day I killed her granny. There's not a damn thing anyone can do about it, especially her. She's a tiny thing at five foot three, and her dark hair sweeps down her back like a waterfall of night. The greenest eyes, fair skin, and lips like spilling blood, her curves are sin, and the fact she wants to watch me die? For a monster like me who loves to kill? I couldn't think of something more delicious than a curvy little killer ready to make me bleed.

"Pretty little Muffin," I coo into the darkness, and smile as she looks over her shoulder, not sure if she heard something or not.

She places the box on her little table before she turns to undress, talking to herself as she often does. I don't know if it helps her think or she's insane, but either way, I love the view into her thoughts. The idea that she's so lonely doesn't sit right with me though, another reason my timeline can't be avoided.

"Damn that Wolf, who the hell does he think he is?" She asks no one, but I could tell her if she really wanted to know. The problem is that her and the truth have never kept close company. She keeps cursing to herself about the injustices of the world and how good people keep dying. They weren't all that good or that innocent, not that

it matters much. I like her shiny, selective view of the world.

If she had any clue just how unjust things actually are, my little huntress would never sleep again, and I couldn't bear to see her suffer that way. She doesn't need to worry, though. Even though she turned me down once, I still plan to keep her from the worst of things and protect her from the truth as she deserves.

She turns back to face me, flashing me her full tits as she does, and I tell myself it's intentional. She wants me to see them. Muffin knows how hard she makes my cock. That killing the flocking sheep living on this mountain makes me so horny I'm practically insane, and I only need her. She's getting naked for me to take the edge off, and I appreciate her efforts too much not to take advantage of them.

My cock throbs behind my zipper. Tight jeans are a crime against big cocks, and I'm forced to open them just to relieve some of the pressure. That's all I'm doing. The night air kisses my erection, cold enough to take the edge off but not enough to calm me down. She picks both her tits up and squeezes them.

"Jesus, they're sore. My cycle is coming," she says to herself.

I've never been afraid of a little blood, and the idea of holding her extra-large tits while I fuck her has me rubbing my cock with my hands still coated in blood. This is what she wants, why she's getting naked for me and feeling her tits like she's putting on a show. Who am I to deny my muffin what she wants?

My fist squeezes around myself as I work the length nice and slow, watching as she dresses her soft curves, bending to change into her pajama bottoms and flashing me the sweet cut of her cunt. My cock is so large I'll have trouble putting it all inside her when the time comes. That's not going to stop me from trying. I'll break her in half if that's what it means for her to take me all the way.

I'm running out of patience when it comes to being inside her. She ran from me four years ago, and I suppose that was smart because that's the only reason she's not mine already. She was hard to find for those few years, but not for a lack of trying. And since she's been back? Well, she doesn't put the guns down often.

She dips down even further, showing me another inch of pussy, and my cock throbs as my balls draw up. I play my favorite fantasy in my mind as I watch and stroke myself. I've just killed her granny, but the Red in my mind is the adult woman. When I ask her to come with me, she says yes instead of attacking me. Then we fuck right there in the blood I spilled. She loves me for protecting her. She knows what I did was for the best. She's grateful.

I imagine how she would squeeze me and how stunning she would look coated in blood as she came, and that's really all I need. It doesn't take much more to bring me over the edge. I haven't been with anyone since that night four years ago when I realized she was mine, and my desperation is reaching a fever pitch. My orgasm grabs me deep, pulling my balls up tight as I spill, shooting cum in thick streams across the ground. The farthest reaches of it splash up against her cabin.

That's okay. I'm just an animal marking my territory. I'll do the same to her first chance I get. She may tell herself she wants to kill me, but somewhere deep inside, I think she knows what she is. That she's my property, and anyone who harms her forfeits their life to me.

How can she hate me when I'm the only one who's ever really loved her?

CHAPTER 14

REDLEY

“Hey, hey, wake up,” a male voice says, and I’m so painfully tired, I don’t open my eyes right away despite not having a clue who’s speaking to me. Maybe I should be afraid, but I’m past worrying about anyone other than the Wolf, and that’s not him.

When I do finally force myself to confront my surroundings, I’m lying face down, pressed into something hard. My mouth is wide open as I drool, and I lift my tongue off the plastic coating beneath me, more than a little confused about who’s talking to me and why I am so damn uncomfortable. My hand rests on top of the floor rather than the thin mattress, concrete and painted green.

“You finally up?” the voice asks. “I’m bored as hell in here.”

I roll over to figure out what is going on, finding tubelights sitting above me, never having dimmed and giving me no hint at a time of day. Oh shit. It’s then I remember the previous three days and how I slept in a jail cell last night. Though sleep is a generous description of my night on this piss-scented mattress.

The Murphy boy is officially in the ground. His funeral is what actually pushed me over the edge and onto the doorstep of local law enforcement. I asked, or demanded, help from a lot of them. Most turned me away, but these ones decided to keep me. Everyone, including Mr. and Mrs. Murphy, is trying to “heal from the tragedy” and move on while I’m in the drunk tank.

Instead of moving on with my life and pretending everything is fine like the rest of Grimm Groves, I'm trying to stop the Wolf. I went harassing police officers and getting myself tossed out of every station in a hundred-mile radius. I'm not sure if I'm looking for justice anymore or a way to escape his note and that ring.

My whole body aches as I push up into a sitting position, groaning at my stinging tailbone. I've got a literal bruise staining my ass. Though, in all fairness, a different set of officers is responsible for that.

"Where's breakfast?" the drunk who got the single bunk last night asks. They pulled this spare out of storage. I guess they're not used to having to hold more than one person at a time. I couldn't care less about breakfast; all I want is to get the hell out of here before I have to use the toilet in front of him.

"You're quiet today," he accuses me, but I hardly spoke to him last night.

"Don't have anything to say," I shoot back, and he laughs, but it's not funny to me.

"Ain't no breakfast, Jim. You'll be leaving after you talk to the judge," the asshole who tossed me in here says, and I turn to find a short and hefty man who didn't take kindly to being called a disgrace. He looks at me next. "Time to go."

"Aw, come on, there's my entertainment," the man behind me says.

I stand up pretty quick, ignoring him and reminding myself not to lose my temper, but a nasty crick has formed in my neck. Coming from a family of moonshiners, I have a natural distrust for law enforcement, but that is quickly morphing into something nastier.

Once I'm on my feet, the officer looks me over, glaring at me. I don't know what he's thinking, but he doesn't leave me long to imagine before he says, "Quit looking for

trouble, young lady, or you might just find it.”

“Thanks,” I say, having learned my lesson enough to shut up just this once, but trouble is obsessed with me, and I’ve never had to look for it.

“I’m serious,” he repeats. “You’re a pretty enough girl. There ain’t no reason for you to be poking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“I learned my lesson.” I don’t tell him the lesson was I should lie to people like him more.

He nods. “Step back.”

I do, and he unlocks the door caging me and allows me to leave under my own power. We walk down the hallway with him standing behind me. I don’t dare look back and show him just how nervous I am to have him in this position. A group of officers stand around a desk and talk to each other. My cheeks turn pink as I pass, not because they’re discussing me now but because I know they will be once I’m gone.

“You have a nice day, Miss Little ,” one of them taunts, putting an emphasis on my last name I don’t quite understand.

I want to turn around and ask, maybe fight a little , but I don’t want to give them any more reason to think I should stay. The door opens beneath my hands. The fresh spring air clears away the last of the reeking cell. It was only one damn night, but I’d rather not repeat it, and I feel broken to my core as I cross the parking lot.

I cry a couple of tears as I climb into Penny and smell the traces of Pop’s pipe tobacco that are starting to fade after all these years. The loneliness I usually feel doubles and triples over itself until I might explode. I could head home, and dammit, I want to, but there’s one last station on my list, and what more could they really do

to me that hasn't been done? I shiver as I consider a few options, but it's the last on my list, just one more set of assholes, and I'll have done what I set out to, even if none of them help me.

"You could just leave!" I shout at myself as I slap the wheel. "Why the hell won't you just leave?"

One of the officers steps outside, and I quickly realize he's watching to see if I leave. I dry my tears on the back of my sleeve and start the truck, thinking about all the ways I've been disrespected recently. I pull to the edge of the lot, thinking about everything until I'm spitting mad, exhausted, and damn ready to just go home, but at least I don't have any more tears to cry. One more conversation, and I can be done with all of this.

Or you could just leave , a little voice suggests from somewhere deep in the back of my head, softer than my shouts and more reasonable sounding. My gaze follows the highway north for a moment in the opposite direction of home or the last station. I haven't been this far from the mountain since I moved back. I'm nearly shaking with the tension of being rejected so many times, especially so close to that old freedom.

I could leave.

I salivate, dreaming of the life I always wanted, that freedom, but it only lasts a few seconds before the truth sinks in. The Wolf is my cage, and I'll never be free so long as he is.

I take out my map and give a longing look at the interstate I won't follow, and with that, I have the strength to fight. Just one more time.

CHAPTER 15

REDLEY

I pull up, finding only one cruiser sitting in the parking lot of Ever Pines Sheriff's Department , but at least someone is here. I put Penny in park and check my face in the rearview. I've seen better days. My long black hair barely stays tucked in its bun, and my scars glow brighter than normal with the dark bags under my eyes and the shining sun. Thanks, Granny , I think to myself right before guilt punches a hole in my stomach.

The door to the station swings wide as I push it open, a bell ringing above me. Dust hangs in the air. Not too many people live out this way or have cause to pass through, but it's still miles ahead of Grimm Groves in assets. A TV sits on a table in a waiting area as proof of that. It's tuned to a baseball game, and the sheriff's deputy sits behind the desk, eating a sandwich and watching. I walk up to him, prepared for another bad time. He nods when he sees me but barely pulls his eyes off the game.

"What can I do you for?" he asks. "You're only catching me because I came in from patrol for my lunch," he says, gesturing to his sandwich. Is that a guilty conscience? Seems to me like he's watching the game. Blond-haired with a sharp jaw and nice to look at. Porter, the shining badge on his chest says.

"I need your help," I tell him. "It's serious."

He chews as he looks at me and finally waves for me to take a seat in front of him. The chair creaks as I sit, and I run over which part of the story proved too much for

each officer. Mentioning deaths that happened over fifty years ago got me kicked out of one. Saying law enforcement doesn't do their job got me kicked out of another.

"I live out in a town called Grimm Groves," I begin.

He narrows his eyes, already deciding I'm bothering him. "Never heard of it, and it's not in my jurisdiction."

"Oh," I say, trying not to sound too confident. Being an overly confident woman is another reason I was turned away yesterday. "That's not what they told me. They told me you could help." I try to bat my eyes, but he's looking at the game again, not me.

"Who's they?" he asks, and I realize quickly that the innocent act isn't for me.

"Oh, you know, those officers," I hedge as I reach into my bag and pull out the map of the mountain and hold it open for him. "Over the past five years, there have been sixteen murders in this town." I point it out to him. Little X's detail each place they died or were found. "Just a few nights ago, a teenage boy was killed. Had his throat slit and our self-appointed mayor put him in the ground without calling the locals."

"People die for lots of reasons that don't involve the law," he answers, still paying more attention to his sandwich than me. "I'm sure you're wrong about how that kid died. What did the mayor say killed him?"

"A bear." My hands try to shake as I sense the conversation going nowhere again.

"Then it was probably a bear."

I breathe through my nose real slow so he doesn't see just how much all this bothers me. This isn't going to be another situation like the other night, where I throw the lamp and leave myself in the dark. "It's been happening for about nine years. People

keep dying bloody out on this mountain, and no one is paying attention.”

“So what do you think is happening?” he asks.

“Someone is killing people.” It takes everything I have not to shout, not to show him just how angry I am.

“Do you have any proof?” He already believes I don’t, just like the rest of them.

“I do, but I would need you to come back with me to see it.”

He laughs. “I’m not going all the way out there if you don’t have some reason to make me think I should.”

“I have proof back home. That’s all I’ve got,” I insist, holding in all the rage and pain tearing me apart. Like hell am I going to let him see just how fucking angry I am and offer him an excuse to call me a hysterical woman.

He shakes his head at me. “I don’t know, Miss... ?”

“Little.”

“I don’t know, Miss Little. Anyone can put marks on a map and spin a yarn.” He takes the last bite of his sandwich and wipes a napkin across his mouth.

“I’m telling the truth,” I insist.

“You might be. Doesn’t make it true, though.” He leans back in his chair, not a hint of the urgency I need or hoped for. “I hear an awful lot of unbelievable stories, and some of the people telling them believe them with all their heart.”

“Are you calling me crazy?” I ask through my teeth, briefly considering the sawed-off in the bed of the truck. Maybe I’m crazy like the Wolf now and want to spill some blood.

“I’m not calling you anything. But your story isn’t making you sound too believable.”

“It’s true.”

He picks up the phone and dials a number.

“What are you doing?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer as he rotates the little wheel again and again until it picks out the right sequence. Holding it to his ear, he greets whoever is on the other end.

“Yeah, I’m watching,” he says, clearly commenting on the game. “Have to ask you a question. You ever come across a Miss Little? Says she needs help and someone told her to come my way.”

He listens for a long moment before he says, “Uh-huh, of course, I’ll send her on her way.” He hangs up the phone.

“Seems like the boys west of here didn’t believe you either.” His hand moves to his side, and my instincts scream he’s about to cuff me, jail me, and do something awful to me that I don’t want to stick around for.

“Just because other people didn’t believe me doesn’t mean I’m not telling the truth.”

“I can’t help you,” he insists. “And it sounds like you’ve been making quite the impression of yourself with my neighbors.” I’m not sure who he called, but if it was the guys from last night, they definitely had some unkind words.

“You are my last hope, okay? That’s the truth. No one told me to come here. I’m desperate.”

I’m not sure why, but that seems to get his attention, and he gives me the full weight of his stare for the first time.

“Desperate?” he asks. “Why are you so desperate, Miss Little?”

“No one will listen.”

He smirks as he gives me a once-over. “I really wish I could help you.” He’s clearly not listening either, but he is the first officer to give me this type of attention. I’ve never even had sex with myself, let alone anyone else, and I don’t plan to change that status. Sex causes too much trouble, and I don’t have the time for any of that when I’m trying to protect people, but if I have something to use, maybe I should.

“All you have to do is help,” I say, letting him know how damn easy it would be for any of them to stop turning a blind eye to me.

“My friend at the next station told me to stay the hell away from you if I’m smart.”

“Why would he do that?”

He smirks. “I don’t know, but maybe I’m interested in finding out.” He leans forward, putting each elbow on the desk, and I suddenly understand why I’m interesting now. People like what they can’t have.

“You’d have to come see the truth for yourself.” That’s not a double entendre. All he needs to see is the blood all over my cabin, the fingerprints, and he’ll have to see it’s true.

“Your mountain is an hour from here. You want me to go that far for a little proof and nothing else?” he asks.

My thoughts once again fly to the sawed-off.

“People are dying ,” I insist. “That has to be worth something.” I swallow hard. “You’d be my hero,” I say.

“Miss Little, I’m awfully sorry about the situation, and I really would like to help you, but Grimm Groves just isn’t in our jurisdiction. Hell, I’ve never even heard of it. What can I do if I head out there?”

“Whose jurisdiction is it, then?” I insist. It can’t just be mine and the Wolf’s.

Porter thinks about my question for a minute before answering, “The feds, I guess.”

But they’ve already turned me down.

“What about a police report?” I ask. “You can take a police report no matter where you are, can't you?”

He thinks, shrugging. “I mean, if there’s something to report on, who’s to stop me from writing down what I see? It wouldn’t be official, but the local boys are more likely to listen to me than you,” he agrees.

“That’s good enough for me,” I swear, a fierce hope lighting me up from the inside out. “Please help me.”

“I’m not sure, but leave me your coordinates, and I’ll think about it,” he says. “Maybe you can cook me dinner one of these nights.”

“Help me solve this case, and you’ve got yourself a deal,” I say, picking up a pen and marking the exact spot on the map on his desk.

“I’ll consider it, I promise,” he says.

I fold my map up and put it back in my bag as I wink at him, feeling dirty in a way I never have before.

CHAPTER 16

REDLEY

The truck's paint job has faded from red to nearly orange over the years, and I stomp across the gravel parking lot back to her. The Appalachians stack in the distance, misty and green, climbing into the sky like the earth wanted to get a little closer to God. I kick it up to a run, desperate to get home, to get the hell away from the constant rejections and assumptions. I am not insane.

Before I climb in, I toss the half-open backpack onto the passenger seat. I have a knife in there, and part of me wishes I'd used it rather than flirting. After being ignored and called crazy for so long, I want people to fear me. I'd maybe even like to hurt some of them. The idea of that power trills through me. I know it's not healthy that I'm starting to develop a taste for violence, but that doesn't change the fact I am. Maybe I've just been powerless for far too long.

This was another wash, but at least I didn't have to spend the night in a cell like last night. We head downhill on a real paved road and pass a school that I'm sure receives taxes and grants, things that help the kids learn. Grimm Groves isn't all that far, but we don't get any of that same treatment. From my current elevation, the backside of my mountain is just visible, far in the distance. The beauty of it breaks my heart. It's not meant to be haunted.

My mind wanders as I drive, and soon enough, I'm pulling back into Grimm Groves. The town hasn't changed much since I was a teen, except that Bobby's married, and a whole new crop of families have turned up to give The Wolf more opportunities to

kill. There are nearly thirty kids at the school this year, and rather than feeling pleased that we're coming up in the world, I'm terrified about which one is next to go and how the hell they're going to get any supplies.

Bobby never did wind up believing the stories, and at this point, he thinks I'm criminally insane. Maybe he's right, but at least his wife has to deal with his pointy tongue and not me.

I pull up outside the trading post and head inside for some chicken feed. Daniel, who runs the place, stands behind the counter. We're the same age and spent years in school together. Like everyone around here, I know him far better than I'd like to. One time, when we were nine, he stabbed me with a pencil, but despite the lead scar, I'm not holding grudges.

He acts like he's a boring type of guy, and he doesn't often have much to say that isn't about his business, but he's weirder than he lets on. Stabby little fucker. His daddy passed this position off to him a couple of years ago, and now I see him nearly every day again.

"Been gone a few days," he comments as I step up to the counter with a sack in my arms, proving my thoughts correct. Why is he watching where I am?

"Was talking to law enforcement." I don't see any point in lying. I'm already the crazy lady around here, and public opinion isn't much better for him.

"Moonshiner goes to the cops. That's a first," he snarks.

"Not a moonshiner, Daniel. Just trying to stop a damn killer. What are you doing today? Let me guess, standing there?"

I slap the money on the counter.

“Red’s in a mood,” he comments as he picks it up and counts.

“Spent last night in jail, Daniel. Not feeling awful friendly.”

He hoots and laughs as I turn and leave with my sack of corn.

Almost an hour later, I’m back home. I head out to the coop, toss the chickens some feed, change out their water, and collect their eggs while cooing to them about what good girls they are. They’re sweet birds, and I’m not sure what it says about me that I’m so fond of them. I eat a lot of eggs, and truthfully, I don’t mind the simplicity. I pick up a few feathers before I head inside to add to my collection of the prettiest ones.

The chickens came home with me when I moved back last year, so Granny never got to enjoy them. It’s hard not to think of her and everything she missed out on each time I step through the front door. Time and practice are making it easier, but not all right. I pile the eggs on the table and then take a quick look around the house to ensure there aren’t any intruders.

I’m alone, which is true in many more ways than one, and I’m finally forced to think about why I tried to run again to begin with—the Wolf’s offer, threat, whatever the hell it was.

I don’t think he’s been here since he left the ring, but I would be stupid not to check. I’m starving half to death with a day passing since I last ate. The woodstove has gone out with more than a day left unattended, and I curse myself before getting it going again and tossing in a new log. A while later, I’m scarfing down fried eggs, burning myself as I swallow them.

The anniversary of Granny’s death fast approaches, and my garden is faring better this year. I might even have enough food for two this time between the eggs and the

vegetables, not that it matters anymore. It hurts that the last thing to happen between us was a whooping, and that she never lived long enough to see justice served.

Little pieces of my time away line the cabin, and each one carries a bittersweet punch. Polaroids of the few friends I made, a couple of paychecks from jobs I liked, and tickets from concerts. I had a lot of fun while I was free and pretending this wasn't my cross to bear. I miss that life and can't help but feel my time at home has been a waste.

In the past year, I haven't gotten any closer to ending things, and the previous few days are just the cherry on top. The wolf has kept killing hard and fast. He's let me chase him, always a step ahead. The ring is only a new and exciting element he's trying to add to the mix. And dammit, he got what he wanted because he's in my head.

My belly is finally full. All the driving, repeating myself, sleeping in a jail cell, and being accused of lying have worn me down to nothing, and I need to sleep. Walking to my room, I barely look at Granny's door as I open my own. I've cleared out some of her things when I needed to make a few bucks, but she was more of a pack rat than I ever could have imagined. I haven't made much headway.

The same damn bed I found the Wolf in lies in the same corner, and I sit on it, trying not to think about the ring or his note. I definitely can't admit that I'm afraid of those consequences he threatened me with. If I was right that this has all been a source of entertainment for him, it makes sense that the novelty has worn off. Tormenting me from the shadows while I take shots in the dark can't stay exciting forever. What the hell does he really want from me? Because I know it's not a partner and certainly not love.

I lean toward the window and close my curtain. I don't mind the sun or anything, but I just don't need the Wolf looking inside, and it's been a couple of days since I've

been home. I should scrub last night's jail cell off me, but I'm too tired. Instead, I lie down and close my eyes.

In a moment of weakness, I think about all the kindness the Wolf showed me before he killed Granny. My stomach fills with butterflies as I picture a world where I could accept his proposal and feel things like that all the time. I'm already half dreaming as I drift off.

The warm memory of his hand on my skin overwhelms me, and I'll be ashamed of that as long as I live.

CHAPTER 17

REDLEY

A fist bangs on my front door, ripping me out of my much-needed sleep. I was dreaming about the night Granny died again, which has been added to the rotation of nightmares along with the night my parents and brother died. All this sorrow is like a tidal wave, and it takes my body a while to catch up with reality.

Granny's been dead for years, and I'm as safe as I want to be. If the Wolf is here, well, he can't kill her twice, and for whatever reason, he doesn't seem to want to kill me. For the moment, no one is dying while I lie useless in this bed, but still, it's hard to convince my heart to stop pounding.

Another knock.

"Hold your horses," I shout.

I climb out of bed and open the curtain. Bright, clear stars shine outside the window, but without the moon in sight, I'm not sure how late it is. I light an oil lamp and check my great-granddaddy's pocket watch. Six thirty . I rub my eyes and decide not to be too hostile to whoever is here. It's barely past suppertime, and I'm sure it's just one of my neighbors needing help again. Maybe even returning one of my chickens. They have a tendency to break out of the fence I built.

Despite how crazy everyone thinks I am, I'm also one of the most knowledgeable people out here, and plenty of them need to pick my crazy brain. Still, I grab my knife

from my bag and prepare for a fight before opening the front door.

A greeting waits on my lips as I twist the knob, but it falls when I see who's here. Not Bobby looking to have an affair or the city slicker who bought old Mrs. Reed's house when she passed. Instead, I find a wide-brimmed hat, a shining badge, and a smile that oozes confidence—the cop I spoke to just a few hours ago.

“Surprised to see me?” he asks as he tips his hat.

I really am, and that stops me from saying anything at all. My narrowed eyes size him up, trying my best to judge why he's here. I'm sure not making him dinner on such short notice. It's far less likely, but could he actually want to help?

“I'm not cooking for you tonight.”

“I know,” he says. “I thought about what you said earlier. Can I come in?”

I consider his request, taking one more moment to think about whether or not he's here to rape and kill me.

“Why are you here, Porter? Really.” I lean against the doorway. I might be happy and shocked to see him out here, but that doesn't mean I trust him.

“You said you have proof. I want to see it for myself.” His words and tone are innocent enough, but I still don't buy it.

I cock my head to the side. “Swear to God?”

He clears his throat and looks up before he answers. “If you have proof, I want to see it. I swear to God. We can always have dinner another night.”

Well, that was loaded.

“Come in.” I shrug, stepping out of the way and waving a hand for him to enter. I slide the knife onto a small table, acting as if I wasn’t prepared to use it on him if need be.

He takes one step inside and then looks around the room, his light eyebrows smashing together like something about four walls confuses him. A single oil lamp serves as the light, but it casts a bright glow, and there’s plenty to see by.

“You don’t have electricity?” he asks as he looks around at my things.

“A little bit, not enough to waste.”

He takes a few more steps but leaves the door open behind him. It’s cold at night, and he’s wasting my heat, but he’s also inviting in the animals.

“If you’re coming in, shut that behind you,” I tell him. “You want something to drink? I’ve got a beer if you want. It’s warm, though.”

The door closes softly. “I’m fine, thanks.” He takes a few large steps around the room, looking at the things on the walls. “Who runs lines out here?”

I shoot him a sharp look. “You still talking about the damn power?”

“Just curious.”

“I’m not sure. A bill comes every so often, and I pay it. Like I said, I don’t use it much.” I grab myself his beer. Maybe it’s old paranoia, but I don’t want him asking about moonshine.

He nods, but he's still thinking.

His uniform is too neat and clean, out of place in this beat-up old cabin stained with Granny's blood. Tan pants, dark brown shirt, a sleek new hat with a wide brim and a shiny badge in the middle. He's handsome. He's a cop. He's got nothing to worry about other than a crazy girl from a make-believe town telling him stories about children dying.

"Can we sit down?" he asks.

"Sure, I don't mind."

I wave to the table for him to take a seat and place the beer down, but when I do, he finally notices what I've wanted him to see all along. He makes a comical expression, and I try hard not to laugh. Most people would've tried harder to remove the stains. I don't think that's fair, though, given Granny never got justice, and maybe I'm just not quite right.

Porter looks down at his feet, realizing he's standing on it too. His knees kick up, doing a couple of real high steps like a show pony. His mouth opens and closes like he's a trout. I almost laugh, but I manage not to since I really don't need to offend the only lawman who's made it out here.

"Not used to blood, Officer?" I ask.

He clears his throat and puts his foot back down. "Deputy," he corrects me about his rank, but not the fact that he's not used to blood.

Out in these tiny mountain towns, people usually die only a couple of ways. Not many as nasty as having your throat slit. I take a seat at the table and push out the other chair for him, and since it's off my granny's bloodstain, he accepts.

“How long ago did this happen?” he asks.

“Four years.”

He lifts a brow like he can't quite believe I'm telling the truth, but the evidence is very obvious in front of us. My granny's entire lifeblood is stained into the floor of this cabin. There's no denying someone died here unless he thinks I slaughtered a pig or something. Maybe he does think that low of me. It wouldn't surprise me, given that law enforcement has never taken me seriously. It would actually be more strange if he showed up here purely out of the goodness of his heart.

“Why hasn't someone done something?” he asks, more mistrust slipping into his tone as he stares at the blood like he'll be having his own nightmares tonight.

“Like you told me earlier today, Deputy. Grimm Groves is outside your jurisdiction and everyone else's.”

CHAPTER 18

REDLEY

Deputy Porter stares at me like I'm the one responsible for telling him his life is a lie. I know he's young, but I'm surprised by his naivety. I kind of assumed all law enforcement knew they were full of shit. I didn't realize only some of them were in on the grand con.

"That's not—someone would have come out here," he tries to defend the locals, but there's no use.

After Granny died, I ran from town to town, begging for help. I knew what the killer looked like, and he walked like a man, so what did it matter if he was a monster? They all turned me away. Outside their jurisdiction. When I ran from home, it was a cop who convinced me to just walk away. They might think it was you. After, I shoved her in the ground and made myself scarce.

"You're far from the first officer I've asked."

He stares at the wood pattern in the table, eyebrows pushing together with a little bit of guilt.

"What would you say if I told you I didn't actually believe you when I came out here? If I did it to prove you were crazy?" His eyes still can't meet mine.

"I would say, I'm not surprised you didn't believe me, but I am surprised you cared

enough to check.”

He looks up at me then and smiles. “Ah, well. That’s because you’re so pretty.”

My cheeks turn pink at the compliment. It’s been a long time since I’ve gotten one, even if I’m not interested. He puts his hand to his chin.

“Maybe I’m changing my mind about not believing you, though. I’ve never seen a bear kill someone in their living room, not with a door that size anyway. Sorry, Miss Little. I don’t mean to be crass.”

His words don’t bother me. It’s hard to be affected by a description of something when you live each day with its reality.

“Of course not, Deputy, but you’re right. It wasn’t a bear.”

My heart races. There’s no way, no way someone might actually help me. He swallows hard, the movement bobbing in his throat. If he’s a better shot than I am, we can end this. We might end this tonight . A shiver of fear runs down my spine and turns my stomach. With sickening dread, I realize I'm not afraid for myself, but it can’t be. I wouldn’t be worried about the Wolf.

“Is there anything else in here you need to show me?” he asks, with a little bit of hope, or maybe it’s him calling me pretty that’s coloring my opinion of the situation.

“Just one thing. It’s in my bedroom.” I swallow, trying to clear my throat and the misplaced fear. This is what I want , I remind myself.

Porter looks up at me, and I realize my mistake before he even responds.

“The lighting is awful romantic, Miss Little.” Too bad his blue eyes aren’t yellow.

My cheeks turn red, this time, not out of interest but pure embarrassment. I'm not sure which is worse, the misunderstanding or my own thoughts.

"Not that, Deputy," I correct him.

He coughs to cover a laugh. "Of course not, Miss Little. I do apologize. Which room is yours?"

"This way."

We head down the hall, and he follows a little closer than he needs to. The lamp in the bedroom is already burning, and when I open the door, his expression says he's still not entirely convinced we're in here because of evidence. Quickly planning to get that idea out of his head, I point at the windowsill where the Wolf's dried blood has been smeared for the past four years. Inside the bloody network are at least a few partial fingerprints.

He may be a monster, but he has to have money too. He's involved with regular society, so it's possible he's been caught committing a crime at some point.

Porter holds the lamp up to the windowsill, looking carefully. "I could definitely pull some prints from this if we ever found a suspect to compare them to. I'd need to get a kit, though."

"No one has even compared them to the locals." I doubt an immortal monster has his prints in the local database, but it's worth checking.

"Really?" His brow scrunches up like he's having a hard time believing me again.

"Who would have done it exactly? Whose jurisdiction is this?" I ask him the same style of question I asked at the station, yet rather than getting angry with me like the

rest of the cops have, he seems to accept my point.

“You think whoever did this is still in town?” he continues.

“I sure do. He’s the same one who killed the kid in the woods the other night. I’m telling you, Deputy, bears don’t slit people’s throats.” I told him this already, but I guess you don’t remember things when you’re not really listening. I don’t know why the Wolf likes slitting throats so much, but it seems to be his preference.

“I’m not sure how to handle this. I wasn’t lying when I said it’s not my jurisdiction, but...” He stares at the blood for a minute before finishing. “Someone needs to do something.”

A rush of warmth fills my stomach. If I wasn’t smarter, I’d think I was in love with Porter. He’s handsome. He keeps flirting with me. Someone seems to give a shit, and I’m less terribly alone than I’ve been these last four years, but I stamp the thought to death right there.

That same weakness is why the Wolf got so close to me, and why I still think about him in ways I shouldn’t all this time later. My need for a little warmth and connection is as pathetic as it is dangerous, and I won’t be nurturing it. That’s exactly why I don’t ever want to have sex. I can’t trust myself when someone is gentle with me, not when they make me feel good. Unlike the Wolf, I’ll keep the deputy at arm’s length.

“There’s one more thing I need to show you. If you really want to do something about all this.”

He turns and raises a brow, waiting like this was some test and he passed. Now he’s expecting me to get naked for him.

“It’s down the mountain a ways. We need to drive,” I say, edging toward the door.

“Oh, sure, of course,” he says as he clears his throat. “After you.”

Much to my satisfaction, his cheeks are red this time. I blow out the lamps as we leave, and he gives Granny’s bloodstain one last frightened look before I lock up.

“I’ll drive,” Porter says as he walks quickly down the steps and over to his still running cruiser. He checks the surrounding forest as he moves, and I think what he saw in my cabin really spooked him. Try living with it.

His fear speaks to the violence inside me that keeps growing bigger and hungrier. I want men as afraid of me as I’ve been of them, feeling as helpless as they’ve left me. Porter isn’t one of them, and I don’t want to hurt him, but his reaction satisfies me all the same.

He opens the passenger door for me with a shaking hand, and I climb in. A moment later, he’s sitting in the seat next to me.

“Take the road straight back down. There’s only one way, really.”

He nods as he pulls out and slowly rolls down the slope. It’s thickly dark tonight, the stars high and bright above us but too far away.

“Where are we going, Miss Little?” he asks.

“My other house, I suppose.” It’s strange to think of it that way, but everything that once belonged to the Littles now belongs to the last one left. “It’s a long drive.”

He whistles. “How many acres you got out here?”

It’s not an unusual question in these parts. People are proud of their land, especially when it’s been in their family for years like mine. I don’t feel proud, though, just

bound.

“Somewhere around six hundred acres. I would have to get out the survey to know for sure.”

“You own two houses and all that land?” he asks.

“I wouldn’t quite call the cabin a house, but I own about a third of the mountain proper,” I tell him.

“I would. It just needs some work, a rewiring.”

I don’t like how much thought he’s already put into the cabin's renovations.

“I suppose I do, then.” I watch the dark forest passing, my dread growing with each second.

“And you don’t have a husband to help you take care of all this?”

Take care of it? I can barely face it.

“Just me.”

He’s thinking for a moment, and I don’t know if I like where this is going.

“You know, Miss Little. If I had a vested interest in this mountain, I’d be sure to serve justice myself.”

“What does that mean exactly?” I ask.

“If this was my land— our land ,” he corrects himself. “There isn’t a chance in hell I

would let anyone get away with killing people on it.”

My heart pounds, not bothering to decide whether he’s being truthful. That’s how appealing the idea is.

“Do you mean that?” I ask.

“I surely do.”

He glances over at me to make eye contact before looking back at the road. I let his offer hang in the air between us, not sure if he’s even serious, but I’m forced to ask myself, am I that desperate?

And maybe I am.

But what if the Wolf actually dies? And why the hell should that worry me?

CHAPTER 19

REDLEY

“On the right about twenty feet up,” I tell Porter. Once again, my hands shake, but I’ve got the dark to cover up my emotions this time.

He slows to a crawl in his effort not to miss it, but the driveway is even more overgrown than I realized. Headlights outline the cutout that used to be a clear path, and my heart tightens at the overgrowth. Porter pulls along the edge of the drive, getting as far off the road as he can without getting stuck. He doesn’t need to worry about the safety of his cruiser despite the low visibility. No one else lives farther up. The mountains like to hang onto the fog, and thick puffs of it swell around us.

“I’ve got flashlights. We can walk the rest of the way,” he tells me as he clicks his seat belt and gets out of the car. The cab lights when he opens the door.

Saplings have more than sprouted, reaching a few feet tall. Grass and weeds grow with the new season, filling out the spaces in the craggy rock. I can’t see all that far up without any sunlight, but it seems to get denser the farther you go.

“It’s about a mile,” I warn as I step out into the night. “The terrain is rough, and God knows when it was cleared last.”

I checked on the place once when I moved back to town, but I don’t like to think about my first day back often, and I didn’t go inside the house. The reality of all the time passing aches like an infected wound, and the night mercifully keeps the full

reality from me. My daddy built this house for my mama with his own hands from the logs he felled, just like Pop did for Granny, and here it is rotting away to nothing.

“We can make do,” he insists.

“I’m sure I can, but...” My voice trails off, giving him a clear picture of how I view his abilities.

He turns back around and points his flashlight at me. “Are you trying to say something about my physical fitness, Miss Little?”

“I wouldn’t dare, Deputy.”

He gives me a charming smile. Since the Wolf made me his offer four years ago, I’ve truly believed I’m destined to be alone. Now he’s trying to force me to choose him again. Porter has given me an alternative to consider. Whether or not he’s serious, his words still roll around in my head.

“You want me to take a police report, don’t you?” He lifts an eyebrow.

“Of course I do.”

“Then get moving.” He claps twice. He’s not being a dick, just joking around.

He’s already proven he’s a decent enough man by making the trip out here. Most people wouldn’t and haven’t. That ring from Wolf has been weighing a million pounds on my soul since he gave it to me, but what if I tossed it for the deputy’s proposal? My thoughts are dangerous, but I’m addicted to the idea of not being alone ever since Wolf put it in my damn head. Maybe I don’t need love at all, just help.

I walk around the back of the cruiser to meet him, and he hands me a flashlight.

“Here,” he says as I take it.

“After you.” I wave for him to lead the way.

“It’s your house,” he argues.

“You’re the big strong man, aren’t you? What if there’s a bear or something?”

I’m mostly messing with him, given the story about the Murphy kid. If there’s a bear, we’re going to play dead and pray. It doesn’t matter who’s standing in front of who.

“Uh, of course, Miss Little. I’ll lead the way.” He puffs his chest as he walks ahead of me, not quite catching the joke.

“My hero.” And I don’t even say it with sarcasm. There’s something so refreshing about good intentions, whether he can follow through on them or not, whether he also wants a little land and ass in the process. Maybe he’s not a saint, but he’s not heartless.

My optimism gives in to a deep nervousness. Is there a chance in hell this man can help me? He seems good-natured enough, the first person with a conscience I’ve come across, but he was scared of Granny’s bloodstain. I can’t imagine he’s actually got the stomach for this fight.

The Wolf tears people to pieces for fun. Porter couldn’t stand on a bloodstain.

I aim the flashlight high to widen the light beam, and he looks over his shoulder to give me an appreciative nod. Aside from enjoying scaring him, I’m glad to hide my expression as we walk backward in time to the life the Wolf stole from me. Granny was as mean as they came, but my mama? She was kind; she loved me. My daddy wanted to do better than his parents did. He wasn’t perfect, but he tried. And my

brother?

I swallow hard just thinking of Corey. He was my best friend, the only person who got me and my sense of humor, who stuck up for me when the other kids on the mountain thought I was weird. God, the way I miss them only gets worse with time instead of better. And I do truly hate the Wolf for taking them from me.

“You weren’t kidding,” Porter says when we’re about halfway.

He puts a finger through a hole in his shirt. I’m not partial to the clothes I’m wearing, so I’m not upset, but I’ll certainly be patching holes tomorrow.

“I can fix that for you, Porter. Will only take me a minute back at my cabin.”

I shouldn’t offer to take the man’s clothes off, but it only seems right, given I’m able to fix it, and he ripped it while helping me.

“That’s awfully kind of you, Miss Little,” he agrees with a smile in his voice.

I’m panting by the time the trees break, and we’re standing in the clearing near the house. This landscape isn’t forgiving, and it’s all too happy to reclaim what you’ve left untouched. Bushwhacking in the dark is no simple task.

The wraparound porch groans as we approach the front door. It takes me a minute of searching to find the hidey-hole drilled in the side of the cabin, but my finger slips inside eventually. I flash some light in there to check for spiders when I feel the mound of silk. Thick webs fill it, but there aren’t any living residents. I pull out a bunch of nasty stuff and one key. When I try it in the lock, it doesn’t fit well, and the door sticks like hell.

“Allow me, Miss Little,” he says before attempting a good hard shove.

It pops open under his weight and easily swings the rest of the way. I hold my breath as we step inside my family home. I leave the door hanging wide open to let the fresh air in. The room is heavy with dust and mildew, and the items inside are moldering with time and neglect.

“Not so impressive anymore, is it?” I ask, referring to the state of the two houses I own.

“I don’t think this makes what you have less impressive,” he says as we step inside. “I’ve never seen a view like yours, and the sunset before I got all the way to the top was unbelievable.”

Good thing there’s no basement, because the floorboards are rotting out beneath our feet. The couch slumps all the way to the floor, like someone flattened it, and my daddy’s recliner lies fully back, cushions sagging off. The smell is awful, and tears brim in my eyes as I realize just how much has been lost here, how much continues to go even now, and how little I can do about it because there’s only one me.

“It’s pretty,” I agree, not really believing a word.

Turning in a slow circle, I cast a beam of light on all the little details of our life that never moved but decomposed all the same, and finally, the first of the bloodstains. Chills cover my body and I’m sure there will be a new layer to my nightmares. There was a reason I didn’t come here. Three concentric circles, the pools where my family bled out and died.

“Is there a light?” he asks.

“Not sure if it still works, but there is one,” I answer, my voice sounding disconnected from my body.

Quite a few animals have been in here. Granny used to keep the house up before she passed, but I clearly haven't followed the tradition. I find the light switch and flip it on. While the light is weak, the bulb still glows. The bloodstains are obvious now, even if you don't know what you're looking for. This is far worse than I thought it would be, and I can barely breathe as I stand in my family home for the first time since the night they died.

CHAPTER 20

REDLEY

Tears fill my eyes as I can practically hear my mama's laughter and singing, and my daddy calling her name when he would come in the door. I hear their screams and cries too when I woke up in that closet, knowing it was too late to help them. Everything that ended with the Wolf runs through my mind. My heart wants to rip itself out of my chest, and I hate myself deeper than anyone ever could for all the soft feelings I still harbor for him.

“You okay?” Porter asks.

I know what’s expected of me, so I say, “Yes.”

All our belongings are still here. My brother's book lies open on the coffee table where he left it. Instead of leaving well enough alone, I pick it up. The pages are dusty and brittle, and the edges chip off beneath my fingers as I turn them. I swallow hard before I put it back down. I’m sick in a way I can’t explain, closer to my family than I’ve been in years and somehow even more alone.

I am so terribly far from okay.

“Shit, is that blood too?” he asks as his flashlight traces the floor.

“A lot of people have died on this mountain, and no one has ever helped us,” I answer numbly, too caught up in my own pain to deal with his shock.

He swallows hard, and the lights flicker like the bulb might go any moment. He's frowning hard, dreadfully serious with a pinch between his brow, and a tremble in his lip like he might actually care for the pain of my family. That sense that I might love him already grows a little stronger.

"I'm going to help you, but let's get out of here for tonight. We can try again in the daylight."

"You afraid, Deputy?" I ask with a raised brow.

"Of course not." But he swallows and clears his throat. "No use investigating what I can't see properly. I'll take a good look in the morning. You got extra room in that cabin of yours?"

"Why do you ask?" After all the little hints he's made tonight, I'm not sure that's a good idea.

"I can't stay down here," he counters.

"I didn't know you needed to stay at all."

He shrugs like it isn't a big deal. "It only makes sense, being it took a few hours to drive out here, and it's already so late. I'll be no good to you tomorrow without any sleep, and you've got the room."

The reality of the situation smacks me in the face. I'm suddenly sure that he didn't have any good intentions when he came out here. He saw an opportunity to screw me, and now he sees crimes were actually committed. What an asshole.

But is that such a big deal? another side of me counters. He's in law enforcement, and he's on this mountain. As far as I know, that's already a first-time occurrence, and I'd

rather not press my luck. He can play games and so can I. I'm getting justice either way.

"Sure, Deputy. You can sleep at my house," I agree, knowing he won't be sleeping in my bed tonight. I'll never let a man in my bed again.

His satisfied smile overrides his fear for a second. I said he could sleep at my house but never said I was going to sleep with him. That will be his own disappointment to bear.

"Come on then, let's head back," he says like he's excited about what might happen. A cocky smile hangs on his cheeks, and I have to remind myself not to forcefully put him back in his place.

I forgot myself for a minute, but I don't have any interest in men, women, or anything, other than spilling the Wolf's guts on the floor of this forest.

We're about three-quarters of the way back to the car when Porter stops and turns toward me. "I wanted to ask you something," he says.

This spot is a little less densely overgrown than others. He aims the beam of the flashlight at my chest rather than away from me, and my eyes struggle to adjust. I can barely see his outline over the top of the halo.

"What's going on?" I ask, trying to figure out if he saw something I didn't. There's wildlife out here, and some of it you don't want to mess with. I was kidding about the bear, but this is uncomfortable and puts a new perspective on the "spotlight."

"What's your first name, Miss Little?" he asks, still aiming the light at me.

"It's Redley." I'm not sure why he's asking me right now or why he's still pointing

that light at me. “But we should get back to the car. These woods aren’t safe at night.”

“I’m James.”

“Oh, okay, nice to meet you,” I say, not trying to be rude but growing more certain by the moment his help isn’t just contingent on the possibility of marrying me but also sleeping with me tonight. “We better get moving.”

“Pretty, tough, seem smart too. Not the type of girl to cry over a broken nail.”

“Not many girls are that type.” Men just don’t often listen to why they’re actually crying .

“You’re too modest, and damn, I like a humble girl.”

“I’m not that humble,” I argue as a sick sense of unease moves up my back. He takes a step closer to me.

“I don’t think that’s true, Redley. I’ve seen enough about you to know you’re easy to please.”

I don’t need much, but I’m not sure I like his interpretation of things.

Cologne surrounds me, and it’s too much compared to the fresh night air. I take a step back, but he grabs my hand so I can’t take another without pulling free. James looks down, but I can only see the shapes of his features. If he’s trying to scare me, it’s working. I’m so damn tired of being helpless.

He’s got the power, though, the power to hurt me or help me. And he’s a cop, so when doesn’t he?

He leans in, lips pursed, and I never imagined my second kiss would look like this. Why didn't he just wait until we were back at my house to try to make things physical with me? All around, it seems like the better option. Is there something to be gained from doing this in a place where I'm uncomfortable and can't see? I've played a lot of games, but this is a new one for me.

"You're damn pretty," he tries to compliment me again, but it sounds more like he's admitting how hungry he is.

"Thank you." I swallow hard, definitely in over my head.

I don't want his lips on mine, but what can I do? He doesn't expect rejection, and why would he when he's got me exactly where he wants me?

I'm debating my options, but ultimately, time is running out. His lips are crashing toward mine. I most certainly am not going to sleep with him tonight, but what's one kiss really? Sure as hell isn't like Bobby is special to me.

Who has ever been willing to help me?

My eyes fall closed, as I decide to accept my fate if it means justice. My stomach twists because I really don't want this even though I'm letting it happen. Rather than warm lips, a whooshing sound pierces the air, followed by a wet thunk like an arrow ripping through a deer.

His flashlight drops to the ground, and while it doesn't go fully dark, I'm blinded by the sudden change. Porter falls hard, hitting the ground and landing on top of my feet. I scream on pure impulse and quickly shuffle out from under him before dropping to my knees at his side. Despite all the death I've seen, I'm still not too keen on touching it. Forcing myself to keep quiet, I feel for a pulse.

My fingers skim his throat. Finding his pulse spot still. I hold out hope for a second longer, but then blood dribbles onto my fingers. Oh no. I span the flashlight across him, and the beam reveals the arrow sticking through one side of his skull and straight out the other.

“Fuck, fuck.” I start to gasp. “Goddammit dammit!” I shout.

He can’t be dead, I argue with myself as I wipe the sticky blood off on the ground. The only cop who listened to me isn’t dead right now.

But he is.

CHAPTER 21

REDLEY

“Wolf!” I scream, certain there isn’t anyone but him who would have done such a thing. But the bastard doesn’t answer me.

Standing back up, I draw the light over James Porter’s limp body. All six feet of him lay crumpled against my overgrown driveway. I can’t help but feel that Wolf is already making good on the threat in that note. I’m not going to scream again. I’m over my shock, and I’m just disgusted and sad.

I can’t just leave him out here. Look what happened to the Murphy boy when I made the mistake of leaving to get help. Still, what are my options? Porter’s cruiser can’t make it back here, and I can’t carry him out. Leave it to the Wolf to complicate every part of my evening.

I take a step backward and collide with something hard and warm, someone . My breath cuts off as an arm snakes around my middle, snapping me tight against a man’s chest. Hot breath touches my neck, and he smells just the same, a million times better than Porter did.

“Muffin,” he breathes. “You called?”

An instant cold sweat breaks over my skin, followed by a nervous rush. It’s a special kind of fear that belongs to him alone.

“I wouldn’t phrase it like that.” It was more of an outraged shout.

“Have you thought about my offer?” he asks, and his voice is even deeper up close like this. We’ve been talking from the shadows for a year now, and this is the first time I’ve heard the difference. His lips skate my neck, the tender gesture taking me farther off my feet than the arrow took Porter. More electricity fills my veins than runs up the mountain.

I hold my breath, more alive and closer to death than I’ve ever been. It’s the most thrilling and horrifying experience, like the first time I rode a sled when I was a kid, and I thought I’d fly straight off a cliff.

“No,” I tell him.

“No, you won’t marry me, or no, you haven’t thought about it?” he asks.

I’ll never stop him if I can’t get him out of my head, and it’s starting to feel like it would take another arrow to do that.

“I would never think about it,” I lie.

“You’re thinking about it right now, with a corpse at your feet, naughty Muffin.”

He presses a tender kiss to the place my shoulder and neck meet and rather than shiver I resist his most potent weapon. “Fuck you,” I spit.

“I’ve missed you,” he answers like I never said anything at all. “Too bad it took a dead pig to bring us back together.”

This time I do shiver against him, and insist to myself that the feeling is disgust, not sweet reunion.

“I’m hunting you,” I insist for both our sakes.

“Hunting me or searching for me?” he asks. “Because sometimes I think you come outside at night hoping I’m up to something.”

“Hunting,” I repeat to remind myself more than him.

His nose moves up and down my neck, smelling me. I already noticed the change in his voice, but is he taller too? It’s hard to tell with him behind me, but I swear he’s even more massive at my back than he was four years ago. All the nights spent chasing him across the mountain have given him mystery, but now that he’s right here? Something isn’t adding up. How can an immortal monster change? And he’s most certainly different.

“What was the point of playing with your food before eating it?” I ask, as his warm hands start to slide over my midsection, curving around the swells of my hips.

“What is my food in this analogy? Because I killed that cop quickly.”

“This whole situation. How long have you been watching?” Did he follow me around to the police stations too? Did he sit outside while I slept next to the town drunk.

“I’m always watching you.” His answer is simple and assured, but it’s not possible.

“Are you Santa Claus now?”

A throaty chuckle vibrates against my neck. “I thought I was the devil.” But he doesn’t deny his ridiculous claim.

“Fine, I’m the food in this analogy, then. Why are you playing with me?” His fingers move across my skin.

“If you want me to eat you, Muffin, just ask. I’ve been desperate for a taste.”

His tongue darts out, sliding along my neck, and it’s all I can do not to pant.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What. Did. You. Mean?” He enunciates each word like my answer is incredibly valuable to him, and I better not get it wrong. My cheeks burn. My heart rate kicks up.

“That ring and note. You’re playing with me.”

“Not in the ways I’d like to.” He briefly cups my breast, but his hands keep moving.

“You’re messing with me.”

“Not in the ways I’d like to,” he says as he twists one of my nipples, and I gasp.

I’m too small beneath his hands, never making it past five foot four, and his touch is making me crazy. His proposal and every damn interaction I’ve ever had with him are pushing me over the edge.

“I get you’re pissed about me trying to kill you for a year. It’s just a fucked-up way to pay me back,” I grit, starting to let my anger show despite my more noble intentions. It’s taking everything in me not to melt into a puddle at his feet, but I’m not giving into him or my own fucked up desires. His entire frame tightens.

“What exactly is a fucked-up way to pay you back?”

“Pretending that I actually have the choice to marry you when the only real option you gave me is payback. You don’t want me.”

Wolf squeezes my sides, and I can't get over how his hands span nearly my entire waist.

"I don't?" he asks, and the way he says it challenges my entire worldview.

"Why would you?"

He doesn't answer, instead asking a question of his own. "Have I ever gone back on an offer I made you?"

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

"No, Muffin. You've only ever rejected me. You can't expect a man to stay patient forever."

That's obvious with his hands and mouth all over me, the arousal I'm trying so damn hard to ignore.

"You're not a man. You're a monster."

"Is that what you really think even after all this time? Come on, Redley, you're smarter than that."

When he uses my real name, it takes my breath away. I can count the number of times I've heard him say it on one hand. I've had my own suspicions that my family's stories about the Wolf might be affected by time, pain, and moonshine because the man I met didn't match the stories, but when he phrases it that way, all I feel is a deep sense of naivety. I've been very, very stupid, and that's not something I want to face.

"You better kill me now because if you don't, I'm going to kill you," I promise him, my ego bruised and shattered along with everything else.

He laughs again, driving in the metaphoric knife. “No, Muffin. It’s been a year, and you’re not a bad shot when it comes to anything but me. I think there’s a reason I’m alive.”

“Yeah, and what the hell is that?” I challenge because there’s no damn way he knows the truth.

“You’re grateful I saved you from that old bitch, and you wish you’d have come with me.”

CHAPTER 22

REDLEY

I gasp, so deeply offended that if I had a gun on me, I'd shoot him dead right now. It's even worse that he's right, and I've been struggling with these disgusting feelings for years, but it's different and harder to deny when hearing the accusations out loud.

"Oh yeah? And what's your excuse this time? Should I be grateful you killed a damn cop who was trying to help me?"

"I don't need an excuse to kill, Muffin. I like it, and I'm always looking to help you."

My stomach flips. Yeah, right. "Did you even have a reason then?"

"He wasn't taking that kiss or anything else he was trying to get out of you tonight."

My heart flies, pounding like it wants to race out of my chest. "Why not?"

"They're mine." His voice slips into a growl. "You're mine."

"I've been kissed before, and like hell is anything of mine yours," I argue.

"One kiss from a teenage boy doesn't count. That man wanted to fuck you, but you're my wife in every way that counts, and no one's going to touch what's mine." Chills run up my spine as he speaks.

I despise him. I'm going to kill him. I've never been so turned on in my life. Why the hell does he think any part of me belongs to him? And why do I agree with him that maybe he gets one small piece?

"You think you get to destroy my entire family and then be a part of it? You are insane."

He laughs loud and harsh as he spins me in his arms to face him.

"Your whole family?" I don't answer him, and he gives me a little shake. "Who said you have a choice?" he asks.

"You did." I can't see much, but he's much taller than I expected. He's grown six inches since that night. How does a monster grow?

"I said choose me or regret it. I never said you had a choice."

Is he actually saying I'll be his wife either way? That my regret will be my own choices being disrespected at all times. There's no way he was just offering me a chance to get used to what he considers inevitable. That's far too kind for him. Your whole family? His question runs through my head on repeat. What the hell is going on? If there's some chance that he didn't kill them all, then who did?

I kick him as hard as I can, but I'm too close to get much leverage, and he doesn't even react.

"That was my fucking kiss, and he wasn't gonna take it," he repeats. "You're mine, Redley Little. Have been since I picked all that glass out of your face and decided no one would ever lay hands on you again."

"Your hands are on me."

“I’m going to touch you so often my hands will fuse with your skin.”

And that shouldn’t sound like the most appealing offer I’ve ever heard. My belly falls out with the combination of arousal and guilt. How could I feel this way for someone who’s done the things he has? Even if I’m wrong about what he is, I know he’s a killer and a cold-hearted one too. Am I as evil as he is for entertaining this?

The Wolf doesn’t leave me the chance to decide, just like he said. His mouth crashes into me. Broad, hot lips spread mine, and his tongue sweeps across my open mouth. The pure physical strength and warmth upstage everything until that’s all I can feel, but he’s holding me so tight it makes no difference that my legs are numb beneath me. I stomp on his foot with tingling toes, and he drops my wrist to wrap his arm around my middle, squeezing hard.

His kiss is deep, skillful, and scorching hot, and my long-dormant libido begs for more. My sense of self, duty, and love for my family scream in outrage, but it doesn’t matter. I can’t stop him anyway, and unlike with Porter, I’m enjoying this ride. This is nothing like the pointy kisses I had with Bobby when I was a teenager. It’s hot and wet, and my body responds in kind, preparing for the sex I never plan to have. The sex Porter certainly died wanting.

A last attempt at a shove is my only failing hope to save my dignity, but he’s just too strong. His arms band even tighter until I can’t breathe, and my head might pop off. My body goes limp, and he growls as his tongue slips even deeper into my mouth. Everything about him is so hot, and so am I in every spot we touch. His arms gentle around me. Suddenly he’s touching me as softly as he did that night and every part of me aches. The mountain could come crashing down and I wouldn’t notice.

He’s the one to end the kiss a few minutes later. When he pulls back, I can’t face him, but I feel his eyes on me. I’m not afraid anymore, though maybe I should be. I’m just ashamed and aroused. He leans forward, pressing his lips sweetly to my forehead and

inhaling.

“Just remember, Muffin, this is your fault for bringing a pig into a wolf’s forest. Bring another, and I’ll kill him too.”

Tears fill my eyes as the reality of my betrayal sinks in and the fact that I was ready to have sex with him, even though that’s not what he seems to want anymore.

“I hate you,” I vow.

He laughs, a haunting melody that weakens my joints. “Run home before I decide I want more of you. You really do look good enough to eat.”

He kisses me one more time, and my heart pounds in fierce hatred and arousal, but I’m truly afraid of my own guilt, if he and I go any further.

“You ruined everything,” I tell him.

“I’m so sorry I killed your dumb cop before he could bring me to justice,” he taunts.

“Fuck you.”

“Drive the cruiser home. If something happens to you, Grimm Groves is going to have a very bad time.”

“What would happen to me if you’re right here?” I ask.

“I’m not the only monster in these woods, and I’m not sure how you haven’t figured that out yet.”

He releases my hands before slipping off into the night, and I can’t even say for sure

which direction he goes.

“Take the cruiser. I’m not kidding,” he shouts from somewhere far off.

He’s not the only monster in these woods. His words from before come back to me.

If that’s true, what the hell is out here?

CHAPTER 23

REDLEY

I look at the cop car I drove home last night as I walk to my truck. Part of me thinks calling this in is a bad idea, and the other part thinks it might be my only chance to get anyone else out here. I have a dead cop, and I have his cruiser. That has to be worth something.

And after everything the Wolf said last night, my head is too messed up to deal with this on my own.

I drive into town, pulling off at Doc's place. He's got one of the only phones that dials long distance, and he lets people use it on occasion. My truck stops right in front of the door, tires sinking into the mud as the spring comes in fully. I hop out, boots squelching as the earth tries to slurp them off me.

I use all my strength to ignore what happened between the Wolf and me last night, but I can't. His lips on mine is all I've thought about since. My stomach wants to fall out, my heart aches, and my pussy reminds me that I'm a traitor .

"Hey, Doc," I say as I push the door open.

He might be an old man now, but he's still one of the biggest guys I've ever seen, strong through the shoulders and arms. His size reminds me of the Wolf, and I shake my head, hating that I'm seeming to find him in all these places where he isn't.

“How’re you doing, Redley?” His greeting is pleasant enough, but a sigh in his voice tells me he’d rather not be seeing me. Oh well, the feeling is mutual. I’ve never liked the man, but things are especially strained between us since the issue with the Murphys.

“I could be doing better. Can I use your phone?”

He shrugs. “I don’t see why not. You know where it is.”

The phone hangs on the wall behind the secretary's desk, but he hasn’t had one for as long as I’ve been alive. I pick up the receiver and turn the dial, picking out the number of the station where Porter worked. They have to take me seriously when he doesn’t show up, right? He left his car.

As soon as I say my name is Redley Little, the phone goes dead, but I call again. This time, they don’t hang up immediately, but as soon as I say, “James Porter is dead,” I hear the distinct slam of a phone on a receiver.

“What on earth? Did he just hang up on me?”

I pick it up, prepared to call them back, but there’s no dial tone.

“Red, did you say there’s a dead cop up on your property?” Doc’s tone says he thinks I’m crazy, but I’m here to use his phone, not receive his judgment. “You know as well as I do that the law doesn’t come out here.”

That’s the very first time I’ve ever heard him acknowledge it outright. Most people don’t.

“The cops should be coming this time. I’ve got one of their brand-new cruisers.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” His hand scratches his gray beard like he’s deep in thought. “You run along home and get some rest. You’re imagining things again. It’s starting to make me worry.”

I’m extremely tired of the people in this town acting like I’m insane. I’m not goddamn insane.

“You’re starting to make me worry, Doc,” I shoot back. “Maybe I’ve got questions for you too.”

His eyes narrow, and there’s real malice in his gaze as he says, “That won’t work out well for you.” His hands tighten into fists, and despite his age, I’m sure he could hurt me. So I just wish him a good day and get the hell out of there.

I wait the better part of the morning and afternoon just messing around town in case the cops show up. Someone will have to lead them up into the woods and to the body. But by about three, I accept that no one is coming, and the Wolf isn’t dumping him off in town like he did the Murphy kid. I’m in this alone, and it’s time for someone to get Porter out of the sun.

My parents' home is even worse in the daylight, but at least my truck can handle the drive. The trees snap repeatedly as I go, the driveway so overgrown it’s hard to pick out. I stop to check I didn’t run over Porter more than once when the snaps sound a little too much like bone.

I’ve been thinking hard about what to do with him once I’ve got him. It’s not like I can hang onto a body as evidence like I did those bloodstains. Porter is going to be stinking soon if he isn’t already. The cops aren’t coming like Doc said, and even with a dead cop out here in Grimm Groves, that’s still not enough. I found the only cop horny enough to help, and the Wolf killed him.

I stop a good ten feet short of hitting James Porter, but it's still too close for comfort. I imagine his swelling body popping beneath my tires, and I get full body chills. I might just put him back in his car, put the transmission in neutral, and push him off a cliff. If anyone finds him, they can make up their own crazy story as to how him getting shot in the head was an accident.

Granddaddy's pistol is strapped to my side. The gun is too big for me, and I always struggle with it, but it's my only one-handed option until I can afford a smaller caliber handgun. Maybe part of what Wolf said is true, and I don't actually want to kill him. Perhaps if I did, I would have brought the double-barrelled sawed-off.

I can't even begin to sort out what that means about me.

"Oh, dear lord. Poor Porter," I say as I look over his corpse. I didn't think about it last night, but now that the light of day is shining on him, his holster is clearly empty. The Wolf took his gun.

He's already gone completely off color, and the blood on his temples is dried. The puddle underneath him is working its way there, tacky and sticky. I think about pulling out the arrow, but I just don't have the stomach. So it will have to stay put. I drop the tailgate and look over the corpse like it's nothing more than a load needing moving. As disgusted as I am by the head wound, I need to lift Porter by his upper body if I'm going to have any chance of getting him in there.

My hands slide under his armpits, and his stiffening limbs creak like the old floors as I try to lift him. He still bends a bit, which helps, but he's incredibly heavy, and I'm not sure I'll be able to make this work. I'm groaning and grunting and not making much progress when a familiar laugh comes from behind me.

Shit . I gasp as I drop Porter, but I manage not to scream. My hands fly to my holster as I scramble for Granddaddy's gun. Spinning toward him, I plan to take a shot

whether my heart is in it or not.

Wolf leans against a tree, and it's the very first time I've seen him in the daylight since the morning after our one night together. As I suspected, the picture doesn't match my memory. He's larger, older, and somehow even more handsome. The barrel finds him. Pull the trigger, I tell myself.

To my nearly sixteen-year-old eyes, he was a man, but it's clear now that he was still a teenager when he killed my granny. He is a man now, standing somewhere around six-foot-seven, over a full foot taller than me. His shoulder span and arms are incredibly impressive, much more so than you could ever tell in the dark, but what strikes me the most about the picture in front of me is how human he looks.

Are you really dumb enough to believe that? he asked me when I suggested he wasn't.

"Muffin, put the gun down. You never point your gun at someone unless you plan on killing them."

He cocks his head to the side, his expression open, eyes wide, staring at me like he knows anything about me. He doesn't if he thinks I won't shoot. That pisses me off and gives me a little of the resolve I lack.

"I'm planning on killing you." My stance widens as I make my decision.

He rolls his eyes. "Why? What did I do that offended you so badly this time?"

"Granny," I say. He doesn't need any more explanation than that, but I have more.

"You really still have your feelings hurt over me killing some old bitch who beat you stupid? I'm not going to say sorry, Muffin. I'm glad she's dead. You are too. You're

just too much of a coward to admit it.”

My mouth drops open. I never expected a monster to regret their deeds, but what he just said is beyond cruel. I did not want her dead, and I do hate him for killing her. He’s right that she was awful to me, but that doesn’t matter. She didn’t deserve to die just for hurting me.

“Not just Granny,” I insist. It’s nearly impossible to keep my voice steady. Rage and pain fill it, but I don’t let the tears follow. He doesn’t get to see me cry. His eyebrows push together. His head tilts the opposite way, confusion rather than arrogance for once.

“Stop acting like you care about these people. You don’t even like them, and they sure don’t like you,” he says.

I deeply resent the implication that I’m doing this for the wrong reason. I do care.

“I’m not talking about them .”

“The hell are you talking about then?” And his confusion is so delicious it’s almost as good as Porter’s fear.

I aim the gun at his forehead as I speak, fully planning to end this here and now. I can’t keep living life as a traitor, so what if this feels a lot like betraying myself too?

“You killed generations of my family. From my great-great-granddaddy to my mama, daddy, and brother. You killed all of them.”

His mouth falls open. His expression shows real fear as he raises his hands, and dammit, I practically drool for it.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Muffin. How the hell could I do all that? Put that gun down.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I don’t usually like to agree with the people in town, but you do sound crazy this time.”

And those will be his final words ’cause my finger closes on the trigger.

CHAPTER 24

REDLEY

The gun kicks in my hand, just like it did the night with the Murphy boy, but the Wolf was right. I wasn't determined enough then, but I am now. He drops to the ground before the bullet can strike him, and I aim just a hair too high. The bark shatters off a tree about a foot above his head rather than blowing his brains out.

"Are you fucking crazy?" he shouts.

The question picks at the last threads of my patience. Goddammit, I was just regretting my decision to kill him, but now he's pissed me off. I raise the gun and aim again, but my arm shakes I'm so tired. There's a lot of power behind this thing.

"Fuck, you are crazy."

He scrambles backward across the ground, but I shoot again. The bullet grazes his shoulder this time. His shirt tears, and a fine spray of blood flies.

"Shit, goddammit," he curses, gripping the wound, blood pooling between his fingers. It's nowhere near fatal, and despite the blood, it doesn't look deep. His arm's moving too much.

My own arms shake like noodles, and I don't know if I have another shot in me, but not one that's worth firing anyway. My arm drops to my side in pure exhaustion. The second that weakness presents itself, he rushes me. I barely have a chance to turn. His

hard shoulder hits my midsection, and my breath leaves with the force. He smashes me into the ground, nearly squeezing my lungs back out through my throat. Every joint and bone grind together as his mammoth form crushes mine.

“Shit,” I wheeze. “Get off me!”

“Does that hurt, Muffin? So does getting shot.”

“Flesh.” I cough, trying to bring air back into my lungs. “Wound.”

He pulls his weight off me enough that I can breathe. I don’t know what happened to the gun, but it’s no longer in my hand. I have no defense except my body, and I can’t find it in myself to even struggle. I’m in so much pain. He grabs my wrists and presses them into the dirt above my head. His hips pin mine. His yellow eyes stare fiercely like he’s trying to figure out something very important about me.

“I didn’t kill anyone but your granny. Well, not anyone else in your family.”

“Liar,” I wheeze, barely able to inhale even though he’s no longer crushing me. My ribs ache from being ground together. My lungs pulse instead of inflating.

“How old do you think I am?” he asks. “This is ridiculous .”

“You’re older than me,” I manage to say. I don’t need to know how old he is.

“Not by much,” he practically growls at me as he comes closer.

We’re nose to nose.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I was twelve years old when your mama and daddy died. I wasn’t alive to kill your granddaddy. I am two years older than you, but you’ve clearly gotten lost in the moonshine.”

“Fuck you!” I shout because even if the stories were affected by moonshine, I’m not sitting alone in my cabin drinking like Granny did after Pop died.

“We’re going to get there. Be patient, Muffin.”

“You’re not human!”

He laughs. “Then what am I?”

A little of my strength returns as he taunts me. I’m humiliated, beaten down to nothing, but still fighting my pointless battle. He killed a cop last night, and no one cares. Tears drip down my cheeks as I uselessly struggle.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what you are!”

“Yes, you do. You’ve never been stupid.”

I shake beneath him, refusing to answer.

“Fine, I’ll tell you.” I shrink away from him like the truth will worsen everything, but he keeps going. “I’m a murderer, Redley. I killed your granny, but I’m not some damn immortal monster. I sure didn’t kill any of the other people you’re missing.”

“Then who the hell did?” I sob, tears pouring. If he didn’t kill them, then why have I been chasing him?

“Not me,” he insists.

“You killed the Murphy kid four days ago, Wolf. Am I supposed to believe you’re so innocent?” I scream through the tears.

“He was three years younger than you, climb down off your damn high horse!”

“You still killed him!”

“I’ve killed a lot of people, but I didn’t touch your family other than that mean bitch who beat you. I’d do it again too. I’ll kill anyone who hurts you.”

And before I have a chance to respond he kisses me.

“Why do you taste so fucking good? Like cake and wine,” he groans against my lips. “All you ever drink is moonshine.”

“I don’t drink that much!”

I hate that he knows that I do sometimes, late at night when no one’s paying me any mind and I can sleep it off. I know he’s watched me, but that closely?

I’ve never even tasted wine, but I’ve seen enough bodies to make me a believer. They told me about the Wolf, and then the Wolf came. I was kind to him, and my granny died. Suddenly, I’m desperate for monsters to be real because if they’re not, something far worse is happening on this mountain.

And the most important question is, Who killed my parents and brother?

“Who are you then?” I ask as his lips leave mine. “Who killed the rest of them?”

“Like I told you a long time ago, I’m no one, but you? You’re Redley Little, and I’m tired of waiting to devour you.”

His teeth sink into my neck, and I scream as the blunt force of it bruises and digs into my flesh. I'm shocked as hot arousal follows behind it, drawing goosebumps all over my body. I've been beaten plenty of times, but never bitten, and I don't understand what the sensation is doing to me. He forces his hands into my pants, popping the button straight off before yanking on the zipper and quickly dragging them down over my hips and thighs.

"What are you doing?" I shout. As I struggle to get away from him, I turn my head, finding Porter still slumped on the ground with the arrow sticking out of his head. I scream again, as loud as I possibly can. With the way the sound travels, someone will hear, but will anyone come?

"Keep screaming just like that," he says.

I use whatever strength I have left in my too weak arms to swing on him. My fist collides with his mouth. The impact screams in my joints, and though I have the satisfaction of his lip busting open under my hand, I think I hurt myself worse. He just seems excited as he licks the open wound.

"I love how scrappy you are," he tells me. "Means I don't have to worry about you too bad."

I doubly regret my choice to hit him when he dips back to press his bloody lips to mine. I remember his fingers carefully picking the glass out of my face and wondering then if we had built some blood link between us. If we didn't then, he seems determined to forge one now.

"You don't love anything about me. You don't know me . "

"I know everything about you, but most importantly, I know that there isn't a cop around except that corpse willing to listen to you."

He's not wrong.

"I know that no one's coming to get him because he was a problem. The sheriff wanted him gone, and now he's your problem."

What he's saying tracks, given I spoke to more than twenty officers in my search for someone to help me. They all turned me away, except for the ones who arrested me.

"You're lying." I really don't think he is.

"I'm not, I promise you that. You have nowhere to turn that I'm not waiting."

That's the one thing that hasn't changed. My humiliation grows by the second as the truth is sinking in starkly. He's just a man—an evil one, but a man nonetheless.

His hips pin mine, and his erection is an obvious ridge between us. I don't know why this sick bastard is turned on, but goddammit I am too. He reaches for his cock, pulling it out of his pants and letting it fall against my crotch. There's nothing but the fabric of my panties between us, and heat pools there.

The sharp rocks cut into my ass and back, but I'm hot all over. The pain is part of the experience, along with my guilt and self-hatred. Maybe he didn't kill all the people I thought he did, but he surely killed my granny. He's killed others. I shouldn't be hot and ready beneath him. I can't be a goddamn traitor. I'm the only one who's been searching for answers. Badly, given I thought he was a supernatural creature, and he's just flesh and bone.

I swing on him a few more times, but my arms are vibrating pathetically from firing the gun and fighting him with all my strength. There's nothing left in me, and my fists are useless on his cheeks. I don't draw any more blood. I have no effect.

“Calm down, Muffin. I need you so bad. I’ve needed you for a long time now.”

He leans back as he finishes pulling down my jeans. When he removes my boots, I try to kick him, but he’s back between my legs too fast. Before I know it, I’m half naked beneath him with his hard cock pressed to my warm, bare pussy.

I’m a virgin, and there’s no way in hell I’m giving him my virginity. He might have said last night that kiss belonged to him, but he’s wrong. Nothing of mine is his.

He’s stolen every kiss he’s gotten, and this surely isn’t his either. I don’t stop hitting him until he takes my hands and puts them back above my head in the dirt. His face falls to my neck, smelling me again, lips tracing, and then his nose runs along the column of my throat. My hips struggle to push him off, but it doesn’t do anything but rhythmically encourage him.

“Don’t do this. Please,” I beg.

“Why not, Muffin? You’re already soaking wet. You already left your juices on me. What’s the difference?”

“I’m a virgin.”

CHAPTER 25

REDLEY

He smiles wide and terrifying, like he really is the Wolf I thought he was, like those eyes are supernatural, but really they're just peculiar, beautiful, belonging to a killer.

“That’s because you’re mine. You knew better than to let someone else get inside this cunt other than me.”

I gasp at him using that word. I’ve only even heard it a couple of times in my whole life, and never while dirty talking.

“It’s not—you can’t.”

His hands hold my wrists in place, and the head of his cock bobs against my pussy, nudging at my opening and spreading me out. I know how babies are made. I know how sex is done in theory and what sex parts look like. I’ve seen animals do it on the farm, but that’s about where my experience ends.

I’m as hot and wet as he accused me of being, and if I asked my body, the answer would be yes, I want him. But I’m not asking my body. I’m remembering my dignity and sense of self-respect as I try to close my legs and shift away from him so he can’t take me, but it all proves moot when he grabs my hips.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’ve fucked before. I shouldn’t have done it, but it was before I met you. It will make this better for you, though.”

I'm about to scream at him that he's fucking insane. I'm not his baby, and I don't care who he sleeps with except for me—don't sleep with me. I'm not interested, no matter what my pussy says about the matter. He gets tired of waiting, playing at rubbing his cock against my wet pussy instead of fully using it. His hands grip my thighs, tipping my pelvis until I'm in a position he likes. Then his thumbs press into my lips, peeling me open for a crude inspection.

The sunlight blazes across us, and he doesn't leave me an inch for shyness as I try to snap my legs shut. My heart races under his inspection. I've never looked at myself that closely, and I can't help but worry it's ugly. His eyes meet mine, and a little understanding buckles his brow in sympathy. I don't know how he sees my insecurity, but he does.

“Muffin,” he coos as he runs a finger over something that makes me jump and moan. Holy shit , what is that? “I'm obsessed with you. This cunt is even more perfect up close than I could have imagined. I can't wait to fuck you. Don't be nervous.”

I gasp, and my pussy twitches, letting him know she has similar intentions. I'm the third wheel on this date that doesn't agree. He watches with a leering smile, and my cheeks turn a deep red. The sun sinks slightly lower, and with the angle of the light, his brown hair glows a golden color so similar to his eyes that I'm stunned. His beauty haunts me, probably because it came straight from hell, but he looks almost angelic with the sun behind him. The devil was an angel once, though, wasn't he?

I shake my head, needing to stop thinking of him in superhuman terms. He's not magic or some immortal monster. He's just a man with a big, hard dick and a lack of respect for boundaries. Something doesn't need to be supernatural to be evil, and I'm sure more than I've ever been that he's evil.

“This is it, Muffin.”

He holds his cock with one hand and spreads me with the other. His fingers touch that spot again, and my whole body shakes. I've never masturbated or even really explored myself, so each touch comes as a shock. My fingers dig into the dirt like I'm trying to hold onto the world as I know it.

I've heard about the bad sides of sex more times than I can count, but I never realized there was something in it for the woman too. I always thought sex was for the man, but I find myself rotating my hips, desperate for him to touch that spot again.

His cock presses to my entrance. I'm not a complete idiot. I don't know all the names for all the parts, but I've heard often enough times how much this will hurt. He's going to tear up my virginity and stretch out my insides. He's going to love it, and if I'm fortunate, I'll get through it without getting pregnant, but when am I ever lucky?

He's everywhere as I lay against the ground, so I don't bother continuing to struggle. My chest heaves as I ready myself to accept my fate, much like I did with Porter. I'm too tired. I'm just too tired. If I'm calm, maybe I'll survive. I'm too weak to get away.

"Take a deep breath and keep breathing through it," he coaches me, and I have no choice otherwise.

He could kill me so easily if he wanted to. Maybe he will when he's done with me. That would probably be the easiest solution for everyone. I'm starting to hope he will. I think I would go to heaven, maybe see my family again, but a secret part of me worries that if the ghost story of the Wolf wasn't true, neither is the one about God. I worry about that as his cock shoves inside me. If the world is actually that empty and cold. I moan long and low as he enters my body like he did my window all those years ago—without permission.

He breaks the resistance of my virginity too easily. The pain I've been told about repeatedly comes, and while it burns and pinches, it's not as bad as I feared. In fact, I

think I like it even more than the bites he pressed into my skin.

“Your body is mine now too,” he says as he pushes past that barrier, inching himself deeper.

He’s once again gentler than I expect, treating me with a reverence I’ve never experienced and surely don’t understand as his hands move over my body. His cock fills me to the brim, and he holds still so I’m forced to appreciate the depth of him inside me.

“How does that feel?” he asks.

“It hurts.” That’s only half the truth.

“Does it? Just breathe for me, Redley, breathe nice and slow and relax around me like the good girl I know you can be.” My entire body shakes in response. Why the hell do I want to be that for him after everything?

“It hurts.” But that doesn’t really sound like pain.

“It will stop if you do what I say,” he promises.

I pull a deep breath in through my nose and push it out through my mouth like the firefighters taught me when I had a panic attack outside the station after he killed Granny. I let my body fall slack, and as I relax, it does hurt less, but that’s worse.

“Shit,” he hisses. “I knew you were going to be tight, but I should have known that a tailor-made pussy would feel otherworldly.”

“I’m not made for you,” I whine, but God, he does fit me so well.

The soreness fades now, switching to a deep and dull pleasure that makes me want to cant my hips to create my own friction between us. My self-control hangs on by a thread, fraying faster and faster as something deep inside me pulses in time with my increasing heartbeat.

My hips move on their own. I don't ask them to or give them permission, but my body is its own being, suddenly hungry and aching for release. Somewhere inside myself, I'm so ashamed I could puke, screaming that I'm losing my virginity to the man who killed my granny. I know I'm going to crash hard after this is over, but right now, it makes me even hotter. Everything about this feels good, the warm sun touching us contrasting with the cold rocks digging into my bare butt.

His massive, solid form above me is the deepest, most intense pressure, and for some reason, that comforts me. I fought him, shot at him, drew blood, and he's on top of me fucking me like I'm something small and lovely rather than his attacker. He killed Granny because of what she did to me and no other reason. That truth makes me feel a confused mix of horrible guilt and flattery.

His hands move to my shirt, and he pushes the fabric up to show my bra. He doesn't stop, reaching inside the cups to pull my breasts out the top. He licks his lips as he rolls my nipple between his fingers. I know men like breasts, but I don't expect the hot jolt of pleasure that shoots straight through my body and to the spot he touched before.

"Oh God, what is that?" I ask as my hips pulse and shake against him.

"That's not a god, Red. That's a Wolf."

"Wolf," I scream as a deep and rhythmic pulsing wraps my pussy around him. My orgasm rips through me, the most supernatural experience I've ever had on this mountain.

CHAPTER 26

REDLEY

For all I've heard about sex and how much men enjoy it, I had no idea it could feel like this for women. I look up at him, yellow eyes like molten gold, brown hair glowing in the failing light. My mouth falls open as little shocks of pleasure move through me like liquid gold dripping out of his eyes and flooding through me.

My feelings for him confuse and overwhelm me, leaving me stranded with nothing to hang on to but my own shifting worldview and his shoulders.

He stays inside me for a moment, leaving us connected while we stare at one another and the obvious place where he invades me. His cock twitches, and the rhythmic pulse connects us. He pulls out, and I look down, catching the shine of my blood and my orgasm painted on him.

"Mmm, all mine," he says as he tucks his cock back into his pants, still bloody.

Then he lowers himself to my pussy and places a series of kisses across it. When he hits that one spot, my eyes roll to the back of my head. I have half a mind to ask him about what it is, but then I remember that I hate him. That he's not my handsome and gentle sex mentor who forces me to fuck for some benevolent reasons. He's a murderer, and he wanted to use my body, so he did.

He lifts his head and smiles at me, showing the fresh blood of my lost virginity all over his lips. This is how he looks in my dreams—vicious and feral but also painfully

beautiful. He stands a moment later, practically looking like a building as he towers over me. Our eyes meet, like soft and flirting kisses from old lovers, a ball gown sweeping across the dance floor.

He smiles softly for just a second, his split lip stretching from the punch I landed. The mix of our blood on his lips makes him all the more beautiful and terrible before his features turn hard, and he's just a monster again, a human one, but a monster all the same.

"Your first fuck and your first orgasm are a big deal, and someone should love on you. I would help you with the body and get you home, but you fucking shot me three times."

I lift my head off the ground. "Only once."

Blood stains his tattered shirt, but I can tell from the fact it's already clotted that it was not serious.

"You tried three times, and it's the effort that counts, Muffin. Anyone ever told you that?"

I almost want to laugh. That's not really how it works in the Little family. "No," I tell him. "I was mostly told nothing I ever did would be good enough. But if that's how you count it, I've shot you a lot of times this past year."

"You owe me," he agrees. "I'll be happy to collect."

His eyes rove over my exposed pussy. There's nothing more revealing than what he's already done to me, so while I shiver, I don't bother to waste my energy covering myself from his inspection.

“Don’t stay out here too long. The weather isn’t that warm yet.”

The concern in his voice undoes me as much as the pleasure, and I wonder if I begged him to stay would he change his mind.

“Or what?” I ask, just being stubborn for the sake of taking back a little control.

“They’re your toes, Muffin. Keep them or don’t.”

He nods to my clothes and boots lying off to the side.

“You’re leaving?” I ask, sounding a touch more disappointed than I’d like to.

“I’ll be seeing you soon,” Wolf promises before turning and jogging off. His broad back shines in the light, and I wonder how he could possibly be so attractive. The trees quickly obscure him, and I have no chance of keeping my eyes on him.

I look up at the clear blue sky. The very edges of the horizon are beginning to turn orange. I’ve been out here, trying and failing to kill him, and then losing my virginity for a very long time. A tear rolls down my cheek as the cold ground starts to sink into me, and I realize I have no choice in anything.

Just like the night before, I listen to Wolf and get off the ground before the bedrock can chill me to my bones. I put my panties and jeans back on and then tie up my boots. I search for my gun and find it a few yards away. My heart aches, and my stomach turns as I give Porter one last look.

His eyes sit open, and I’m not sure if he was like that or if they fell open when I tried to move him earlier. Either way, his death is partially my fault just like Granny’s. I brought him into my fight with Wolf, knowing what would happen, and he paid the price for it.

“I’m so sorry, James. I’ll move you tomorrow,” I tell him, but it feels like I’m lying. “I’ll figure something out.” That feels more true, but he’s too dead to care what promises I can or can’t keep.

More tears fall as I close the tailgate and get back into the truck. It’s not all my emotional turmoil this time, but the physical pain of everything my body’s been through. There’s no way I have the strength to move Porter today. I’ll be lucky if I can get this truck home with my shaking arms.

Rather than leaving him to the elements, I pull the blanket I planned to cover him with out of the flatbed and toss it over him. No need to subject him to any more indignities. I say a quick prayer over top of him, refusing to accept what a grim excuse for a funeral this is.

It’s the best I can do, and that’s all I’ve ever done. All I can keep doing is my best. I just know that sooner rather than later, it won’t be good enough, and this will all fall apart on me very soon. Wolf is not a monster; he’s not the anything, and I gave him my virginity—no, he took it, and I liked it.

“Man, I wish I had power steering,” I say to myself as I climb into the truck. My arms shake as I put the old girl in reverse, and push past the overgrowth. “You’re going to be okay. You’re just fine,” I tell myself again and again, not sure why I’m doing it. I’m not usually like this when talking to myself.

My eyes stay peeled for the Wolf, but I’m not surprised when I don’t see him. He’s been following me for a long time, and he never made himself known until now. Why now? Why lose patience after all this time?

I’m back on the road and ready for the drive to my cabin when I remember another aspect of my sexual education. I know how they breed livestock. Men come inside you, just like the stud bulls. I slide my fingers into my panties, and as far as I can tell,

there's nothing between my legs that didn't come from me other than his spit.

He didn't finish. Only me.

Why would he do that? What does he have to gain by making me feel good? Does that mean I won't get pregnant?

Would he do that more if I was his wife?

CHAPTER 27

REDLEY

My eyes are already open when the sun comes up the following morning. Despite all the chores that need doing, I just lie there as the sky turns from black to dark blue to brilliant orange. I thank a God I'm not sure exists anymore for the beauty of the world around me and curse him for all the miserable fucking pain.

As far as I know, Porter is still lying dead in my parents' driveway, and even though I'd love to go and get him, I don't have an ounce of strength to carry myself, let alone him. Maybe he'll rot out there, and I'll push the bones over the cliff one day.

I don't know what to believe anymore, but nothing good springs to mind. If my soul wasn't crushed, there's my body to contend with. Every part of me hurts. My arm muscles scream from the kickback from the pistol. My entire body is bruised from Wolf tackling me to the ground and the cops throwing me before I spent the night in jail.

My lungs complain when I try to breathe too deep, but the most noticeable effect is my stinging pussy. I place my hand down there, feeling around for the first time. I didn't even know women could feel how Wolf made me feel yesterday. Granny warned me so much about the evils of sex, but the idea never came to mind. She misled me about the Wolf, so I shouldn't be surprised.

While the sensitive skin stings, nothing feels particularly broken or torn. The bleeding stopped last night, and only when I touch my opening do I notice the injury. It's hot to

the touch, and once I get used to the pain, I spend a little time trying to figure it out for myself. I find that same sensitive spot just to realize nothing feels as good as when he did it to me. I'm not sure I'll ever reach the high he brought me to again.

I won't be his wife.

My stomach growls repeatedly. I used up a lot of my strength yesterday, and I need a good meal to set me straight, but I can't stand food. The chickens have probably laid a dozen eggs by now, but my stomach isn't sure how to handle such thorough humiliation. Being used and forced into something you didn't want is one thing, but how about being used and enjoying it beyond what you thought was possible?

Why the hell am I getting butterflies over it? The worst part isn't my virginity, though. It's the way nothing looks the same. The mountain isn't stalked by a monster and there's nothing magical, so why the hell has no one even heard of Grimm Groves? But why? Was my family keeping something from me, or did they really not know?

And Wolf? If he's just a man, then who the hell is he? I don't even know his name, and I'm not sure I want to.

I fully intend to find some answers. When I can get out of bed anyway. For now, I'm going to lie here and wonder how the hell I got everything wrong, how I believed something that so clearly wasn't true. Why did my whole family? There really is nothing like excruciating pain and moonshine to make life rough.

I seriously consider filling up the tub with hot water and salt to try to ease some of this soreness. But I don't have the strength or energy to go through the effort. Instead of bathing, I just lie there wondering about my life.

The hardest thing to think about is Granny's death and whether or not I actually hate

the Wolf for that. I understand now that he couldn't have killed my parents and brother as a little kid, and he certainly didn't kill people before he was born. So if the only person he took from me was Granny, do I need to avenge her? Was what he said true?

I look at the walls of my bedroom, the cabin her husband built for her, and admit that I hate myself to my bones for not being sure. She was so cruel to me and beat me so badly. When I look at myself in a mirror—which isn't often—all I can see are the scars covering the side of my face, the scars my own granny gave me for breaking a glass. Did she deserve to suffer for all the things she did to me? Or was all the suffering she did in life enough?

I just don't goddamn know, but the one thing I can't deny is that I don't miss her. My life has been better since she's gone. Wolf was right about that. I would pray and ask God for forgiveness or direction, but all of a sudden, it feels a lot like talking to myself like I did last night, and I'm still feeling silly for that.

Around noon, someone knocks on the door. I wish more than anything that today, of all days, I could be left alone. I'm partially terrified it's Wolf again, but something tells me he wouldn't knock, and that fear quickly passes. Hell, he doesn't even wait for permission to have sex with me. I'm sure he'd find his own way into my cabin if he wanted.

A shiver runs through me as I imagine him slipping inside and having his filthy way with me again, putting his mouth on me, but not stopping this time—"One minute," I call, pushing myself out of bed and the fantasy out of my mind.

My eyes cling to my scars when I check myself in the mirror. With thoughts of how I got them so fresh in my mind, I can't help but look. Did I deserve to have my face covered in scars for the rest of my life? Was Wolf the first person to act protectively toward me since my parents' passing?

It's hard to say. Mama and Daddy whooped me too, but they never took it as far as Granny. There's nothing that can be done about the scars and not much that can be done about the deep, dark circles under my green eyes. Sometimes I forget how light they are, how close they come to matching the leaves beginning to bud, just like Mama's. My heart clenches, wishing I could ask her for some advice.

I tie my hair back so it doesn't look like a rat's nest, but I don't have much time to make myself presentable. I pull on a flannel and a pair of soft pants, and that's the best I can do. If anyone needs me to leave this cabin today, it's not happening.

When I open the door, I find Bobby standing there with his blond hair and awkward smile. The sun burns bright behind him, and I squint for a minute before my eyes adjust. His lips are pinched, and lines of worry crease his forehead.

With his expression, I'm positively dreading whatever he's come to say.

CHAPTER 28

REDLEY

I don't like the hungry way Bobby looks at me, and since I'm no longer a virgin, I feel especially qualified to make that determination.

"Morning, Redley," he says.

It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes and tell him to get lost, but this place is too small to make enemies willy-nilly. He better watch what he says, though, because I'm one unwanted sexual advance away from killing a man.

"Hey Bobby, what can I do you for?"

"Nothing." Surprise raises the pitch of his voice, and my eyebrows push together. Why did he come to my door if he's surprised to find me? "I'm glad to see you're alright."

If he thinks I look alright, then I'm glad I look better than I feel.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I ask, putting my hand on my hip.

"Neighbors said they heard screaming down by your parents' place. No one saw anything, but I wanted to make sure you're fine."

I work very hard to control my reaction. If no one saw anything, that means they

looked. Did they find the body? Is Bobby coming here for a citizen's arrest thinking I killed the cop myself?

“That’s awfully kind of you, Bobby.” I swallow hard. “I couldn’t tell you what it was. Haven’t been down there in a couple of years now.”

His brow scrunches. “Really? Doc said you were just having some problems over that way, said you were talking real loud about some dead cop to the locals. I’m starting to worry about you. I know you’ve lost a lot, but this Wolf thing is getting out of hand. Doc is worried about you too, you know, and he’s a professional.”

Out of hand seems like a great description actually.

But I’m pissed to the teeth over his insinuation, bone-tired of him and everyone else acting like I’m crazy. Wolf is the most qualified to call me that, seeing as I shot at him, and I’m not willing to take his shit either.

If I really wanted to make an impression, I’d just bring him round back and show him where I stored Porter’s cruiser so he could see for himself I have a dead cop on my hands. Would my chickens pecking at the leather be enough for him? Though that would only serve to convince him that I’m a different type of crazy.

“Doc might be a professional, but I’m not his patient.”

I breathe through my nose before I do something rash. Bobby’s dad left his mom officially for his second wife a few years back, and now he lives with her in the city. Bobby’s wife comes from money out that way. If anyone out here had a chance at getting the cops to listen, it would be them.

I can’t afford to have Bobby pointing his finger at me. He’s too connected to people in the outside world. Hell, if it comes to it, I’ll kill him myself before I spend another

night in a jail cell. I swallow, shocked by the patterns of my own thoughts. That violence just keeps growing, and Porter dying in front of me fed it in the strangest way.

Maybe more than Doc and Bobby should be worried. I imagine Wolf's bloody lips, and for a moment, I think I'd like how I would look with a set of my own.

"There's nothing to worry about, Bobby. I wasn't down at my parents' house, and I don't have any clue what Doc's talking about. He's getting real old lately. If you ask me, it's about time he retires."

He pushes his eyebrows together as he places a hand on my doorframe, leaning into my space. I take a little step back, enough to get away from him, but it takes me out of the doorway and leaves room for him to step inside.

"His behavior isn't concerning me half as much as yours is," he says.

"It's a good thing then that you ain't got any reason to be concerning yourself with my behavior."

He lifts a hand like he's about to touch me, and I physically recoil. He doesn't get the message, and the back of his hand glides against my cheek. I put up my hand to knock his away and just manage not to slap him.

"This is ridiculous, Bobby. If I called the cops and told them I had a dead cop out here, you don't think they'd come check for themselves?" I tilt my head to the side, staring at him like he's crazy. Either he's going to admit something's wrong around here or that I'm right.

"Well..."

“I know you don’t believe in the Wolf, and you never have, but you know that’s a family legend. Do you really believe Doc over me now?” I look at him like he’s crazy, pushing all the doubt in the world into my tone.

“He’s Doc...”

“He’s an old man, and personally, I still don’t believe he’s even a doctor.”

He rolls his eyes. “Not this again.”

“You’re not going to stand there and call me the crazy one while you’re trying to say some nonsense like that, are you, Bobby? Where is this dead cop that Doc says I’ve got? You smell anything dead?”

He turns a little pink at that, and I know I’ve talked him down enough that I won’t have to worry about him for long. The mountainside theater gets intense around here, and this isn’t the first time a crazy rumor has gone around because people are bored.

“No, I guess Doc might have been mistaken. Sorry, Red.”

“Maybe he’s just bored, old, and lying. Wouldn’t be the first time someone around here told a story because they had nothing else to do.”

He nods. “I mean it. I’m sorry, Red.”

“No harm,” I answer, but the acid doesn’t leave my tone. “But listen, Bobby, I’ve got a lot to do today.” I nod back toward the cabin, hinting for him to leave.

“Yeah, me too. I’m dropping off my electric bill at the post office. Do you want me to take yours?”

I am pissed at him, and I really would tell him to get lost, but I'd much rather avoid a drive into town today, and I do need to send it.

"That's awfully kind of you." I force myself to talk a little nicer. "Let me grab it." I smile at him, some of my anger melting.

CHAPTER 29

WOLF

A car pulls up while I'm outside her cabin feeding her chickens because I know she's too tired to do it herself. I step to the side, making sure whoever it is can't see me. A chicken clucks stupidly as it walks across my feet. I kill people for sport, but I don't harm the damn thing because it's her's.

I watch as my Muffin talks to her childhood fling, the boy who stole my first kiss, and I'm filled with a familiar craving. I like to kill, and I do it well. This could end so quickly since she doesn't like me playing with my food.

I bristle, every inch of my body going tense as he steps into her cabin. She's freshly fucked by me, still smelling like my skin on hers, and he's in her intimate space. I try to hide my reaction, but my knuckles turn white as I clench my fists, and something raw inside me churns.

I walk over to the edge of the house, boots crunching against the ground, but the chickens don't tell on me, and Red doesn't notice me standing to the side, watching outside her window. The noisy little birds really do make this easy, and I lean down to scratch the brown one—that's my favorite.

Bright sunshine floods the cabin, making it quite peaceful. If it was just my Muffin standing in the center of it, it would be perfect. Bobby stares at the bloodstain, and I fill with pride. I protected her when he never even thought to, and if that scares him, then good.

Red sits down at her granny's old desk, eyes moving to the ring box. My heart jumps into my throat at the thought of her putting it on in front of him.

Bobby, I'm getting married, and his dick is so big it would put yours to shame.

She hands him a sealed envelope, and a surge of jealousy courses through me. Did she write him a letter? Why?

He takes it, but he looks nervously between her and the floor. "Are you okay, Red?" he asks. "You don't seem like yourself since Granny died."

Who the hell is he to ask her something like that? He doesn't know my Muffin from a hole in a stump, and I want to kill him just for the suggestion she might have ever been his.

"Granny died when I was sixteen, Bobby. Believe it or not, you just don't know me that well."

The pride I so often feel for her rises in me. She's so strong, so beautiful, and I'm such a filthy backstabber for all the things I've done, and there are only more to come.

"I used to," he argues with her, his face filling with a passion I'd like to cut out of him. He has a wife, so why the fuck is he worried about mine?

"Not anymore," she says, and much to my enjoyment, her irritation is starting to show.

"That might be true, but I think the old you would've cleaned up that bloodstain."

She wasn't here to clean it, you stupid fucker. She was in Pennsylvania, then New

York, then Tennessee, and finally Florida.

“It’s called a stain for a reason, Bobby. I’ve tried.”

He stares at it, and both of us know she’s lying, but he’s too much of a coward to say it.

“You’re sure you weren’t down at your old place?” he asks, hinting at some knowledge of what happened over there. Did she tell him something? He’s refusing to leave well enough alone, and he’ll regret it if he doesn’t end this now.

“I’m sure. Thanks for your help with the bill,” she says, obviously hinting for him to leave. At least she’s not passing him secret messages.

“Bobby, do you know the name of our electric company?” she asks.

He pauses first, thinking about it before answering.

“You know, I really don’t know. Does it matter?”

“No, I suppose not. Well, thanks again,” she says. Is she having trouble paying the bill? It’s the least I could do after everything.

He nods as he walks toward the front door, and she follows him out.

“Take care of yourself, Red. You can always talk to me if you feel like it,” he says as he turns toward her.

My muffin isn’t looking at him, so I know she doesn’t see him leaning in to kiss her. My hand slides into my pocket and pulls out a knife. His lips collide with hers—messy, wet, disgusting—for only a fraction of a second before she shoves him

away.

“What are you doing?” she shouts. “You’re married! What the hell?”

He groans, but he doesn’t seem too apologetic. “Come on, Red. You know what I want from you. I’ve asked before. I could pay that bill for you if you make it worth my while.”

I was just thinking the same thing, but it seems so much nastier coming from him.

“Go home to your wife,” she says.

“Just think about it, Red. I’ll pay your bills, and I’ll buy you things. You just got to give me what I want. You’re not doing well alone out here anyway, and I can’t have two wives.”

She’ll be doing perfect when she accepts my proposal.

“Thanks, but no thanks, Bobby.”

My rage calms slightly with her flat-out denial and then cools a bit more when she slams the door in his face. He walks away from my Muffin’s cabin with his miserable tail between his legs.

But when he climbs into his truck, I follow.

CHAPTER 30

REDLEY

Later that afternoon, after I've scrubbed off the sex and the slimy feeling of Bobby's lips on mine, I go outside to collect some eggs. I'm slightly worried that my chickens have been avoiding their feed since the bucket is full, but I'll worry about them later.

It's getting warmer, and I don't have the woodstove running, so I fry up some eggs on my gas range. Once I've eaten, I feel nearly human again and decide I have the strength to deal with Porter's corpse, though I'm going to need to make some adjustments to my plans.

Putting him in his car and pushing them both off the cliff together has been reduced to rolling him off a cliff on his own. We all have to go somehow. I shrug as I head out to the truck and pick my path back down the mountain. If I'm feeling up to it after I'm done, I might even hit the diesel station and buy myself a soda pop.

I use my tire tracks from yesterday to find my way to his body. It's a bit easier than the first time, but I still move slowly, not wanting to pop him and make the task that much harder on myself.

The tire tracks end abruptly about twenty feet up, and I slow to a crawl. I park about five feet from him, and as I step out of the cab, I do my very best not to look at him.

But that doesn't mean I don't see...

He's turning purple and yellow in spots, his skin and organs already decomposing beneath the sun. My stomach turns, and I think I might be sick. Studying the incline and the terrain, I carefully pick the best path to roll him since there's no way I can lift him.

The nearer cliff side is uphill. It's only about forty feet to the edge, and the drop would leave him spread across the rocks and trees and washed away in the next rain. The downhill one is quite a bit farther, maybe a half a mile, but there's a lake at the bottom where he could sink and rest peacefully.

One solid try at rolling him uphill, and I realize I really only have the one option. It will be a nicer resting spot for him, but this will take a while.

"Shit, I am so sorry, James," I tell the corpse, truly regretting the unnecessary abuse. The arrow is still sticking out of his head, and I pray the wooden edges snap off quickly since I don't have it in me to do it myself.

I'm too tired to bend over and use my arms to push him, and my legs are far stronger anyway. Feeling like a world-class villain, I use my feet to roll him over, flipping his corpse slowly but surely downhill.

"This is fucked up, even for you, Red."

For once, I don't feel like Wolf is watching me, and that alone provides a certain freedom. I've started dropping "the" and just calling him Wolf because it seems so stupid to title a human man like an inhuman beast. I roll my eyes and Porter in unison.

The day is beautiful, sunny, and hot for spring. I would normally kill for this kind of day, but today, I resent it. Sweat pouring, corpse stinking, I'm not sure how this became my life. When I used to run and play in these fields, I surely never imagined

this.

Because there are some small mercies in life, the arrow snaps off at both ends by the fifth rotation. While there's still a wooden shaft running through his brain rather than thoughts, at least he's rolling more smoothly. When did I become so terribly jaded?

As time and Porter roll on, I grow more and more irate that Wolf isn't watching me. He could help clean up the mess he goddamn made. I may be partially responsible, but Wolf shot the damn arrow through his brain.

I'm pissed off at everything and everyone, but maybe Bobby was right about one thing. The old Red would have cleaned the blood off the floor. Maybe Wolf killed the old Red too.

My breath is so short as I push, my exhaustion painful, but I owe it to Porter not to let him sit in a sun-soaked field while the birds pick him over. Maybe someday, someone will even show me the same kindness.

It feels like hours later when I find the spot I'm looking for. We're still a few feet shy when I sit on the ground next to his corpse, but I can't go any farther until I catch my breath. The scavengers are already hovering, and a few carrion birds circle above.

The stream that supplies most of the town's water runs through here, and I leave Porter behind for a moment to dip my fingers in and drink. Another cliff face sits just a few feet beyond the stream, and at the bottom rests a small but deep mountain lake.

Porter will sink to the bottom and never be seen again. He won't even affect the water quality since the lake is an outlet only, not an inlet.

I just need to get him to the right spot and push hard enough. I can do it. It's better than rotting in the sun and being eaten by the animals. I splash water on my face, hot

and needing something to make me feel like the world around me is real and not some horrible nightmare.

Just a few more pushes, I promise myself, as I return to his side and starkly ignore the damage I've done to his corpse during this trip. My heart pounds nearly out of my chest as we finally reach the edge.

I don't take anything off him, even if some of it might be valuable. It feels in poor taste when I'm already dumping his body. There's nothing left but one long drop and a sink to the bottom. I just need to give him one last hard push. I tell myself to do it four times before I can force my body to act. One last kick, and he slips over the edge.

He spins through the air as he falls, not bouncing or smearing as he would have on the other side. When he hits the water, there's an immense splash and then utter silence as he sinks.

After the ripples in the water settle, I sit down and breathe. I'm so tired I really might just curl up and sleep here. Just an hour or two of rest. What does it really matter?

As I'm staring into the forest, thinking absolutely nothing for once, my eyes focus on something strange in the distance. That's definitely still my property way over there. I know what parts of this mountain belong to me, but I've never seen this before. I think it's a cave...though a very small one.

Is that a little footpath leading to it? It looks like people have been going in and out, but it's just a split in the side of the mountain. How strange.

I stand eventually, seeing if I can get a better look, but that's not happening unless I jump off the cliff after Porter. I don't feel like a cold, wet swim, and as curious as I am, I decide that I'll find it another way, another time that doesn't involve a freezing

swim with a corpse.

The sun sits low in the sky now. Three o'clock, if I had to guess, and I'd rather die than get stuck in these woods in the dark again. So I don't take that nap I want so badly. I force myself to my feet, and then, because I deserve a little bit of pain for everything I've done, I run.

When I get back to my truck, I puke my guts up from the overexertion and absolutely nothing else.

CHAPTER 31

REDLEY

I didn't get my damn soda pop, and Penny is really low on gas, but it's been a hell of a few days.

As I pull up my drive and toward my house, screams echo, and rather than being concerned, I sigh in soul-deep frustration. I wonder if I'll hear the sound often enough that I'll eventually just stop responding. Like the little boy who cried wolf except there is a wolf, but he's just a man who enjoys killing, and maybe I just can't afford to care anymore because when the hell am I supposed to sleep?

Night has fallen, and I climb out of the truck slower than normal, even sorer than I was earlier from having dealt with Porter. It's colder than I would have expected with how warm the day was, and I regret not starting the woodstove before I left. There are a few more screams, and I leave the keys in the truck so the headlights stay on and the night isn't so dark.

I grab my shotgun out of the bed of the truck, with my eyes wanting to fall shut. I really wasn't ever planning on taking the saying "sleep when you're dead" so literally, but this mountain seems determined to deprive me of sleep until my body just stops.

Walking out into the clearing in front of the house with the gun over my shoulder, I'm as ready as I can be for a fight. The only problem is if it's Wolf, I'm not sure I want to win.

“I’m not in the mood for any more goddamn shit!” I shout, my voice comes out strained and reedy.

I don’t need to wait long for his response.

“So sorry, Muffin, that’s exactly what I’ve come to deliver,” his familiar voice greets me, and he actually has the audacity to sound apologetic.

But the next sound is a thump and a masculine groan of pain.

“Wolf,” I say. “What the hell is going on?”

Another grunt follows. “Come see for yourself, Muffin.”

“I’m too tired for games. What the hell are you doing now!” I demand as I take a few more steps toward the firepit outlined by the headlights.

The matches are still in my pocket, and I light one and drop it on top of the already assembled timber. This pile is nothing but dried out brush with a log or two at the bottom, and it goes up quick. I take a step back as the flames catch and rip a few feet high.

“Shit, Muffin, why don’t you just turn on a light? No need to start a forest fire.” That tone has a nasty little insinuation, and I think about shooting him again just for fun.

“Just got the one light, and I’m not wasting it on looking at someone ugly like you.” God, I wish that he were ugly instead of the best-looking thing I’ve ever seen.

“Hear that, Bobby? She’s not wasting it on someone ugly like you,” he taunts the man sitting at his feet. Bobby , shit, and my stomach drops. He's not being funny.

The flames settle glowing brightly and, widening my field of vision. With the help of the fire and the headlights, I find them about fifteen feet away. All six-foot-seven of Wolf leans against a tree, relaxed like he doesn't have a care in the world. Bobby kneels on the ground at his feet.

Wolf's yellow eyes gleam in the light from the fire, his hair hangs to his chin, straight and blunt. I'm sure I'm going to hell for wanting him the way I do, but fuck, he's sexy.

It takes some effort, but I pull my eyes off Wolf and give my attention to Bobby, who was here just a few hours ago. How the hell he went from kissing me and dropping off checks at the post office to this, I don't know, but I'm sure I don't envy his night.

Bobby's arms are tied behind his back, and the bandanna tied around his mouth explains why he's moaning but not speaking. There's a flash of worry for him, but also the anger from him kissing me earlier. He had no right to touch me, and even though Wolf did much worse, Bobby is by far the one I'm more upset about.

Finally, that petty violence inside me is thrilled "the Wolf" got him when he told me I was crazy all those years for believing in him at all. No, he wasn't a monster, but they certainly weren't fucking accidents either.

The light from the fire casts a red tinge as it dances over them, but the effect is worlds apart. Wolf appears even more mysterious, darker, and more delicious as the flames and shadows flirt with his evil yet playful expression.

Bobby's face is as pale as death by contrast, the pain and contortions in his expression, a horridly macabre sight. His bruised eyes search my face for help, puffy lips wrapped around the fabric, begging me to do something, but how many times did I ask him for help?

There's no such thing as the wolf, Red. You sound crazy. Doc's worried about you. His countless refusals run through my head. Even today, he tried to take advantage of me rather than be my friend. There were so many times I needed someone, anyone to believe in me, and even though things weren't as I suspected, something was still happening.

I was wrong. I wasn't crazy.

He didn't need to be such an asshole. He didn't need to act like everyone else when he was close enough to know I wasn't crazy like that. He asked me to be his damn mistress because he thinks I can't manage my life out here, just like Porter thought, not because he believed I'm insane.

How exactly are you different from the victims who came before you? The ones you didn't believe? I don't ask him, though I don't help him either.

"What the hell are you doing now, Wolf? What's he got to do with me and you?"

Bobby shrieks, like the news that I've also had dealings with the Wolf is the really frightening part. Maybe it is, for someone like him who's convinced himself I'm a hysterical woman who's better off as his mistress than on my own.

In fact, the more I think about our interaction earlier and the things he said to me, the less inclined I feel to shoot Wolf. Maybe I'll kill Bobby myself just to ruin my nemesis's power trip.

"This fucker?" He kicks Bobby again. "He doesn't have a damn thing to do with us except the fact he put his nasty lips on my wife."

"I'm not your wife, you psychopath. I shot you!"

“Barely, and let’s not worry about your little love mark right now.” He pats his shoulder. “I’ve got it all wrapped up don’t you worry.”

Love mark? I’m so angry I nearly snarl at him, hell if it was any colder tonight you’d see steam coming out of my ears.

“I’m not worried.”

“Don’t get worked up, Muffin. It will scar. You marked your territory.”

“My territory?!” I do shriek this time. “Your mounted head on my wall is going to be my territory!”

“Then actually kill me this time, Little Red. You brought a gun you can handle this time. The question is, can you shoot me?”

I lift the gun and point it at him, but I don’t put my finger on the trigger, goddammit . When did I completely lose my nerve? I square my shoulders, holding my posture hard, making it seem like I want him dead more than I want anything else, and maybe I’m just holding off so as not to spray Bobby with buckshot.

“Muffin, I see your hand.” His voice is a sickly sweet singsong, and I wish I could blow his brains out. “You don’t have any plans to shoot me.”

CHAPTER 32

REDLEY

Goddammit, he's right.

“What does Bobby have to do with whatever you and I keep doing? If you saw that he kissed me, you saw that I turned him down.” Yeah, I'm changing the subject, but it's a valid question all the same.

“What you and I keep doing is called flirting, maybe even courting.” He sifts through options, and I'm annoyed as much as I'm flattered. “And I know you turned him down. That's why he's on his knees in front of me instead of you.”

I picture myself in that very position, and heat travels down my spine. Such a shame Bobby has to pay for this when that sounds so appealing.

“Leave Bobby out of this, and I'll get on my knees for you willingly,” I say, not sure I'm offering for his sake or my own.

“That is very fucking tempting, actually, but I already told you no one gets to touch you and live.” His words soothe something deep inside, like an old lullaby hummed just right.

“Come on, Wolf, it was one damn kiss. He doesn't deserve to die for that.”

Bobby starts to wail at the mention of his own murder, and I can't say I blame him,

but I do wish he would shut up.

“Was I imagining it when he offered to pay one damn bill for access to your pussy earlier?” he asks.

Rather than answer, a strangled sound leaves my throat. How dare he? “You’re still following me?”

“Why would I stop one of my favorite hobbies, Red? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“One of your favorite hobbies is watching me?” My outrage and flattery mix a little too well.

“And it’s a good thing too, or I wouldn’t have seen this pathetic excuse of a man kissing what belongs to me,” he grits through his teeth.

“What exactly do you believe belongs to you? Because I don’t belong to anyone,” I speak very slowly, making sure he gets it through his thick skull.

He turns his head, and the light is enough to see his smile. “Who do you think about all day, every day, Redley? Who have you spent the past four years trying to forget about, chasing, pursuing? Who did you try to kill already and fail?”

“You’re wrong,” I say, but I’m fighting a losing battle, and he knows it.

“If you don’t belong to me, you better pull that trigger right now because it’s the only way I’m going to let you go, but I better warn you. If there is hell, I’ll find you there too.”

I— can’t do it.

“You think I’m yours, and I should burn in hell for you? You have a lot of goddamn nerve,” I say.

“I think when you’re soulmates, your souls end up together, and there’s no way I’m going to heaven. I’m sorry, baby, I’ve killed too many decent people for that.”

My cheeks warm, and there’s this stupid, lonely part of me that’s truly flattered by what he’s saying, and then the other part that’s sick and terrified.

I’ve been alone too long, unloved for spans of time that have made me practically feral. I shouldn’t be susceptible to him, but hasn’t that been the problem since I was nearly sixteen? I let him stay, and I let him sleep in my bed. I still haven’t put my finger on the trigger, and I know if I don’t, he’ll keep forcing me into whatever he wants.

“You are not my soulmate,” I say, but even I’m not so sure of it right at the moment, with my virginity belonging to him and my stomach filling with butterflies. Have I thought of anything but him these past four years?

No.

“I’m not?” he asks, bending over and grabbing Bobby by the collar to lift him off the ground.

He stumbles but manages to get his feet beneath him. “Is this your soulmate, then? This disloyal motherfucker who put his grimy lips all over you with his wife waiting for him at home?” His voice drops so low it reminds me of the night in my room after Granny beat me.

His rage was similar then, palpable, and that was about someone touching me too. I can’t let myself be flattered by this. Bobby shakes and stares at me, his eyes begging

for help.

“Wolf, just put him down. He’s got a wife, and we don’t need to make her a widow.”

“I would be making her a widow, not we,” he corrects.

“You know as well as I do that I’m partially responsible for everything you do since I don’t have the balls to kill you.”

“And why don’t you have the balls to kill me?” He smiles wickedly.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, Muffin, whatever you say,” he agrees, but I can tell from his tone I’m not going to like the results of my actions.

I don’t see what’s in his hand, but the wet schluck as the blade digs into Bobby’s side is unmistakable. He screams into the fabric, and I know once again I’m going to have someone at my door asking about the sounds people heard coming from my property, but this time, it definitely won’t be Bobby showing up to ask.

I scream too, but only for a second before I get control of myself. Wolf’s arm swings again and again, the wet cutting sound repeats as Bobby’s screams and gurgles grow fainter. He smiles as he kills him, wraps an arm around his body to better feel the violence he’s committing. I’m sick, fascinated, unable to turn away. What the hell happened to him to make killing normal, to make him enjoy it?

Is some sick part of me enjoying this too? At least enough not to look away.

He liked what he did to my granny. I’m sure of that now as I watch him, much more so than I was when he told me himself. He nauseates me, but it also makes me

desperate to understand. To poke around and ask questions until I turn over the right rock and find the answer to what makes this man Wolf. There are still so many unanswered questions for me. Hell, this one truth, that he's human, opened up an entire lifetime of misconceptions, and I'm still not sure how to fix that, but I want to know what makes him tick.

Is he killing Bobby right now because he likes the feeling of blood on his hands or because some part of him really cares for me? Is he actually angry that he touched me?

And why the hell am I so desperate for this insane, murderous bastard to have some real feeling and softness for me?

Bobby is dead, and Wolf seems to have tired of stabbing him.

Wolf stares at me as he drops Bobby's body to the ground, and the knife goes too. I'm glad, at least, that he doesn't seem to be planning to use that on me, but I don't like the way he's approaching me either.

He comes into the headlights of the truck, and the view of him is fully revealed. He's gorgeous, massive, and covered in the lifeblood that just poured out of Bobby.

The stains are nearly black in the harsh light, and he looks more like a devil than he ever has. He stands in front of me and waits only half a second before slapping the shotgun off my shoulder with one bloodied hand and wrapping the other around my jaw. I just manage to hang onto the gun, though it's not much of a deterrent when I can barely grip it.

He forcefully tips my chin up so I have to face him. His features are filled with such an intense excitement it turns me on, and next, my stomach turns. I don't want him, but tell that to the faint tingling in my pussy that reminds me my body hasn't

forgotten all the delicious things he can make me feel.

“You’re mine, Redley. Now, how many people are going to have to die before you accept it?”

CHAPTER 33

REDLEY

His yellow eyes bore into mine, his fingers tighten.

“Just you,” I say. “Kill yourself, and I’ll believe you.” Despite speaking the words even I know I don’t mean it.

“Kill me yourself, and I’ll believe you want me dead. You’ve got a gun. One you can handle even. So why don’t you use it?”

He’s had an attitude all night, and a strange thought occurs to me. Is he actually upset that Bobby touched me? Not just furiously, murderously angry another boy played with his toy, but hurt? The glow from my headlights makes him look especially sinister. Like an old horror movie, he’s covered in blood with the steam rising all around us.

“I regret what I did,” he says.

I don’t get excited. He can’t mean the murder. He enjoys killing too much for something like that. He’s stumped me.

“What do you regret, Wolf? Is that what I should even call you?” I ask, letting that anxiety free.

“It’s my name.” He smiles, flashing me his sharp teeth.

I don't believe him, but I'll play along. "Fine, Wolf. What do you regret?" He stares into my eyes. Our moment of connection is too raw and real, and I can't stand that we keep doing this next to corpses.

"I should've brought you home and taken care of you after I took your virginity earlier."

His words stun me. Of all his regrets, that's not what I expected. "I thought you said I didn't deserve it because I shot at you." This strange blossom of hope opens inside me. He's shown me brief flashes of the tenderness I felt when he removed the glass, but I'm desperate to feel that cherished again.

"You don't deserve it, but it's not about what you deserve so much as it is doing what I believe is right."

"What you believe is right?" I scoff at the idea that he has any kind of morality. "You killed a kid a few days ago and a cop yesterday, if you haven't forgotten, and what about Bobby?" I gesture to the corpse.

"My morals being different from yours doesn't mean I don't have them, and I regret leaving you to take care of yourself. I'm sorry, Muffin, truly."

He sounds so sincere that I'm starting to regret the gun in my hands just like he regrets his cold actions. How the hell did things become complicated when they used to be so simple? Why the hell can't things be as simple as good and evil and right and wrong, or am I the problem? Am I so twisted that I can't see the difference anymore?

"I don't believe you."

"Put the gun down, and let me convince you."

The weapon shakes in my hand. With him pressed against me, he's all I smell, and now that I'm intimately familiar with how good it feels to be covered in his sweat and pheromones, I realize there's real power in his proximity. That hand on my chin tethers me to the world beneath me.

"How would you do that?" I ask.

"By doing what I should have done with you this morning."

The offer is far more tempting than I want it to be, and I turn it over long enough to make him daring. He reaches for the gun, gripping the barrel and twisting, forcing me to release my hold or break a wrist. He tosses it aside, but no more violence follows.

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me so damn tenderly I melt from head to toe. I'm exhausted, emotionally destroyed, trying to adjust my life, and I couldn't be more vulnerable than I am at this moment. So just like a wolf, he takes full advantage of that.

He lifts me, cradling my body against his chest. I'm so damn tired I don't have any choice but to go limp and enjoy the ride. He's covered in Bobby's blood, but even finding horror in that would take energy I don't have.

"You've had a rough day, didn't you, baby?" he coos into my hair, and I only just have the self-respect not to nod into his chest. "Let Wolf take care of everything for you."

He carries me back to the cottage, and despite the fact I locked it earlier, it opens easily under his hand. He must have already been inside today and left it open for himself. I know it's an invasion, but I'm too tired to be mad. I'm even less mad when I realize he lit the woodstove I regretted not starting myself. My kerosene lamps burn along with a few candles that most certainly aren't mine.

“You did all this?” I ask.

“I wanted you to be comfortable,” he answers like it was nothing, and maybe it wasn’t, but then why am I about to cry?

“Shh, Muffin, it’s okay. I’m here now.”

That’s not why I’m crying. It’s—I don’t even know anymore...

He carries me deeper into the cabin, and I imagine we’re headed toward my bedroom, but instead, he brings me to the bathroom. There’s a toilet with a rudimentary septic system and a metal tub, so it’s never been anything fancy. More flickering candles are set around, and thick steam rises off the sweet-smelling water.

“You didn’t do this,” I insist.

“Who did, then? I don’t suppose you believe in fairies too.”

I’m surprised I have the energy to blush, but my cheeks burn. I don’t say anything else as he carefully places me on my feet before checking the temperature of the water.

“It’s still a little hot,” he tells me as if I’m going to wait.

I only scrubbed myself with a bucket and a rag earlier. I still haven’t bathed since the morning before the damn night in the police station. I’ve touched corpses; I’ve lost my virginity. He could boil my skin off, and I still wouldn’t be clean enough. Walking over to the edge of the tub, I dip my fingers in and feel for myself. The water is hot but not too hot for the few days I’ve had. It must’ve taken him a long time to boil this water. Why waste it? Why do this for me?

Maybe I should have some reluctance. It's not like we have a long-standing relationship where I can trust him with my nudity. I'm not his wife despite that ring and his claims. I have no intentions of accepting his proposal, but God, I think this is the best thing I've ever seen in my life, and I see no issue in stripping naked right in front of him.

A low, growl catches in the back of his throat as I remove my shirt and bra. Then a low hiss as I peel off my pants and panties as one. He seems so genuinely thrilled by an opportunity to see me naked that I blush all over. Even the tops of my tits turn pink.

“You're so pretty it hurts, Muffin.”

My eyes instinctively drop to his pants. The blood covering him is less obvious in the low light from the candles. The size of his cock, however, isn't diminished by the low lighting. I don't know that much about penises, but I expect it must hurt all hard and pressed up against the denim. I find myself wanting to take it out and relieve it.

Instead of doing something crazy that I'll definitely regret, I climb into the water and enjoy the burn over every inch of my skin. The soothing heat reveals a weakness that I didn't even realize I had. There is absolutely nothing left of my strength. I'm fully at the Wolf's mercy, and God, I think I like it. I think this is the most wonderful thing anyone has ever done for me.

My thoughts aren't clear; they're clouded by a long-standing neglect for my needs, floating in a pool of warmth. I let my arms rise on the water, and my eyes fall closed.

“Is this all you have for your hair?” he asks as he comes to kneel at the back of the tub behind me. I shouldn't leave him at my back with my eyes closed, but what's the difference between this and him stalking me through the night?

“Yeah, why?”

“You deserve better. I’ll get you better,” he promises, and his fingers dig into my hair, massaging bar soap into the lengths.

“This seems fine to me,” I answer as he massages my scalp. And the word is a cruel understatement to one of the greatest experiences of my life.

His fingers are strong, and they move from my scalp to my shoulders, rubbing the muscles in a way that’s almost as pleasurable as the other things we’ve done.

“Oh God, oh God,” I whine as he picks out one muscle in particular.

“You’re not this tense over me, are you, Muffin?”

“I’m tense over a lot of things.” The truth about what actually happened to my parents and brother is not the least of them. I don’t want to ask right now, though. For once in my life, I just want to enjoy feeling good. It won’t last. Nothing ever does.

“Let me make it better. Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“You can’t fix my problems when you are my problems,” I tell him with my eyes still closed and my hair sudsy.

“I can make it feel better, and trust me, Red, that’s what really counts.”

I don’t trust him. That would be stupid.

“Tip your head back,” he says.

Maybe I do trust him a little bit because I don’t think he’s going to drown me or push

me under like Granny would sometimes to make sure I was getting clean enough. I slip deeper into the water, and he carefully rinses out the soap, never shoving me below the surface.

“I can’t even imagine what feeling better would be like. I can’t remember ever being anything but angry and in pain.”

Memories of living in this house with Granny after my parents and brother died fill my head. Granny stretched out on the couch, drunk again, thinking I could have a little freedom while she slept it off...

“Good thing you don’t have to imagine anything. The Big Bad Wolf is here to ruin everything and show you the world.” His words cut off the memory before it turns uglier.

“This isn’t the world, Wolf. This is a tiny bathroom in a shitty cabin.” But my tone lacks my usual negativity with my muscles melting pleasurably into oblivion, his thumbs digging into spots in my shoulders that I didn’t know existed.

Why is it that he is the only person who has ever done these things for me? Why does it make me so stupidly soft for him?

“Let me show you how much better they both are with me inside them.”

CHAPTER 34

REDLEY

I already see it, goddammit . Don't tell me he has more to offer. I'm supposed to hate him, but if he keeps it up, I'll have very different feelings for him soon.

"Scoot forward and let me in behind you," he says.

There's no point in arguing, but I really don't have the strength to do as he asked either.

"Get in yourself if you really want to." It's his fault my body is so heavy. I can barely move.

"Watch your mouth before I fill it." My lips part, and my pussy twinges.

I may no longer be a virgin, but I'm not experienced, and I've certainly never done that . He stops rubbing my shoulders, and I growl in frustration. My eyes stay closed, but soft thuds mark his clothes hitting the floor as he strips. The basin is really too small for us both, but that doesn't stop him from squishing in behind me.

My body is about a third of the size of his, maybe even less, and I fit between his powerful thighs. I don't relax right away, tense with the intimacy of the position and his naked body at my back, but he pulls me against his wet chest, and I relax into what is now cool skin compared to the hot water.

“This is comfortable to you?” he asks. “I’m burning my dick off.”

“Yeah, it’s good,” I answer, ignoring his dick and how much I want more of it. His hands move over my body, soaping as he goes, and I struggle not to moan. I don’t want him to know just how good it feels when he touches me like this. I’m just insane from sleep deprivation, I tell myself. He skates soap across every inch of me, saving my pussy for last. He’s so gentle as he cleans me, the slightly swollen flash stinging with his touch, but he doesn’t put the soap there. I hiss slightly, and he shushes me.

“It’s okay, Muffin. Be good for me.”

Being good for him means lying still and letting him continue making everything feel amazing, so that’s what I do. His cock hardens at my back, and while it makes me wet and hungry for another round, I don’t even rub against it. I’m too relaxed. Have I ever relaxed before? Is this why other people aren’t so miserable?

His one hand finds my breast, and the other slips down, this time not to soothe my pussy, but to play with it. His fingers touch that spot, and I don’t really understand why it feels a million times better when he does it than the one time I tried, but I don’t argue with that either. My hips sway, and it would take more effort to keep them still than to allow them to respond to him.

“This is the prettiest pussy,” he tells me. His lips touch my ear, my neck. “You’re so lovely, Muffin. Thank you for having your first orgasm on my dick.”

I moan as his fingers pick up their circular pattern, drawing the pleasure out until my hips are shaking between laps. He reaches down slightly farther and fits one finger inside my sore opening. I whine as he does it, not sure that the stimulation is worth the pain. He makes a humming sound as he slips in deeper, finding another place inside me that feels unbelievable, though entirely different. I recognize the pleasure that pushed me over the edge on his cock.

The soreness fades to the pleasure of his fingers stroking me. There's a building sensation deep inside, and despite the pain of losing my virginity so recently, I find myself desperate for him to take me again. Hell, I bet it wouldn't even hurt much in this soothing hot water. He could spread me out how he liked and fuck me right now, but I don't ask him. There are still some shreds of my self-respect left, aren't there? Somewhere deeper than his cock, maybe?

Tears prick my eyes as he prepares to put me out of my misery. One hand spreads me while the other holds him steady, and he enters me. My guilt overwhelms my sense of peace. He's giving me exactly what I want, and it shouldn't feel like hot, sweet, relief. It should feel like a betrayal. He may not have killed my family, but he knows who did. He killed Granny. I shouldn't be doing this willingly.

He goes slow enough, but it's still a snug fit as he pulls me tight on top of his lap. Everything about it is gentle, his hands, the way he nudges forward, but it burns. He's so big that the stretch is absurd, and with the bathwater for a little additional lubrication, he's bolder about shoving himself deeper. A minute later, I've taken all of him, and I'm seated flat against him.

My thighs lie against his. His balls press against my soft bits. He's so large inside me. There's an uncomfortable sensation in my stomach like he's moving my guts around. Every inch of me is touching part of him, and the intimacy of the position unnerves me. He spends a moment seated inside me before he wraps a hand around my throat. A spark of fear shoots through me. My pussy clenches tightly around him.

Instead of choking me to death, he holds me with a firm possessive hand. I'm not sure if it's my exhaustion, the sex, or his fingers, but I feel like I might pass out. He's everywhere around me and everything inside me.

"Have you thought about my proposal?" he asks, and God, he's making me feel so incredible I have no chance of lying to him.

“More than the last time you asked,” I admit.

His fingers flex, but it only adds to the pleasure.

“You don’t have much time. I won’t wait forever,” he promises.

“This is waiting?” From everything I’ve heard about saving yourself until marriage, he’s thoroughly spoiled me.

“I could have been inside you the first day you came home last year, but you would have hated me for it. I’ve been so patient I might qualify for sainthood.” His fingers flex on the column of my throat, and I think he’s enjoying himself as a killer as well as a man.

“I hate you now ,” I argue, but I moan as I say it, and neither of us believes me, not really.

“Sure you do.”

He grabs my hips, firm but gentle, and uses the buoyancy to bounce me up and down on his cock with no effort. I moan as he works me over him, and I know I’ll hate myself for this later, but right now, I want it so bad. My hands grip the edge of the tub as my pleasure builds, and I’m so close to my second ever sexual release. Wolf is the only person to ever give this to me, and I can’t help that I’ve become partially addicted.

A few more times on his dick and I might not be able to kick it.

He reaches around, fingers on that spot I like so much, and rubs until I’m moaning so loud I’m screaming. My pussy pulses around his cock, and his fingers play me like a damn fiddle. This orgasm is so much harder than the first time, a tear of

overstimulation trails down my cheek.

“Please, mercy,” I whine as he keeps fucking and his finger keeps moving.

“Sorry, Muffin. Not this time. I need to come. Hang on tight.”

I squeeze the edge as he thrusts harder, and I whine. “Oh my God.” I’ve never felt anything like this, never imagined it either.

“You’re going to call me Wolf while I come.”

He thrusts even harder, the rhythm punishing, painful. He hits something deep inside me that is so intense it’s very nearly agonizing. He growls behind me as he fucks, taking everything he wants from me.

“I’m about to come. Say it.”

When I don’t immediately respond, he grips my chin from behind. “Say it.”

“Wolf.”

“Again.”

“Wolf.”

He makes the most beautiful sound as he comes, deep and animalistic, but full of a pleasure that compliments my body. The heat fills my insides and soothes the ragged feeling and stinging left by his penetration. I’m not trying to make a baby, but his cum feels right inside me.

“What if you get me pregnant, Wolf?” I ask, voicing my fears for him to soothe like

everything else.

“You’re my wife, Muffin. I’m fine with that.”

I want to complain, but you really can’t argue with crazy, and I’m too tired to try. Maybe there’s part of me that even likes it. I float on top of him as he thrusts a few more times and then slowly slides out of me. He washes his cum clean, and though he’s not trying to make me jump, I do all the same.

“I want to go to bed,” I tell him, feeling like he’s taking his sweet time when I’m so exhausted I’m disconnected from my body.

“Okay. I can make that happen,” he agrees.

He climbs out of the tub first and grabs a few towels that are most certainly not mine. He pulls me out next and then wraps both around me. They are so big and soft, so fluffy I feel like a baby animal or something. He leaves himself dripping wet and rubs me all over to make sure that I’m dry.

Wolf scoops me into his arms and takes me directly to my bedroom. He’s been watching me for so long, it’s no surprise he knows I never switched to the big room. He lays me down in bed, still naked, and wraps me in my blanket. The second I’m warm and cozy, my eyes are already falling shut. My exhaustion is a physical pain, and I can’t hold on any longer.

My eyes have already closed when he says, “I’ll take care of Bobby before I go. Sorry about making you move the cop’s body, Muffin. Think about wearing that ring soon, huh? I’m not going to stay patient much longer.”

I’m not sure I want to live without this either.

CHAPTER 35

REDLEY

One week has passed since Wolf killed the only cop willing to help me.

Six days since Wolf took my virginity beside his dead body.

Five days since I rolled him off a cliff, watched Bobby die, and willingly got in that tub with Wolf after everything he's done.

Four days since I realized I still don't know who killed my parents, and I was too distracted to find out.

How many more until I can face myself in the mirror?

I wish Granny was here to give me the beating I most certainly deserve. Wolf's gentleness, his insistence, the way he made me feel. If I don't do something soon, he's going to win. I haven't seen him once since the tub, but I've felt him watching here or there.

He's playing with me again, knowing that after something so intimate, his absence makes me think harder than anything else. So that's what I've been doing, thinking about whatever the hell is actually going on, on this mountain, and talking to my chickens about their treatment of the cop cruiser I am still living with. He took care of Bobby's body, but not that.

Leaving me alone was a poor choice because that's when I'm most dangerous. When Wolf is near me, I'm too stupid to think straight. I did a little research on day three. Porter didn't get a chance to ask many questions in the course of his very short investigation, but he did ask me one that not even Bobby could answer.

“Who runs the electric lines out here?”

I've never made friends with Peter Jones, but I haven't needed to owe him in years, so when I showed up at the diesel station just outside of Grimm Groves and asked him, he thought it was a strange question, but he answered.

“Walden Power, just like everyone else in a five-hundred-mile radius. How hard have you been hitting the shine, Red?”

The rumors of me being a crazy drunk are starting to wear on me, and I often wonder why not just give in to it when I've got gallons of moonshine and nothing worth living for anyway. But I haven't even had a sip in weeks. I've survived on pure spite for this long. Why stop now?

It took a couple of hours of driving, but I finally pull the truck into a parking space outside a building. The huge industrial complex only has one sign, really, but it points the way to the administration office of Walden Power, just like everyone else .

When I open the door, a woman in her forties with curly blond hair looks up at me from her phone call and holds up a finger. I smile and then walk around the office while I wait, looking at the pamphlets for rates and coverage areas. All the towns in their part of West Virginia are written in full on the map, but there's nothing right where Grimm Groves should be.

I look over at the woman and wonder if I'm not bringing her into some kind of awful trouble like Porter, but I'm not bringing her out to the mountain like a pig to the

slaughter. She probably won't wind up dead as a result of me showing up here, but the thought crosses my mind as I see the picture on her desk with her husband and children.

"Miss, I can help you now," she says as she places down the phone.

I pull out my own marked and weathered map as I walk up to her desk, unfolding it in front of her as evidence. "I live in a town called Grimm Groves, and I've been paying my electric bill to cash for a long time now. I wanted to stop doing that in case the letters get stolen. Can you verify for me that you hold my account and what the number might be?"

She blinks at me a couple of times. "What state do you live in, Honey?"

"West Virginia," I answer.

"Wait, you're saying there's a town in West Virginia named Grimm Groves? I don't think so. I've lived here all my life and never heard of it."

I take a deep breath and remind myself that of all the people who might be in on whatever is going on, it's not her.

"Is there anything you can do to help me?" I'm not above begging, and I know it. "Can you even look?"

"I don't have to because I know all the areas we service. I'm sorry, we don't send power out that way. I'm not sure how I can help you because you're just not one of our customers."

My hands shake around the map. So much has happened since I stood in front of Porter in a similar position, and I just don't have it in me to pretend I'm strong

anymore.

“I need this,” I say. “I need to know what’s happening.”

She looks confused. “If the power keeps coming, why don’t you keep paying your bill?”

“I don’t know who I’m paying.”

She shrugs, but it’s not rude, only clueless. “If you move into our service area, we’ll be happy to have you.”

Her look is so strongly pitying it’s like a smack in the face. I’ve never gotten help before, and I don’t need it now. What I need is the truth, and someone is going to give it to me.

“Can you show me your service map, the current one, not the big one on the wall?”

She’s getting frustrated with me but trying her best to be kind. She sighs as she rolls her chair back to make some space and pulls her own off the desk. Hers shows the entire state of West Virginia and a few chunks of surrounding states they cover as well—far more than what’s on the wall. She places it on the counter in front of me.

“You can look for yourself. The red spots aren’t covered by us.”

My mountain isn’t the only red cross-hatched section on the map, but I know the area well enough to know that the rest of these places aren’t habitable. As far as I know, my mountain is the only place under the red with a good number of residents, many of whom have power.

None of this makes sense.

“So who covers this mountain?” I ask, pointing at Grimm Groves. “Is it a special deal or something?”

She looks for a long minute, furrowing her eyebrows.

“No one, dear. That's a dead zone . No one lives out that way.”

“That’s Grimm Groves,” I insist. “And I have electricity in my cabin, and I pay my bill. So whose customer am I?”

Her expression shifts to one I know well. She’s shutting down, deciding not to listen to the crazy lady. I’m not going to get much more out of her now.

“Dear, I don’t know what to tell you or how to help you, but I’m a very busy woman, and I just don’t have time for this.”

My jaw clenches even though I knew this was where we were headed. “Fine, thanks anyway,” I say, turning to leave.

“You have a good day, and stay safe.” Her well-wish is another dig at my sanity, and I consider showing her my rudest finger.

“Lunch is here, Mary,” a tall brunette says as she enters the room.

“Oh great. Let’s shut her down a few minutes early.” Mary’s tone changes completely now that she’s speaking to someone she wants to. She stands, preparing to eat lunch somewhere else, and I watch in the reflection of the glass door.

I think a few very unkind thoughts before I realize what this is. The file room sits directly next to the secretary's desk. I spotted it when I first walked in, and that’s what I need, the records. Someone is serving power out to Grimm Groves.

My rage and disappointment give way to opportunity. Go to lunch, Mary. I'll figure things out for myself, like usual.

CHAPTER 36

REDLEY

I walk out the door and back toward my truck, putting on the show they need to feel comfortable leaving the office unattended. I walk a lap around the parking lot, and by the time I'm back, the desk sits empty.

A little sign says "Back in thirty." That's less time than I was hoping for, especially since I'm not sure exactly what I'm looking for, but it will have to do. The door her friend came through seems to lead deeper into the building, and with the glass covered, I don't have any way to tell if someone is coming. The upshot is they can't see me either.

I grab the doorknob, anxiety-shaken fingers slicked with sweat, but it doesn't budge. Locked.

"Goddammit," I whisper as I spin, looking for another option.

Voices carry down the hall, muffled by the door, from people sitting in their various offices just on the other side. The two women are probably sitting in one of them. Even with the secretary's post empty, I'll be noticed soon if I just try to brute force my way in.

As quietly as possible, I sit behind her desk and start rifling through her drawers in search of the keys. Every move I make is louder than I want it to be, each slam and jingle threatening to expose me. Every second, I'm afraid one of them will come

back, and I'll permanently lose my opportunity. If they catch me, I'm going to wind up with my picture on the wall.

A key ring rests in the bottom drawer, but there are so many, and I have twenty minutes at best. Flipping through keys by color and shape, I run back to the closet. The first one won't get past the keyhole, the next two fit but won't turn, and it's not until the fifth that the handle gives and the door opens.

Stale air and old paper smell pour out of the room, reminding me of the library in the city I visited once when I was young. So many cabinets line the space that there's only a narrow alley to walk through. I swallow my dread. There are a lot more people out this way than I realized.

I open the first cabinet, expecting to have to search each one and pray, but much to my surprise, they're not alphabetized. They're sorted by zip code first, then address, then name. That's interesting. I take a moment to think about what I might be looking for. Grimm Groves's zip code is the obvious choice since we get mail.

I open the first cabinet, finding I am quite a few digits off where I need to be. Running down the line, I open cabinets until I'm close, but when I get to the point where Grimm Groves should be, I realize something: our zip code is missing the final number. It's not real either.

I pull out my map with all my x's and thank my seldom lucky stars that there's a lot of information on it both printed and added by me. The local zip codes are listed beside their town, the entries for Grimm Groves written in by me, like the mountain is unclaimed land. I find the five zip codes that directly surround the mountain, then find their respective files inside the drawers.

I'm running out of time, and with so many files to check, I can't even be sure I'm not missing something. My one saving grace is that very few people live in the area, and

their files are inside three drawers. There are only maybe two hundred customers. That wouldn't be so bad if I had time, but I don't, and I don't think I'll be able to break in later tonight when the door is locked and there might be an alarm set.

My hands shake as I start to look more carefully. The one town is just lots of small houses and residences, all the folders are thin, so I quickly pass them over. By the time I get to the second town, I realize the thicker the folder is, the heavier the usage and the more detailed the bills.

One file here has at least three times as big as the second largest, so I grab that, hoping it has something for me. Knowing my luck, it's probably a grocery store. My hands shake as I pull it out. It's got so many papers inside I can barely hold it in one hand.

I sit on the floor and lay it flat, flipping to the oldest and newest bills. This is one of the first customers of the electric company even before it was commonplace to have power in your home. Their most recent bill was over a thousand dollars.

My eyes nearly bug out of my head, and my mouth falls open. That's an insane amount of money, given my bill is usually about five dollars for three months.

There's no name on the account, just an address, on a mountain nearby to my own. The numbers on this bill are astronomical, far greater than any of the others I've seen tonight. I find the general area of the property on my map. Whoever it is lives on a mountain so close to ours that I can clearly see how they might run their own lines out to us, but why?

Who the hell are you? And how did this happen?

As I'm reading, voices and footsteps echo down the hall, telling me I'm out of time. There's no window in this closet, and I'm not sure how the hell I'm going to get past

them, but I can't leave here with nothing.

I take the information I need in the form of the most recent bill, fold it up, and stuff it in my pocket alongside the map. Very carefully, I slip the folder back into the drawer, hoping they won't give whoever this is some advanced warning. One problem at a time, and getting out of here will be thorny enough.

I listen carefully, waiting for them to pass. The one woman wasn't working in this area, so she's likely to go back to her own department soon, but I don't know for sure if she's left or not. They've been quiet for a minute now.

When I'm sure I haven't heard anything, I decide to crack the door and see if I can make a break for it. Just as I'm about to grab the knob, the door opens on its own, and I have to step back to avoid getting hit. The secretary blinks at me in shock as her suspicions about me being crazy are confirmed right before her eyes.

I'm tempted to yell at her that I'm not insane. I am just stealing, but yelling about being sane doesn't usually convince anyone, and I don't think theft will help my case either.

The urge to punch her in the mouth and run overwhelms me. Her head can't be anywhere near as hard as Wolf's, and she's wasted enough of my time, but I recognize that these weird, violent impulses I keep having aren't normal or appropriate. I take a deep breath, and rather than hit her, I charge her. She scurries out of the way, but she's not fast enough, and my shoulder knocks hers harder than it needs to as I shove past.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she shouts. "This is private property! I'm calling the police!"

I cackle as I run, feeling like an old-school outlaw. Her threat means less than nothing

with my history. I'd pay good money to see a lawman do his job without wanting anything other than his paycheck in return.

"Good luck with that, honey!" I throw her endearment back at her as I run as hard and fast as I can to the truck. If she does call the cops, she does it behind me.

I run into the parking lot with a big stupid smile on my face. Employees heading back from lunch give me sideways glances as I hop in, but they don't know I'm running 'cause I stole from them. The key slides in, and I start the engine, cursing Penny for not waking up a little faster. A second later, she's growling and in gear, and we peel out of there with gravel and dust flying behind us.

The old girl wheezes as she moves as fast as she can, but even Penny likes to play getaway sometimes. The sun floats high in the sky like it's encouraging me. I think I've finally got something this time. I'm trying to decide whether I should go home and make a plan or head straight to this address. I've already got the shotgun in the cab beside me. I don't need much else.

I'm not thinking about Wolf for once or why my family keeps dying. I'm worried about why the hell no one knows Grimm Groves exists. Something even nastier is going on here. It centers around the Littles, but I don't know why. I'm running over what I'm going to say when I get to whoever's been taking my money all these years.

About ten minutes later, lights and sirens grab my attention. I hold my breath, hoping they pass, but no dice. Goddammit, I almost forgot the cops aren't a story like the Wolf. They actually respond in some places. I guess she called them.

"I wouldn't follow me into Wolf territory, boys," I taunt them in my rearview and hit the gas a little bit harder. "He doesn't like it when livestock touch me."

It doesn't do much. This old girl tops out at sixty-five. Adrenaline shoots through my

veins, and I'm excited like when I used to chase Wolf through the woods. I might not have had the heart to beat Wolf, but I don't share that weakness for them.

I'm not sure what's wrong with me exactly, but I'm starting to think it's going to get me in serious trouble one of these days—if not today.

They get closer; only a few feet separates us, and a vicious smile curls my mouth as my plan forms. Wolf says there's nothing I can do to get the cops out to Grimm Groves. That's fine. If he's right, I can use that to my advantage. I'm untouchable, right?

Penny is built like a tank, and that tailgate is like a radiator-height battering ram. Shortly after I replaced the engine while I was still living in the outside world, a woman rear-ended me at a supermarket, and her car did not live to tell the tale.

I slap the wheel. "Sorry, babygirl, I'll fix your paint job if you need it."

The officer is tight on my tail now, cocky thinking he's got me where he wants me. I slam on the brakes. He tries to stop too, but it's too late, and he rear-ends me. The metal crunches, his tires squeal as he's pushed off course, and he careens into the ditch.

I watch the bounce in his suspension as he rolls off course, but not his final stop, and I hope he didn't hurt himself too badly, unless he's one of the cops who turned me away.

My muscles shake from the adrenaline and the impact, and I don't pause to check the damage, or I'll lose my lead. Pressing the gas as hard as I can, I carry on. I'm only about two hours from home, and apparently once I get there, no one will touch me.

When I look in my rearview a moment later, the road is empty behind me.

CHAPTER 37

WOLF

Despite being twenty-two years old and standing at six-foot-seven, my father has brought me into his office to lecture me like a child.

He stares at me from his seat behind his desk. His blond hair and skin are far fairer than mine, but his yellow eyes match my own. They're a gift from the original "Wolf," my great-great-grandfather who first sold the Little family that story after he betrayed his best friend Lester Little.

Old Netta Little can't be blamed, though. It's easy to convince a grieving woman of something when she trusts you, when there's proof—fabricated proof, but still, the Wolf is born.

"Has she accepted your proposal yet?" he asks.

"Not yet, but she will," I tell him, and I'm sure of that. I've been circling her too long and know her too well for any other eventual outcome. She's one solid push from leaping into my arms herself.

I'm not a man who's been told no often. My father trained me from a young age to take what I wanted without reverence for anything but our family secret. He taught me how to kill, not just as a defense of that secret, but how to enjoy it. With that monstrous reputation and some pressure, we've kept the people in this area carefully toeing the line and not asking dangerous questions for generations.

He wanted me to enjoy the hunt. To be the Big Bad Wolf on this mountain like his fathers before him. He named me Wolf after our own invented legacy—Red might not realize it, but that's actually my given name. My life is my cause, and while I didn't kill most of her family, I did inherit the responsibility of finishing them off.

“You're out of time.” His tone is filled with disappointment, but I see the truth behind it. He's impatient and short-sighted, and he wants to enjoy my win while he can still claim it as his own.

“Like hell I am.”

I'm closer than I've ever been. I've fucked her senseless twice now, showing her just how good life with me will be. She'll come around, just like she's been coming around my cock, and so what if the union is forced? She'll forgive me in time when she realizes I'm what's best for her.

He looks up at me, and his thoughts may as well be written across his forehead. This wasn't what he had in mind when he gave me a choice on how to handle Red years ago. I was twelve, standing over the corpses of her parents and brother. Red hid, crying in the closet, thinking we didn't know where she was.

Kill her or keep her, Wolf, but she's yours. End her family line how you see fit. He never expected me to pick option two.

He had a good enough plan in his own time. He befriended her father and had an affair with her mother. He had every angle to get close enough to find what he needed, but like always, he's not good at the long game. His impatience killed them.

They were already dead on the floor when he handed me a knife and went to find the deeds himself. He was so sure they were stowed away inside the cabin. He was wrong, and he's lucky I didn't have the heart to kill the pretty hiding girl before he

realized his error, or we wouldn't still be here now, living off what we manage to steal from the Littles.

My obsession was born. Ten years have passed and he's no closer than he was that day. We never found the deeds, but it won't matter when Red's my wife. That's not his problem, though. He's watching my loyalty divide right in front of his eyes. She's become something more than a war prize, more than a pretty pussy to steal from the enemy or a tool to end an old family feud.

"You know what she's been doing?" he asks, and of course I do. Isn't he angry that I follow her more than I do anything else?

He pulls out some paperwork, and I try to ignore it, but he spreads the pages in front of me. His elegant script covers them, and I lean closer to see what it says despite my disinterest. Someone beats you enough times, and your first instinct is to listen to them whether you like it or not. Red's Granny comes to mind and there isn't a single part of me that regrets ending her. If anything, I should have done it slower, but I didn't want to wake my Muffin after that beating.

If I allow myself to think about it, I'm incredibly burdened by all the ways she's suffered for my family's greed. The knowledge that I'll spoil her to death once she's my wife takes the bitter sting off.

"I haven't been with her every moment," I say.

My eyes move across the pages. It's a long-winded list of the issues she's caused recently, the questions she's raised, and the dollar signs associated with keeping it all quiet—dollars we ripped directly out of her hands.

"You got paid for the cop, and she dumped the body," I comment. "You really are against earning your own money, huh, Father?"

He would never admit to it, but he's a far worse businessman than his father before him, or his grandfather before that. We've lost a lot since he's been in charge, and his obsession with being the one to end this once and for all has cost us not just money but also connections.

"You'll watch your fucking mouth, Wolf. You might not think so, but I've got some lessons left to teach you."

I just stare him down. I don't think so. I tell him with my glare. I haven't bitten back yet, but he should remember that I'm capable.

"You need to kill her. It's been too long, and she's causing too many problems. Toss a dart, and you'll hit pussy. You don't need her."

If this was about pussy, that would be true, but I'm not obsessed with her looks or how her body feels alone. I'm obsessed with her fire, her willingness to chase me down again and again, the fact she cares more about her family than she does herself even though they are dead and she's still alive. I've never seen that before in my life. I want it for my own.

"I don't need you either, yet here I stand," I tell him.

His face turns red, and his fist clenches. He wants to hit me, but he's realized recently I'm stronger than him. If I decide to turn on him, it won't be a fair fight.

"Grimm Groves is mine," he insists, but it's only his because of the lies.

Grimm Groves belongs to Red Little, whether she knows it or not, and it will continue to be that way unless she says yes to marrying me. Then it will be mine. He'll never get a chance to enjoy my win. I won't let him.

“You know where those deeds are, then, Father? This whole game can finally end?”

“You haven’t looked hard enough. You haven’t tried hard enough,” he insists, but if I haven’t, neither has he.

“I’ve searched every inch of both those cabins more times than I can count. I’ve searched for holes and caves. Hell, Redley doesn’t even know about the—” I stop myself before I keep speaking. We never mention what we’re stealing, ever. You never know who’s listening, and it wouldn’t take long to ruin everything we’ve worked for.

“She doesn’t know anything about them . She has enough moonshine out there to run quite the business and the still, yet all she cares about is killing me and her chickens. She’s harmless, and if you kill her without those deeds? Someone else will find them .”

“Maybe she knows something we don’t.”

“She knows nothing.” I’m sure of that. I’m the one who told her the Wolf story isn’t true. “She still believes I’m an inhuman monster.” She doesn’t.

I’d be worried he’s getting paranoid in his old age, but he’s always been this way. When you lie, cheat, steal, and kill as a way of life, you tend to expect the worst of everyone. I don’t. I know we’re the bad guys. I’m okay with that. I actually enjoy it.

He grits his teeth because he knows it’s true. There isn’t any way around it. We don’t have anything without those deeds, and this century-old family feud will continue brewing. Hell, we’ll both wind up in jail if things go really sideways.

“Don’t make me regret giving you a choice, Son.”

“Don’t act like your choice comes from your benevolence. You don’t have any options but to be patient unless you find those deeds yourself, and last I checked, you couldn’t find them even while you were fucking her mom.”

His fist hits the desk, and I know I’ve pulled the pin out of a live grenade. My father is a nastier creature than me. I’ve never been sick enough to please him. While I love to kill and take pleasure in it, I still care for some things. I know that he doesn’t. My mother, for example. She was nothing to him, and he enjoyed tossing her away, but I loved her. I’ll never forgive him for that. He’s harder than me in so many ways.

“I told you to watch your mouth, Wolf. Remember, you’re not the only monster lurking in the woods alongside your little girlfriend. You might regret not acting sooner.” His threat has testosterone pumping through my system, the need to fight and defend what’s mine.

“You’re not going to touch her. You don’t have what you need yet.” My confidence is a bluff. I’ve seen him act in his own disinterest before if he had a special chance to be cruel.

“We’ll see about that, Son. We will see.”

“Are we done here?” I ask, skin crawling to get the fuck away from him.

“For now,” he agrees.

As I’m leaving the room, the doorbell rings. Our maid, Hilda, looks up from her task, intending to answer it. She’s busy, though, so I wave her off and get it myself. We have visitors occasionally, but very seldom unexpected ones. When I open the door, I find the prettiest face in all of creation.

What the fuck is she doing here when my father is dead set on killing her?

CHAPTER 38

WOLF

Redley's black hair is down, falling in bouncy waves around her face and shoulders. She's usually got it in a braid when she's out, practical, utilitarian, my Muffin. Green eyes shine like the leaves behind her, and her too tight flannel and jeans are enough to make a stronger man than me weak, and fuck, am I weak for her.

The more important point might be that she's got a shotgun over her shoulder, and it's aimed straight at me. The light shines across the double-barrelled sawed-off, and I smile as I imagine the mess she would make of me. That kind of thing might bother normal people, but I'm not normal. I don't want to die. I like living, but I've seen and delivered too much death to dare being afraid of it. She doesn't shoot, though, and I keep staring, thinking about the ways we've fucked already and the things I'd still like to do to her.

How did she find out where I live? What else did she find and just how fucked am I?

"Wolf?" she asks, shock and confusion her primary expressions as her eyes run all over me.

Her inspection gives me tingles. She's so pretty when she's unnerved, making it clear she didn't expect me to answer the door.

"You've got to be kidding me. What the hell are you doing here?" she demands, not lowering the gun.

“Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that question?”

“Oh my God!” Something seems to click for her but not for me. I’m just as lost as I was before.

I can’t guess what she’s thinking in that pretty head of hers or why she’s here, but I suddenly remember why this is a very bad thing. She can’t be here, especially not after the conversation I just had with my father. He wants her dead, and if he finds her in his house? He’ll kill her. What the hell was she thinking coming here?

“Red, let’s talk later. I need you to leave, now ,” I grit.

I glance over my shoulder, making sure my father isn’t following down the hall to see who knocked. Hilda, however, sees us from her spot as she cleans. I shake my head severely at her, threatening and begging her to keep her mouth shut. She nods and leaves, and I silently hope she’s taking my side. Odds are good, given she goes to the other side of the house and not toward my father’s office.

“Please be quiet. I need you to leave,” I beg her. “You’re not safe here.”

Her eyes and nostrils flare, pupils dilating. God, she’s sexy as hell when she’s mad.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s going on. You want me to be quiet so bad? I’ll scream. How’s that for goddamn quiet?”

She doesn’t, though she stares at me, giving me a chance to decide. That’s a convenient request, given I have no idea what she’s talking about this time or why she’s here right now. We’ve always met in the woods, and she’s never looked to find me outside of them. Her surprise at seeing me keeps me pretty confident she didn’t uncover my plans. What I don’t feel confident about, though, is her safety.

My father may not believe in ghost stories or monsters, but he is egotistical enough to believe he's part of fate's divine play. If the woman he wants dead shows up on his door minutes after he calls for her head, he will believe that he was supposed to kill her. I'll be forced to kill him or watch her die, and I can't do either.

"Fine then, have it your way."

She opens her mouth, and before a sound can pass her lips, I slap my hand over it, preventing her from speaking. My fingers dig into her cheeks, and I can't help but savor how damn soft she is. Every time she's beneath my fingers, I feel more and more alive. It's hard to believe there's anything more exciting than killing, but here she is.

She grunts in surprise at the force, but it's better than what he would do to her. I spin her, and she's weightless as I pull her tight against my chest—warm, soft, perfection—but I can't let anything happen to her, and something like fear slithers inside me.

"Shut up. He'll hear you," I growl in her ear, my lips swiping over the soft shell.

"Who?" she whispers beneath my hand.

"Keep your mouth shut, and I'll tell you." I squeeze tighter, eyes begging her to agree.

After a tense moment where I think I might fall into her green eyes, she nods. The arm around her back supports her as I sweep her legs out with the other and pull her tight. She and her gun against me is the best feeling, and I suppress the little flash of pleasure. A quick look over my shoulder confirms there's no one in the hall, and had Hilda run to my father, he would already be out here. He's never been patient. I'm not often afraid—hell, I am the scary thing in the woods—but not being able to

protect my wife in my own home? That makes me uneasy.

The stairs raise all the hair on the back of my neck as we climb them. Not being able to cover my own back or check if I'm being followed is the most unnatural feeling. I need it to end before I snap and kill something just to prove I am the biggest, baddest thing she can find.

Despite how tense I am, I'm struck by the humor of her being the least dangerous thing in this house, even armed with a sawed-off—well, except for Hilda. If Redley tries to pull the trigger, she's not just going to make a mess all over herself. My father will kill her, and then Hilda will have some nasty work on her hands.

The door to my wing stands open. It's roughly a quarter of the house with all its own amenities—kitchen, dining room, living room. Because our family has been forced to keep a close eye on hers, multiple generations have lived together for over a century. My great-uncle lived here most of my life until about ten years ago. We barely saw him. We're not close, and we're not the type to share.

I drop Red on her feet the moment we're inside so I can lock the door and the deadbolt. It would take a lot for my father to get in here now, so she's relatively safe. Red looks around, her eyebrows pushed together in some form of judgment, her lips pursed like an annoyed kiss. I grab her hand and lead her down the hall. Her eyes stick to each room, gasping out loud when she sees my sun room with the glass ceiling, but there's no chance I'll let her lounge in there when my father could then see her from the grounds.

The door to my room stands open as well. It smells freshly cleaned and vacuumed, so I know Hilda was here not too long ago and that means she won't be back too soon. I tuck us both inside before closing that door behind us too. She looks good in my room, slightly out of place, but that will change quickly once I dress her in my ill-gotten gains and stolen riches.

This lock snaps shut behind us too, and I breathe a little easier knowing she's safe for now, but she'd be much safer not here. My father's threats are still fresh in my mind. I'm nearly shaking, and I turn on her, waiting for an explanation. Sometimes I lose control while I'm killing, and things get particularly messy, but I enjoy that. When I do it around Red, I fear the consequences to her. This is too much, and my sanity separates from the killer beneath revealing some new aspect of my personality.

"Where is your truck?" I ask.

It wasn't parked in the driveway, and I pray she didn't do something stupid like leave it at the bottom.

"A mile or so up the road, hidden. I wanted the element of surprise." I relax only an inch. "What the hell is going on, Wolf?" she asks.

"You're tired of meeting me in the woods?" I say, with a sarcastic lilt to my tone. "Why don't you tell me? Seeing as you're the one who just showed up at my door."

She's still hanging onto the gun, but she's not pointing it at me. Given our history, that's huge progress. She looks around the room a little more carefully this time, and I'd give a lot to know what she's thinking right now.

"I expected you to be happier to see me, Wolf," she snarks. "It's almost like I'm inconveniencing you."

Multiple lights illuminate the space, a small chandelier overhead and little electric sconces on the wall, a record player, the cassette player that always reminds me of that night with her when we were teens. Is she disgusted by all this wasted electricity when she's so precious about using any of it herself?

My room is bigger than her entire cabin, and my bed is nearly as large as her whole

room. I have every amenity you can think of. My same guilt from earlier grows until it's painful. She's not had any of the same, but she should have.

She finally looks back at me. " You're the one supplying power to the mountain," she accuses. "What I don't get is why ?"

Her words sink in, and all I can do is laugh. Of all the things I've done, that's not on the list.

CHAPTER 39

WOLF

I laugh, and it's not that I'm trying to insult her, but it's just not true. If I was running the power to the mountain, she'd have a lot more than one damn light. She's insane, and I shake my head in denial rather than saying it out loud because that's gotten me shot before.

"No, can't say I'm guilty of that one."

"Oh no?" she huffs in outrage, pulling a piece of paper out of her pocket. "You're going to lie to me when I have the proof right here?"

She opens it and lays it flat before handing it to me. The expression on her face is like she's really got me this time. I'm extra annoyed, given my father did the same thing to me twenty minutes ago. My brow furrows as I take it from her and quickly read over the lines, seeing that it's just an astronomical electricity bill.

"What the hell is this, Muffin? What does this prove exactly?"

She pushes out her chin. "Actually read it instead of playing stupid." She's so cute when she's sassy. It makes me want to smack her ass and kill people in front of her just to keep her on her toes.

"Bold of you to assume monsters can read," I say.

She snorts a laugh, and even if it is a mocking one, it's so rare I can't help but enjoy it.

"You're right. Should I read it to you?" she asks as she tips her head to the side.

"You'll be reading the tag on your jeans when I pull your pants down and spank your ass."

A brilliant picture fills my mind, and she blushes a sweet pink. I'd spank her a few shades darker than that if she liked it as much as I do. Despite all that, I do look again, actually reading it this time. There isn't a name on the bill, but that's definitely my address. I'm not even sure what this is about or where she got it. She risked coming here for this? What was she looking for?

"I'm stumped, Muffin. Seems like you got yourself a real mystery on your hands." Impressive, given I thought I knew all there was to know about her and this mountain. I plan to ask my father about it as soon as possible, but like I said, he's not a great businessman, and this seems above him.

"Don't play dumb, it doesn't suit you," she says.

"You think I'm a clever Wolf?" I raise an eyebrow at her.

"No, I don't, and you're certainly not an innocent one either." Her chin tips up as she pouts, and I can tell she thinks I'm lying to her, and I'm not.

"That may be true, but in this case, I have no idea where this came from," I insist as I hand it back to her. It's her mystery to solve, not mine.

"Then who is it?"

“Again, I’m really too young to have been responsible for wiring the mountain. You really do hold a high regard for the child version of me. Running power lines, murdering, I was a prodigy.”

She’s blushing so hard she’s throwing heat.

“If it’s not you, then who is it?” she asks, starting to get angry now. “I write checks, and who the hell is cashing them? I know there’s something nasty going on out here! There’s a reason no one came for Porter!” She’s close to screaming now, and I need to keep her quiet, but I’ve got a more pressing question.

“Who the fuck is Porter?” I seethe.

Her face turns nearly blood red. “The cop you killed, Wolf! You put an arrow through his brain.”

“Oh right,” I say.

“Oh right?” she asks. “I think I should shoot you!”

“I said keep your voice down,” I threaten in a much lower volume, giving her a cue as to how I would like her to speak.

She ignores it entirely, talking just as loud with a sneer on her top lip. “You said because he’ll hear me. Who is he ? Is he the one charging the residents of Grimm Groves because it’s not the damn power company, Wolf!”

It’s my turn to harden my jaw. Not only do I not know, but I wouldn’t tell her anything even if I could. Information is need to know only, and there’s nearly nothing about me that my Muffin needs to know.

“I have no idea,” I say. “Frankly, I don’t know why it even matters! Who cares who supplies the power?”

Her eyes widen, her mouth opens, and I realize I’ve struck a nerve.

“No, you wouldn’t understand, would you? We are all alone out here. The cops don’t help us, the government doesn’t fund our school, the mail comes once a damn month, and we don’t have a real post office. No one cares about what happens to us out here.

“But someone is bringing power out here and charging us for it. What happens to this mountain and these people has to matter to someone other than me because someone is making money! I’m at the end of my fucking rope, and you don’t get why it’s important? You don’t get why I need the fucking truth?!”

I’m sick to my stomach because my family’s greed has done all of this to her. Part of me wants to apologize. Admit what I’ve done and tell her what’s really hiding out on her property. I want to tell her that she doesn’t have a single concern in the world if it weren’t for my family, but like usual, I don’t do what I should.

“I don’t know if he is that person, Red, but I promise you don’t want to meet him. You don’t want him to find you in his house.”

She swallows, which means some part of her trusts I’m telling the truth. She knows she’s in danger, but that doesn’t motivate her to protect herself. Nothing does that.

“Who is it? Because this is the very first time I’ve ever seen you act afraid of anyone.”

She stares into my eyes, and the way she challenges me brings every intense conflicting emotion I have to the surface. If the world were fair, I would just melt into her, and that would be the end of it.

“I’m not afraid of him, but you should be, and for good reason. Now, keep your voice down.”

Her expression changes as she makes a decision.

“You know what? I think you better keep me happy, or I’m going to scream because I’m not afraid of whoever you’re trying to keep me away from.”

“He’ll fucking kill you,” I repeat, not believing she’s stupid enough to threaten me when her life is on the line.

“Sure, I bet that’s true. I’ll still do it.”

I take two steps forward, hands gripping her shirt as I pull her closer.

“Why the fuck would you? Are you suicidal now?”

“No, I’m just starting to think you stand to lose a lot more than I do. I’ve got nothing left, and you’re still afraid of something.”

“I’m not afraid of dying.” She’s a fool to think I am when she’s taken so many shots at me.

“Then maybe you’re afraid to lose me.” The suggestion is insane, and I can’t believe she’s bold enough to say it out loud.

“What makes you think I care?” I demand, but I know it was that damn bath. Being soft with her was incredible, but look if it’s not the consequences of my own actions in the shape of her attitude.

She laughs softly. “I know you don’t care about me , Wolf, but you sure care about

your game. I don't know why exactly, but I'm at the center of it."

"You want to know why?" I ask, sure that I can take the power back in this situation and knock her off balance.

"Tell me who he is, or I'm going to scream loud enough to be sure he hears me."

My teeth clamp like a vise, but I answer, "My father, and if you don't shut the hell up, he's going to kill you like he did your parents because you're the center of his game too."

My lips slam shut, and I know I've said far too much.

CHAPTER 40

REDLEY

Like. He. Killed. My. Parents.

A million thoughts run through my head, and unfortunately, none of them are helpful. The room around me is beyond anything I've ever imagined, and a red haze fills it up, made of my fury and devastation.

I lived outside of Grimm Groves for three years, and I made sure to see a lot in that time, but this is the home of an oil baron or something. I want to watch it burn to the fucking ground with his father inside.

It's so strange to see Wolf in this setting. His chin-length hair is swept back and styled, his green button-down highlights his yellow eyes in this brilliant and fascinating way, and best of all, he's wearing slacks. The killer, the monster I've chased all over the mountain and through the woods, is a rich, preppy boy dressed in more money than I've ever had in my life, and his father is the one I've been hunting.

"Are you okay, Redley?" he asks, using my full name to get my attention, but it isn't working.

I think this might be worse than when I realized he was just a man rather than a supernatural entity. At least then we were on more level footing. I think I have a hell of a lot more in common with a monster who lives out in the woods than I do with a millionaire living with his murderous daddy. Hatred burns in every part of me,

begging me to finally get revenge for the family who loved me.

“Your father,” I repeat. “Of course you have a father.”

It’s a stupid thing to say, given I’ve already accepted that he’s a human man, but somehow, him having a family never occurred to me. I can’t breathe right. Reality is a bitter pill to swallow, and it’s worse because it’s not just my own naivety but generations of it mixed with drunkenness and passed down through my family.

“Even most monsters have parents, Muffin.”

“Murderous, evil parents?” I ask.

If I’m not imagining it, I’ve offended him. Funny, I didn’t really think you could hurt a monster’s feelings either.

“My father is those things. My mother was one of his victims.” A pang of sympathy for him shoots through me, but I stuff it away. I can’t afford to let him dig his way in deeper.

My mind races, turning over the idea he has a family, just like mine, fucked up and mostly dead. Suddenly, a lot of things make more sense. Generations that seem to line up, patterns where there are extended periods between kills, and then they speed up. It was a cycle of men raising their sons, aging, dying, there weren’t enough of them to keep the kills constant. I feared Granny more than anyone I’ve ever known, so I suppose I can understand why he might be afraid of his father.

“You told me a while ago that there’s something worse in the woods than you. Did you mean him?” I ask.

Little’s have been dying hard in these woods for a long time. Has it always been their

family, or was the mantle passed on? His nostrils flare, his full lips pinching.

“I didn’t mean anything . You need to stop asking me questions when the answers will only get you hurt. As soon as it’s dark, I’m taking you back to your truck.”

“What has he done that you, of all people, are so scared, Wolf?” I square my shoulders but don’t even bother to try to threaten him with the gun. We both know I really won’t shoot. “What has he done to you ?”

His whole body tenses, but he doesn’t answer.

“I don’t give one crap what he’s done to me,” he finally says. “I’m worried about what he would do to you if he knew you were here.”

My heart warms in the strangest way, but it’s misplaced. I can take care of myself. He’s right that I’ve spent a lot of time taking potshots at him, but I won’t make the same mistake with his father. I want to spill his blood.

“I can take care of myself.”

His eyes flash in his anger. “He’s the man who taught me everything I know, and he’s a lot meaner than me. You’re only alive because I don’t want to kill you. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

It’s my turn to laugh.

“Same for you, Wolf. I’m not actually a bad shot.”

The truth fills me up and hollows me out. All this time, I’ve been shooting at the wrong man. I’ve been aiming at him, but his son has stood in the way.

“You need to calm down,” he says, having the exact opposite effect.

“Has it always been your family?” I ask. “Why did all this start? Don’t you owe me an explanation at this point?”

He doesn’t say anything, but he won’t meet my eyes either, and that’s nearly as good as a confession. He knows everything. It’s always been them. I turn away from him, and he lets me go, but instead of sitting on the bed or something, I lift the gun, fully determined to go and pump the bastard who killed my brother and parents full of lead. Wolf might have earned my forgiveness for killing Granny, but I’ll never forgive the loss of my parents or brother.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” he asks as he rips it out of my hands and tosses it onto his bed.

It lands with a soft thud, nothing that anyone will hear.

My family was wrong about the origin of the Wolf but never about the fact that there was one. Generations of killers teaching their sons and targeting the people of Grimm Groves. He’s just the latest in a long line. I should have seen it sooner, but I was too caught up in my misconceptions and the impossibly good sex.

I open my mouth to scream. If he won’t let me face him on my own, I’ll force his hand. There’s no way I’m not going to take a shot at him. I’ll die in this house tonight and be done with all of this if that’s what it takes, but I refuse to just stand here. One strangled yell works its way out of my throat before Wolf uses both hands to silence me. One covers my mouth, and the other wraps around my throat, squeezing until I can’t even breathe, let alone complain.

His yellow eyes flash, pupils dilated in fear and anger. He listens for a long moment, not letting go, and despite the fact I incited this, I’m just as frightened as he is.

Footsteps echo down the hall, and I realize I've gotten what I wanted. They belong to the man who killed my family.

He's that close, and I called him.

CHAPTER 41

REDLEY

“Wolf?” a deep male voice asks, but it’s muffled with the two doors between us. A loud knock follows.

The man who created my nightmares is closer than he’s been to me since that night. Wolf drags me over to the door and unlocks it, and then there’s only one door between me and the man who killed my parents and brother. I’m suddenly ten years old again, and I’ve never been so afraid.

“Yeah?” Wolf shouts back, quick and sharp.

“What was that?” his father asks.

“I don’t know. I didn’t hear anything.”

Both his hands tighten, and my eyes start to flutter backward at the lack of oxygen to my brain. He presses his lips to my ear and shushes me one more time before loosening his hand and allowing me to breathe again. “Go back to my room and be quiet,” he whispers.

I shake my head hard.

His eyes beg me. “I don’t want to watch you die. Please.”

I shake my head again. If I could get the gun, a decent shot at the closed door could take him out, and then I'd open it and shoot him again for good measure. He growls in my ear, tightening his fingers as punishment.

"There's a problem in the woods," his father says, his voice reeking of someone who thinks he's important. "Open the door so we can discuss it."

What the hell does that mean?

"I just got out of the shower. It can be handled later," Wolf says.

A long pause follows.

"I'll take care of it myself. I've been bored lately anyway. Haven't had a good night out since last summer."

What the hell does "take care of it" mean?

"Fine, Father, but remember, we hide them better now." I've never heard Wolf use that tone before. Is he trying to be agreeable? He's bad at it.

"Don't think you can tell me what to do. It won't go well for you." A shiver runs down my own spine at the threat. Why am I suddenly worried for Wolf? I shouldn't care what happens to him.

"Just a reminder, Father."

"Mmm." Even if I didn't have good reason to want his head, I'd hate him. "Perhaps, I'll take care of your Little problem while I'm out too."

"She's not in town today, but I promise I'll take care of it. Trust me, she'll come

around.”

He’s not seriously talking about me right now, is he? I shake in his arms, wanting to fight my way free, but his fingers tighten hard enough to draw tears, and I can’t. He’s going to die, and I’m going to kill him, I swear on my family’s memory.

“Who was at the door before? Hilda said you answered it.”

“Traveling salesman. I told him to fuck off.”

“Good. I’ll be back when I’m done.”

His footsteps echo as he walks away. Wolf doesn’t loosen his grip at all, and the pain is growing unbearable. He shoves me back into his room, pushes me roughly into it, and then locks the door behind us. My face burns like hell and so does my dignity.

“What is he going to take care of ?” I whisper this time, finally as scared as he asked me to be. Now that his father is leaving, all I can think about is getting the hell out of here. Am I just supposed to sit here while he commits a murder?

“That’s not a question you actually want the answer to, Muffin.”

“Don’t tell me what I want. I am so sick of you deciding what I want for me. Is he going to kill someone right now?” My hysteria builds, my voice rising again, and tears gather in the corner of my eyes. “You have to stop him!”

He stares at me like he thinks it’s sad I even asked.

“Why would I do that when he’s saving me from doing it myself? I get to stay here with you now. I love killing, and still, I’d rather be with you. He’s doing me a favor.”

My mouth falls open, and I don't know why I'm shocked by his cruelty. All he's ever been is cruel, except for the other night when he bathed me and made love to me in a way I didn't imagine possible. Why did I start to see that as the truth of him when years of actions prove he's something completely different, and I sure as hell don't want to be with him?

"Why are you still living with your dad like some kid, Wolf? Which is apparently your real name?" Venom spews out of my mouth along with my words. "You can kill people, but you can't decide for yourself? You can leave me all the fuck alone in the world while you're living at home with your daddy?" My voice rises as I speak, but I keep it down. "Your name shouldn't be Wolf. It should be Pup."

His expression hardens, his lip raising as he sneers at me.

"Well, you're my bitch then, so how are you any better?" he asks.

My anger is like a demon, growing inside me and threatening to take me over. "At least I'm not a coward." But on some level, I know that I am. I never could kill him, could I?

His hand shoots out and wraps around my neck. If he's going to kill me, let him kill me. I don't think I'm suicidal like he said, but I've been fighting for my cause too long not to be willing to die for it.

"The inner workings of my family are not for you to understand, and as far as why I live here, why do you still live in that awful cabin? You live on top of crusty bloodstains like a savage, and you want to try to judge me?"

I reach out and dig my nails into his side, but he doesn't even flinch.

"I've been afraid of you, and you're not even a man. You're a boy." I laugh in his

face. “You’re a joke, your daddy’s puppet.”

“That isn’t funny.”

“It wasn’t meant to be. You asked me to marry you, and you wanted me to believe that was a serious proposal?”

“It was,” he growls as his fingers dig deeper into the side of my throat. His yellow eyes flash as his pupils narrow.

“Then how the hell am I not entitled to the inner workings of your family?” My words come out strangled by his hand. “Do you want a wife or a pet, Wolf? Either way, I’m not really interested in being either anymore.”

He towers over me, baring his teeth and shaking in his rage. He looks like he wants to hurt me, and I don’t really care. I want to hurt him back. I’ve revered him as something next to a god, and this is reality.

“It doesn’t matter what you’re interested in, Red.”

“I think it does.”

He laughs this time.

“You walked into my house, and I have you exactly where I want you. My daddy’s house? I’m going to fuck you in it, and maybe next time, you’ll think better of walking into a wolf’s den.”

I raise my hand and slap him hard across the face.

CHAPTER 42

REDLEY

I would punch him again, but frankly, I'm still afraid to have my knuckles bruised for days like last time. I turn to grab the gun, but even with my fury, I'm not sure I have the balls to actually watch him die. There's this strange spot in my chest he's built a home in, and he's tough to kick out. He doesn't give me the chance to make a hasty decision, grabbing my arm and yanking me back over to him. I kick him hard but miss his groin by an inch, and before I can recover, he forces me into a headlock.

"Little fucking bitch."

Oh, I've really got him mad this time.

I struggle against his hold, but he only tightens up until it feels like my head is about to pop off.

Shit, shit.

With my head and neck in the crook of his arm and my feet stumbling, he drags me into his closet—which is a room about the size of my bedroom.

Digging my heels in, I try to get free, but his arms are especially powerful, and in this position, I just can't get the leverage I need against him. With his free hand, he pulls a belt off a rack. Chills break out over my skin, assuming he's about to whoop me with it. It's been a long time since I was beaten, and if I'm being honest, I've had a grudge

against leather ever since the night Granny died. My body shakes with a fear I can't control between what just happened and this. I'm not sure I can take it.

He loosens the arm around my neck, but rather than letting go and beating me senseless as I expect, he wraps the belt around my neck, taking the place of his arm and letting me out of the headlock. He replaces his arm as he slides the buckle over and then tightens it. The shiny metal against my throat scares and turns me on. It occurs to me that some insane part of me really does trust him, and not just in that tub, because I'm not afraid for my life, just my skin.

"See, Muffin. You were bad, so I put you on a leash. Now, I'm going to spank you like you deserve."

I can still breathe, but only if I try very carefully. I want to run my mouth, but I truly can't waste the oxygen. He wraps the length of the belt around his fist until his knuckles touch my neck and then pulls me behind him, leading me on a leash just like he said. Piles of clothing surround us, rows of shoes, I can't even imagine the price tag behind it all. I've never seen one person with so much, not even when I was friends with that rich girl in the city.

He leads me to a three-paneled mirror with a pedestal in the middle like at a department store, but it's in his house. Does he really get dressed up and look at himself here? I always thought of him as nearly feral. The money is one thing, but is he actually vain? I guess I'm not really surprised at this point that I've gotten everything wrong.

"Up," he snaps at me.

"Fuck you," I tell him before I spit at his feet.

"Rude little bitch."

He yanks hard on the belt, taking me momentarily off my feet. A yelp catches behind the buckle as he forces me to step up or choke. I take that step to avoid the crushing pressure on my throat. My heart pounds halfway out of my chest, and it certainly doesn't help that I know he enjoys killing. He would enjoy feeling me die.

"Look at yourself," he demands, and it takes me a long, humiliated moment to comply.

My eyes lift to a distorted version of myself. My green eyes look especially bright and frenzied against my face. All the things I've learned today overload me and threaten to permanently steal my sanity. My flannel shirt and jeans look so dingy compared to everything here. I'm so unbelievably out of place. My accusations in the room feel even more weighty. He couldn't have been serious about marrying me because why would someone like him want that? What the hell could he do with someone who would never fit in his world?

I'll never know the inner workings of his family.

That hurts in a way I don't expect it to. I hate his family, despise them in a way I can scarcely understand. I want to watch his father bleed out slowly from a gutshot. I didn't realize that his offer had taken root in my heart. That he appealed to some part of me with his lies. I thought I was stronger than that, but it was just a wild fantasy.

I don't have feelings for him, I insist to myself, feeling like the world's most profound failure. I've only forgiven him for killing Granny because she was so cruel. I only stopped wanting to kill him. I didn't develop feelings for him. That would be insane.

I would never love him.

"Remember, you did this. You came here," he says.

He's right, more so than he can imagine. I walked into this time and time again. From the beginning, we've both been responsible. I deflate visibly, my feet falling flat on the ground, my shoulders along with them. My chin nearly touches my chest in my effort to never face myself again. I'm not relaxed, but there is a certain freedom in realizing just how stupid you've been and how useless all your efforts are.

I believed a lie, hunted the wrong man, slept with my enemy, and somehow, along the way, I let him convince me he was my savior? Fuck, I think I wanted to marry him. I had no idea I'd been so foolish.

His eyes trail me up and down, obviously noticing the change but not able to tell what brought it on. He looks like he's going to ask me. Instead, he keeps up with his own plans. A hand slides into his pocket, and he pulls out a knife. He unfolds the blade and tucks it beneath the collar of my shirt. Cool metal touches my skin, and I jump in shock, expecting the pain, but it doesn't come. The sharp edge is reserved for my clothes.

"Who do you belong to?" he asks, and it's like he's rubbing it in just to hurt me.

"Not you," I answer, lifting my eyes from the floor just long enough to meet his.

"That's a shame. Let's hope my hand doesn't slip then."

He cuts the flannel down the middle, the flat black of the blade sliding against my skin, cool but threatening. Strong hands push it off my shoulders, and it falls to my feet. I shiver, not because he's undressing me and forcing me to watch, but because the knife acts as if the fabric is butter. Something is incredibly sexy about a man who cares for his knives.

He runs the blade over my stomach but doesn't cut me. "Your skin is so pretty, Red. So smooth."

Is that another taunt? My skin isn't smooth on my face. It's been covered in scars since the night he killed Granny, at least on the one side, and he knows it.

He slips a finger through the loop in my pants, putting space between my skin and the denim, then he slides the knife into the gap he made and slices one leg down the middle, the long tearing sound doing more to damage my dignity than my own revealed skin. He does the same to the other side, and when they fall away, they're sliced so thoroughly that there's no chance I'll be able to mend them. Dammit, that was my best pair.

He could easily unsnap my bra, but he cuts it apart at the center, right over my heart. When it's time for my panties, he kneels, first pressing his face against the fabric and inhaling.

“You smell so damn good.”

He slices the panties down the center, the blunt edge separating my pussy lips as it passes, and teases that spot. I moan but don't dare move in the slightest, lest I lose something I'd rather keep. He finishes his cut, and then I'm standing there in nothing but my boots.

My nipples stand hard, and I'm not sure if I'm cold or scared—maybe a little of both—but I don't want to think about the fact I'm turned on too. Somewhere along the way, I've developed a fetish for the knife he uses to kill people, and when it skated along my skin, I felt filthy and alive. What if he spread me with it again and told me how good I smelled? Wetness floods my pussy, and I don't dare check if it's obvious in the mirror.

“What do you have to say now, Redley?” he asks, his voice deep and husky.

Has he forgotten about making his point because he seems incredibly distracted. I

have nothing at all to say. I can't even open my mouth to speak. I just stare at my feet as he stands beside me and holds me firmly in place.

"I said to look at yourself, Muffin."

I do, and I'm not sure what he wants me to think, but I'm relieved. I look better outside of those awful clothes than I did in them. I don't seem quite as out of place as a naked whore in his closet than I did as a dirty country girl.

"Sometimes I want to cut you," he admits in a whisper. "Watch your skin split and bleed red like your pretty name."

"You want to see me die?" I rasp through the tension on my neck and my head that's growing lighter by the minute.

"I couldn't breathe if something serious ever happened to you. I just want to cut you a little."

And some insane part of me wants him to. Before I can really process that, a strong hand smacks my ass, at least as hard as I smacked him, and my first thought is how wildly different it feels than any of the other times this has been done to me.

"Remember that you've earned this."

He grabs me by the back of the neck, forcing me forward until my hands shoot out to prevent my fall. I catch myself against the mirror, and if I had any issue with facing myself, I'm forced to confront it. There isn't a single detail out of focus right now, and I can't even remember the last time I looked this close.

Another smack lands on my ass, and it's so incredibly thrilling I don't understand it. He strikes me again, and the slapping sound filling the air makes it even hotter. The

pain comes in time with the sound, but the most beautiful shattering sensation follows like hot rain falling over my skin. I moan on the fourth one, eyes closed and nose scrunched up as the pain becomes harder to bear. My chin drops to my chest, and his slaps fall in rapid succession now. My tits sway with the force.

“Fuck,” he moans behind me. “Your ass is just as pink as I imagined it would be.”

He rubs my cheeks, and it stings in a dull and pleasurable way. Another smack takes me by surprise, and a long moan slips free. Rather than hit me again, he slides his fingers down my ass cheeks, making me jump as he passes that hole.

“I could fuck you here. That would be a good punishment.”

I don't say anything, not wanting to encourage him. His finger keeps moving, finding the entrance to my pussy.

“You're so wet,” he says, and there's reverence in his tone.

Right when I think he's about to enter me, and I'm practically shaking my hips begging for it, he says, “You're enjoying yourself a little too much for my tastes.”

CHAPTER 43

WOLF

My hand stings beautifully as I slide it up her chest and gently push her body weight off her hands and the mirror and back onto her feet. She stares at me in some kind of wide-eyed wonder, and I'd kill or stop killing, whatever I have to do to get her to keep looking at me like that.

“ Wolf ,” she mouths. I pull down on her makeshift leash, and another round of surprise enters her gaze, but she doesn't fight me like I'm accustomed to. In fact, all the times Red and I have been physical, I've never seen her so docile, so submissive.

My cock aches from spanking her, but there's something truly blissful about seeing this side of her. When was the last time she let go? She lands a little too hard on her knees, not because I'm being rough but because of the lack of oxygen and the very thorough spanking. She looks up at me. Her eyes are so big and green that I have a hard time believing she doesn't have the whole mountain hostage inside them.

“Who do you belong to?” I ask her again, and I need her to say it's me because if it's not, I'll lose my damn mind. I'll force her to stay with me.

“I belong to my damn self,” she tells me, but there's still that soft glow in her eyes and the heat on my palm. I just don't believe her.

I drop her belt as I pull my own loose and then undo the button of my slacks. For someone who doesn't belong to me, her eyes sure stick to my movements like she's

highly interested in whatever I'm about to do. After pulling my cock out of my pants, I give it a few long strokes. Her eyes never leaving. I've never been harder in my life than when I'm with her. She licks her lips as she watches, and I give her a mocking smile, but my sweet muffin is too caught up in the show to even notice.

I take pity on her hungry tongue and press my cock to her lips. It's obvious she's never done this before, but that's okay, she'll learn. Despite how badly she wants to, she doesn't open her mouth at first. I appreciate how stubborn she is. I pull the belt just a little tighter, finally cutting her off from her air completely.

"Open," I command.

But she doesn't listen, and there's no way in hell I'm going to break first and make her think she has that much power over me. I'm a fucking murderer, for God's sake. I'm not going to fold for her pretty face. I don't yield, and I watch as she slowly loses consciousness. Once she's entirely passed out, I'm actually a little scared about hurting her.

It's a completely new feeling for me to want to play with someone and keep them alive after. I lay her down and start to loosen the belt. Her eyes flutter open, and she groans in pleasure as the blood rushes back to her brain, giving her an amazing high. I'll do it while I fuck her sometime, and she can feel just how hard she can really come.

I'm only patient enough to wait for her eyes to flutter open once before I yank her up to her knees by the belt around her neck. It's looser now, so it's rougher against her skin but easier on her windpipe. She can breathe. She probably won't pass out.

"Wolf," she murmurs, and I might as well be a god.

Her mouth hangs open, and her body sags as I place her on her knees, but that's all

the opportunity I need. I slide my cock past her lips and over her tongue, surprising her.

She barely fights me, too choked out and caught off guard. This is going well. I'm going to come straight down her throat, but the little bitch bites me, teeth digging into my extremely hard cock. Because I'm a sick bastard, it feels good at first, but my concerns quickly switch to permanent damage.

Rather than let her win, I reach down and squeeze her nipple. She bites harder at first, and I just squeeze so hard it feels like the tiny thing might pop in my hand. We both whine in pain, but eventually, she gives, releasing her teeth from my cock and letting me slip nicely over her tongue. I play with her nipple softly now to comfort her. I'll kiss her all better when I'm done fucking her throat.

"Naughty fucking Muffin," I scold her as I tangle my other hand in her hair so I can fuck her just the way I like since she refuses to hold herself up.

I have the tightest grip on her, the kind of leverage that will make it impossible to escape my cock. Slipping to the back of her throat, I can't help but grunt. It feels so fucking good. She's not interested in learning to suck cock the right way today, and that's okay. It's her first time, and I'm plenty happy to use her the way I like.

She stares into my eyes as I bottom out, and my balls rest on her chin. I feel even more the villain for fucking something so beautiful. I know damn well I don't deserve her. Her throat clenches as she gags, but she doesn't move me even a centimeter. Instead, it adds to the insane pleasure of the experience.

"You're so good for me."

She continues to gag around me, swallowing reflexively as if she doesn't realize it just inches me deeper and keeps me locked into her throat tight. A tear rolls down her

cheek as I thrust, pumping in and out. Her nose hits my pubic bone, and her teeth scrape, but it only adds to the sensations. She has absolutely no control, which makes me that much fucking hotter. She's the prettiest thing I've ever seen, and I shouldn't be sticking my dick in her, but I have no plans to stop.

I lean to the side, glancing down at her pussy. Her knees are spread nice and far, like she knows exactly what I want to see. Her wetness shines, making her look slick and delicious, good enough to fucking eat. I'm not sure if I can truly love, but sometimes my obsession with Red feels close. I need her near me to feel okay. I despised the years she spent running from me.

"I was serious," I tell her, looking deeply into her eyes. "I'm going to marry you."

I know she wants to argue, the tension in her jaw makes it obvious, but it's tough to run your mouth when it's full of cock, and your pussy is dripping wet for someone. Her eyes slide past me, finding the mirrors behind us. I look back too, and I'm more than satisfied with her hungry inspection.

The mirrors offer an amazing mix of angles. From one, I even get a good look at her ass. Fuck, that's hot. She's so small on her knees compared to me that the difference in our sizes almost doesn't feel real. I'm the stalking monster in the forest she accused me of being, and fuck is it good to be him right now. She stares at me like she couldn't give a fuck what I am and what I do, and that side of her is so satisfying that my orgasm grabs hold of me.

My balls buzz as they jump up, hugging tight to my body. The pleasure grabs me at the base of my spine, and it's so intense I can't help but roar as I empty deep down her throat, shooting my release past her tongue so she has no choice but to swallow. Fuck, I have never come so hard. But in all fairness, I thought that last time too.

In the silence after, I hope that my father is still gone, and he didn't hear me, but

when no one comes asking, I assume he hasn't returned. The buckle loosens beneath my fingers, then the belt falls from her neck. Redley goes completely loose as she slumps against the platform, absolutely spent. I can do anything I want to her right now, and that power is the most exhilarating thing.

I remove her boots and leave them on the floor along with her socks, and then I lift her into my arms with supreme gentleness. This was supposed to be a punishment. I was so goddamn angry with her, but how do you stay mad at someone who makes you feel so good? I tuck her against my chest, enjoying the warmth of her soft body. Her hair smells like a resinous perfume—maybe pine but more feminine somehow. I can't toss her out like this, and it's not dark yet anyway.

I don't know when my father is coming back, but I can't risk him seeing her come or go. Under the cover of night while he's sleeping in his bed is the safest bet for getting her the hell out of here. It's almost like I have no other choice when I lay her in my bed and wrap her in my blanket. Climbing in beside her, I pull her into my arms, relishing every inch of her warmth against me. That's one benefit of her being so small.

I don't know that I've ever felt so good in my life as I wrap her up as tight as I can, not because I'm trying to hold her prisoner but because she's everything to me.

"Who do you belong to?" I ask.

She still doesn't answer the way I want her to, but this time, she's silent rather than denying me, so I'd call that progress. I don't plan to sleep. It's early, and I have far too much to do, but somehow as I lay here, more comfortable than I have ever been in my life, my eyes drift closed beside her, and I fall into my first ever peaceful night's sleep.

CHAPTER 44

REDLEY

My eyes open slowly, and a warm sense of peace surrounds me. I don't question it at first because I've never felt as comfortable and safe as I do right now. Slowly, I realize the bands around me are Wolf's arms, the moving platform beneath my cheek is his chest as he breathes, and that even rhythm soothing me like a lullaby is his heart.

I don't know what it is about Wolf, but he overwhelms all my senses and my reason, leaving me a mix of things, but none of them strong. He's only got one hole left to fuck, and somehow I don't think it will be long before he pushes that boundary too. Revelations about my parents' death and memories of our time in the closet fill my mind. It's hard to believe that one person can be responsible for such a range of emotions, but he is.

My eyes flick over Wolf as he sleeps beside me, and he's so peaceful as he rests. He's hardly the same man, and it's especially hard to see him as a killer. The light from his alarm clock casts enough of a glow to see by. It's almost one a.m., and the outline of the numbers reveals the most disturbing beauty. I want to stay beside him, touch him, maybe run my fingers through his hair, but that's not our relationship. That's not why I'm here, and I'll certainly never be in this position again, so no need to get a taste for something I'll need to live without.

He said he was serious about marrying me, but how could he be?

I climb out of bed slowly, inch by inch, careful not to wake him. It's hard to determine what I can get away with, not knowing how deep a sleeper he is, but I just move slow and take my time. There are a lot of things I'll do to feel as good as he makes me feel, but he's crazy if he thinks that I'm just going to stay here and do his bidding. As I stand beside him and stare down, I worry that he could be faking sleep just to watch me hang myself, but I'm willing to take the risk.

I grab the gun and slowly open the door to the closet. Closing it behind me, I take a deep breath and turn on the light. If he catches me, at least I'm armed, but I'm quiet enough that I don't think a small flash of light under the door will disturb him. My clothes lay in a pile on the floor. My boots and socks are the only part of my outfit he didn't ruin.

Well, he didn't leave me any option but to rob him, so that's what I'm doing. The problem is that he's well over a foot taller than me, but that's okay, I'll make do. Opening a few drawers, I find slacks and jeans. Those are a lost cause. There's no way I can even walk in them, and I can't leave here in just a shirt. Eventually, I find something perfect—a brand new pair of long johns with the tags still on.

I climb into them, finally, mercifully covering my naked body. The arms and legs are far too long, and the crotch sags so far I look like a kid, but I quickly fold them up and stuff my feet in the boots. That will have to work, seeing as I don't have any other good options. I turn off the light before I open the door and silently pray he isn't awake in the dark watching me as I sneak out. His bedroom door closes, and I'm standing in the hall where he spoke to his father.

By the time I close the second door gently behind me, I'm sure he's not messing with me. I stand outside Wolf's wing. The air not only smells different out here, it feels it too, and I can't explain other than Wolf's space is a lot more comfortable. The stairs he brought me up are to the right, I think, but instead, I go left. I'm not sure what my plan is exactly. Despite everything I learned today, a part of me still wonders about

the electric company.

Is Wolf lying? Is it his father, and he just doesn't know? I don't know why I think I'm Sherlock Homes all of a sudden, but I found the address today, didn't I? I never expected it to lead me here, but it did. The entire house is dark with the exception of a few night-lights. There aren't any gas lamps or creaks in the floor. Everything here is immaculate and beautiful. It doesn't even make sense to have this clean look on the side of a mountain, but heck, it isn't mine.

Wolf and I have lived far more different lives than I could have imagined, and his being a murderer is the least of it. Maybe there's another reason I'm looking. Maybe after some rest, when I'm not feeling like I'm ten years old anymore, I'll be up to ending things. The gun is steady in my hand, and for once, I feel like the stalking predator in the woods. I'm invading their territory for once, and I like it.

Wolf doesn't work as far as I know. Most people out here have a trade or a hustle rather than steady employment, so maybe he does something with his time other than killing people and stalking me. I know so little about him that it's impossible for me to say. After all this, I still don't even know the man's last name, but I plan to change that as I stop at the kitchen where a shelf of mail sits. A few letters reveal both their names. Carver Badgley and Wolf Badgley—I've never heard of either, and this is a very close-knit community. How strange .

Clearly, something is going on here, but why do I get the feeling it constantly circles back to me and my family? I know it's a federal offense, but I stuff the mail in my boot just in case they can help me later.

I pass through a dining room, open the door to a kitchen, and finally come to an ornate door very similar to the one Wolf took me through. My heart beats halfway out of my chest as I try the door and find it locked. I breathe deep before letting go, giving up, and turning around.

I'm disappointed, but I decide that failure is probably for the best, given I'm not sure I would have succeeded. Plus, I'm still not sure where Wolf's loyalties really lie. Do I really need to watch him turn on me? Do I need to add that pain to all the others? I'll get my revenge, but maybe I'm too afraid right now to bust a door down.

I turn back around and leave the way I came. My sense of daring has faded and given way to a deep unease that makes every step worse than the last. My self-preservation seems to have woken up quite a few minutes after I did, and now it's getting my ass to Penny a bit too late.

I shouldn't have wasted my time.

I pass Wolf's wing and find the door cracked. Crap , I close it, not realizing I was foolish enough to leave it open. The stairs he carried me up sweep through the house with a dramatic curve, more important than my whole damn cabin. My heart beats painfully as I reach the last step.

The front door comes into view, and I simultaneously breathe a sigh of relief and choke on my fear. The entryway is grand, and there's no choice but to expose my back to the dark as I head to the door. I'm going to make it. I'm going to get the hell out of here. My hand reaches for the knob, twisting, and finding this one unlocked.

"What are you doing in my house?" a terrifying voice asks me from the darkness.

I jump and yelp, turning to find the outline of Carver Badgley. My first instinct is to run, but then I remember I've got a gun in my hands, and this man killed my parents and my brother. He isn't confusing like Wolf, who's sweet, gentle, and cruel all at once. This man is everything I've hated and everything I want to kill.

I hold it up and cock it, wasting no time in my effort to finally bring justice to the man who ruined my life. Their family might have been doing this for a long time, but

the man I've personally got a problem with is right here, and no legends, vendettas, or feuds matter but this one.

I pull the trigger, fully set on ending this. At the exact moment that I fire, Wolf hits the side of the gun, forcing the spray of shot off course. A masculine shout of pain comes from the space where Carver waited in the dark.

"She fucking shot me," he grits, but it's clear I haven't had the impact that I wanted. The sound of his pain is so exciting, the chance to finally finish this too tempting to deny, so I hold the gun up to finish the job.

"Are you fucking crazy, Red? What are you doing?" Wolf shouts, getting between his father and me. Strong hands grip the weapon as he tries to pry the gun from my hands. He wrestles me until he pulls it free, and for a moment, I think that I've underestimated the situation so badly he's going to use it on me right in front of his father.

Instead, he shouts, "Get the hell out of here!" at the top of his lungs. "Leave now!"

It's then I realize he's not only defending his father. He's also furious with me. His rage fills his eyes as I finally crossed his line. Wolf is officially my enemy. There's no way in hell he'll leave me without a way to defend myself. So rather than letting him take my gun, I kick him in the balls as hard as I can. Because I finally mean it, I don't miss this time. My foot connects with the soft flesh, and he crumples to the ground. I grab my gun, not wasting any time listening to him and getting the hell out of his house.

It really pisses me off that I'm always listening to him.

My breaths come in pants as the front door slams shut behind me. I run into the night like my life depends on it because I'm sure neither Wolf nor his father is interested in

giving me a painless death now. If he thought his father was going to torture me before, I've ensured that's exactly what he'll do if he gets his hands on me.

The manicured lawn gives way to the forest, and thankfully, the trees close out the ultra-revealing light of the stars. As far as I can tell, no one is following me yet, but I know that won't last for long. It's dark as hell as I move through the trees, and I'm glad I thought ahead and left the keys in the truck. I wouldn't have them right now if I didn't.

I've been getting myself into a lot of shit lately, so it seemed wise to plan for a hasty escape. Well, relatively hasty. In the dark, with the rough terrain and the multiple stumbles, it takes me about forty-five minutes to jog back to it. It reminds me of so many nights in the forest with Wolf, but this time is entirely different. This time, his kind gestures and surprisingly soft hands are meaningless.

When I get to the truck, I'm beyond relieved to find everything exactly how I left it. Jumping inside, I thank my lucky stars and quickly start her up. Time to get the hell out of here and figure out how I can survive long enough to take them down.

The long johns smell like Wolf's cologne, and I memorize the scent because I'll never enjoy it again.

CHAPTER 45

WOLF

“How the hell did she get into the house?” my father seethes as the night passes us by. Spit literally flies from his mouth as he breathes, and I stare out the window for signs of her as he drives.

She clipped him with buckshot, so he’s hurting, but sadly for her, not dead. His lip shakes, and he bares his teeth, doing his best to pretend this isn’t agonizing. Real men handle their pain, and men who kill for fun certainly can’t expect sympathy for theirs.

“I don’t know,” I lie for the hundredth time tonight, and I imagine I’ll have to do it a million more times before he starts to believe me. I can still smell Red on me, and I can only hope he’s beyond noticing.

His trust in me is clearly strained, and his paranoia is on overdrive. A lot of people who have been perfectly loyal to us are going to wind up dead over this stunt tonight if he doesn’t get himself under control. He’s already run through ten people he’ll kill just for this happening, and I can confirm that not one of them is guilty. I still can’t believe she robbed the electrical company. A smile very nearly breaks free, but I stuff it down before he seriously loses his mind.

“How the hell did she find us?”

“I don’t know,” I lie again.

“Do you know anything, Wolf?” He slaps the steering wheel. “Are you good for anything but disappointing me and fucking hillbilly whores?”

His words are enough that I want to wring his neck myself, but at the same time, I am so angry with her. She tried to kill him, in the house, after I warned her to stay away from him. I didn’t want to see her hurt, but I can’t let her kill my father either. I may have this strange obsession with her that feels like it’s growing, but what would that say about my family loyalty? Am I really a traitor after a lifetime of kept secrets and killing?

All my training says that’s an unforgivable betrayal, and she’s the enemy now. My father expects nothing less of me. His anger and our racing to find her are proof of that as well, but I don’t know if that’s how I feel. In fact, I don’t think I do at all. Am I a traitor? An odd sensation sits in my chest, and I’m too unfamiliar with it to give it a name.

One thing I can say is that I’m afraid, and I don’t know that I’ve ever felt an emotion so acutely. I wasn’t afraid when she took that shot at my father. I was just angry, feeling that she had no right, but as we race toward her cabin, the idea of her being there terrifies me.

“This is her last fucking night on earth. I’m killing her,” he says.

I don’t argue. I just pray to a god I don’t believe in that she isn’t stupid enough to go home. I don’t think I can turn on my own father. Of all the people I’ve killed and all the disgusting things I’ve done, I never intended to harm my own blood. Even monsters have a line. But would she go home and just wait to face him?

No, fuck that. She’s not stupid. Red knows that she and I have been playing a flirtatious game since that night in her cabin and that I never wanted to hurt her back. It’s one thing to play chase in the woods when the Wolf refuses to bite you. She

knows she doesn't have the same liberty with my father. She won't be there. I'm worried about nothing.

But fuck, I am worried.

When I don't answer him, he only grows angrier.

"I'm not just going to choke her to death while you watch, Wolf. I'm going to break her neck with my bare hands."

That's simply not true. Don't react.

"We're finding those deeds tonight. We're killing that bitch. They have to be in that damn cabin. I'll rip up the floorboards. I'm going to find them. I'm going to end this."

I've worried about his sanity for a long time, but as he continues ranting and raving, it grows to a certainty that he is no longer all there. He grits his teeth but seems to take my silence as acceptance of his plans. Blood pools slowly through the fabric of his shirt. He won't wrap it. Wrapping it would be admitting weakness, and I can practically see the vision in his head where he shows her that even her best efforts aren't enough against him. It's so much scarier to die when the monster killing you is already soaked in blood from your failed attempt to end them.

He drives a hell of a lot faster than he should in the dark with the many cliffs and possible pitfalls, but that's my father in a nutshell. He's willing to take unnecessary risks. The normal drive up the mountain is about forty-five minutes. It takes Red forever because she drives that old beat-up junker that wheezes as it struggles to carry its ass down the road, let alone hers.

We make it in thirty.

The house and yard are dark as he slams the brakes and rough-cut gravel dings up his car. He'll be angry about that too when this is over. Chickens scurry out of the way, and I hope they're all smart enough to stay far back. The brown one looks at the truck for a moment before waddling off.

Thankfully, her truck isn't here, and I can't find any sign she made it back before us, but with how he was driving, that doesn't mean she's not coming. He seems to have the same idea and pulls around to the back of her cabin, where she won't see the car if she does pull up, and he turns it off.

"Let's go," he whisper-shouts for me to get out of the car.

My eyes slide over to the cop car. That will have to go. We reach the back door, and my father doesn't even check if it's locked; he just kicks it off the hinges. We step inside, and my guilt chokes me as we invade what's hers again.

"Fucking disgusting," he comments as he looks at everything she owns in the world. Big talk, considering everything he owns is stolen from her and this family. My chest clenches in the strangest way as he pushes over her things and intentionally disrespects everything she cares about.

"She might still be coming back. We got here quick. Start looking for the deeds, but do it in the dark," he says.

The stars are bright tonight up here in Red's cabin, and while I can't see great, I can see well enough. The problem is I searched her entire cabin just a week ago, and there are no deeds here. However, the ring I gave her is still sitting on her granny's desk, and I worry she'll never accept my proposal now that I've made my allegiance to my father clear.

Worry, what a stupid term. I know she'll never choose me now.

I'm more or less pretending to look for the deeds. I know every damn inch of this cabin just for the sake of wanting to know how Red ticks. Long ago, I got over the idea that they were hidden here, but I never got over the idea of being close to her. My father, however, searches in a frantic frenzy, ripping everything apart and tossing it. We'll have a lot of advanced warning if Red pulls in, but he's worked himself into such a state. I wouldn't be surprised if she got the jump on him.

"GODDAMMIT, WHERE IS SHE!?" he screams, and I can only be glad that the answer isn't here.

* * *

Close to two hours pass with him destroying and breaking, and Red never arrives. That's when the gloves truly come off. He turns on the one light reminding me of the accusation that led her to my house to begin with. Does he know something about the electricity up here?

"Dad, do you know which electric company supplies the lines?" I ask, speaking to him for the first time in a long while.

"No, and why the fuck would I care?"

Huh , and now we've got a mystery that has me just as curious as Red because who the hell else would have run power to the mountain? And why would they send the bill to our address? Better yet, if our address is on the bill, why have we never gotten it in the mail? I don't ask him any more questions, but I ask myself a lot of them as he tears apart the rooms. When he's done, there is no interior finishing left to the cabin, and he's even pried up what he can of the floorboards like he promised.

"There's nothing, goddamn nothing!" he shouts, and while I know that's true, it's still relatively dark in here, and he's made far too much of a mess to be sure of anything

himself.

While he was tearing everything apart, he uncovered the jugs of moonshine Red's uncle distilled before we killed him. It takes me a second to realize what he's doing when he picks up a wrench and starts smashing them open. Glass flies, liquor pours. He grabs a box of matches and strikes off four of them, letting them fall to the ground one after another.

The first and second go out, and the third and fourth catch on the fumes starting to billow off the surface of the liquor. The flame makes a hungry noise as it floats across the floor, then picks up its consumption in the nearest pile of her belongings.

"What the fuck are you doing, Dad?"

He turns to me as the flames grow higher and hungrier. His gold eyes shine, and I see a strange future where I'm alone and as angry as him.

"Burning this place to the ground, obviously. Maybe they're buried in the foundation. Either way, she'll pay for coming into my house and making a move against me."

"What if the deeds are in here, and you burn them too?" I shout, wondering why he isn't leaving and standing among the flames and wreckage like the fire is feeding him.

"So you fucking lied, then?" he shouts. "I thought you searched this place a thousand times. You couldn't have missed it!"

"This is stupid," I shout, trying to get his attention over his own fixation, but it's not worth getting burned to stand beside him. I rush over to the desk and grab the ring box off it before it can go up too.

“No, Son, stupid is the series of mistakes and poor choices you’ve made. You led me here, so don’t blame me for what happens now.”

There’s nothing left for me to say, and I leave the cabin through the front door. The path to the back is already too choked with flames. The top of the mountain has a small plateau that drops off with a steep, sharp cliff. I stand at the edge and stare down at the dark expanse as the flames and smoke pile out behind me. It feels incredibly wrong that I don’t know where Red is right now, and that I’m not keeping her safe.

I walk over to the cop car and find that Red left the keys inside.

“We’ll need to get rid of this, just in case,” I tell him as he walks out behind me.

He looks at me like the world's greatest disappointment for a long moment before he finally nods. “But you better be back at the house soon, or I’ll find you.”

As he drives away, he tears through the fence that keeps the chickens loosely surrounding her cabin. I don’t bother to hope they stay put because they’re already marching down the hill within seconds.

Muffin is actually going to kill me this time.

CHAPTER 46

REDLEY

There's one more Little property that I don't share with anyone. Hell, I avoid thinking about it when I don't need to. I ditched the truck well over a mile out. If Wolf or his father find it, it's still highly unlikely they'll find me. My moonshiner great-uncle built it to hide his money, and he never showed a soul until he was too old to get out here himself. Only then, when he couldn't get his money, he told my daddy, and not long before he died, Daddy showed me. No one else ever knew.

Something is happening up on the mountain, and an insidious dread snakes through me as the smell of smoke grows and rolls down to this lower elevation. The night doesn't seem quite as dark as normal. I approach the little cabin, being very careful. Uncle Terry was crazy, and I wouldn't put it past him to have left some trap he forgot about, but I don't find any.

The faint brightness I've been trying to put my finger on grows, and there's a slight warmth to the night as I put my hand on the old lever. The door opens easily enough, just a latch holding it closed, but the metal's rusted, and the hinges snap as I push, dropping the door flat against the ground.

"Shit," I comment to myself as I move it off to the side. From the smell in here alone, I know I don't want it closed yet anyway.

A sob climbs in my throat as a warm orange glow becomes distinct up on the top of the mountain, and the only things up there are my home and the trees. It's only

getting bigger and more out of control. And if my cabin isn't the epicenter, it will be burned soon. I clear cobwebs and animal debris off the floor. Tears start to fall as I grow more certain what's going on. Why it smells like a house fire and not a forest fire, and how many forest fires do we get in the wet early spring? When I finish, the floor is cleaner, and I feel confident anything staying in here has scurried out.

The smoke rolling downhill and over the mountain is so thick I can barely breathe as I stand outside and watch. I wonder if the fire department boys will try to put it out or assume it will all be gone by the time they get up there. Are my belongings and I worth the trek to the top? The smoke and flame billow in the distance as I prop the door closed.

I don't hear sirens, and even if they tried, they wouldn't be able to stop Wolf or his dad now that they're set on their path of destruction. No one who wants to can help me, and no one who can help me wants to. I am on my own in a way I've never been, not even when I went away because I always had a home to come back to.

At least I have one last stronghold. My tiny cabin on the far side of the mountain from Wolf is no more than one room and an outhouse, but I know for certain no one will find me here. Still, my skin crawls, and I shake in my terror. My gun is the only thing keeping me company, and I decide to never miss again. I was playing with Wolf, but I won't be anymore.

I cry for another few minutes before deciding it's time to make the best out of a shitty situation. I'm a Little, and that's what I do best. I've never quit for the Wolf before, and I'm not about to start now. A pile of supplies sits in the corner, and I dig through them until I find the old flint start and the kerosene lamp. It's not going to light off a spark at this temperature, so I press the small tank to my body until the gas and wick start to warm.

I'm vibrating by the time it's ready, and my hands shake so badly as I try to spark the

lamp. I almost give up, but one last try takes. I turn the knob down low not just to conserve resources but to keep myself hidden. There's very little chance anyone will see me with the smoke so thick, but I'll be careful or dead, I'm sure of that now.

Once I can see, I take a better look at my supplies. There's a camp stove, a couple of pots and pans for cooking, some dry bits of cotton for starter, and a few other survival items I thank my daddy for. The old walls creak with the wind, and the flooring gives just a little as I move. It's cold tonight, and normally, I wouldn't dare to start a fire or light the lamp, but I think Wolf and his dad are fully occupied for the moment.

I wonder how his father is doing. I know some of the shot hit him. He's got to be hurt at least. If he's off ruining my stuff instead of getting the wound treated, maybe I'll get lucky and he'll die of his own stubbornness. The idea of ending Wolf doesn't sit nearly as well or easily with me, but I realize how definitive a line has been drawn now. I tried to kill his father, shot him, and he's burned down my home. What's done is done.

We are done.

A stack of wood sits next to the stove, and while it's got a smell like animals have been pissing on them, they'll burn. I open the woodstove, fully prepared to stack the wood and get the fire started, but I'm shocked to find something inside. I lift the lamp to cast a beam of light deeper, and a rectangle sits in the back of the stove.

Reaching inside, I try to avoid the sides of the stove as I pull it out. Old, soot-coated, and rusted, it's a metal box. What the hell is this, and why is it in here? I'm curious, but not enough to worry about it with my life burning in the distance and my fingers and body aching with the cold. I set it on the wood pile, then grab a few pieces to stack and get them started.

Memories of my father showing me this place run through my head. I was young, the

first time we came out here, only eight, and he told me this was a secret between us. No one could ever know about this place, not even Mom or Corey, and I never understood why he trusted me, but it didn't matter because I felt special.

As soon as the fire catches, I put out the lamp. If anyone was going to find me out here, the tip-offs would be the light and the smoke. Well, the light is out, and with my livelihood burning down in the distance, no one will notice one tiny spiral of smoke out here.

I leave the door open so the fire can catch and grow, and to offer myself a little light. A slight glow won't catch the eyes from a distance like a lamp meant to throw light. I'm not sure what to do. I don't have a coat with me, or anything that will make me comfortable. There wasn't any bedding stored here, and if there was, it would have been long destroyed by the animals.

Exhaustion crushes me. I'm More tired than I've ever been in my life, and sit on the floor of my tiny hunting cabin to cry as I watch everything I care to own burn and billow into the sky through the filthy window. I prop my body up against the wall because I'm too scared to roll into the wood stove if I lie down flat, but I'm so cold I can't stand to be too far away. It takes a little time, but the heat gets rolling, and I soften. I haven't fallen asleep like this in years.

Something changes inside me as I drift off, and my daddy's most important lesson floats through my head. Never aim a gun at someone you don't intend to kill. I'll mean it from here on out.

CHAPTER 47

REDLEY

I forgot how much I loved it out here. The birds sing all around me. The little hunting cabin is such a natural part of the forest that they perch on it just like the surrounding trees. Sun drenches the small space. And the usually clean air stinks like the cinders of my life. I don't remember the last time I felt this peaceful, though I understand more deeply than ever that peace and happiness are scarcely the same thing. More importantly, this can't last.

Despite my aching back and the sore spot on the side of my head, I'm feeling pretty good about not being dead. What they did to my cabin last night is a solid indicator they plan to kill me. I was smart to get scarce, but that won't be the last they hear from me. They'll pay for what they did. I shiver as I imagine what they would have done to me if I were home.

Would they have burned me along with everything I own?

My ears perk toward some commotion in the distance. I'm not sure what's happening exactly, and sometimes sounds can be misleading with the way the mountains hang onto them, but I think something big is happening down in town, and things are finally quiet at the still smoking remains of my home.

They won't find me, though. I'm almost a mile away tucked deeper into the mountains than anyone knows to look, and I'll see them long before they see me. A few of my chickens however have found their way to me, not intentionally, but I

caught them puffing along, and despite the fact they're escape artists on their best day, I know this was Wolf.

The wood stove burned out late in the night, and it's not throwing smoke anymore other than a weak puff that diffuses long before it can be seen. There are a lot of reasons I didn't go home last night, and I'm grateful for this option for a place to hide. But what bothers me most is hearing how Wolf's father talked about me, realizing that there's really nothing happening between us more than some sick murderer playing with my feelings.

Most embarrassingly of all, I'm sad that he didn't want to marry me. Hell, that diamond was probably a fake. No plot is worth the kind of money that thing would cost.

The most important thing I realized is that Wolf is loyal to his daddy, not me. Afraid of him, not me, and as much as that upsets me, I need to put my emotions away and take his father seriously too. I ignore the stupid part of my heart that twinges in pain when I remember the hatred in Wolf's voice when he shouted at me to leave his house. I hated him too when I thought he killed my parents, so why wouldn't he feel the same when I tried to kill his daddy?

I stretch, trying to work the worst of the kinks out of my joints. I'm hungry as hell, and I don't have the time to hunt something, nor the energy to skin and cook it. Hopefully, one of these chickens laid an egg this morning, and I look out the window, planning to search for one. I turn back to the pile of supplies, thinking about getting the camp stove running.

It's then I remember the box I found in the wood stove last night. It's sitting on top of the wood pile, caked in soot like it's been in there long enough for it to turn back into coal. I don't get too excited. I know it's not Uncle Lester's money. That's long gone. Forgetting food for the moment, I open it. Fortunately, the contents of the box have

done much better than the outside of it, and seem relatively clean. It's just a couple of dusty books. I'm not sure why they were hidden inside the wood stove, maybe old logs. I open one and immediately snap it back closed.

My eyes prick with hot tears. It can't be. I open it again, and sure enough, there is my daddy's handwriting. I haven't seen it in so long I almost forgot what it looked like, but this is like walking back home after being gone too long. My hands shake, and I repeatedly wipe them on my pants, trying to remove enough soot that I feel okay touching something so precious. Daddy sure didn't keep it in pristine condition, but it was his journal, and it's not the same if I mess it up.

I take a few deep breaths as I hug it to my chest. I haven't even read a single passage, just the date he started in this journal, the year he was killed. Time confuses the hell out of me. How can I be a grown woman and a little girl at the same time? How is my father gone, but I can feel him right here beside me?

I kneel on the ground and sob, sob for everything I've lost, everything my life should have been, everything Wolf has been so happy to take from me, but why? Why did they take my whole damn life? What game have these Wolves been playing all along. I don't have any real answers, and I'm sick to my stomach over it.

I really thought I was onto something with the power company and then finding his home? Obviously, it all brought me closer to the end, but did it actually help me? I'm out here alone, crying in the damn woods while they're doing everything they can to tear apart whatever remains of my life. Was an ending actually better? Just because I'm hiding out while planning what to do doesn't mean Carver Badgley will get away with it, I tell myself. He's going to pay even if I have to take down Wolf too. I'm sorry, Daddy.

I finally stop my crying. I never cried this much when Granny was around. She would have beaten me senseless, and maybe I need a little bit of that now. I need to

remember the tough-as-nails, mean bitch stock that I come from if I'm going to take on two wolves. I open my father's diary again, just to feel his presence and maybe to know what he was doing in his last days. My hunger is long forgotten with my discovery. I open it back up and start to read my father's very last journal entry, dated just days before he was killed.

April 15th 1963

I don't think Elias is who he says he is. Jolene says I'm crazy, but I think he might be the Wolf.

He's been following me, and every time I catch him, he's got a convenient excuse. At first, I thought I was acting crazy, but after digging deep through great-granddaddy's journal, I just don't think so.

I stumbled into this, wasn't even looking for anything in particular, just digging into family history and finishing great-granddaddy's survey.

I don't know what it is, but I think there's something to find, just like great-granddaddy did, and I don't trust those strange yellow eyes.

Elias? Something tells me I know exactly who he's talking about, and my father was right. Carver wasn't telling him the truth about who he was.

Flipping through the pages, I find a number of other entries mentioning his name, starting off positive, liking him, thinking they could be friends, and ending in the suspicions I read on his final days. Knowing that my father was killed by Wolf's dad, knowing that those yellow eyes run in their family, I don't have any doubt who befriended my father.

I close my father's journal and open the one beneath it. My hands shake again as I

realize what it is—the survey he was discussing following and finishing and great-great-granddaddy’s personal journal. There’s a line on the page that my father was following but never finished plotting. He was killed trying to finish the same survey Great-great-granddaddy died working on. Isn’t that convenient?

I tuck back into the cabin to read them both as thoroughly as I possibly can, and there’s one thing I notice, Daddy and Great-great-granddaddy both were bothered by their friends’ yellow eyes, and that’s ultimately what drove my daddy to believe he had befriended the wolf, and that he was inches away from finding out who the wolf really was.

There’s only one option that makes any sense to me. Find out what’s missing from that map, and what the hell did my daddy find that led to Wolf’s dad killing them. I need to figure this out, but if I’m going to be hiking, I’m going to need supplies. One fact rolls through my mind on repeat. My daddy knew the truth, at least some of it, and that’s why he died, but what about my brother and mama?

Why are they dead, and why did I survive?

CHAPTER 48

REDLEY

Later that afternoon, I head into town for the supplies I need for hours of hiking through treacherous mountain terrain. There's a reason people avoid a very large section of this mountain. It's profoundly steep, covered in cliffs like the earth cracked the mountain, and there are lots of places that are truly unsafe. It is profoundly beautiful, though.

I'm afraid to run into Wolf and his dad, but I'll be as fast as I possibly can and keep my eyes out for trouble. They're much more likely to spot me here and follow me to a secondary location anyway than they are to fully blow their cover and act in public. That will give me some time.

As I'm pulling back into town, I'm struck by a sight I've never seen before. A team of vans line the main street, and on the side of the road, men holding cameras, microphones, and those things on the sticks have gathered. There's a news crew in Grimm Groves.

For a minute, I just slowly roll down the road, staring at them moving and setting up an interview, but I can't tell who it's for. This may be the strangest thing I've ever seen. No one even knows about this town. Why would they come here now?

I never thought to call the news. We don't get it out here.

When the fire station parking lot comes, I still don't have any answers, and I'm

forced to let it go or pull over. Given the fact I've been present for a cop's murder, I think it's wise to figure out why someone is trying to report on a town that no one even believes exists. My tires bounce as I meet the shoulder, and I put her in Park.

I jog back over to where they're setting up, trying to keep my head down at first but quickly realize that's pointless. Not a single person is looking in my direction. Everyone in town is out here trying to figure out what's going on or waiting to smile for the camera. Giggles and blushes cover loads of faces, but waiting on the edge for her turn to speak to the crew is none other than Bobby's widow. She's not smiling. Well, shit, that's not good.

I assumed if it was about me, it would be about the cop or the car, but it's Bobby, and I guess that makes sense too. His wife is an out-of-towner and wealthy; his father left the mountain for the city, so connected people are involved. People who not only care about Bobby but believe in Grimm Groves and want to see justice. I'm not sure if I'm more shocked or disgusted that someone's finally taking action, and it's far too late. Kids died, and no one cared, so why now?

His widow's blond hair and makeup are all done up, but it's still obvious she's been crying. Blotchy hazel eyes, red nose, all the typical hallmarks of grief and distress. She wears a handsome suit dress, and I admire her for her strength while blaming her for being bold enough to make this happen.

Was Bobby actually worth it, though? I wonder if she knew what kind of man she married and if she really loved him or just tolerated him. I hope it was the second, but either way, Bobby isn't coming home to her. Wolf made sure of that. So this all seems like a poorly timed joke to me.

I swallow hard, my guilt swelling like an overdue pregnancy ready to bust out of me. I don't know what Wolf did with Bobby's body, and I'm glad I don't, but I pray to God that whatever it is doesn't lead back to me. I've only ever spent the one night in

a jail cell, but I can't say I'm keen to repeat the experience.

I can't believe I've become so selfish, but it's hard not to think about how much more complicated their presence makes my situation. There's something out there in those woods, and I won't stop until I find it. The last thing I need is people who don't know what they're doing crawling behind me.

The large audience tightens around her as she steps up to the microphone to speak. I think I'd look a lot more out of place if I backed away right now. Despite my instincts to run, I huddle in with everyone else, using every ounce of self-control not to let the guilt show on my face.

"Bobby is a good man and a good husband, and all I want is to see him come home safe."

Bobby learned the expert skill of two-timing from his father, and Wolf saved you from a lifetime of embarrassment and eventual loneliness, but sure, keep crying. A nasty voice speaks from somewhere deep inside me. I have to remind myself I'm not on Wolf's side, and feeling like I am will result in my death.

Once again, I'm frightened by the nature of my own thoughts. Who am I anymore? Who am I becoming? Bobby may not have known me like he thought, but he was right about one thing—I am not the old Red. That was something he died to tell me, even if he didn't realize the cost of moving in on me. My hands twist in anger as I think about it. How dare Wolf lay claim to something he never wanted?

"Please, there isn't anything I wouldn't do to have my husband back. I don't have a ton of money, but I've got enough to offer a reward. One hundred dollars to anyone who helps us find Bobby." She sniffs and dabs her eye with her handkerchief. "God bless you all."

I can't listen anymore. Since I know the truth, her pleading makes me sick. The outpost is about two hundred yards away, and I leave them to it to see what I can grab for my trip. I might be in the woods for a long time, and it's not like I can run home for supplies. That stings terribly; Pop fell those trees to build that home for Granny, and now it's gone, bones turning to dust like them. The air down here still stinks like fire.

Danny stands behind the counter and tips the corner of his mouth up when I walk inside.

"Afternoon, Red."

"Afternoon," I agree as I start to eye up supplies.

"Interesting outfit," he comments.

"I like what I like."

There are only a few packs up on the wall, and I pull down one of the bigger ones, not sure how long I'll be out there.

"Saw something up on the top of the mountain last night. Wasn't your place, was it?" he asks when I'm facing fully away from him.

"Yep," I answer, not bothering to turn around until his eyes start burning a hole in my back.

When I do face him, he keeps staring, trying to figure out something to say. I guess it's my fault for not making this easier on him. That would be the friendly thing to do, but after everything, I'm not feeling sociable.

“Anything I can do to help?” he finally settles on.

“I’m going to be out in the woods for a while. I need whatever you got.”

He rubs his chin. “You still got your parents' place, don’t ya? No need to stay out there.”

I really wish that were true, but I know for sure after the night with Porter that the cabin needs a lot of work before it’s safe for anyone to sleep in it. I don’t need to wind up sick on top of everything else.

“Not staying anywhere, looking for something, might take me some time. I need whatever you got.”

“Can you pay?” he asks the one question I’d hoped he wouldn’t. He usually lets me run a tab, but I suppose with my cabin burning to the ground, I’m not a safe investment.

“Can I write you an IOU?”

His eyes narrow as he looks at me. His scrutiny stings, even if I don’t really blame him for it. “Got any collateral?” he asks.

I smile because I do. It’s the one thing I have right now.

“How about the truck? I won’t need it while I’m hiking anyway.”

He shakes his head, but he’s not saying no. He’s just thinking.

“That’s too much.”

“I’ll be taking a lot, and you’ll give me my truck back when I pay you.”

He thinks for a minute before he nods. That makes more sense than the truth: I can’t pay him back, and I’m hoping my daddy and great-great-granddaddy were right that there’s something out there worth finding. If not, I won’t be seeing my truck anytime soon.

“Alright, Red. As long as you’re sure you can pay me back.”

“I’m sure,” I lie.

I finish loading a giant pack with food, supplies, and everything I think might be useful. There aren’t any women’s clothes, but there is a jacket, and while it’s a little large, it will do just fine. I have no clue if I’ll ever get the truck back, no clue if I’ll be able to pay him, but Daddy was sure of it and I am too. There’s something out on that mountain, and Great-great-granddaddy died looking for it.

“Can you give me a ride?” I ask him.

“How far?”

“It’s on the mountain, not too far up, but around the lee side.”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go, Red,” he agrees.

We leave the outpost, and he waves me to my own truck. I climb in, and he gets into the passenger side. I start her, and we’re rolling down the road a minute later, but a familiar flash of brown hair gets my attention. Wolf stands off in the woodline, watching me.

CHAPTER 49

WOLF

I don't know what the fuck Red was thinking getting into the truck with him, but it's taken all of my self-control to obey my father rather than following them and finding out what the hell Daniel Payton thinks he's doing within spitting distance of my wife.

Driving back to my house, I wrestle with my temper. It's been a little longer than usual since I killed, and I'm getting twitchy. Daniel suddenly seems like the perfect target, and I imagine graphically how I might do it. I've been killing so long there's no doubt I'm addicted to the adrenaline, the power. Red gives me many of those things, but right now she's giving me the opposite.

Never have I ever felt so stressed, concerned for another person, or frankly angry. If I'm being really honest with myself, I'm hurt and jealous too. How could she get in that truck with him so easily when she ran from me, when I don't even know she's safe?

I realize there's some hypocrisy in that, given I allowed my father to burn her home to the ground, but I never said I was fair. I'm a terrible person, but I'm growing more certain by the day I love her. That's the only word I can fit to this overwhelming sense that she is everything. The smoke smell of her home sticks in my hair despite the shower I took, and it stinks like my own failure.

I shouldn't have let my father do it. We've already taken too much.

When I pull up, his car sits in the driveway already, and I can tell by the way he's sideways across his intended spot that he came home in a bad mood. I'd like to avoid him, but that will only worsen the situation.

I climb the steps, then walk into the house.

"Wolf!" he shouts from a sitting room near his downstairs office before I've even closed the door. His voice distorts with the pain, because he's not doing well. I could take him into the city for real medical care, but I've offered already, and he's declined colorfully.

My self-control is already suffering from seeing Red in her truck with another man, and my father is getting nastier by the hour. I don't foresee this going well. He's spiraling, and I'm not sure how much longer before he really loses it.

I step into the room and find him sitting on the couch with a bottle of Rye between his legs and a glass in his hand. His upper arm and shoulder sit tightly bandaged and propped beside him. He finally gave in when he started to develop a fever. Blood leaks into the fabric, and he's still lousy with buckshot. He shakes as he stares at the TV, and I decide the man has officially lost his damn mind.

"What did your little bitch do this time?" Spit flies out of his mouth, and he slugs back the rest of his drink before I can answer.

He takes me by surprise because I'm really not sure. He didn't see her driving away with the outpost merchant, and that wouldn't matter to him either. As far as I know, she really hasn't done anything but hide surprisingly well.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

I'm trying my very best to be accommodating, gentle, knowing he's one word away

from blowing his top. Drunk as hell, suffering, this is the worst of Carver Badgley, and I've spent too many years getting the worst of him to take that lightly.

"Fuck you, Wolf. Did you know?" He points an angry, sloppy finger at me.

"Know what?" I ask through my teeth.

"I'm so fucking tired of you playing stupid."

I'm actually getting a little tired of being accused of faking stupid. Maybe I just fucking am.

"Maybe you're tired from the buckshot," I tell him as I watch him struggle to breathe through the pain. I enjoy his suffering more than I expected to. Maybe he's already done more to work a wedge between us than I ever imagined.

He glares at me, and a moment later, the crystal glass he was sipping from flies past my head and shatters on the wall. I hope the effort to throw it hurt him 'cause it didn't hurt me despite how close it came to my head. He snarls in fury that he missed, and it takes all my effort not to choke him to death right now.

"Why am I full of buckshot, Wolf?" He grunts in pain. "HOW THE HELL DID SHE FIND MY HOUSE?!" his voice rips through several octaves as his wound torments him. Too bad for her she doesn't get to see what she's done to the man she hates so much.

A faint ring fills the space as he quiets, the vibrations bouncing off the china and vases around the room. My stomach flips as I try to make sense of this situation. Is it the pain or the impending infection making him act, or is this just what a failing psychopath looks like?

“I don’t know how she found the house, but why are you so angry right now ?”

“You haven’t seen?”

He lifts his remote, turning up the volume. I turn to the screen, which I didn’t realize was playing behind me, just muted. Reporters cover the mountain. Not only are they looking for Bobby but they’re asking all kinds of questions about Grimm Groves, questions we’ve worked hard and paid a lot of money to prevent people from asking. My jaw drops as I watch a multi-generation, hundred-plus-year-old secret get blown to shit on national television.

“She finally got them asking questions,” he says.

I nearly laugh at his assumption because I know damn well my little Redley, who’s never even owned a TV, didn’t come up with this. She thought I was a goddamn immortal monster who had killed her entire family. She’s not stupid, but she sure is naive. I could try to explain any of that to him. That she lights her home with oil lamps and entertains herself by working hard and chasing me through the woods at night, not contacting the news, but he would kill me if I tried to defend her right now.

A handsome man stands in the center of town as he speaks. “Is Grimm Groves a scenic mountain town that people have forgotten about, or is something more sinister happening here? And where is Bobby Archer now? His wife is begging for our help in finding him, and we plan to do that now. We’ll be back with you at six.”

The broadcast ends, and a commercial replaces it. The only warning I get is a whizzing noise and a deep sense of dread before the bottle collides with the back of my head. The blunt force fades as it shatters and rains glass all over me, blacking out my vision and slicing my scalp apart. I stumble forward but manage not to fall. Searing pain covers my head, bits of glass drop to my feet, and hot blood drips down my skin.

“What the fuck!” I shout back, every inch of me vibrating and begging for retribution.

My fists clench, and I’m brought back to the night Red’s granny beat her into the broken glass on the floor. Graphic memories of the way I slit her throat, how she tried to call for Red, but she didn’t fucking deserve her, and she died for it. What does that say about my own father? Why did Granny deserve to die while he keeps stalking? I’m not any better than he is, but if I’m going to kill people for scarring up their family, he should go too. The problem is, I don’t think I can seriously harm him.

I turn to my father, already deciding that I’ve had enough. This relationship between the two of us needs to end. This plot against the Littles needs to end. It’s fucking over as far as I’m concerned because I’m going to marry Red, and we’re not going to keep paying the bill for his life. I plan to say all of that, but I don’t get the chance.

He’s already on top of me, wheezing in pain, drunk as hell, and using his good arm to strike me again. The pain is nearly blinding with the chunks of glass still left in my head from the bottle, so there isn’t a chance in hell I’m going to let him keep beating on me this time. He keeps swinging, and I can’t get my head straight. I reach out, grabbing at him until I find his injured shoulder, and then I dig my fingers into his wounds. He shrieks in agony and falls back. His eyes wheel, and I think about killing him myself. I really fucking want to, but I can’t. He’s still my father.

“This is all your fault!” he shouts. “You’ve ruined everything, just like usual! Stupid, useless, worthless?—”

“I’m fucking done.” I cut him off. “I’m done with you.”

He takes an aggressive step toward me, and I push him hard. He stumbles back until he finds the couch and then slumps down, practically wheezing in pain. A sheen of sweat coats his skin, and I’m not sure if it’s an infection in the wound sight or the bullets poisoning him, but he can’t keep going like this.

“What does that mean, Wolf? Done with me?” he asks.

“I’m going to help Redley. I’m going to marry her, and I’m going to finally put an end to all of this.”

CHAPTER 50

REDLEY

“You sure this is it?” Daniel asks.

I compare the natural markings with the compass and the gridlines in Great-great-granddaddy’s map.

“Not as sure as I’d like to be, but close enough to risk it,” I tell him, folding everything back up and slipping it into the front pocket of the jacket I got from the trading post. I climb out of the truck and make sure I’ve got everything. Finally zipping the jacket, I take a deep, steadying breath.

I’ll need easy access to all that as I hike the mountain and follow the line. Great-great-granddaddy died before he could finish mapping. There are nearly five hundred acres left to search, but the fact that Daddy was killed when he looked here, too, gives me hope I won’t have to look too far, but too far is relative.

The hike is smooth at first, but soon enough, I’m climbing steeply up. I take breaks more often than I would like, the weight of my cargo far more than I’m used to. An hour passes without any trouble, just taxing physical labor and a constant sense that I’m poking into the very thing that got my family murdered. Am I knowingly climbing toward the same fate, naively thinking my outcome will be better? The only difference between me and them is that I’m the last Little. Whatever Wolf’s plot is, if I’m gone, I think they win.

The light is beginning to fail, and I've decided to camp for the night. I light my lantern and start picking out a soft spot when something in the distance catches my eye. At another thousand or so feet up, at a slight leftward angle, and on a different line than the one I'm searching, is a natural opening in the rock. Large enough for a man or two to pass next to each other but stealthily tucked into the mountain.

I've seen the opening in the cliff face before. The one time I needed to dump a body that I didn't kill. The shape of the cave tucked away, the feeling of endless curiosity, no way of knowing and no way of reaching it. I couldn't have guessed from that angle just how easy it would be to approach from Wolf's mountain. In fact, I have a perfect view of both his mansion and the cave from here.

This is Little land through and through, at the heart of it even. As far as I understand, our property is immense, though I've never seen the full maps to know the proper edges. But this part is definitely mine, and it's supposed to be empty.

Hell, I don't even know for sure if Daddy made it out this far or not before Carver killed him. I was always told it was lousy for rockslides and far too dangerous to test. There's no way, though, that this area has been abandoned for years. Like I saw the day I dumped Porter in the lake, there's a worn footpath.

Thoughts of resting for the night lay abandoned as I realize this is it. The feeling vibrates my fingertips and makes my heart pound in my chest. Great-great-granddaddy's survey line ended about a mile out from here. He didn't have this book on him the day he died in the woods, and I'm awfully grateful for that right now.

I climb the side of the mountain, feet sticking to the narrow path leading straight into the cave's mouth, and find the ground pretty sturdy. Confusion mixes with suspicion as my gaze travels far into the distance. The view is just too perfect. There's a reason they built their home there. Are they watching me enter right now?

What the hell? This is my goddamn property.

My feet keep moving, carrying me toward that opening. My fingers wrap around the entrance to a cavern, and I thank my lucky stars that there's enough light to see a few feet inside, but it's so tight, I don't think I can fit with my gun, and I need my hands to feel my way. I leave my gun with a nervous twinge before placing the pack next to it, then I tuck in. The only thing I keep is the oil lamp I'd already lit.

And if there are any people in here? It's too late anyway. They're going to get the jump on me long before I realize. The sun has nearly set now, and I hope the watching wolves won't notice the light inside the cave they're stalking, but why are they stalking it anyway?

I take a few steps through a very tight space, and much to my relief, it opens wide, and there's no more rock at my back. The cave appears perfectly empty, though far deeper than I expected, and when I listen carefully, I realize there's running water coming from somewhere within.

I'd be disappointed if I expected a rough cave dug into the mountainside. Fortunately for me, I had no idea what to expect. The walls are surprisingly smooth beneath my fingers, and I lose sight of the opening as I wind deeper inside. About twenty feet later, I feel safe enough to turn the flame up high, and the cave comes into fairly bright focus. The ceiling is higher than I could have imagined, and I'm surprised there could be so much open space inside the mountain without it caving in.

The walls are surprisingly black. That isn't the coal West Virginia is so famous for, but if it's not a coal seam, then what the hell is it? What really stuns me isn't the natural beauty or the fantastic discovery of the majesty of my own land. It's a giant circuit box on the wall, leading to a complex network of power paneling and a giant lever that appears to turn it all on.

What the hell?

I don't dare flip it, in case it triggers some kind of alarm and tells Wolf and his dad I'm out here, but part of me fears that's already happened, that they built their mansion right there for exactly that reason. But why? I look deeper, finding a series of lights anchored into the stone walls, and the farther back I go, I discover a cart on a small track.

Is there a mine?

I keep going until the sound of rushing water is everywhere, and the air is damp and humid in a way that it doesn't get above ground, the cave feeling like it's its own subterranean world. It tightens again the deeper I go, and it takes me a little bit to realize what's beneath my feet as I walk on the banks of an underground river. My boots soak through as I keep going, but I'm not ready to stop just yet.

When I step on something quite large, I look down and find a giant uncut stone. It's white, with a hazy shine on top of it, and I'm not even sure what I'm looking at. The light of the lamp is enough to show me that it's wet and dark, and whatever is in my hand glimmers like a grayscale rainbow beneath that crud.

"This can't be a diamond," I say out loud.

"But it is." Wolf's voice comes from somewhere in the immense darkness, echoing around me and making it seem like his presence is everywhere.

CHAPTER 51

REDLEY

My hands shake, but I don't dare turn. I don't have a gun or any weapons on me at this moment other than the diamond in my hand and the lamp, but I've already tried that before with very little success. I should have taken my gun, but my wretched curiosity got the better of me once again.

All but a couple of the last pieces slide into place. This is exactly what they wanted all along—diamonds, but I still don't get the why of how they've done things. I don't get how they found it to begin with. Great-great-granddaddy's journal might have had a lot to say about the mountain and distrusting his yellow-eyed friend, but he and Daddy both died without learning these secrets. I hope Wolf will at least tell me the truth before he ends the Littles once and for all. Really, that's all I want at this point. I want to be able to take the truth with me into the afterlife in case I have any more ancestors who are still confused about what's happening out here in Grimm Groves.

"You've been stealing from me? That's how your family got all that damn money? The house, the clothes, your entire life? You stole it from me?" I ask as I roll the diamond around in my hand.

"Yes." He doesn't bother to deny it, and I'm not sure if that makes me angrier. How dare they? I thought they stole my life, but dear lord, I couldn't have guessed just how deeply that ran.

"Why make up a ghost story? Why not just end us all and take our diamonds?"

Diamonds? ” I repeat because it doesn’t make any sense. There have never been diamonds in West Virginia except when Old Punch Jones found a giant one in his horseshoe pit.

“Most of the diamonds are deep inside the mountain, Red. The ones we’ve stolen have been carried out in the stream. The real treasure is still locked deep inside and can’t be cracked open if it belongs to you.”

I turn over his words for a minute before it all snaps into place.

“It was better to steal what you could than it was to let us know what we had. If we knew, we would have mined the diamonds ourselves and your whole game would have been up. So why haven’t you done that, then? Why haven’t you just killed me and stolen everything?”

His arms wind around my waist, and I gasp at his touch. I still haven’t turned to face him, and dammit, I just don’t want to. How can I look him in the eyes, knowing everything we’ve done together, all the ways he’s pleased and hurt me, and now knowing this. He’s lied to me about every single thing. He’s a thief and a rake, and... I suddenly understand exactly why he proposed to me. My jaw drops open, and with what he made the offer.

“You proposed to me. With a diamond you stole from me.” My whole body shakes as rage and something like generational agony sweep through me. “And you asked me to marry you because you needed to legally own my property to break it open and take the rest from me.”

A long moment passes before he says, “Yes. I was going to marry you to steal more from you.”

His words are like a knife to my heart. I thought I had already known all the greatest

pains imaginable, but Wolf quickly taught me just how wrong I was. You can be ended in so many ways, and your heart will still beat. I didn't realize it until this moment, but I must have let myself love him, even if just a little bit, because this type of agony, this type of betrayal, doesn't come without loving the person first.

“Where the hell did the legend you got your name from start? What's the damn truth, Wolf?”

“Our great-great-grandfathers were friends, and they moved out to this area together. Each of them used their savings and bought the mountains beside each other. They were hiking together when they found this place, found the diamonds. Mine killed yours right here as he was holding one of the rocks.”

I swallow hard as I keep hold of it. Is he just telling me a story or suggesting what may happen to me too?

“After he killed him, my great-great-grandfather tore him up real good, took him home, and told Old Netta a story about a Wolf, an inhuman monster that had descended upon them in the woods.”

Netta . He only mentioned her name a few times in his journal, so I didn't realize she was his wife, but he said one thing about her I'll need to check if I make it out of here alive.

“But why? ” I insist.

“He didn't know where the deeds were, and he knew the only way to get them out of Netta was to get her to fall in love with him and marry him. He thought if she considered him a companion in her grief, she would happily take him.”

“But she didn't.” It's not a question. We wouldn't be here today had she taken the

bait. Netta never remarried, though I didn't know her by name, only Great-great-grandma.

"No, Muffin, she didn't."

"So is this the part where you replay history and kill me in the same spot my great-great-granddaddy died?" I ask.

His nose skates against my neck. "Would you like that? You seem to enjoy painting me as the villain."

"You are the goddamn villain, Wolf." His legend wasn't just a lie. Everything about him was. "Have you ever cared for me?" The question feels so profoundly stupid, but it's all that my torn-up heart really wants to know. "Did any of this mean anything to you?!"

"Ever since I watched Granny beat you, I've cared, but the night that I climbed into your window, I wasn't there for any good reason. I was there to kill you both and find the deeds to your land so I could finally end this game. Everything changed when I saw you."

"Nothing changed! You've been killing all these people all this time. Why ? What the hell did any of them have to do with it?"

"They were the ones who found this place or came too close. Anyone who came within spitting distance has died for more than a hundred years. My family makes sure of it. I make sure of it."

"So you kill people to make sure you can keep stealing from me?"

My fingernails dig into the arms wrapped around me, trying my best to cut into him

and hurt him in some way, but he doesn't move at all. Am I so useless and ineffectual he can't even feel it when I make him bleed? I dig deeper.

"I'll never steal from you again. I swear on my life."

"Why the hell should I believe you?" I shout.

"You have no reason to believe me, and you'd be stupid to anyway, but I love you. Redley, I fucking love you."

CHAPTER 52

REDLEY

I turn to face him, shocked he has the audacity to say that to me. He doesn't know what love is. He can't even feel. How could he when he kills the way he does? He was raised by a monster, and not the type I thought he was, but the real kind with nothing good inside. Someone hungry and willing to destroy anyone in his path to satiate it.

What stops me dead in my tracks is the obvious wounds covering his scalp and the bruises on his face. It's hard to tell if the shadows are making things worse with nothing but a gas lamp to see by, but I know for sure something terrible has happened to him.

My heart twinges, and I want to comfort him and make sure he's okay, but then I remember not only does he not deserve it, but I'm betraying my entire family by giving it to him. Everything he stole from us is centered here.

"I love you," he repeats, but I don't dare take the words in. I already said he's abused and battered my heart too many ways—an insincere marriage proposal, sex like I didn't know existed, and now this? An offer of love. It's too much, and I wonder if maybe he's just as evil as his father.

"You don't love me, and I sure as hell don't love you!" I tell him, trying to make him understand this is over. It's too far gone. "You and your father burned everything I had to the ground. You burned my home."

“I couldn’t stop him, Red, but I’m so sorry.”

“You couldn’t stop him?” I ask. “I had just shot him. You wouldn’t have even needed to hurt him to stop him. You didn’t want to.”

He doesn’t dare deny it. “I’m done with him. I told him I was planning to help you.”

“Miserable fucking liar,” I spit. “You let him take everything from me just like you always have, because you are just as quick to take everything from me, and I swear to you, Wolf, that is not love.”

“I’m a miserable liar?” he asks, pushing into my space even more. “How about you? You said you don’t love me, you miserable little liar. Why don’t you try that again with feeling this time?”

I hate that some part of me knows he’s telling the truth. It’s not all of me. I’m not stupid enough to let all of me love him, but I am lying if I say he hasn’t taken hold of my heart. I don’t answer him. Instead, I choose to ask him something practical while I can. Part of me still believes he intends to kill me, and this is just a way to make the game a little tastier for him. He told me once I smelled like cake, so maybe this is the part where he devours me.

“Were you still planning to take everything from me?” That’s what matters most to me right now. Did anything that happened between us change his plans? If he loved me, was he going to stop hurting me?

“Depends on how you look at it,” he says, and the moment the meaning of his words registers, I turn around and rip out of his arms so I can run like hell.

My boots echo as they slap against the water, quieting as I reach the drier part of the cave. He’s right behind me, but his feet aren’t as heavy. I’m not playing this time, and

neither is he. I know that if he were up to his usual self, he would've caught me already. Fortunately for me, I'm pretty quick, and he's just a bit slower than normal.

The small opening in the cavern sits a few feet away. It's nearly dark, twilight, and hopefully, I can avoid him in the forest rather than him avoiding me for a change. I drop the lantern as I shove through the too small opening, and it smashes on the ground.

"Red," he shouts my name as he enters the antechamber, and it echoes so loudly. It vibrates down to my bones, but it's too late. The night air is a bit too cold, and I curse myself for leaving behind the pack that carries everything I'd need to get warm.

I'm still wearing Wolf's damn long johns, but at least I have the benefit of the thick coat. I was never stupid enough to take that off. My feet fly beneath me, and I'm not sure what to do because I found my destination quicker than I expected, and I also found Wolf.

He screams my name again, but I don't dare think I've escaped him. The mountains can do strange things to sound. I'm still holding the diamond I found, so if I can get back to the trading post, I can get my truck. Daniel might not believe it at first, but it should be obvious with a little bit of testing.

It's pretty stupid to trade a diamond the size of a small grape for a 1950s Chevy, but if Wolf is telling the truth about what I've got buried on my property, all I need to do is find the deeds myself, and I'll have enough money to end the legend of the wolf on my own terms.

But where in the hell are the deeds?

As I weave around an oak tree, I hear rustling behind me. I don't dare to look and check if it's an animal or him. I just push myself even faster. The sense of being

pursued climbs higher, pushing my heart rate to a painful beat.

He's hot on my trail now. Heavy footsteps pound behind me, and his breaths saw in and out. I know he's hurt and struggling, and I shouldn't care about any of that.

"Leave me the hell alone," I scream.

He doesn't say anything back, but I feel the swipe of his fingers as they nearly tangle in my hair. I push myself harder, running faster than I ever have in my life. My arms pump, and when a fallen tree crosses my path, I jump, clearing at least six feet.

It's not enough, though.

Heavy feet close in on me. I gag as my shirt tightens around my neck. I'm lifted off the ground, and it takes me a moment to realize that Wolf has grabbed me by the back of the jacket and is carrying me like it's scruff on a puppy. I struggle to breathe as I fly through the air, but everything comes to a crashing stop when he drops me against the forest floor.

At our current incline, I roll. My body slams against the hard mountain rocks, sticks, and whatever else is protruding from the ground. By the time I come to a stop, lying flat on my back, every inch of me hurts as I pant.

Wolf is already there, jumping on top of me like I'm his prey.

CHAPTER 53

REDLEY

The jacket I got from the trading post goes first, then he's pulling off the long johns. I can't see him well in the dying light, but I feel him all around me. His fingers dig into my thighs as he pulls my ass against him, ready to penetrate me. I wonder if he's been this turned on every time I've chased him through the forest, and if so, why he waited so long to force himself on me. Is Wolf a better man than I think he is, or do I just enjoy fucking him more than I ever thought I would?

Before he does, he leans down and kisses me so hard it's like fighting, like a tangling of wills and pain. He bites my lip, and I moan into his mouth before snapping his top lip in my teeth. He lets go, and I let go of him too, but if I was hoping he was yielding to me, he proves me wrong by moving to my neck and biting the tender skin there instead.

The emotions are messing with my head, and his lips and teeth on me are destroying whatever chances I had left for fighting him off. His hand slides up and over my breast, and he grazes my sensitive nipple, and with that, a flood of wetness follows but also a flash of sanity.

"Stop," I tell him, my back rising and slumping against the forest floor repeatedly. He doesn't listen, fingers digging into my pussy lips so he can spread me open and better get at the contents.

"Stop, Wolf," I repeat. "I won't do this with you anymore. I don't love you. I hate

you.”

He pulls off his shirt before he holds my arms to the ground above my head, and when I struggle against him, it’s more like a hot writhing of naked skin.

“You do love me, Redley, and I’m going to make love to you whether you want to accept me or not.”

“Never,” I promise him.

“Right now.”

He’s so impossibly large above me I can hardly believe a man’s shoulders can span this wide. I hate to admit that I feel incredibly fragile in his arms, and that’s part of what turns me on so much about Wolf. The uneven ground digs into my back, and with the last light of the dying sun, his expression is ferocious.

He could kill me so easily if he wanted to. Hell, he has killed so many people, including my own granny. There’s no good reason for him not to kill me except for those deeds, but even I don’t know where those are, so fucking me wouldn’t help him anyway.

What was his plan if I said yes to marrying him? Yes, I may be the last Little, but I don’t technically own a damn thing if I can’t find the proof, and people have proven time and time again they don’t care what happens in Grimm Groves.

He laughs above me, like this is the funniest thing he’s ever been a party to. He’s insane. He and his family have ruined everything. Hell, he and his dad burned my cabin down last night, and now he’s on top of me laughing.

“You know how I know you’re lying about loving me, Redley?”

He uses my full name so infrequently my entire body pulses beneath his. I don't ask him how he supposedly knows. As far as I'm concerned, he's wrong. He has to be.

"For all the times you've shot at me, hit me, done anything against me, this is the best chance you've ever had of actually hurting me, of getting away."

"Shut the fuck up!" I shout as he releases my hands and starts to pull his cock out of his pants.

"You don't love me?" he taunts. "It's so easy for you to hurt me? Well, do it, do it right now. There are chunks of glass sticking out of me!"

"How could I do that to you when you pulled the glass out of my face in the same damn situation?" I know it was his dad. It had to be.

"It's more than that, and you know it! You know damn well I deserve to pay far more than that for my sins."

He pulls me closer to him, lines his cock up with my entrance, and spares no time shoving himself deep inside, yet I don't stop him. I make no move against him. For the first time, I have a real chance to fight him and get the advantage.

He's probably got a concussion, and he spent so much energy chasing me. He's supposed to be resting, someone sitting with him to make sure he doesn't fall asleep and not wake up. That would never be me, and it would be so easy to reach back and grab the wounds. Even after everything I've learned tonight, I just don't have it in me. My stomach turns at the thought of hurting him.

He stares into my eyes as he says, "Redley Little, I am so fucking sorry for everything I've taken from you—your time, your home, and maybe even your choices—but I love you."

“When did you decide all that?” I ask.

He grits his teeth as he shoves deeper inside me, but he doesn’t answer.

“I said when did you decide that, Wolf?” His hands roam my body while his tempo picks up, and he starts to fuck me in earnest. It’s like he’s daring me to strike him, trying to piss me off as much as possible to prove his point. He grips my hips, pumping into me as hard as he can, but he refuses to answer.

“Was it when you burned everything I have?” I shout at him as he keeps fucking. “Did you love me when you stuck your dick in me the first time, or were you still just working for your daddy?”

His silence tells me everything I need to know. He may enjoy me, he may love the chase, but I am nothing but a game to Wolf, and one he plans on winning.

I reach above my head, fingers digging around tree roots for leverage. I pull myself hard, up and off his cock, but he’s back on top of me, shoving even deeper than he was before, but this time, he doesn’t hold me still. He uses all of the force in his hips to fuck me across the forest floor, my ass scraping on the rocks and twigs as he uses me.

“You don’t love me, Wolf, and you haven’t suddenly realigned your loyalties. You’re mad that he would dare to beat you the same way I was beaten. You just don’t wanna be as low as me.” I can’t help but point at the scars on my face. Scars I’ve felt uncomfortable about since the day I got them. They remind me of everything wrong with me and all of my failings.

“I’ve been lower than you since the day I met you because there’s nothing I value more than loyalty, and you’ve split mine,” he shouts in my face, the depth of his rage surprising me and making me shake. “I might be a criminal, a murderer, a thief. I

might be destined to burn in hell with a long line of my forefathers, but I have never been disloyal until the day I met you.”

His lips sit an inch from mine as he quiets. My ears ring, and I can’t breathe. I can’t think. If he was trying to confuse me enough to get deeper inside me and into my heart, he succeeded, and I can’t tell if I hate him or love him for it right now. All I know is that if he keeps fucking me like that, I’m going to come.

And so what if I do love him? Doesn’t that make all of this more sad anyway? How many times have I needed something and not had it, and they’ve been living like kings on what rolls out in the stream?

“It doesn’t matter,” I say.

He seems to understand what I mean without actually taking my refusal seriously. Maybe I do love him, but there’s no chance I’ll be with him, no chance I’ll let him and his miserable father profit any more than they already have. I open my mouth to tell him that I’ll never be with him, I won’t give him a pass to mine my mountain and rob me dry, but before I can speak, he kisses me.

Who on earth does he think he is to kiss me like this after all that?

It’s passionate and intense but sweeter than I expected, and my heart clenches again at the idea that Wolf wants to be loved. Has anyone ever loved him? I need to stop thinking like this, looking for excuses for him to be better than he is so I can feel better about how badly I want him.

A constant unintelligible stream of grunts and growls leaves his mouth as he fucks me, and he continues the kiss. I know he’s hurting, but instead of fighting him, I lie beneath him, waiting for my inevitable orgasm.

A few more strokes, and I let go, my pussy wringing him hard as my orgasm rips through me. He follows right behind, and he roars as he empties inside me and quickly slumps against me. He doesn't move, and his weight becomes too much to bear.

“Oh shit, you're not dead, are you? Wolf, come on.” I try to push him, but he's so heavy. “Wolf, what the hell?” I ask, but I realize he's not conscious.

CHAPTER 54

REDLEY

Stark fear floods me as I check for a pulse. I didn't hear or see anything that would have killed him, but maybe it's his own damn head injury. I breathe a deep sigh of relief when I find that he is still alive. After a minute of pushing and wrestling, I manage to get out from under him but not flip him over.

He makes a noise beside me, and I think he's coming to, but he never rouses fully. I don't know what to do. I don't want to see him hurt or leave him here, but I wasn't kidding that I have to put this whole thing behind me. There's no way in hell I'm going to be with Wolf. I need to find those deeds and get his father out of Grimm Groves permanently.

I know he must have gotten out here somehow, so I check his pockets. My eyebrows shoot halfway up my face when I find my own key ring inside. My heart is in my throat, and I can't help but wonder if he actually did something kind for once. I head back in the direction that I had Daniel drop me off on sheer instinct. If Wolf saw that I traded him the truck and wanted to give it back to me, leaving it in the same place would make good sense.

I don't need to go that far. My truck stands in the middle of the forest, parked on top of an access road I had no idea existed.

What the hell?

I ignore the fact that I didn't know this was here, that Wolf and his family have a private access that they used to rob me and instead focus on the kindness of the gesture. I'm so moved that I'm considering driving the truck as far down as I can so I can load him inside and get him help. It may be stupid, but he's right. I think I do love him.

I unlock the door to the truck and climb inside, sticking the keys in the ignition with every intention of trying to help him. That's when I look to the right and find Daniel's dead body sitting next to me. I scream at the top of my lungs. If Wolf has regained consciousness in the distance, he certainly hears me.

I want to say I can't believe he did this, but I can. It's so typical Wolf.

After climbing back out of the car, I open the passenger door. In the same way Wolf caught me while I was running, I grab Daniel by the back of the shirt and toss his dead body on the ground.

Fuck Wolf, I'm leaving him here.

I take the truck back to the main road, then pick my way around the mountain until I find the closest access to my little cabin. Much to my relief, the majority of my supplies I got from Daniel are still in the truck, and I'm grudgingly grateful that there are a hell of a lot more things than what I got from Danny. It's almost like Wolf was trying to make something up to me, but I won't let that take root in my heart too.

It's cold tonight, but now that I have blankets, I don't dare start more than a very small fire in the wood stove. The light shouldn't be too bright, and the night should cover the smoke. I curl up and eat some smoked jerky and drink the canteen. I'm so tired and hungry it's seeping into my bones and making my foundation weak.

I take out Daddy's journal and Great-great-granddaddy's too, and once again read

through everything, but the benefit to a second read is that you find things you didn't the first time. He wrote in his journal that he told Netta before he passed not to trust anyone if anything happened to him. He would die as the last person she trusts and to always keep her secrets hidden with him.

I fall asleep, clutching both books in my hands, wondering if I have any hope of beating men who, by all accounts, are far worse than monsters.

* * *

The old Little cemetery is close to town, unlike my goddamn diamond mine, which is hidden on the lee side of the mountain.

It hardly feels real, but it must be, given I'm still holding a chunk of a precious gemstone in my pocket rather than my usual nothing. The terrain here is far easier, and it takes me very little time to reach the series of gravestones after I pull the truck off the road and do my best to hide it behind some trees and bushes.

Old leaves from seasons past crunch under my feet as I approach the graves. Despite how bad things have gotten for me and how fast, it makes me feel good to see all the flowers popping up among them like they are having a peaceful rest. Our original settling family chose the spot to bury our dead because of the natural clearing and cover. Other than the leaves and a few sticks, they've been pretty protected here.

Granny is the most recent one planted despite being a fair bit older than many of the others there. The dirt above her grave is packed down now but hasn't grown much moss or lichen like the others. Memories of burying her out here all alone fill my mind.

After Wolf asked me to go with him, I knew I couldn't stay here without eventually saying yes. I wanted what he offered too damn much, and it's only now that I can

admit that to myself. Granny already had a pine box prepared for the occasion, and I put that in the ground first. Her tiny withered body went next. I just wasn't strong enough to pick them up together.

I cried in the ground with her before I climbed back out and shut the lid. I suppose I could've let somebody help me, but it felt wrong to let anybody touch her who denied how and why she died. I may not have always seen eye to eye with my granny, but she sure deserved better than to be handled in death by people who called her crazy in life.

She's lying next to her husband. Like Old Netta, she never remarried after he died. Maybe that was part of why she was always so hateful to me. I was one of the last people who spent time with her husband before he passed, and he chose to spend a day fishing with my brother and me over spending the day with her. I always wondered if part of her blamed me for taking that time with him as well as surviving when the rest of my family died.

My heart jerks as I see my parents and my brother. I say a little prayer for each of them, hoping they're together and happy in the afterlife. After picking a couple of the surrounding flowers, I drop them on each grave. I don't spend long with them, or I'll start thinking and crying, hating myself for missing when I took my shot at their killer.

I keep moving, looking at the long line of Littles who have met their untimely end, always leaving one alive so there would be a chance to find those deeds and take everything. You can't rip a mountain apart for diamonds when it's not yours. He wanted to marry me to steal my land.

So I guess I was wrong. It was always a genuine offer. It just didn't come with any love attached. Once he was married to me, legal and proper, he would have all the time in the world to take what's mine. Hell, he could've easily killed me himself once

we were married and pretended it was the wolf. It wouldn't even be a lie. The people of town would assume he was just as crazy as Granny and me, and he could live his life as an unapologetic murderer.

So why the hell didn't he just do all that? Why skulk through the woods as a murdering monster instead of just coming to my door and wooing me? If Wolf had come to me with sweet words and gentle kisses, this would've been his land five years ago. I guess I can't blame him for being too stupid and shortsighted to understand that building bonds with people out of love is more valuable than those made by fear and manipulation. He is the Wolf after all. He's just an animal.

Great-great-granddaddy's tombstone is one of the most elaborate in the cemetery. You can tell from the size, shape, and epigraph that Netta loved her husband dearly. No wonder Wolf's grandfather failed in wooing her. She loved her husband and wasn't going to go with someone who was supposed to be his friend. On the other hand, I have been easy prey.

Despite what Wolf said, I don't think The Badgleys understand that, but the Littles have loyalty, married and natural-born alike. I came out here to confirm a suspicion. No one has ever found those deeds or either cabin. I've been staying at the little spot by the lake, and they're sure not there. There are a lot of places on this mountain you could hide something, but most of them aren't safe. They're exposed to the elements or buried in a way you might not find them again, but buried corpses tend to stay put.

My daddy had his own suspicions about the deeds, but all he ever wrote about them in his journal was that Great-great-granddaddy and Netta were the last who knew. Great-great-granddaddy wouldn't be the first or last Little to take a secret to the grave.

I'm about to kneel for a closer look when something catches my ear. I turn and find someone standing in the wood line.

CHAPTER 55

REDLEY

“Howdy, Redley, how’re you doing today?” Doc asks, and my eyebrows push together with my confusion. I’ve never run into him so randomly like this.

“I’m good, thanks, Doc, and yourself?” My born and bred Southern hospitality is kicking in, but in the back of my mind, I’m wondering what the hell he’s doing out here.

“The Smiths’ dog went missing. I’m helping them look for it, and I saw your truck,” he says by way of explanation.

I look at Doc carefully. He’s always been real short with me and made me feel kind of stupid, if I’m going to be totally honest, so I’ve avoided him. But now that I’m looking close, I notice something that’s been right in front of me the whole time. They’re not exactly the same color as Wolf’s, a deeper amber maybe, but all the same, he’s got yellow eyes, and how many people around here have yellow eyes? My hands shake, and my heart pounds, but I do my very best to act normal.

“Hate to say it, but the dog probably got eaten by a wolf.” I watch Doc as I speak, looking for a reaction. He’s always been one of the greatest deniers of the Wolf, a doctor, a man of science, far too high on his horse to believe in magic or curses. How many times did he say a death was an accident when it damn well wasn’t?

A sudden pit of dread opens in my stomach when I realize just how well it all fits into

place. He's been working against me the whole time because he's one of them.

"Oh Red, while I'm out here, your electric bill hasn't been paid this month."

I swallow.

"Oh no? I asked Bobby to bring the money down for me before he died, but I guess it never made it there."

"No, I suppose not," he agrees.

"How did you know anyway, Doc? My cabin's burned to the ground now so I wasn't exactly worried about it."

"I wasn't sure if that's what happened or not," he hedges. "I don't make it up to the top of the mountain much, but a bill is a bill."

"That is what happened. But how did you know I haven't paid?" I ask again, refusing to be dissuaded.

"Oh well, the company knows I have about the only phone in town, so whenever anyone doesn't pay, they just call me. I got a call about your bill just yesterday."

"Oh, I didn't know they call you. I guess I've never had a problem paying before."

"No, you've always been good. Anyway, if you get it to me, I'll get it to them," he says.

"Okay, Doc. Well, I haven't seen any dogs."

"All right then, I'll be on my way. Make sure you get that bill to me."

“Of course Doc, just as soon as I’m done here, I’ll bring it into town for you. Quick question, though. What’s the name of the power company? I’ve never known that before.”

“Oh, uh, West General Electric.” He’s the first person I’ve asked who’s ever been able to answer that very simple question, but he’s lying through his teeth. I know damn well which company services this mountain, and why the billing address is the Badgley mansion.

I’m not sure what his relationship to Wolf really is, but I know for certain his name is Doc Badgley, and as he’s leaving, his eyes stay stuck on Great-great-granddaddy’s grave. I wonder what the hell he was really doing out here because, as far as I know, the Smiths don’t have any dog.

Once he’s gone, I head back to my truck. Instead of going into town to give Doc the money he feels I owe him, I head back to the trading post. Daniel is dead now, dropped out of my truck and onto the forest floor by my own hand. I would and probably should feel sad for him, but I’ve seen so much death recently that it doesn’t actually seem real.

I wouldn’t be surprised if one day all of the corpses of Grimm Groves walked in, including the ghost of my cabin, and said surprise. It was all a prank. You’re just completely insane. Fortunately, Wolf and I are the only ones who know Daniel is dead yet. And Wolf doesn’t have a single reason to steal anything from anyone but me. Why steal from a trading post when you have a mansion full of treasures you’ve stolen?

I try not to be bitter as I grab a shovel, a pickax, and pretty much everything else that’s lying around. I break into Danny’s office and hoot with relief when I find he keeps an extra set of clothes here. Danny was a bit taller than me and completely flat-chested, so my pants are too long, and my boobs are busting out the top. Still, they're

an immense relief after the long johns, and at least they're clean. I guess I've technically got my own money now, but I'm not sure how the big fat diamond in my pocket helps me if I can't find anybody willing to trade it for gold.

I suppose I could go to the city and find someone there who could afford to buy it in American dollars. But I'm afraid that would be the very first time the cops paid any real attention to me, and I would go to jail for more than one miserable night. There's one thing I'm absolutely certain of, though. I only have one place left to look to find those deeds, and I'm pretty damn sure my daddy was ready to do the job himself before Carver Badgley killed him.

I haven't seen Wolf since I left him in the forest last night, and my worry for him is a constant drip in the back of my mind. I hate that he gave me the idea that I might love him. Hasn't he gotten enough from me already without that too? His entire family has lived a privileged, luxurious life on the back and deaths of mine, so why the fuck am I still worried about him?

I head back out to the forest, considering finding that access road instead just to make sure he's not still lying there. If he died, and I left him, it would be something close to justice, but it would not feel that way to me. I don't go to him, though, because going to him means admitting that I love him, means choosing him over my family and the pain his has caused, and despite everything between us, I'm not ready to do that. And why should I when he won't choose me over his own father?

I shouldn't ask him to, just like he shouldn't ask me to forgive him. You can't have things both ways. Instead, I head back to the cemetery. I keep my eyes open for Doc, looking around and expecting him to come out at any point. Knowing now that he's a member of their family, I find his presence on my property highly concerning. Does he know what I'm up to out here? Does he suspect I'll find it?

But I find I'm entirely alone. I say a quick prayer and ask my great-great-granddaddy

for his forgiveness before I put the shovel in the dirt and start digging up his grave. Hours pass as I work. He's not buried six feet down since it's not really possible with the rocky terrain, and I find the lid of his coffin at about three and a half feet. A metallic ping sounds when my shovel hits it, and I cock an eyebrow at that. We don't usually work that hard to keep the dead safe out here.

My heart pounds as I reveal the rusted surfaces, the holes starting to form from time and my own shovel. Let's hope if there's something inside it's not as rotten as everything else. My hand slides over the lid.

This is it.

Sweat coats my skin as I work, and when the coffin is nearly fully exposed, I sit to take a break and catch my breath. My concern that Doc is still circling hasn't left me, though every time I've looked over my shoulders, I've found nothing but trees and the occasional scurrying critter.

This time, though, when I look to the right I find someone standing there watching.

CHAPTER 56

REDLEY

It's not Doc who steps out from behind the trees like I've been expecting. At first, my heart jumps into my throat, thinking it's Wolf. He's about the right size, about the right coloring, but as my eyes focus, I realize I'm looking at Carver. His blond hair and lined face definitely don't belong to the man I refuse to love. He holds a pistol that I'm sure he can handle and aims it squarely at my head. I don't have any doubts he would greatly enjoy killing me, and that's exactly what he plans to do.

"Don't stop," he says. "You were just getting somewhere."

He steps out of the tree line, coming closer with the gun trained on me. My eyes run over him, and though I'm terrified, I realize he looks really bad. I knew I shot him the other night, but I assumed he missed more of the spray than he did. He stumbles as he moves, and I wonder if he waited so long to show himself because he was leaning against one of the trees to support his weight.

"I'm taking a break, actually." If he's going to kill me, then I'm going to die, but there's no way in hell I'll finish the last of the work for him and hand over whatever is hidden inside this coffin. Even if it's nothing but bones, I won't disrespect my great-great-granddaddy like that while I'm digging him up.

"You want to die, bitch?" he asks me. Wolf suggested I was his bitch once, and it pissed me off and turned me on. The word on Carver's tongue makes me want to carve the muscle out of his mouth and feed it to him.

“Not too worried about dying, actually. How about you? You don’t look far off.”

“I’m not fucking dying. Not until they break this mountain down to rubble and pull out every diamond inside. Not until I can lord over your daddy’s grave.” He tips the gun toward said grave. “And show him I won. That he let me be his friend, opened his door to me, and like ‘The Wolf’ I am, I turned on all of them.”

He’s pouring sweat. The bandages wrapped around his arm and shoulder are old and dirty, looking yellowed from sweat and puss, and he no doubt sports an infection. The yellow in his eyes has spread to the whites, and I don’t know what that means in medical terms, but I know your eyes don’t turn full yellow like that unless you’re real sick. The gun shakes in his hand as he aims it at me. It’s not that he’s nervous or unsure about what he’s doing. He’s weak, and it looks like he’s got one hell of a fever.

I have no doubt he can still shoot that gun and kill me, but I’m amazed he’s standing on his feet. Will I die from that gun, or will he die from the infection raging through his body?

“You know, it takes a special kind of coward to kill a kid,” I tell him, trying not to get myself too worked up, but here in my family’s place of rest, it’s hard not to feel a certain type of way about his presence.

“Takes a special kind of moron to trust your enemy,” he spits back, and I’m not sure if he’s talking about me or the entire Little line. They’ve indeed taken advantage of us a fair few times over the years, but that doesn’t make us stupid. We just didn’t know we had anything worth working so hard to steal for. There isn’t a chance a Little would have believed in that ghost story about the wolf if we knew there were diamonds on our land.

Great-great-granddaddy beneath me right now was the only one who ever learned that

secret, and he died before he could tell us, just like my daddy, mama, and brother died because of the monster standing in front of me. I wish I had my gun with me. It's sitting about five feet away, so it's not far, but he'll have more than enough time to put a hole in me if I dive for it. All I have is a knife, and he's not close enough to stab, and I'm not good enough at darts to risk throwing it.

Sweat coats my skin until I'm as sweaty as Carver. My heart pounds in my chest, nearly popping, and I'm not sure what's on the other side, but I hope to God it's soft. That it isn't loneliness and struggle like my life has been up until this point.

"Open the goddamn coffin!" Carver shouts at the top of his lungs, but I don't move an inch. "I said do it now. I swear to God I'll shoot you, you stupid little bitch."

I close my eyes and think of Wolf as a small boy. What horrible things must this man have done to him? I don't want to die, but part of me is relieved that at least one shot I took did its job. Carver might be dying slow, but there's no denying he'll die without medical care, and for whatever reason, he's too crazy to ask for it. The explosive pop of gunfire goes off around me, and I feel the shock of being hit, of dying, but I don't feel the pain. A full five seconds pass before I realize I'm not in pain because I wasn't shot. Did he miss?

I open my eyes and find Carver has fallen to the ground. He twitches back and forth, writhing in wordless agony for an excruciating moment before opening his mouth and screaming at the top of his lungs. I don't know how he shot himself, but I'm thanking God for the miracle.

I should have known it was the devil helping me and not some angel. Wolf steps out of the woodline, my granddaddy's pistol in his hand. He must have taken it from the cabin when they set it on fire. His father has dropped his gun beside him, and Wolf walks up to him. Standing over top of him, Wolf stares down at his dad with an emotionless expression.

“How could you?” his father asks.

Wolf doesn't turn away as he answers, “I guess you named me Wolf for a good reason, Dad. You were stupid enough to let me inside, weren't you?”

“How could you choose her over your own family, your own blood?” I can't see where Carver was shot, but somewhere on his body. He's fighting to speak but determined to twist a knife into Wolf any way he can.

“How could I not?” Wolf asks.

Wolf's hands shake as he points the gun at his father. He prepares to take the final shot and put him out of his misery, but it's not going to be that easy. He's not going to die point blank in the same place where my family he murdered rests.

“Stop, Wolf.”

“No, Muffin. I need to finish this this time. You wanted me to choose? Well, I have.”

“I didn't tell you to choose. I told you I was done with you,” I say as I climb out of the grave. “I told you I didn't want to be with you, and I didn't love you.”

“Well, you're a liar, obviously.”

His father makes a disgusted noise. “You chose her over me, and she won't even pretend to love you. You're even more of a disappointment than I thought, Wolf. I should have killed you like I did your mother, gotten rid of both my problems.”

Every inch of Wolf's body tenses, and I wonder if that's news to him or something he's had to spend years living with. I resent it, but every time I learn something new about Wolf, I can't help but feel for him.

“If I was old enough, Father, I would have gutted you for sport to protect my mother. She might be gone now, but it’s not too late to make a point, is it?”

Wolf doesn’t hear my approach, too caught up in arguing with his dying father. I pull out a pocket knife I got from Daniel as I close the distance. I’m standing behind Wolf with the knife to his neck when I say, “It’s far too late for that, Wolf. He’s mine.”

Wolf turns around quick, not worried about me or my knife for one minute.

“Fuck,” he curses as the blade knicks his skin. His eyes drop to the knife. “That’s what you want to kill him with?” he asks. “Seems a little small.”

“So I’ll feel him die.” I shrug.

I kneel next to the man who killed my family, not Granny the mean bitch who put these scars on my face, but the family who wanted and loved me more than anything. I run the blade over his sweat-slicked face, and he purses his lips to spit at me, but I slap him straight across the cheek, hard, before he gets the chance. I lean down, press my lips to his ear, and whisper, “I’m going to gut you like you did to my daddy, Carver.”

He curses and shouts a stream of profanities, and despite the fact I told him to stay out of this, Wolf kicks him in the side. Carver coughs and heaves, trying to catch his breath after the brutal force, but it never comes. I insert the knife into the soft flesh just below his rib cage. Dig that blade as deep into the fatty tissue as I can, and then drag it down.

It may be small, but it’s sharp, and it’s more than enough to split his insides open, even if it does take two passes. The knife ends at his pubic bone. He’s bleeding terribly, but I can tell I haven’t split him deep enough for his organs to fall out.

“This one is for my mama,” I tell him conversationally as the warmth and heat of his blood and guts spill over my fingers.

And because something inside me has truly snapped along the way, when his stomach is sliced open and he’s nothing but a bowl of guts, I reach inside that warm, nasty goo, and find his intestines. He wails in agony as my hand moves, and his screams echo like you wouldn’t believe, but there’s a smile on my face.

With a strong grip and a lot of determination, I pick up the slippery ropes and tug them out of his abdomen. A sick wet, slurping noise fills the air, and once his guts are slapped on the forest floor, he doesn’t last much longer. He dies, bloody and painful, right on top of the family members he killed.

I guess that’s a better gift than a few fresh-picked flowers.

CHAPTER 57

REDLEY

“Fuck, my cock is so hard.”

I refuse to acknowledge the psychopath at my side as I stare down at the remains of the Big Bad Villain in my life, the man who took away all the people who loved me. He may not have started this, but he surely enjoyed his part in it.

I’m worried whatever I did to Carver will seem like nothing but hypocrisy compared to what I have in store for Wolf. He’s every bit the killer his father was. He’s just not as cruel, not as personally responsible for my pain. It shouldn’t matter. I know this is a double standard, but I guess that doesn’t matter either. I won’t be with him, but I care far too much about Wolf to cut him apart slow and painful. He doesn’t deserve to profit off the Littles any longer, but he’s right. I love him.

“You liked that, huh, Muffin?” he asks with a wickedly sexual tone.

An excited chill runs down my spine as I relive it. I’ve spent so long focused on this revenge, and I always thought Wolf’s kindness to me that night would interrupt the eventual pleasure of spilling this blood, but it turns out this is the purest form of enjoyment I’ve ever experienced, better than sex with Wolf because I don’t feel like a filthy little betrayer. And I am turned on.

“You know I killed your father, right?” I ask as I look at him, and find nothing but intense yellow eyes and a look of hunger.

“I killed your bitch, Granny.”

“Shut your mouth, Wolf, she’s buried right there.” But my chastisement is only halfhearted. Of all the things I’m angry and hurt about, Granny’s death has fallen very low on the list. I guess in reality, you don’t have to mourn and grieve people who treat you terribly if you don’t actually want to.

“And you dumped his guts on the ground.” He shrugs.

A smile passes between us, and I’m so high off finally killing Carver, I nearly forget this isn’t some lovely little moment between Wolf and me. We’re not a couple. Never going to be one. As I’m turning over my conflicting emotions, Wolf looks back at the grave I was in the process of digging up, and the reality of the situation comes flying back to me.

“Oh.” The weight of the realization nearly takes me down.

“What?” he asks, expression falling as he processes my reaction.

“You’re here for the deeds.”

A long moment of silence stretches between us.

“I’m not here for the deeds. I’m here to save you. Fuck the deeds, Redley, they’re all gone. It’s just us. I don’t care about anything but you.”

I swallow hard. “I really wish I could believe that.”

He takes one last long look at me, the silence passing only so he can decide something. Wolf places a kiss on my lips.

“You do whatever the hell you want with those damn deeds if they’re even in there—burn them, sell your land, I don’t give a damn—but once you do it, come find me because I’m tired of waiting for what I actually want in life.”

“And what the hell do you want, Wolf?” I ask.

“I want you.”

He jogs off before I can respond, and I sit on the ground beside the dug-up grave and his father’s dead body for a very long time before I begin to even consider the idea that he left me alone when I know he never does.

The sun is about an hour from setting when I decide it’s now or never. Even if he is waiting in the woodline for me, I’ll have to leave for the night eventually, and if he was lying, he could just come back then. Hell, he could have just killed me for them, but he didn’t.

If he’s trying to screw with my head, it’s working. I finish carefully clearing away the bits of dirt and rot from the lid of the coffin before cracking it open. The old metal lid breaks, brittle and rusted from the time underground.

It’s a good thing I’ve seen so much death, or the sight of the bare skeleton might upset me. They only had natural fibers back in the day, so whatever they buried him in is long gone. His bones are oddly pretty, eerie, sure, but striking, and I’m relieved that great-great-granddaddy doesn’t stink anymore. Thick fear fills my throat. What if the deeds are just as rotten?

At first, I’m disappointed. There isn’t anything in here but some old bones, and if there was at some point? Well, they’re long gone. At least I killed Carver. At least I know now that I’m done, and I can leave. What Wolf does here doesn’t matter because I don’t have it in me to act against him. As I’m taking a second look just to

be sure, I spot something near the foot bones. Down in the bottom of the coffin sits a small and feminine metal box. On the top, the name Netta is carved into the finish.

I pull it out, wiping off dirt, dust, and flakes of rust before flipping open the little latch, and then the lid. Sure enough, the deeds are inside, but it's only one deed, along with a letter from my great-great-grandma.

To whomever finds this deed,

If you're my kin, I'm hoping you do right by us.

If you're the one who did my Clarence in, may God curse you to hell and more for what you've done.

And if this Devil Wolf was real, well God help us all.

Netta

I unfold the deed next and blink rapidly as I read it. This can't be right. This has to be a mistake. To my understanding, I've only ever owned two large properties, Granny's and my parents', and while they take up nearly half the mountain...

There's no way. The deed, singular, has to be wrong because there's no way I own this whole mountain, the whole town of Grimm Groves. Why would we let other people build and settle on our land for free?

I'm forced to wonder just how much old Badgley was able to convince Netta of. Clearly, she never fully trusted him, but he shaped the entire history of our mountain and family. Was it one of the Littles who pieced out our land and let people settle here, or was this something the Badgleys made happen too?

I just don't have all the answers, and I don't care anymore.

The man I wanted dead is gone. I can't kill Wolf for anything, and I'm done. I left that big-wide world for my small-town justice, and now I have more than what I needed. It's time to get the hell out of here and see what else the world has to offer.

"I'm getting the fuck out of Grimm Groves," I tell the mountain air. "I don't care if any or all of it's mine. I'm done."

CHAPTER 58

WOLF

Redley stays back with her family and my father for far longer than I expect her to, but I wait around anyway because I plan to bury my father while I'm out here. I know she won't want him on her land, but if she felt so strongly about that, she wouldn't have gutted him, making it exponentially harder to relocate the body. So now we're both going to have our family tree planted here.

I know I should be swamped with emotions. Losing my father should be a big deal, but of all the things Carver was—a killer, a thief, a cruel teacher—he was never actually that. He was the man who taught me to kill, my first and worst bully, and the type of shortsighted fool who would die rather than get himself medical attention. A hundred years of scheming died on his shoulders because I'm done.

I'm embarrassed to be his son and glad that he died before he could make more of a fool of our family name. Hell, my great-uncle, who lives in town and pretends to be a doctor, moved out of the mansion and into town specifically because my father behaved so impulsively he couldn't stand to be around his poor decision-making.

He's the one who does a lot of our smoothing over; he gets the mail delivered out here, and because he's respected as the town doctor, people listen to him when he tells them not to worry. His word has been the biggest obstacle between the people of Grimm Groves and the truth. When the doctor tells you it's just an accident or an animal, you tend to believe them.

He told my father over and over that without being able to properly mine the diamonds, we were at risk of running out of money and losing everything. Being at the mercy of what washed loose in the stream wasn't dependable, and it wouldn't last much longer. They fought viciously over it and, as far as I know, haven't even spoken to one another since. Other than him, we don't have any other family, but then again, my father is dead now, so I guess the fake Doc is my only living blood.

As I'm waiting and thinking very hard about the situation and what to do with my father's corpse, I'm struck with inspiration. Why would she ever dig up her great-great-granddaddy again? She would probably even be grateful that I took care of the issue for her. I'll just bury them together.

I'm apparently more distracted than I realized. Too late I hear a truck running in the distance, and I focus hard, realizing I recognize that engine. It's Red's truck. How the hell did she get past me?

I spring to my feet, wondering how I could have let myself get so distracted, but there's no way I can outrun her truck, no matter how slow it is. I run back to where I left the thing just to be sure, and Daniel's dead body lies slumped on the ground like she tossed him out and didn't offer him a second look. I'm proud of the vicious little monster she's becoming.

I have no chance to catch up with her on foot. Frankly, I don't know where she's been staying since she ran from me. I assumed it must be another one of her family's little hidey-holes. Her uncle, the moonshiner, was especially fond of finding hiding spots.

I run back to my house and grab my own car, hoping to catch her before she's gone.

CHAPTER 59

REDLEY

I break the tree line and hit the main road filled with an ambition I've never had before. When I left the first time, I was devastated and tempted by the devil. I was running away from my problems, not toward something. This time feels different, though. Yes, I am running away from Wolf again, but this time. it's not a question or a what-if. I know I love him, and I can't keep doing that. I can't imagine what kind of woman I'll turn into standing at his side, but I don't think I'm ready to see.

Everything I own or stole from the outpost is already in my truck, but I don't have money, and I'll need gas to get out of town. Wolf didn't kill the owner of the diesel station, which if he's going to kill people, can't it be deaths that help me for a change? A jolt of guilt pulses through me. I shouldn't be thinking things like that, but damn if it isn't true.

There's only one person in this town I know for sure has any money, and I'm not trading a full-blown diamond for a tank of gas.

I pull up outside his office, which shares the parking lot with the post office. The town is really quiet today. It's not that it's ever too busy, but the silence is overbearing, especially after the excitement of the news crew. The truck stops in front of the building, the door stands open, and a light shines from deep inside.

I open my truck door, grab my shotgun off the seat, and then hop down, boots crunching across the gravel. Since the door stands open, the bell doesn't ring when I

walk in, so Doc doesn't notice me right away. I'm not too surprised to find him with boxes in front of him, flying around the office with his things like he can't get out of town fast enough. I wonder if our conversation had anything to do with that.

I watch him under the light of his shop, wondering exactly who he is to Wolf. It doesn't really matter, though. Wolf is the only one in their family who won't die by my hand. His yellow eyes flash, and I shake my head at myself for not having realized sooner. That's what you get for having tunnel vision. I've watched enough, and it's time to put an end to this and get the hell out of town.

"Doc," I say, raising the gun. "Where're you headed?"

He stops in his tracks, looking up at me with a kind of hunger I've seen a time or two now. Just like that, he shows me his true face for the first time in my life. I knew there was something about him I didn't like, something that stank, but now that he's dropped the act, it's clear what stunk was the bullshit he's constantly covered in. I wonder if he's been a part of the killings all along or maybe just when he was younger.

"Not headed anywhere, Redley. Just doing some spring cleaning," he says, so obviously full of shit I'm not sure why he's trying anymore.

"You know, Doc. I've never known your real name, not even your last name. What is it?"

He clears his throat before he says, "Don't have one. It's just Doc to you."

"Where did you learn how to be a doctor, Doc. You're from Grimm Groves, aren't you? Never seen a medical school around here."

He sneers at me. "Some people are poor. Some people leave for an education."

“No, not everyone is poor, and I’m sure not.” I pull the diamond out of my pocket and hold it up for him to see. “I know almost everything.”

“I highly doubt that,” he answers.

He’s not a doctor. He’s not here to help anyone.

“Are you the one cashing all the checks for the electric bills? You ran these lines out here yourself, didn’t you? Stealing from my family all those years wasn’t enough?”

He looks up at me, surprised, a laugh in his throat.

“You really figured that out? Maybe you’re not more tits than brains after all, but as a matter of fact, no, stealing from you wasn’t enough. My nephew likes to spend money. Doesn’t matter, though, because I’m leaving. I’ll find someone new to steal from,” he assures me as he closes his case and slaps the top.

“You think so?” I ask with a little lilt to my voice. “You think you’re going somewhere with my money?”

“I suppose I am,” he says as he spares me one glance like he thinks I wouldn’t dare actually shoot him. Have none of these stupid fuckers figured out yet that the only one of them I’m weak for is Wolf?

If I’ve learned one thing from all of this, it’s don’t point a gun at someone you don’t really want to kill, and that’s not a mistake I plan to make with Doc whatever his name is. With the shotgun resting smoothly on my shoulder and my trigger finger sure, I shoot. The butt sits solidly against my shoulder, my aim is true, and I blow the old bastard’s fucking head off before he can give me any more of his bullshit.

I wait for my gun to stop smoking and then for what’s left of him to slide slowly

down the wall and hit the floor. Only then, I walk over to his corpse and take a closer look at my handiwork. The intense pleasure I got with Wolf's father was a more thrilling experience, but this isn't bad. I'm starting to get just a little too much of a taste for killing, and that's just another reason to leave Grimm Groves. I take one last look at him before I spit on his corpse.

"Rot in hell," I tell him before I finally return the favor to the Badgleys and rob them back.

I look through the shit he was packing up and steal everything worth my time, but most interestingly, I find ten thousand dollars of cash wrapped up in little bundles of five hundred dollars. I whistle long and low through my teeth, then I walk out of there with a bag full of money and opium and a fine blood spray all over me.

All I need to do is sell these drugs and this miserable fucking land, and I'll be set for life. No one ever needs to know about the diamonds. Wolf can keep stealing them from someone else for all I care. I am done.

CHAPTER 60

REDLEY

My hands are speckled in blood as they hang onto my steering wheel. The rearview mirror shows me the empty road behind me, and the low-hanging sun glows bright, making it harder to see. I'm heading east out of the mountain and then up the East Coast to Canada. Maybe I'll take a ferry or something into Nova Scotia. Wherever I'm going, I'm getting far enough away not to think about this hellhole for a while. I'm not sure where I'm headed, but Doc had a lot of money, and it's mine now.

Doc also had a sink, and I could have stopped to wash my hands, but I didn't feel like it. What's the point in washing your victory off your skin when you can wear it for a little while instead? I can't keep killing even though there are a fair few more people on my list. Cops who ignored me and people who tried to take advantage of me. Hell, there are a lot of bad people out there, and something inside me is screaming to fight.

I've convinced myself there will be some immense freedom for me, a new life free of complications, but I shouldn't be surprised to find the one and only road in and out of Grimm Groves is blocked. An El Camino is parked across the road, and Wolf steps out. I consider running him straight over. The truck can definitely take him. I don't stop, though, simply going off the shoulder to get around him. Again, I shouldn't underestimate Wolf.

A large shadow covers my windshield a moment before he collides with it. The glass cracks in a giant spiderweb, and his weight is so immense the shards nearly dip to my face.

“What the fuck?!” I shout at the top of my lungs. “What now, you miserable asshole?”

“Can’t leave now, can you, Muffin?” he taunts, but it’s weakened by the cough that follows.

I thought I had been angry with him before. Hell, I falsely convinced myself I wanted to kill him, but I truly think this moment is by far the most raw anger I’ve ever felt in my life. There’s no pain to twist the emotion, no sadness, just the raw urge to pummel him beneath my fists for fucking up my damn truck when I was less than an inch from free of him.

“You’re not leaving me,” he moans from atop my truck.

I shove the door open and climb out, coming to face the overgrown asshole lying on top of my hood. I stand in front of him, and he just looks at me, yellow eyes blinking. Does he even care that I killed his father? He sure did the night I took that shot, and they burned down my home.

“Yes, I am, Wolf. Right now.”

I don’t waste a minute, grabbing my bag and running for his car as fast as I can. I nearly get inside, hand grazing the handle, when he snatches me by the arm and whips me around to face him, and he doesn’t let go.

“You aren’t leaving me, Redley. You’re marrying me.” He shakes me for emphasis.

His free hand pulls the same diamond ring he offered me before out of his pocket.

“You stole that from me, Wolf. It doesn’t count as an engagement ring if you stole it from the person to begin with.”

“Redley, please. Listen to me,” he begs.

“Doesn’t feel like I have much of a choice.” I wriggle my wrist, trying to get free.

“Listen with a hope of seeing my side of things, please?”

“I’m not doing that,” I spit.

“I have something for you. It’s in my pocket. If I let go of you, do you promise not to run?”

“Fine!”

He rolls his eyes at me before he lets go, pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket, and hands it to me. I open it and scrunch my nose as I try to figure out what I’m looking at. I realize what’s happening at the same moment he says, “It’s the deed to my mountain, all my property, my house, everything. They’ve all been yours all along. I was just borrowing them. Well, except my mountain, that’s a gift.”

“Stealing them,” I correct, eyes roaming over the document like I can’t possibly believe what I’m seeing. After everything, why would he hand this all over to me? “You stole more diamonds than your mountain is worth anyway, but why, Wolf?” I ask.

“I just told you.”

“You’ve never done anything in your life out of a sense of morality. Why are you giving me all this?” I demand.

“Because I love you, and you want your justice, and this is the closest thing I could think to give you to make things right, as well as the other things...”

“Other things?” I ask.

“Well, if you don’t leave me, I’ll make you come every day for the rest of your life, for one. That’s a pretty good offer,” he says, and I hate to admit he’s tempting me again.

“It’s not enough,” I tell him.

“I gave you my home, my property.”

“If we’re married, it’s all yours again anyway,” I say.

“Not if you hide those deeds somewhere I won’t find them. Then I can never do anything but be with you and love you. Littles love their hidey-holes don’t they?”

“We do,” I say, thinking about his offer a little more than I’d like to admit.

“See, think about it. It would all be yours. I would never need to know where you hid them, and I can spend my life making all this shit up to you.” He waves his arms in front of him to generally signal what he’s making up for.

“What is all this ‘shit,’ Wolf?”

“Jesus, Muffin. You’re a princess, and you should have been treated like one from the beginning. I’m going to do that. No more scraps of everything, living hard for everything.” He sounds truly disgusted, and while much of it is his own fault, it warms my heart that he cares.

“What if I like things hard?” I cock an eyebrow at him, and I instantly regret flirting.

“I can fuck you hard and make your life soft. I want to. Let me make up for every

time I chased you too close to a cliff or made you go to sleep at night alone. I fucking love you, Redley.”

He pulls me into his arms, trying to impress the weight of his feelings upon me. I stare at his handsome face as he holds me. He’s still hurt from what his father did to him, even more so now that he’s collided with my truck and won. I can’t do this to my family.

“No, Wolf. Not after everything.”

He drops to his knees in front of me, and my mouth drops open in shock with him. There’s no sexual intent in his expression, though that’s the only sense I can make of his actions. He reaches for his shirt and rips it open, revealing a network of thick, fresh cuts. My throat clogs, and I assume his father did worse to him than I realized, but he couldn’t have. I look closer and really see what he’s done. The word Redley is carved into his very muscular chest.

“I could have gone with Muffin, but I wanted to make sure anyone who saw it really knew I loved you and not baked goods,” he says.

“I—”

“I needed to pay for what I did, right? Suffer for it? Bleed for it? I’m willing to do that. Hell, I’ll do it as much and as often as you want for as long as you want. I will do anything for you, except for leave you alone.”

“You’re not serious,” I argue.

“The only thing I won’t do is leave you alone. Run from me and let me show you that I’ll stalk you for the rest of your life, devour you, make you realize how pointless it ever was for you to try to avoid me to begin with.”

I let his words process for a moment as I stare at what he did, and I hate to admit that this has the most effect out of everything he gave me. What does that say about me? I tip my head to the side as I eye his body. “It is sexy,” I say. Everything about him is hot, and because I’ve acquired this strange taste for blood, I dig my fingers into the wounds, and my pussy throbs when he hisses and flinches.

“Anything, Wolf?” I ask. “Anything to be with me?”

He looks up at me from his position on his knees and nods, yellow eyes completely sincere. I’m still not convinced I should forgive him or that spending another minute with him is the right choice, but right now I can’t shake him, nor do I want to. I want to show him how he’s going to pay for his sins.

I dig my fingers into the cuts one more time, and he groans. My pussy gets even wetter, but if I thought it was all pain spurring him on, I’d be wrong. His cock is as hard as can be, pressed against his jeans and creating the most delicious outline.

“Do you like that, Wolf? Do you like when I hurt you?”

“Fuck, yes.”

The sound of his arousal is more than I can take. I’m not sure I have any points to prove other than wanting him to make me come, but two things make a person stupid—love and lust—and goddammit, I feel both in spades for Wolf.

CHAPTER 61

WOLF

Her fingers dig into my skin, and I can't help but go feral for her. I've always liked pain, administering it originally, receiving it came later, but fuck is she lighting up every part of my body right now. I want to hurt her back, that's what would really complete this moment, but this isn't about me.

I need to prove to her that I can go against my natural inclination and put her first and be the kind of man she needs me to be. That might be a lot of pressure to put on my tongue, but I think it's up to the job. I lift her and place her on top of the hood, and since it's a little chilly outside, I decide I don't expressly need to see her tits despite how much I want to, and I'll leave them covered and warm for her sake. Her cunt, however, is going to need to come out.

My hands dig into her waistband, and I start to pull the ill-fitting pants down her legs. She's never dressed in anything but her flannels and jeans around me before, and I have to admit I've developed a fascination with the idea of dressing her up.

"I'm not having sex with you, Wolf."

Her hands shoot out to stop me, but she should know already she's nowhere near strong enough to do that.

"No, Muffin, you're going to lay back and be quiet while I make you feel good. Well," I correct myself, "I would actually prefer you're not too quiet."

My cock jumps when I find she's free of panties, and nothing is between us but one layer of denim. If I'm not mistaken, there's actually a hint of nervousness on her features, and while I know she was a virgin our first time, sometimes the reality of that inexperience escapes me.

"I, I don't know," she hedges, trying to stop me, but there's nothing I've wanted more than to devour her, and there's nothing she can do now to stop me.

My hands slide down her legs, finding soft spots just above her knees, and then I spread her wide, letting the sun pour over the prettiest pussy in existence. My head lowers, and she whimpers so pretty. I'm not sure whether it's from fear or excitement, maybe both, but either way, she thrills me.

My lips press to the spot her lips join, above her clit, but close enough to graze the hood and make her hips lift in search of more, a few more kisses around her clit, making her hips circle like she's trying to force me to apply the pressure where she wants it, but I'm too tall to make things work in this position.

I drop to my knees and let her slide forward on the hood of the truck until her weight rests on my shoulders, with her thighs securely in place around my neck.

"You want me to lick you, Muffin?" I ask, and all that shy insecurity has given way to her wet neediness.

"Please, Wolf, please," she's the one begging now and I can't help but smile at how quickly she folded.

She tries to lift her hips to force my mouth where she wants it, but I don't comply. I open my mouth and let her feel my hot tongue against her skin, but avoid her sensitive clit just like before. An aggravated little snarl leaves the back of her throat.

“Do it, Wolf.”

“Look how forceful you’re becoming,” I comment, but still don’t give her what she really wants.

Her fingers tangle in my hair as she tries to force me face-first into her cunt. When I don’t comply, she pulls, and the pain along my scalp shoots straight to my balls, waking up every nerve ending in its path on the way, and because I really need to taste her this second, I put her out of her misery and sweep my tongue across her smooth, round, little clit.

It feels so good under my tongue and I have this crazy idea that I want to eat it right off her. She tastes that good, she feels that good, but that just means I need to eat her cunt as deeply as possible the ways I’m allowed. My tongue swirls over her clit until her legs shake, and then I dip down to her opening to fuck her on my tongue. She seems especially surprised by that, moaning and shaking as I lick at her G-spot.

Her thighs shake around my face and her hips try their best to move against my tongue as I build her higher and higher. She screams as she comes on my tongue, hot and wet, her orgasm dripping over me, and I’m so aroused by it my cock leaks precum.

I look up at her, completely coated in her cum. “If you marry me, I will do that to you every single day, as many times a day as you want. All you have to do is say the word.”

I know part of me is taking advantage of her sexual inexperience. I’m not the only one on earth who could eat her juicy pussy good, but I’m the only one who has, and that does give me an advantage. Dreamy bliss fills her gaze as she looks down at me.

“I can take everything you own, hide it from you, and you’ll lick my pussy every

single day?" I ask.

"Like the delicious Muffin you are," I agree.

She doesn't answer me, but I sense her weakness, the fact she wants to give in and let this all feel so good for both of us, and being with her really is the most intensely wonderful and terrible thing I've ever felt. She consumes me totally. While she's thinking, I take the ring and place it on her finger. She looks at it, a little undecided.

"When you saved this, you couldn't have saved my clothes?" she asks.

I smile up at her.

"You don't need clothes. I've got everything you could possibly need waiting for you at home."

"My home is gone," she says.

"What's mine is yours," I remind her. "I already gave you the deeds. The least you can do is take pity on me and marry me."

"The least I can do is not kill you," she corrects me.

"Redley, we both know you couldn't kill me even when you wanted to," I tell her with a smile, finally feeling that everything in the world is in the right place.

"I can kill. I'm not some coward," she lies from her back, with her pussy still gleaming with my spit.

"I know that, baby. You're pretty gruesome, actually, but that doesn't mean you can kill me."

I laugh at her expression and her silence because I think I've finally got her. She's going to marry me, and I think she'll even want it.

CHAPTER 62

REDLEY

Am I actually going to marry him? Not if I can't find a good spot to hide those deeds, but I think I am done fighting how I feel about him and what's formed between us while I hunted him through those woods. I should have known the first night I met him that there was no chance I would ever get over his kindness, his soft hands. Or the blood bond he formed between us when he cleaned my wounds with his bare hands.

One of those rough but gentle hands cups mine, holding it against my thigh and making goosebumps stand up all over my legs. Despite everything that's happened, this is the closest thing to a quiet couple moment we've ever had, and the butterflies threaten to fly straight out my throat.

"Can you take me up to my property?" I ask him.

I still haven't seen the damage, and I think I need to if I'm going to officially decide to put this behind me and move on with the Big Bad Wolf. Laying eyes on the destruction won't change it, but maybe it will help me come to terms with it. Get closure or something. I've never had that before. Always just lived with the ghosts.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm sure. If you didn't want me to see, you shouldn't have done it."

His jaw clenches, and it looks like he wants to argue, but he doesn't. Wolf walks around to the passenger side and opens the door for me. I climb inside, and he closes it. This El Camino is even newer than Porter's cruiser, and while I'm pissed as hell Wolf broke my windshield, I won't mind taking this as a replacement.

The most shocking thing about the ride is how fast it goes. I never had the money for another vehicle so it wasn't even a consideration, but there really is something to be said for these newer models. We're only a few miles from my property in about half the normal time it takes.

"Do you like her?" he asks, following my eye to the wood line as the road steepens.

"Pay attention to the road, and I still won't like you half as much as I like her," I confirm.

He laughs and squeezes my hand.

"I really like spending time with you like this," he says.

I don't expect things like this from him, and I can't help but blush fiercely. However, I need to remember all of the very real issues that still stand between us, even if very few of them still mean anything. There is one matter, though, that's still extremely important for my decision. When we're almost to the top, I ask him what I really want to know.

"Are you planning to keep killing?"

His hands tighten on the wheel along with his expression. Clearly, he was hoping I wouldn't ask this question.

"I don't want to lie to you," he finally says after a heavy pause.

“Then don’t.”

His jaw ticks. “I don’t have any idea how to stop. I don’t want to promise you something I’m not capable of.”

I sit with his answer for a moment. It’s not what I wanted to hear, but I think I respect his honesty more than anything. If he was willing to tell me anything just to get me to comply, wouldn’t that be more dangerous? Or maybe I’m telling myself whatever I need to so I can feel okay about a choice I’ve already made.

If I’m being totally honest, I’m not sure that it matters to me if he keeps killing or not. I think I just care who he kills and why.

“You enjoy it too,” he finally says as we pull up the drive and stop in front of the remains of my cabin.

“I don’t want to.” I can’t find it within myself to lie to him when he doesn’t lie to me. At least not anymore.

“You don’t want to love me either, but you do,” he says it like it’s a simple matter of fact, and I guess it is.

“You might be right about that,” I tell him.

“Come on, you wanted to see it,” he hops out. I don’t expect him to come around and open my door, but apparently, Wolf is a gentleman. Who would have known? I look straight past where my cabin used to be to the backyard. Porter’s cruiser is gone, and my initial instinct is to be afraid of who found it. Wolf reaches out and grabs my hand again to comfort me.

“It was me, Muffin. I pushed it over the mountain, just in case somebody found it

while you were hiding. Speaking of, I'm very interested to know where you were."

"While I appreciate you taking care of the cop car, I won't be showing you where I was hiding. Ever. You're not a Little."

I take great pleasure in informing him that while I may love him, that doesn't mean he's going to take everything from me. In fact, he's going to be doing a lot of giving. He looks at me, his yellow eyes shining in the afternoon sun.

"You know, Redley, you've never bored me, not for one minute." His words again take me by surprise as well as the intensity and depth of emotion in his eyes. "I felt more alive with you chasing me through the woods, trying to kill me than I ever have in my whole damn life, and if that's all I could ever have gotten from you, I would've taken it because that's how obsessed with you I am."

He strokes the ring, still sitting on my finger. "I'm pretty sure I'm gonna wake up tomorrow, and this will all have been some crazy dream. 'Cause there ain't no way Redley Little actually chose me."

He kisses me, and it's too damn sweet for me to stomach, so I shove him away. He laughs as he pulls me in tighter and forces me to accept his affection. I had no idea he was going to be like this. I was right when I called him a puppy; all he wants is to be pet.

We stand over top the ashen remains of the home where I spent half my life. Turns out that moonshine is one hell of an accelerant, and dry wood burns quick. Despite my loss and the hollowness of this cabin being gone, I can breathe far easier here than I could before. Like Granny's presence was trapped and hanging on, and has been freed by clearing her blackened blood from this earth. I mean really should anyone be left hanging on like that?

“Are you okay?” he asks. “I’m not really used to caring about other people, so I don’t even know if I’m doing this right, but I am truly sorry I let him do this to you. I should’ve been stronger sooner, and I should’ve stopped him. As your husband, I won’t make a mistake like that again.”

My heart is hurting something terrible, but I consider whether we should do the same to the house down the hill. I’m too upset to even remind him that he’s not my husband. There’s no cleaning those stains now. Just like Granny’s blood, theirs is permanently stained into the wood. I’ve gotten revenge for my family on the man who killed them.

There isn’t anything left I want to investigate or look into, and maybe some of their souls are sticking behind and lingering the same way. Or perhaps I’m being too superstitious, and the idea of burning down another perfectly good cabin is insane, but I don’t know. Maybe I’m just insane now. He’s right, I like killing.

I turn to Wolf who’s watching me with a nervous expression, waiting for whatever I’m going to say.

“We should burn the other house too, after I look for a few things.”

“Okay, but we need to get you cleaned up and comfortable first.”

CHAPTER 63

REDLEY

A little while later, we're driving into town. In order to get over to Wolf's Mountain, we need to drive all the way to the bottom and then over. As the sign for Grimm Groves comes into view, I see something I never expected. Flashing lights and cop cars cover the streets. My fear climbs into my throat, choking me. We're both murderers, and they can't be here for any good reason. Thankfully, the blood on my hands has smeared, and I just look dirty. Wolf doesn't share my concern; he just smiles as he drives to the epicenter.

All two hundred residents stand around talking to the police. Children poke at the cars with faces of joy, and I briefly overhear one cop getting an earful about some infidelity that happened around town last week. Wolf parks the car and once again climbs out to open my door for me. I could just get up on my own, but I keep waiting to let him take care of me. It's been so long since anyone has done that, so each time he does it is a novelty.

Wolf takes my hand and pulls me close to him. "Don't worry," he whispers to me.

"Why not?"

"Trust me, you've got a trick up your sleeve."

They're talking to everyone around, asking questions, but as I listen carefully, I realize that they are not getting much in the way of answers. Everyone else seems just

as suspicious about them suddenly showing up as I am, and some of them are just bald-faced lying.

“What do you mean law enforcement doesn’t come this way?” Mrs. Clyde says, “We have all the normal things everyone else does.”

I look over at Wolf with my eyebrows halfway to my hair. “Wolf, what’s going on here?”

“Well, I can’t say what brought them out here for certain, but you are watching hush money in live action.”

“No!” I gasp, but he just laughs. As I watch them, what I’m learning is that far more of them are paid off to play along than I ever could have realized.

“Is anything about this town real?” I ask.

“Not much.” He winks at me like I’m his co-conspirator rather than the victim of a long conspiracy. God, am I tired.

Many of these people have pretended that I’m crazy for years and are actively on Wolf’s payroll. The reality of all the secrecy and deception is hard to wrap my head around. Some of them were even paid off to accept deaths in their family without question.

“The kids you killed?” I ask.

“Their parents were paid off too, but they found out about the diamonds, and they got greedy. You don’t steal from me and live. If the Littles taught me anything, it’s the value of that lesson. And they weren’t small children. They were teens. Men as far as most people consider them.”

My cheeks heat in anger the more he defends himself. Has he ever had a consequence for his actions? Then I remember the glass still embedded in his scalp. He'll have to get medical attention soon.

"Don't worry, baby. I learned my lesson too," he says, misinterpreting my distress.

"What lesson is that?" I ask.

"I can't live without you," he says the words like they're the simplest truth, but they slay me.

We move from the periphery into the middle of the action. People who know who Wolf is gasp and stare at the two of us with wide, frightened eyes, and I can't help but look at all of them with disgust. If I'm a traitor, what are they? Instead of hanging my head in shame like they seem to want me to, I hold it high.

We walk up to a pair of policemen, the one looking like he's in charge, and Wolf greets them, "Gentlemen, anything we can do for you?" he asks.

"No," one of them answers. "We have a few missing persons, and we're going to be searching the mountain. You can stay out of our way."

Wolf laughs, gentle and polite, but like he's about to not be so accommodating. "So you have warrants of course?"

He stares the cop down, and there's a tense moment of silence.

"We won't be searching private property, only public."

He makes a little sucking noise. "See, that's really unfortunate, given the entire mountain as well as the town, hell, the land you're standing on right now is private

property. You boys are technically trespassing.”

The cop moves his hand to his holster, and I watch the move so closely, feeling ready to commit another murder if he tempts me too far. I really must love Wolf because the impulse is purely protective toward him. No one is going to touch what’s mine.

“Are you refusing to let us conduct a search?” the police officer asks. He’s an older guy, not one of the ones I recognize from my trips to the different police stations. Where did these guys come from?

“Of course not,” Wolf answers. “I don’t own the mountain.” He grips my shoulder and pushes me forward. “Redley, here, is the owner. Show him, dear.”

I pull the deed out of my pocket and open it for him, proving what Wolf says. This is my land.

“Miss, you don’t mind if we look around, do you? You’ve got nothing to hide, I’m sure.”

“I’ve got nothing to hide,” I agree. “But I do mind if you look around. I’m afraid I’m real particular about my land, boys.”

“There’s a local man missing, a Robert Archer we’re looking for him.”

“Bobby?” I ask with a disbelieving lilt to my voice. I lean in close to the officer to whisper, “Bobby was a lousy cheat and a dog. He probably ran away with one of the girls he was seeing behind his wife’s back.” I pitch my voice like Granny used to when she was gossiping.

He gives me a hard look, not sold. “We’d really feel better if we could take a look around.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist, Officer. You need a warrant to be on my land. I’d appreciate it if you stepped off.” I square my shoulders and harden my stance, thinking maybe I wouldn’t mind killing some more after all, but there are a few too many of them for me to feel comfortable with the odds.

“It won’t take us long to get a warrant,” the cop argues. “There’s enough to convince a judge.”

I’m not sure if that’s true or not. I don’t know much about the law other than avoiding it or fighting with it, but Wolf cuts in just as I’m on the verge of breaking.

“You go ahead and do that,” he says, and I’m even more terrified.

I very nearly open my mouth, but he shoots me a glare, and I stay quiet.

“Fine, we’ll do it the hard way,” the cop says. “Come on, we’re getting a warrant,” he calls to the other officers, then looks back at me. “We’ll have that in no time, and then we’ll see what you’re hiding.”

“Sure thing. We’ll see you,” Wolf says, as he stares him down and waits for him to leave.

The officer narrows his eyes at us. “I’ll be back,” he promises before turning to let his officers know it’s time to go.

Once they’re out of hearing distance, I turn to Wolf and ask, “What if they do come back?”

“Well, they’re going to have an awful hard time convincing anyone there’s a town out here to begin with. We don’t even have a zip code, and as far as a warrant goes, they require a complete address to be admissible as evidence in court. You don’t have

one. They won't find anything they can use against you."

I think I might be more attracted to him than anyone ever has been to another person.

"What if they don't get the warrant, but they still come back?" I ask.

"Haven't you heard there's a wolf in these woods?" He flashes me a wicked glare.

"How does that help?"

"We kill them," he answers simply. "I know you've developed a taste for murder, Muffin."

"That's not true," I try to argue.

"We'll just see when the cops come back and try to arrest you."

"If they come back," I correct him. "Like a very clever Wolf pointed out, they don't even have a real zip code."

CHAPTER 64

WOLF

Redley sits in the passenger seat as I drive, and it's so strangely relaxing to be near her without her trying to kill me. Her perfect pussy still coats my tongue from earlier. I smell like her, and things are almost where they should be, but there's some remaining tension between Muffin and me that I'm hoping to eliminate now.

She hasn't asked me where we're going, and I don't know if it's because she's guessed or she doesn't care. Her long black hair tumbles around her face. The ends are cinched in a messy braid with a leather cord. Green eyes point at the sky, and I can't help but notice the beauty between the two. The car bumps and jostles us as my staring backfires.

"Jesus, what the hell, Wolf!" she shouts as she bounces in her seat and her teeth clatter.

"Sorry, Muffin, I was staring at you again. Your fault for being so damn pretty I'd rather die than not look at you."

"I think that's your fault for being insane, Wolf."

I just shrug. The cops are long gone, and with my father and great-uncle dead, it's up to me to either keep things a secret here or let it all come to a head. She was all too proud of herself when she told me how she killed the town Doc and the shock on his face right before he died. I really love her, and she's just as crazy as me, whether she

wants to admit it or not. I won't try to boss Redley around, but if she wants, I'll keep things secret for her forever. We don't really have to change our lives much.

We reach the base of my mountain, and she finally looks at me with a question on her face, but she doesn't ask it. I don't feel inclined to give her information that she's not even brave enough to request, so I ignore her as I find the road that pitches upward toward the mansion.

She must recognize the way, given she came here once herself, but still, she doesn't say anything. We pull into the driveway and park the car up at the top by the house. There are so many things inside that belong to my father that I haven't had time to deal with. It occurs to me that it technically all belongs to Red anyway, so I decide to leave that up to her. There's a hole in my heart where the figure of a father belongs, and that emptiness hurts. But I don't miss Carver.

I climb out of my seat and open the door for her. Each time I do this, she looks at me like I've got some deep ulterior motive. Which I frankly find silly and profoundly hot. I fucked her without her consent. I've killed in front of her. I don't know what ugly thing she's waiting for, but she's not exactly easy to scare away. Despite how much I've lied to her, she's always known the truth of me.

I take her by the hand and lead her up to the front door, much different from the first time she came here when I told her to shut her mouth and carried her up the stairs to my wing in secret. Her eyes dart around the building, and the gardens wonder in her dominant emotion. I slide the key into the lock and open the door. She's seen it before, but it's different this time.

"Welcome home, Muffin," I say, and for the first time in my life, the air doesn't feel so damn tense. "This is all yours."

She pauses in the doorway and looks at me with a thread of distrust.

“You have the deed. Why do you look so confused?” I ask. “Just come in.”

“So you’re really telling me you’re not planning to just take it back from me?” she asks as she looks at the foyer. She seems so small and sad right now, and I hate my family lineage more than I ever have for making her feel like she’s less than she is or doesn’t deserve what was legally owed to her to begin with.

“I want you to marry me, Redley, and I want you to make this house whatever the hell you want it to be. It’s yours now,” I promise her, feeling like there isn’t enough time in eternity to show her what she means to me and make up for the times I allowed her to suffer.

“It’s mine, is it?” she asks, with a wicked glint to her smile. “And I can do whatever I want with it?”

“Of course you can, Muffin,” I insist, feeling oddly vulnerable. I thought we were past this. We were holding hands and chatting.

“Is there money hidden in here, valuables?” she asks.

“Not as much as there used to be. My father was bad with money, and things were getting tight for us already.”

“Grab what you can,” she tells me.

“What?” I ask, but she doesn’t repeat herself. She just walks off into the house.

I decide to listen to her and empty my father’s safe. I head into his wing for the first time in years. He did some truly terrible things to me here and taught me some of his most disturbing lessons, but I don’t allow myself to think of them as I grab everything that could be important or valuable, including the cash and gold he had. Then I stuff

them all into an oversized duffel bag. As I head back to find Red, the smell of smoke catches my attention.

“What the hell?” I ask, but only roaring flames answer me. Anxiety opens in my stomach, not for my home, but for my girl, because I’m sick to death of not keeping her safe from danger.

I didn’t need to worry, though, and I resent her for how often she inspires the emotion. Gorgeous Red stands by the door with an empty bottle of liquor, the match she dropped already eating up the deeper section of the house.

“What the hell!” I shout this time.

“It’s my house, Wolf. You said I could do whatever I wanted with it.”

“Yeah, but where are we going to live?” I ask.

“Your family built it on the blood and suffering of mine, and I want to watch the fucking thing burn. Count yourself lucky that I’m not locking you inside.” She does not answer my question. I knew she was fucking crazy.

And if this was a long game plan to take me down, she really could have, and she would have finally won. Instead, we run out of there together and stand on the lawn as the flames eat the entire mansion apart. And maybe I should feel sad about this too, but what she said about ghosts and hauntings feels more true than I expected, and my mother’s and my pain seems to leave with the smoke rolling across the Appalachians.

CHAPTER 65

REDLEY

My family home sits as a smoking pile of cinders behind me, as does Wolf's mansion, and the cabin up at the top of the mountain. There's been so much fire in the past few days that the sky is thick and heavy with it.

The power shut off the day after the cops came, and it took me a little figuring, but I managed to pay the bill with the money Doc was taking with him to skip town. I've also properly added my name and address to the bill, now that I know the entirety of Grimm Groves is living on my property for free.

I'm setting up a better power infrastructure and charging rent. Though they only need to pay me once a year and it's not much, it's the principle. This is my land, and it's not like these people have treated me well over the years. As far as I'm concerned, they're all liars and snakes and should feel lucky I didn't decide to toss them all off my land and keep their homes, maybe burn them like I did to my own just for entertainment.

I tell myself to calm down. I'm standing in the center of town, outside the school, and a lot of people are around today. Everyone is still real unsure about what will happen now that I'm in on everything that has been going on, and the divide between those in the know and those not is more jarring than ever. I'm not sure if kicking them all off my land wouldn't be better, but I'm not sure where they would go, and I'm just not as cruel as them.

Instead, Grimm Groves is my land, my home, and as long as people want to live here, that's great, but they'll have to get used to the fact I'm the self-appointed mayor. It's my land. I can call myself whatever I want, and they will pay me for the right. Hell, I'm going to set up a little fund similar to the school tax like they get out in the regular world. I walk into the school with that secret tucked into my pocket and a big smile on my face.

The same school teacher who taught me sits with the children. There are a lot of them this year, and I'm not sure how she's managing all of the different age ranges without help. This has never been something she did for money, but always enjoyed bettering the lives of the children here. I realize now she wasn't so benevolent. She was getting paid out by the wolves. I approach just close enough to signal that I need to speak to her alone. She says another word or two to the children before she steps away.

"Redley, what can I do for you?" she asks as she follows me into the hall and shuts the door behind her. She sounds kind and accommodating enough, but afraid. She knows I know everything. She's been in on this charade for a long time, though not to the extent that some people were. Part of me thinks I could kill her, but another fairer part asks, who would teach the kids then? I clear my throat and shake off the violence.

"If you could do whatever you wanted for the kids here, if money wasn't an issue, what would you do?"

She opens and closes her mouth, her cheeks turning red. "Can I think about it and get back to you?" she asks. "There are just so many things and I want to—I don't want. Thank you," she finally settles on, throwing herself at me for a hug I truly didn't expect.

I'm surprised at how good it feels, warm and matronly, and I guess I miss having older female affection too. Maybe I can forgive some of them— definitely not all of

them, but some.

“I’ll come back for a list tomorrow,” I agree before turning and leaving. Standing outside his El Camino, holding the door open for me, is the man I plan to spend the rest of my life with. Husband is still a hotly debated topic, though. Either way, I’m happy, and I’m finally not so goddamn alone.

REDLEY

ONE YEAR LATER

The sun shines off the sweat on Wolf's glistening back. His axe swings as he works to fell another tree. The scar on his upper arm from where I shot him is fading to a light pink. As I learned later, it wasn't even a flesh wound. I just grazed him.

It's a long, arduous task to build a cabin. Maybe he should have been a little stronger and not let his father burn my home to the ground. He's learning that lesson the hard way. Though admittedly, maybe I shouldn't have been such a hothead and burned down a perfectly good mansion. We've both paid for those decisions, but after that, we spent nearly a full year traveling outside of Grimm Groves and seeing more of the world together.

"What did we learn, Wolf?" I ask him again because what's the point of a story if you don't learn something?

"I stole from the wrong bitch?" he asks. I smile. It's a good lesson to come away with after all.

"No, another one?" I ask.

"We don't burn down houses? Though I can't believe you're really making me say this for the thousandth time. Considering you burned down two, and I only did one as an accomplice. "

“You’ll be repeating it for a while,” I tell him as I rub my belly. Our baby is getting big and will be here in just a couple of months. He’s running out of time, and so am I.

“Come on, Redley. When are you going to marry me?” he asks. “We’re having a baby out of wedlock, for Christ’s sake, and I’m building you a house.”

“We can get married, Wolf. Just as soon as my baby owns this mountain and the other, good and proper, and I won’t have to worry about anyone’s motivations. It will be you and me broke and on equal footing, and our baby will be rich.”

“Broke? You have the business plan of the century out here.”

“I just stole it from your uncle, who stole it from someone else, I’m sure,” I inform him.

He smiles, but there’s a sadness around his eyes. “You really don’t trust me?” he asks.

“Of course I don’t trust you. No one smart ever trusts a wolf.”

He smiles in that way that melts my heart and makes my pussy wet. “Clever, Muffin.”

He jumps on me, coating me in his sweat and the delicious resinousness of freshly fallen trees. I can hardly imagine how good the cabin is going to smell. It’s hard to think of him as being a member of my family, but with my round belly swelling by the day, I’m going to have to get used to it because I don’t think he’s giving up on us. He gave up everything for us and has done everything he can to prove he loves me every day since he told me he would.

And he’s never skipped a day eating my pussy, and I mean never . What more could a girl ask for?