



Flint's Fate (Silver Falls Shifters #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A storm, a secret, and a chance at love...

Jenna Hartford never planned on returning to Silver Falls, but when her beloved Aunt Maribel dies under mysterious circumstances, she inherits Cold Creek Orchards, a land rich with history, secrets, and danger. From the moment she arrives, eerie warnings, sabotage, and shadowy threats make one thing clear: someone wants her gone.

Flint Mercer, a brooding ex-lawyer turned rugged cider maker, knows trouble when he sees it. And Jenna is surrounded by it. As a mountain lion shifter, his instincts scream that she's his mate, but she's also in the crosshairs of an enemy willing to destroy everything to erase the orchard's past. Flint swears to protect her, even when she refuses to accept his help.

As the tension between Jenna and Flint ignites into an undeniable passion, so does the fight for survival. The truth about her past, and her future, will change everything. But if they don't uncover the final secret in time, Jenna may not live long enough to claim her fate.

A thrilling, fated-mates, paranormal romance packed with sizzling tension, small-town intrigue, and heart-pounding danger. Welcome to Silver Falls, where the past is never truly buried, and love is worth the fight.

Total Pages (Source): 21

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 2:42 am

PROLOGUE

FLINT

Wildhaven Clan Compound

Silver Falls, Colorado

Three Years Ago

The moon cast a pale glow over Silver Falls as the Wildhaven Clan gathered in tense silence. Flint Mercer stood tall, his golden eyes scanning the shifters, some defiant, others hopeful. He turned his glare on Silas, the clan's failing alpha, his voice a growl of accusation. "You've exiled our young, treated our females like currency. It ends now."

Silas sneered, but Flint could see the flicker of unease in his eyes. "You've been gone too long, Mercer. The clan isn't yours."

Flint's voice was steady. "Step down, or I'll take you down."

Silas lunged first, shifting mid-strike, but Flint was faster. Their mountain lion forms clashed in a blur of muscle and claws, snarls echoing through the clearing. Silas fought with desperation, but Flint had the advantage—training, strength, and purpose. Blood darkened the ground as Flint's claws raked across Silas' throat. A final, gurgling growl, and the older lion collapsed, shifting back into his lifeless human form. Flint stood, bloodied and heaving, as the clan watched in stunned silence.

“Those loyal to Silas have a choice,” Flint declared. “Accept me as your alpha, or leave Wildhaven. There is no middle ground.” The gathered shifters hesitated. Then, one by one, they bowed their heads in submission. A long breath left Flint’s chest, but he knew this was only the beginning.

His younger brother, Wes, stepped forward, his grin sharp. “We’ll rebuild. The ones Silas exiled—they’re waiting for you.”

Flint’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, but pride warmed his chest. Wes had been preparing for this moment all along. Laying his hand on his brother’s shoulder, Flint said, “Tomorrow, we go to the mountains. It’s time they came home.”

Wes nodded but glanced toward the trees, his expression darkening. “Something’s been watching since the fight started.”

The air was thick with menace. Flint looked to the edge of the trees. A hooded figure stepped closer. Everything about the person’s identity was obscured. Whoever it was didn’t flee, didn’t challenge, just nodded and disappeared.

Cold Creek Orchards

Present Day

The night Maribel Walker died, the storm rolled in with the fury of an omen.

Flint Mercer pushed his truck harder than he should have down the winding road that led to Cold Creek Orchards. Sheets of rain lashed the windshield, his wipers barely keeping up. Lightning split the sky, illuminating the gnarled apple trees that lined the property like silent sentinels. Something felt wrong.

Maribel had called him minutes ago, her voice brittle with urgency. ‘ Flint, come

quickly . The orchard ...’

The call had ended in static before she could finish. He hadn't hesitated. Maribel Walker wasn't one to panic. The old woman had been a part of Silver Falls longer than anyone could remember, stubborn as the roots of her apple trees. If she was afraid, it meant something was very, very wrong.

His tires skidded over the gravel as he pulled up in front of the house. The storm howled through the orchard, bending branches, shaking the old wooden fence that lined the property. The house was dark, but something drew his gaze past it—to the trees beyond.

A figure lay sprawled in the wet grass between the twisted trunks of the oldest apple trees.

“Maribel.”

Flint barely heard his own voice over the wind. He was out of the truck in an instant, his boots sinking into the mud as he sprinted toward her. The rain blurred his vision, but he knew before he reached her that something was terribly wrong.

Maribel Walker was dying.

He dropped to his knees beside her, ignoring the cold seep of water through his jeans. Her silver hair clung to her face, her breath shallow, eyes barely open. He could see no visible wounds and there was no scent or sight of blood—only the sharp tang of over-ripened apples.

“Who did this?” Flint growled, his voice low and urgent.

Maribel's fingers trembled as she reached for his hand. He took it, her grip weak but

insistent. “It’s not...” She coughed, her body wracked with pain. “Not just me, Flint. The orchard... it’s in danger.”

His gut twisted. “Who did this to you?”

Her gaze flickered past him, toward the trees. Flint turned his head just in time to see a shadow moving between the trunks, a figure slipping away into the storm. He rose, his mountain lion instincts roaring to give chase, but Maribel’s fingers tightened around his hand with surprising strength.

“Stay,” she whispered. “Too late... for me.”

Flint swallowed hard, his jaw clenched against the helplessness curling in his chest. He had faced death before, had lost people in battle, had taken lives in fights he couldn’t walk away from. But this—this was different. This was Maribel. She had been family to his sister and brother when they’d had none. She had given him a place to belong. And now she was slipping away beneath his hands.

Her eyes were glassy now, her breaths uneven. “Jenna,” she whispered. “Tell her... don’t let them win.”

Flint’s throat tightened. Jenna Hartford. Maribel’s niece. The one she had spoken of so often, though they hadn’t seen each other in years. “I’ll tell her,” he promised. “But you’re gonna tell her yourself, Maribel. Hold on.”

She gave him a weary smile, one that spoke of knowing better. “Take care of her, Flint. The orchard belongs to her now.”

Lightning flashed overhead, and for a moment, he swore he saw something carved into the bark of the nearest tree—a warning, jagged and deep. The words blurred in the storm, but the feeling of them settled like lead in his gut. Something dark had

taken root here.

Maribel let out a final, shuddering breath. Her grip on his hand slackened. The light in her eyes faded.

Flint bowed his head and then looked to the heavens and whispered, “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet lady, and may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

For a long moment, he let the rain soak through him, his hand still clasped around hers. The wind howled through the orchard, rattling the trees, carrying a whisper through the storm.

The orchard should have died with you.

Flint lifted his head, his eyes narrowing. He rose slowly, scanning the trees. The figure was gone, but the scent of something unnatural lingered in the air.

This wasn't over.

He reached down, brushing wet strands of hair from Maribel's face. “I'll protect it,” he murmured. “I'll protect her.”

The wind carried no answer, only the sound of the storm raging on.

JENNA

New York City, New York

Jenna sat at the long, polished conference table, her fingernails tapping restlessly against the cool surface. The Manhattan skyline stretched beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, but she barely noticed. The quarterly strategy meeting was in full swing,

with executives tossing around projections, market trends, and acquisition opportunities. It was everything she had spent years working toward, the culmination of long nights and sacrificed weekends. And yet, as the CEO droned on about expansion plans, she felt like she was suffocating.

Her phone buzzed against the tabletop. Jenna glanced down, expecting another work email, but the screen flashed a name that sent a chill through her. Unknown Caller—Silver Falls, Colorado . Her heart clenched. There was only one person she knew in Silver Falls. Aunt Maribel. Her mother's sister. The aunt they had visited infrequently during her childhood. Jenna's mother had joined her father's mountain lion clan outside of New York City when they married.

Ignoring the disapproving glance from the senior partner across the table, she stepped out of the meeting and swiped to answer. "Hello?"

"Miss Hartford?" The voice on the other end was unfamiliar, cautious. "This is Sheriff Beckett Grey, from Silver Falls. I'm so sorry to tell you this, but—your aunt Maribel passed away last night."

Jenna's breath left her in a sharp exhale. The words made little sense, like hearing them through water. "No," she murmured, gripping the edge of the table. "That... that can't be."

"I know this is a shock," the sheriff continued gently. "We found her in the orchard. It looks like an accident, but... we'd appreciate it if you could come out and take care of some things."

Jenna glanced towards the conference room. "Can't we do it remotely? Things are kind of crazy in my job right now..."

"Some things, yes, but other things will need you to be here in Silver Falls. We'll try

to keep the disruption in your life to a minimum.”

Jenna could hear the disapproval in the sheriff’s voice. That wasn’t at all surprising, considering the close-knit community of Silver Falls.

A deep, aching guilt swelled in Jenna’s chest. She had promised herself, promised Maribel, that she would visit more often. Every year, every holiday, every missed call—she had always meant to make time. But there had always been another project, another deal, another excuse.

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She ended the call with numb fingers and re-entered the boardroom.

All eyes turned towards her and the CEO, Daniel Laughton, peered down his nose at her. “Everything alright, Hartford?”

Jenna took a shaky breath. “Yes. No. That was the sheriff of Silver Falls...”

“Silver Falls?”

“Yes. It’s in Colorado. My aunt had an apple orchard there. The sheriff was calling to let me know my aunt had just passed away last night. They need me to come to Colorado to settle her estate.”

Laughton frowned, his gaze cool and assessing. “For how long?”

“I don’t know yet.”

A beat of silence. Then, “You understand, of course, that we’re in the middle of a major acquisition. Your presence here is crucial.”

Jenna's blood ran hot. Of course. Her boss, ever practical, didn't even pretend to offer condolences. She had given this company everything—her time, her energy, her sanity—and now, when she needed a moment to grieve, she was nothing more than a resource to be managed.

"I understand," she said, her voice steadier than she felt. "But my aunt was family. I need to go."

Laughton leaned back in his chair, regarding her like a chess piece he was about to lose. "This is a defining moment in your career, Jenna. You've worked too hard to throw it away now. Are you really willing to risk everything over this?"

Jenna's jaw tightened. She had risked everything for this job for years. And for what? A life where she measured success in billable hours and sleepless nights? A life where she kept putting off the people who mattered most?

She exhaled slowly. "You're right. My commitment isn't where it should be." Laughton's expression flickered with satisfaction—until she added, "That's why you can consider this my resignation, effective immediately. I'll send you a formal email within the next twenty-four hours."

A stunned silence fell over the room. Laughton's mouth pressed into a thin line. "Don't be hasty, Hartford. You're one of our best."

"I know," she said simply, gathering her things. "But this isn't the life I want anymore."

With one last glance at the gleaming conference room—the power, the prestige, the relentless grind—Jenna turned on her heel and walked out. The weight of years spent chasing someone else's version of success lifted with every step. She wasn't sure what waited for her in Silver Falls, but for the first time in a long time, she wasn't

afraid to find out.

CHAPTER 1

JENNA

Jenna gripped the steering wheel of her rental SUV as she drove through Silver Falls, the town both familiar and strangely foreign after all these years. Maribel had always believed Silver Falls was special, tucked away in the Colorado mountains, untouched by the rush of the modern world. Jenna had been too busy chasing promotions to visit very often. Now, her aunt was gone, and she was rolling into town with nothing but a suitcase, a funeral to plan, and an inherited, run-down orchard.

She slowed as she passed the town square, where a handful of small businesses framed a neatly bricked courtyard. Strings of white lights hung over a fountain, casting a warm glow despite the storm-darkened sky. A banner advertising the upcoming Silver Falls Cider Days Festival fluttered over Main Street. Too little, too late, Jenna thought bitterly. The orchard had been Maribel's legacy, and now it was barely hanging on.

Her hands tightened on the wheel as she made the turn onto Cold Creek Road. The paved streets gave way to gravel, and the scent of rain-soaked earth filled the car. She was almost there.

The first glimpse of Cold Creek Orchards sent an ache through her chest. How had this happened? If her aunt was in financial difficulty, why hadn't she asked for help? Weather had worn the wooden archway over the driveway, making its carved lettering barely legible. The once-pristine fence sagged in places, and the trees—Maribel's pride—looked neglected, their twisted branches heavy with

unharvested fruit. Weeds crept along the gravel path leading up to the farmhouse, a grand old structure with peeling paint and a porch swing that hung lopsided on one chain.

Jenna shut off the engine, taking a slow breath before stepping out. The air was crisp, carrying the scent of apples and damp wood. A presence stirred at the edges of her awareness, a whisper of something wild in the trees.

"You're finally here."

The deep, unmistakably male voice came from behind her. Jenna pivoted, already on guard.

The man leaning against the porch railing looked like he belonged in the untamed wilderness surrounding them. Built like a man who knew how to fight and win, he was tall, broad, and powerful. Tawny hair framed a face that was both rugged and striking, with golden eyes that seemed to pierce straight through her. A flicker of recognition pulsed through her, as though they had met, even though she was sure they hadn't.

Jenna squared her shoulders. "And you are?"

"Flint Mercer," he said, his gaze steady. "Maribel's friend. I was with her when she died."

She hadn't expected that. Maribel had mentioned someone in her letters—a stubborn, overprotective local who had always been underfoot; the alpha of the local mountain lion clan—but she'd never said he looked like this.

Jenna crossed her arms. "I didn't know that. When the sheriff called, he said she was found dead in her orchard."

Flint nodded. “She was not part of my clan, but I kept an eye on her. She was one of the best people I ever knew.”

Jenna searched his face for what, she wasn’t sure. “Again, thank you for all you did for her.”

Instead of continuing the conversation, she strode past him and up the porch steps, digging in her bag for the keys. Her fingers shook, but she willed them to be steady. The lock clicked, and she pushed the door open, stepping into the house that had once been a sanctuary.

Everything was as Maribel had left it—except for the silence. Her aunt had been a woman with a bright, cheery personality, and it had always seemed to brighten any room. Without her buoyancy, the farmhouse seemed small, as if it had withered in the days since she’d died.

Flint followed her inside. "What are your plans?"

“Nothing is set in stone, but this place was important to both my aunt and mother. I feel like I have to at least attempt to return it to what I remember from my childhood. How did this happen?” She said the last with a sweeping movement of her arm showing the dilapidated state of the orchard.

“Your aunt was a proud woman. She had a poor harvest, followed by a bad freeze and she never seemed to recover. She hid her difficulties from those of us who would have helped. Every time I offered, she made light of it and brushed my concerns away. I think you need to be careful. I’m not convinced your aunt died of natural causes...”

“That’s what the death certificate says.”

Flint nodded. "I know, but it's more because there wasn't any overt cause of death and the autopsy was perfunctory at best."

She turned to face him. "Perfunctory? What do you know the authorities don't? This place is a mess. I'm sure this city girl who got to spend a couple of summers out here still sees it with the rose-colored glasses of youth..."

His jaw tightened. "I don't know anything for certain, but I believe Maribel didn't just die. I believe something or someone wanted her gone."

A chill prickled down her spine, but she refused to let it show. "The sheriff ruled it an accident."

Flint's lips pressed into a hard line. "That's what they're calling it. Doesn't mean it's true."

Jenna didn't need this—a stranger showing up on her doorstep, telling her how to grieve, how to think. "I appreciate the warning, but I can handle myself."

His gaze slid over her, assessing. "You sure about that?"

She lifted her chin. "Dead sure."

For a moment, neither of them moved. The air between them changed, thick with something unspoken. Jenna felt it like a live wire beneath her skin. Flint's presence was a force all its own—unsettling, undeniable.

Then, just as quickly, he stepped back, breaking the spell. "You'll need help to get the orchard back on its feet."

Jenna's pulse was still hammering in her ears. "What are you offering?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he walked to the doorway, pausing with one hand braced against the frame. "Whatever you need, but I'm also telling you to watch your back."

Then he was gone, vanishing into the night like he belonged to it. Jenna exhaled slowly, only realizing now that she had been gripping the doorknob too tightly.

Jenna shut the door behind her and leaned against it, inhaling the familiar scent of wood polish, apples, and cinnamon. The house had always felt warm, safe. Now, an eerie stillness lingered, like a presence that didn't belong.

She pushed away the feeling and moved deeper inside, trailing her fingers along the worn wooden banister as she climbed the stairs to her old bedroom. Maribel had kept everything the same—down to the blue-and-white quilt folded neatly at the foot of the bed. It was both comforting and heartbreaking.

Dropping her bag onto the mattress, she made her way back downstairs to the kitchen. She needed something stronger than nostalgia.

The cabinets creaked as she rummaged through them, finally finding an unopened bottle of whiskey. She twisted off the cap and poured a generous amount into a glass. The burn as she took a sip grounded her, but it did nothing to push back the unease creeping up her spine.

Then she saw it—a piece of folded paper sat on the worn oak table, perfectly centered, as if waiting for her.

Jenna frowned and set down her glass, reaching for the note. The paper was thick, the edges slightly crumpled, as though someone had handled it more than once before deciding to leave it behind.

Someone scrawled her name across the front in jagged, uneven letters.

Leave now or suffer the same fate as Maribel.

The words slammed into her like a punch to the gut. Cold, calculated. A threat and a promise.

Jenna tightened her grip on the paper, her jaw locking. Coward. Whoever had written this hadn't had the guts to confront her in person. She turned the note over, looking for anything else—any sign of who had left it—but there was nothing.

From the moment she received the call from the sheriff, there had been something off about Maribel's death. This ominous note only confirmed it. But no one, other than Flint, seemed to be all that interested. Still, she probably ought to show it to the sheriff. A sharp creak echoed through the house. She froze, pulse hammering. The sound had come from the front porch.

Setting the note down, she tiptoed toward the door. Years in corporate warfare had given her a natural authority, but this—this was different. This was personal. The porch was empty when she stepped outside. Only the sound of the wind moving through the trees greeted her. But she could feel someone or something watching.

Jenna scanned the tree line, searching for any movement, any sign of what had sent her instincts into overdrive. In New York City, her mountain lion instincts had been mostly dormant, but from the time she had stepped off the plane, they had come rushing back. But she could see nothing in the trees. Just the deep black of the forest stretching out beyond the property.

The air carried the scent of damp leaves and distant wood smoke, but underneath it was something else. A whisper of danger.

She wasn't alone.

"Looking for something?"

Jenna's spine stiffened, but she managed to keep herself from startling. She turned her head slowly to find Flint leaning against the porch railing, arms crossed over his broad chest. He wasn't even trying to pretend he hadn't been watching her.

"Do you always just creep up on people?"

"I don't creep."

Jenna snorted. "Did you come back to offer more warnings?"

He tilted his head, studying her. "No. Thought you might need a drink." He lifted a brown paper bag. "And the good stuff. Not that cheap bottle you found in the kitchen."

Jenna narrowed her eyes. "How do you know what I found?"

Flint's mouth curved slightly. "Small town. I know what Maribel kept in that cabinet. And I know she saved the better whiskey for nights when she needed it."

She glanced at the bag in his hand, then back to his face. The man was too comfortable, too damn confident. It should have irritated her more than it did. Instead, something inside her responded to the challenge he carried in his stance, in his voice. She could feel her she-cat growling in her mind.

"I don't need company," she said.

Flint took a step closer, his eyes catching the porch light. "I think you do."

Jenna wasn't used to people challenging her decisions. But Flint Mercer wasn't like anyone she'd ever met. She reminded herself he was an alpha and that she would need to tread carefully.

She sighed and held out her hand. "Fine. But if this isn't actually the 'good stuff,' I'm making you drink the cheap bottle instead."

Flint chuckled, handing over the bag. "Deal."

She took it and walked back inside, fully aware of him following. The space between them crackled with an undeniable energy that had nothing to do with the threat lurking outside.

As she set two glasses down on the table, Flint glanced at the folded note. His amusement vanished.

"What's that?"

Jenna hesitated for half a second before sliding it toward him. He unfolded it, reading the message in silence. His grip tightened.

"Where did you find this?"

"On the table," she said. "Right in the middle, like someone wanted me to see it the moment I walked in."

Flint's expression darkened, his easy-going manner evaporating. "This isn't a warning, Jenna. It's a threat. You need to show this to the sheriff."

"Why? You said her death had been written off as natural causes."

“Beck isn’t like that. He had nothing to go on. Very few people here even remember you visiting. If you were just going to get rid of the place, with no evidence to the contrary, he didn’t have any reason to suspect foul play. This note? Gives him a reason.”

“You seem to think I should be very concerned.”

“You should be. Colorado isn’t New York City.”

“Maybe not, but this city girl has a carry permit for a Glock, and I know how to use it.”

A faint grin crossed Flint’s face. “I think you have a lot more of Maribel’s spirit than I originally thought. You still need to show this to Beck.”

She poured the whiskey. “I’ll think about it, but I’m staying at least until I can bring this place back to its former glory and figure out what really happened to my aunt.”

Flint clinked his glass against hers. “Whoever left this note isn’t playing games.”

She picked up her glass, taking a sip before answering. “Neither am I.”

They stood in silence for a long moment, the air between them charged. Flint’s gaze stayed locked on hers, something unreadable flashing through it before he set the note down carefully.

“Well, if you’re staying,” he said, voice low, “you’re going to need help.”

Jenna looked at him. “You volunteering?”

His mouth quirked, but his eyes held something far more serious. “I’m not letting you

take this on alone."

"Why? Because you're the alpha? I'm not part of your clan."

Flint expelled a breath. "I'm aware of that. Neither was your aunt, but it didn't mean we weren't friends."

There was something in the way he said it—as if he was making a promise. One Jenna wasn't sure she should trust, but part of her wanted to.

She set her glass down, meeting his gaze without flinching. "I appreciate your offer. I may hold you to that."

Flint chuckled, the sound low and approving. Outside, the wind whispered through the trees. And in the darkness beyond the porch, something watched.

Jenna sat at the worn wooden table across from Flint, the whiskey warming her from the inside out. She remembered the farmhouse from her childhood, especially her teenage years. It had always felt sturdy, a place built to withstand the seasons, unchanged by time or weather. But tonight, something was different. The surrounding air seemed heavier, as if the walls were holding onto something unseen. It wasn't just quiet—it was expectant, like the house itself was waiting for something to happen.

It seemed Flint felt it, too. There was an edge to his energy—predatory, protective, on guard. His eyes scanned the darkened kitchen, his body still watchful.

"You think whoever left that note is going to try something else?" she asked, running a finger along the rim of her glass.

Flint didn't look at her when he answered. "I don't think. I know."

Jenna leaned back in her chair, her posture deceptively relaxed as she twirled her whiskey in its glass in front of her face. “Good. I’d hate for this to be too easy.”

That earned her an assessing glance. There was something in his gaze—not quite amusement, but not full-blown disapproval. “You’re not afraid.”

“No.” She took another sip of whiskey before setting the glass down deliberately. “But I am angry.”

Flint studied her, the muscles in his forearms flexing as he folded his arms across his chest. “Anger isn’t always the worst thing you can be, but it can get you killed if you don’t use it right.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Let me guess, you think you’re the one to teach me how?”

A slow, measured look. “I am. You’ve been in the city too long. If you’re smart, you’ll let me help you and will listen to me.”

Jenna didn’t respond right away. The way he said it—it wasn’t a challenge. It was a certainty. And damn if that didn’t stir something inside her that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with how he carried himself. How he looked at her, not like she was breakable, but like he was trying to figure out just how much fight she had in her.

She liked that.

“Then stay,” she said finally.

He observed her carefully. “Stay?”

“Yes. If you’re so worried about my safety, Flint, then stay the night. Protect me.”

His jaw worked for half a second before he drained the rest of his whiskey and set the glass down with a soft clink. “You sure you want me here, Jenna? Because if I stay, I’m not just babysitting.”

Something unspoken passed between them, electric and undeniable.

She didn’t look away. “I don’t need a babysitter. I need an ally.”

Flint held her gaze a moment longer before nodding once. “Then I’ll stay.”

Jenna rose from the table, pushing her chair back with a deliberate scrape. “Good.”

Without another word, she turned and headed upstairs. She didn’t check to see if he followed—she already knew he would.

The farmhouse was quiet. Too quiet.

Jenna lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, listening. The wind outside had picked up, rustling through the apple trees, their branches groaning under its force. But it wasn’t the wind that had woken her.

It was the sound of something scraping against the front door. She sat up instantly, her heartbeat steady, but her instincts kicking in. She wasn’t the kind of woman who panicked. She assessed. Calculated. Fought.

Carefully, she slid out of bed and grabbed the knife she had placed on the nightstand. A habit from living in a city where locking your door wasn’t always enough. The wooden floor was cool beneath her bare feet as she padded to the window, pushing the curtain aside just enough to peer outside.

Darkness stretched beyond the porch light’s glow. The orchard loomed in the

distance, its twisted branches like skeletal fingers against the night sky. But something was out there. She could feel it.

Another sound. This time, the unmistakable drag of claws against wood.

Jenna didn't hesitate. She moved swiftly down the stairs, her grip on the knife firm but calm. Flint was already in the living room when she reached the bottom, standing near the door, dressed only in jeans, his torso bare. He looked every bit the predator he was, eyes bright in the dim light, muscles coiled, ready.

"You heard it," she said. It wasn't a question.

He nodded, his focus trained on the door. "Whoever—or whatever—it is, they're testing you."

Jenna strode past him and unbolted the lock.

Flint grabbed her wrist before she could yank the door open. "What the hell is wrong with you, Jenna? Do you have some kind of death wish?"

She met his gaze with a fire of her own. "If someone's coming for me, they need to know they're going to have to face me."

Flint muttered something under his breath that sounded like a curse, but he let her go. Jenna threw the door open. Nothing.

The porch was empty, the night wind kicking up fallen leaves and stirring the scent of damp earth. But the claw marks on the door were there—long, deep gouges in the wood, fresh and deliberate.

She crouched, running her fingers along the grooves. "Whatever did this, it wasn't

human.”

Flint stood behind her, his presence a solid wall of heat. “No. It wasn’t.”

She straightened, turning to face him. “Then what are we dealing with?”

His expression was grim. “Something that doesn’t want you here.”

Jenna lifted her chin. “Too bad for them.”

Flint let out a rough chuckle, but there was no humor in it. “You don’t scare easy, do you?”

“No.” She stepped closer, her gaze locked on his. “And I don’t run.”

Flint’s voice was a low rasp, full of certainty. “Then you better be ready, because whatever this is, I have a sneaky suspicion it’s just getting started.”

Their breath mingled in the cool night air, the space between them shrinking with every heartbeat. A sound stirred in the orchard—deeper this time, more deliberate. Not the wind. Something else.

Flint held her gaze, unreadable, unshaken. For a beat, the real danger wasn’t in the orchard—it was right here, between them. Breaking the tension, he continued, “How about we take that note in to Beck?”

Jenna nodded. “Sounds like a plan—maybe not a good plan, but more than I had yesterday.”

“Did you have a plan yesterday?”

“Not really, which is why yours doesn’t sound too bad.”

Jenna strode into the Silver Falls Sheriff’s office, Flint following behind her. She wondered if the scent of stale coffee and old paper was universal to all law enforcement offices. The place seemed to have been stuck in some time loop from the sixties—if had a ‘Mayberryesque’ quality to it, having the same wood-paneled wainscotting, same outdated furniture, same damn sheriff’s star tacked on the front desk.

The man she assumed to be Beckett Grey sat behind his desk, his boots propped up, flipping through a case file. He barely glanced up as she walked in, but then he spotted Flint behind her, his brow lifting slightly.

“Well, if it isn’t trouble and more trouble,” Beck muttered, setting his file down. “You must be Maribel’s niece. So to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Jenna didn’t waste time. She pulled the folded note from her pocket and tossed it onto his desk. “Someone left this for me at the orchard.”

Beck frowned, unfolding it. His gaze flicked over the words, and his expression darkened. He let out a long sigh, tossing the paper back toward her. “Could be kids messing around. Or someone trying to scare you off.”

Jenna’s jaw tightened. “It’s not kids, and I don’t scare easily.”

Beck pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jenna...”

“No,” she cut him off. “Flint seems to think you don’t believe my aunt’s death wasn’t an accident. And I have no plans to leave Silver Falls until I know exactly what happened to her.”

Beck's lips pressed into a tight line. He didn't argue, but glared at Flint.

Flint, standing beside her with his arms crossed, finally spoke. "I'll be keeping an eye on her." His voice was low, edged with something final.

Beck took the note and placed it in a manila folder.

Jenna reached across the desk and retrieved it. "Make a copy. I'm keeping the original."

Beck took the note and made a copy. As he handed it back to her, he met her gaze. "I'll look into it."

Jenna didn't say thank you. She didn't trust Beck to do much of anything when it came to her aunt's death—but at least now he knew she wasn't backing down.

As they left the office, Flint turned to her. "You could have been nicer."

"So could he."

"We're not your enemies, Jenna. I need to check in with my clan. You going to be okay in town for a bit?"

Jenna looked at him. "It's broad daylight, Mercer. I think I can handle myself."

Flint's golden eyes held hers for a long moment, as if weighing whether to argue. Then he grunted. "Stay in town and stay visible."

She rolled her eyes. "It's broad daylight and I'll have my Glock handy. I may pick up a couple of things, but then I'm heading back to the orchard. I have a lot of work to do. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Flint snorted and muttered something about obstinate she-cats.

Left alone, Jenna scanned the street. The town had changed little—maybe a bit more polished, a little more tourist-friendly. A small coffee shop caught her eye, the scent of roasted beans drifting through the crisp air.

She headed towards it and pushed open the door, a bell chiming overhead. Inside, the place was warm and inviting—wooden shelves lined with homemade jams and baked goods, soft music playing from an old radio behind the counter. A woman in her early forties stood behind the register, her auburn hair pulled into a messy bun, a flour-dusted apron tied around her waist.

She looked up and smiled. “Well, now. You must be Maribel’s niece.”

Jenna blinked. “You know who I am?”

The woman laughed, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “Small town, sweetheart. Everyone knows who you are. I’m Colleen Briggs. This is my place.” She gestured around the cozy shop. “I buy all my apple cider from Flint’s press. He always used your aunt’s apples.”

Jenna glanced at the display case where fresh apple fritters sat behind the glass.

Colleen followed her gaze. “Maribel’s apples made the best fritters. You planning to reopen the orchard?”

Jenna hesitated. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Colleen nodded, studying her. “Well, if you do, I’ll be first in line for another batch.” She wiped down the counter, then looked up again. “Your aunt was a good woman, Jenna. Silver Falls is worse off without her.”

Jenna swallowed hard, nodding. “Yeah. It is.”

She got a cup of coffee and a fritter to go before leaving the shop a few minutes later, Colleen’s words settling deep in her gut.

Maribel had mattered here. And Jenna wasn’t leaving until she found out who had taken her away.

CHAPTER 2

FLINT

Flint's paws pressed silently into the damp earth as he prowled the perimeter of Cold Creek Orchards, his golden fur blending seamlessly into the landscape. The air carried the scent of apples past their prime, their sweetness tinged with decay. Beneath it, something darker lurked, an undercurrent of wrongness that made his hackles rise.

He moved like a ghost between the trees, each step calculated, each breath controlled. The instincts of his mountain lion demanded he stay low, wait, watch. Years of experience had honed those instincts into something deadlier. He was an apex predator, and this evening he hunted for whatever or whoever it was that had marked Jenna as prey.

A whisper of sound. Flint halted, ears swiveling. The orchard stretched before him, a tangled mess of neglected branches and overgrown weeds. The farmhouse sat just beyond the trees, its porch light already lit. Inside, Jenna was waiting—probably with a weapon close at hand if he knew anything about her.

His gaze cut through the twilight searching. The malevolent presence he'd sensed earlier had retreated, but it hadn't gone far. It was watching. Waiting.

Something prowled these woods, something that had left those deep claw marks on Jenna's door.

A low growl built in Flint's throat, but he didn't release it. Instead, he crouched, scenting the air, sifting through the layers of evening smells—earth, pine, the lingering trace of rain. Then he caught it. A scent that didn't belong.

Blood.

Not fresh, but old enough to carry meaning. It came from the eastern part of the orchard, near the abandoned cider mill. Flint pivoted, moving with fluid grace as he cut through the orchard's wild undergrowth. The further he went, the stronger the feeling grew—like the land itself remembered something violent.

Maribel's warnings echoed in his mind. 'There's more to this land than people know, Flint. Some want it for what's on the surface. Others... they want what's underneath.'

He had brushed it off at the time. Maribel had always been superstitious, claiming the land had power, that something old ran through its roots. But as Flint neared the cider mill, he felt the hairs along his spine bristle.

There was something here.

The cider mill stood like a forgotten relic, its wooden structure grayed from years of neglect. The massive stone wheel, once used to press apples, lay cracked and covered in moss. Ivy crept along the mill's foundation, wrapping around its pillars like it was reclaiming what man had abandoned.

Flint padded closer, the scent of blood thick now, leading him to the entrance. Someone had wrenched open the door. Not by time, but by force.

His muscles coiled, ready to strike. He stepped inside.

The fading light streamed through the broken windows, illuminating the dust dancing

in the air. The scent was stronger here, pooling in the corners, staining the wooden floor. Flint shifted back to human form, the transformation seamless. The moment he was upright, he scanned the interior.

Dried blood smeared the area near the millstone. It hadn't been an accident. Someone had been injured—or worse—here. The blood wasn't old enough for it to be a forgotten remnant of the past.

Flint crouched, running his fingers through the dark stain. His gut twisted. This was recent. And that meant whoever—or whatever—had been bleeding here had left a trail.

He stood, every sense on alert. The orchard had always been a piece of Silver Falls' heart, a lifeline to the town's history. But Maribel believed something deeper lay there, something people shouldn't disturb.

Flint hadn't believed her—now he wasn't so sure.

A flicker of movement caught his attention through the broken window. He spun, already shifting before his mind fully processed the threat. His lion surged forward, fur replacing skin, muscles tightening as his claws dug into the old wooden floor.

A figure stood at the edge of the trees, barely visible, cloaked in shadow.

Flint growled, his feral gaze locking onto the intruder. But instead of fleeing, the figure nodded. A slow, deliberate acknowledgment... then it disappeared.

Flint launched forward, bounding through the mill's broken doorway, tearing through the underbrush in pursuit. His heart pounded, his lion roaring inside his head. But by the time he reached the tree line, the scent had all but vanished.

The intruder was gone.

Flint remained in his animal form, prowling the edge of the woods, his sharp gaze scanning for any sign of where it had gone. But there was nothing. Only the whisper of wind through the trees and the distant creak of the farmhouse's porch swing.

Jenna.

He turned back toward the house, his mind already made up. Whoever had been here wasn't done. The note on the table had been a warning. The scratches on the door had been a promise. He wasn't about to let anything happen to Jenna.

He took off at a run, his massive paws eating up the distance between the orchard and the farmhouse. His day was far from over, and this fight was just beginning.

Maribel had often left clothes hidden around the property for him. He found the stash—button-up jeans, cowboy boots and a sweater in a color Maribel particularly liked, a kind of muddy purple. He banished his mountain lion to the recesses of his mind and allowed his humanity to return. The mist swirled up around him and once he was fully human, he stretched before dressing and heading to the farmhouse.

Flint's boots struck hard against the wooden porch as he stepped into Maribel's—now Jenna's—farmhouse, his lion still prowling just beneath the surface. The encounter at the cider mill hadn't given him answers—only more questions. Whoever had been watching him had left their mark, and it wasn't the first time.

Inside, Jenna sat at the kitchen table, legs crossed, a steaming cup of coffee in her hand. The way she looked at him—assessing, challenging—sent something hot curling through his gut. The woman had the kind of presence that demanded attention, and she wasn't the type to scare easily.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she said, tilting her head.

Flint grabbed a mug from the counter and poured himself some coffee. “Could’ve been.”

She looked at him skeptically, but he didn’t elaborate. Not yet. The less she knew about what had been stalking the orchard, the better. At least until he had something more solid than gut instincts and the scent of blood in the dirt. Before he could steer the conversation, a knock at the door made them both turn. Flint’s stomach clenched. He knew that knock.

Jenna shot him a questioning glance, but he didn’t bother answering before heading to the door and yanking it open.

Mayor Thomas Calloway stood on the porch, his usual politician’s smile firmly in place. He was a broad man in his sixties, his salt-and-pepper hair neatly combed, his crisp button-down shirt and vest making him look every bit the respectable town leader. But Flint knew better.

“Flint,” Calloway greeted, his smile never faltering. “Good to see you. Mind if I come in?”

Flint glanced over his shoulder at Jenna. She gave a slow nod, setting her cup down with deliberate care.

“Not at all,” Flint said, stepping aside.

Calloway entered like he owned the place, his sharp gaze sweeping over the kitchen before landing on Jenna. “Ms. Hartford, I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. Maribel was a fine woman, a pillar of our community.”

Jenna's expression didn't flicker. "She was. And now she's gone. So let's skip the small talk and get to why you're really here."

Flint fought the urge to grin. Damn, he liked her; she was a lot like her aunt.

Calloway's smile didn't falter, but his eyes gleamed with calculation. "Straight to business. I respect that. I came to offer you a solution, Ms. Hartford. I know you're new to town, and an orchard isn't the easiest business to manage—especially one that's been struggling for years."

Jenna leaned forward, her fingers drumming against the table. "What are you suggesting?"

"That you sell." Calloway folded his hands in front of him. "There are interested parties who'd love to see this land put to good use."

Flint crossed his arms, his jaw tightening. "You mean Connor McVey."

Calloway's expression remained composed, but something flickered behind his eyes. "Connor's made it clear he'd be willing to take the orchard off Ms. Hartford's hands. A generous offer, considering its current condition."

Jenna's lips curled slightly. "Generous, huh?"

"More than fair," Calloway assured her. "Silver Falls is changing, Ms. Hartford. We need new development, new business. The orchard—it's a relic. And frankly, without Maribel, it doesn't stand much of a chance."

Flint clenched his fists. Calloway had been trying to push Maribel out for years, always backing whatever McVey was scheming.

Jenna, however, didn't so much as blink. "I appreciate your concern, Mayor, but I'm not selling."

A flicker of irritation crossed Calloway's face before he smoothed it away. "I understand you want to honor your aunt's memory. But think about the long term. You're an outsider here, Ms. Hartford. Owning this orchard—it won't be easy."

Flint stepped closer, his voice low and dangerous. "She's not alone."

Calloway exhaled sharply, his jaw tightening. "I see." He straightened his vest, glancing between them. "If you change your mind, my door is always open."

Jenna stood, her posture commanding. "Noted."

Calloway gave a stiff nod and turned on his heel, heading for the door. Flint followed him out onto the porch, stopping him just before he reached his car.

"I know you're not just here to play messenger," Flint said, voice quiet but firm.

Calloway met his gaze. "I'm here because Silver Falls needs progress. You know that as well as I do."

"Silver Falls needs its soul more."

Calloway let out a dry chuckle. "Then let's hope Ms. Hartford doesn't lose hers trying to hold on to something that's already gone."

Flint didn't move until the mayor's car disappeared down the road. When he turned back, Jenna was leaning against the doorframe, watching him.

"Subtle," she said.

Flint ran a hand through his hair. “Calloway’s been pulling strings for McVey for years. He’s got half the town believing McVey’s the future of Silver Falls.”

Jenna folded her arms. “Then I guess I’m the past.”

Flint let out a low chuckle. “You’re something else entirely.”

She didn’t respond, just held his gaze, unflinching, unshaken. Damn. He was in trouble.

The following day, Flint pushed open the glass doors of McVey Development, stepping into the sleek, modern office space that reeked of money and ambition. The receptionist jumped up and tried to intercept him, but she failed. Flint strode past her, without breaking stride, heading straight for the office at the end of the hall.

Connor McVey sat behind a massive desk, all polished wood and leather. He was in his late forties, clean-cut, expensive suit, the kind of man who thrived on handshakes and backroom deals. He looked up from his computer, a slow, practiced smile spreading across his face.

“Well, well,” McVey said, leaning back in his chair. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Flint shut the door behind him. “Cut the bullshit, McVey. I know you want the orchard.”

McVey spread his hands. “Can you blame me? It’s prime real estate.”

“Maribel wouldn’t sell to you. Jenna won’t either.”

McVey sighed, shaking his head. “That’s unfortunate.”

Flint stepped closer, bracing his hands on the desk. “Stay away from her.”

McVey met his gaze, unbothered. “That sounds like a threat, Mercer.”

Flint’s voice dropped to a dangerous growl. “Not a threat, a warning, and a promise.”

McVey chuckled, leaning forward. “I wouldn’t get too attached, Flint. That orchard is a sinking ship, and eventually, Jenna’s going to realize she’s better off letting it go. She doesn’t belong here. She’s a New York City financial hot shot. One hunky alpha and an orchard will never hold her interest.”

Flint’s mountain lion prowled beneath the surface, itching for a fight. But not here. Not yet.

Instead, he pushed off the desk, his expression cold. “Let me make something clear. If anything happens to her—if I even suspect you had a hand in it—I’ll make sure you regret ever setting foot in Silver Falls.”

McVey didn’t answer. He just smiled.

Flint turned and walked out, already planning his next move.

Flint stood outside Silver Mist Cider Mill, his family’s pride and legacy, watching the steam rise from the vents in the old barn-style building. The scent of fermented apples filled the crisp evening air, mingling with the ever-present smell of pine and earth. The mill had stood for three generations, and as long as he was breathing, no developer, politician, or outside force would take it from them.

It contributed little to the bottom line of his clan, but it was a source of pride to him, and it gave him a place to try to bring along future artisans within the clan—brewers, artisanal cheese makers, bakers and the like. McVey and the mayor were right. The

town needed to grow. Just being a once-in-a-while tourist stop was not enough. If the town and the various shifter clans were going to survive and thrive, there needed to be more here to keep the younger generation in place.

Inside the mill, the hum of machinery and the rhythmic clang of metal against wood filled the space. The cider press was in full swing, workers moving with expert precision as they processed the latest batch of apples. But Flint wasn't here for production. He was here for her.

Sybil Mercer—his younger sister and the brains behind their business—was already waiting for him in the office, arms folded across her chest. She was as fierce as she was smart, her honey-brown eyes sharp as she watched him step inside.

“I heard you paid McVey a visit,” Sybil said, arching an eyebrow.

Flint sat on the edge of her desk, crossing his arms. “Word travels fast.”

“It does when you barge into his office looking ready to rip his throat out.” She grabbed a bottle of cider from the mini fridge, twisting the cap off with practiced ease. “So, are we declaring war on Silver Falls’ most powerful land developer? Because if we are, I’d appreciate a heads-up.”

Flint shook his head, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “Not yet. But he’s making moves. The mayor tried to convince Jenna to sell last night—made a special trip and everything.”

Sybil grinned as she took a slow sip before setting her bottle down. “I take it she refused?”

“She shut Calloway down before he even got comfortable.” A slow grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “The man didn’t know what to do with himself.”

Sybil rolled her eyes. “Of course she did. That woman is all fire and stubbornness.”

Flint didn’t argue. Jenna Hartford was a problem in every sense of the word—one he couldn’t seem to walk away from. “And you would know that how?”

“Like you said, word travels fast, and you aren’t the only friend Maribel had.” Sybil watched him for a long moment, then sighed. “Look, I know that face, Flint. You’re getting too close.”

He scoffed. “Too close? To what?”

“To her.” Sybil leaned against her desk. “She’s not just some outsider passing through town. She’s stepping into a fight she doesn’t fully understand. And you...” She jabbed a finger toward him. “... are acting like a lion who’s already decided she’s his to protect. Could it be my big brother has found his fated mate?”

Flint’s jaw tightened, and he groaned. “I don’t believe in fated mates. Maribel was a friend. And now her niece is being hunted. She may not think she needs protection, but she does.”

Sybil’s gaze softened slightly, but her resolve didn’t waver. “You don’t want to just protect her, Flint, you want to claim her. She isn’t one of us. She may not intend to stay, and that is what worries me.”

He pushed off the desk, shaking his head. “I don’t have time for this.”

Sybil scoffed. “Of course you don’t. Just tell me one thing.” She stepped into his path, forcing him to meet her eyes. “If it comes down to a choice—protecting Jenna or protecting the clan—do you know what you’re going to do?”

Flint didn’t answer. Because for the first time in his life, he wasn’t sure.

The sun had long set by the time Flint pulled up to Cold Creek Orchards. The place looked different at night—wild, untamed. The trees cast long shadows in the moonlight, their branches rustling in the cool breeze. The porch light was on, but the rest of the farmhouse remained dark.

Flint climbed out of his truck, his boots crunching against the gravel as he made his way to the front steps. He wasn't sure what Jenna's reaction would be when she saw him again, but that didn't matter. He wasn't asking permission.

The door opened before he could knock. Jenna stood in the entryway, wearing black leggings and a loose off-the-shoulder sweater, her dark hair pulled into a messy bun. She didn't look surprised to see him. If anything, she looked amused.

“Didn't take you for a stalker, Mercer.”

Flint leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms. “Didn't take you for someone who ignores death threats.”

Jenna almost hid her sly smile, her eyes glittering with defiance. “I don't ignore them. I handle them.”

He let out a low chuckle. “Is that what you call sleeping alone in a house that's already been marked?”

Her expression flickered just enough for him to catch it—a split second of vulnerability before she buried it beneath what he had quickly learned was an iron will.

“I can take care of myself,” she said.

Flint didn't move. Didn't blink. “I'm sure you think you can, but I'm not convinced

and so I'm not leaving."

Jenna's lips parted slightly, as if she wasn't sure whether to argue or let him in. He watched her fight with herself, the same fire in her eyes that had drawn him to her in the first place. She wasn't used to letting people stand beside her.

"Flint..." she started, but he cut her off.

"You can be as pissed about it as you want, but I'm staying. Until we know who's behind this, you're not staying out here alone." His voice dropped, softer this time. "I won't let them take anything else from you."

Jenna inhaled sharply, and for a moment, he thought she might slam the door in his face. Instead, she stepped aside, lifting her chin in defiance.

"Fine," she said, her voice like steel. "But don't get comfortable. I'm not the kind of woman who needs saving."

Flint stepped inside, the door clicking shut behind him. He didn't look at her when he spoke, but the words hung between them, heavy and certain.

"I never said you were."

But she'd find out soon enough—he wasn't the kind of man who walked away.

CHAPTER 3

JENNA

Jenna stood on the farmhouse porch, inhaling the crisp mountain air as the sun crested the treetops, bathing Cold Creek Orchards in gold. The place looked almost peaceful in the early morning light, but she knew better. The marks on her door, the threatening note, the shadowy presence Flint had sensed in the woods—none of it had been a coincidence. Someone wanted her gone, but they'd have to drag her off this land before she gave it up.

Flint had stayed the night again. She hadn't heard him leave yet, which meant he was probably still somewhere inside, prowling her house like he had every right to. Part of her bristled at his presence—his intrusion—but the deeper part of her, the part that had felt untethered since Maribel's death, wasn't as resistant as she probably should've been.

She needed to clear her head. Jenna stepped down off the porch and into the orchard. The moment her boots hit the cool grass, her she-cat stirred, pressing at the edges of her control, restless.

It had been too long since she'd let her beast run free. New York had been nothing but a prison for that part of herself. There were no wild mountains in the city, no vast stretches of untouched land where she could run without fear of being seen. Her control had been absolute, but here? Here, the land called to her.

She walked deeper into the orchard until she was certain she was alone. With a

steadying breath, she let go. She removed her clothing, placing it in a neat pile where she'd be able to find it easily.

A swirling mist of thunder, lightning, and shifting color enveloped Jenna, wrapping around her like a living force. A deep, long-suppressed pull coursed through her, and for a brief moment, it was as though her body melted, one form effortlessly giving way to another. As the mist dissipated, her mountain lion stood in her place, powerful and free.

Her she-cat roared to life. The world sharpened in an instant—vivid greens, deep browns, the scent of damp earth flooding her heightened senses. The breeze carried a thousand unfamiliar scents—apple blossoms, rich soil, distant wildlife—each one more distinct, more alive than it had been before.

Jenna launched forward, powerful limbs propelling her across the orchard floor. The grass and fallen leaves whispered beneath her paws as she wove through the twisted trees, reveling in the sheer freedom of it. It had been years since she'd run like this, and damn if she hadn't missed it. The sensation intoxicated her—her body was built for speed and precision.

She leapt over a fallen branch, landing smoothly before digging her claws into the earth and pushing off again, picking up speed. The wind rushed past her face, the scent of apples and pine filling her lungs. The orchard was alive, buzzing with energy she hadn't noticed before.

Her instincts were stronger here. More powerful.

Jenna slowed, breathing deep, her ears twitching at the rustling of leaves in the distance. Her she-cat sensed something, but it wasn't danger—it was... familiarity.

She padded toward the heart of the orchard, moving silently between the trees. The

ruins of an old storage shed stood ahead, long abandoned, its wooden beams cracked and covered in ivy. Maribel had mentioned it once, in passing—said the place had been there before she'd even taken over the orchard.

Jenna returned to where she'd left her clothes, reluctantly relinquishing her lion form and becoming human once more. Rising to her feet, the cool morning air was a stark contrast to the heat running through her body. She pulled on the clothes rolling her shoulders as the human world settled around her again.

Wanting to explore the old shack alone, she returned to it, familiarizing herself with the layout of the orchard. Even though she had a vague idea of where she was, it was a surprise when she all but stumbled upon it. That was when she saw it—carved into the thick bark of an ancient oak was a name. Maribel.

Jenna's stomach clenched as she stepped closer, running her fingers over the weathered letters. The carving was old; the edges softened by time, but below it, in newer, jagged strokes, were three more words.

Trust no one.

A chill slid down her spine. This wasn't just some teenage graffiti. This was a warning, but from whom? The mayor? The developer? Flint? Maribel herself? As she studied it, she had the feeling it might be from Maribel herself and if it had been from Maribel, why had she left it here and for whom did she leave it. Someone deliberately left it here, regardless of who left it or why.

Jenna glanced over her shoulder, scanning the orchard for any sign of movement. The land stretched out before her, deceptively peaceful, but she couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been watching.

She turned back to the carving, her fingers pressing into the grooves. Maribel had

been smart, careful. She hadn't left things to chance. Jenna stepped back, crossing her arms as she studied the message. Maribel had known something, and whatever it was, it had gotten her killed.

Later that day, after she'd returned to the farmhouse and discovered Flint gone, Jenna wiped the sweat from her brow, glaring at the stubborn pile of debris blocking the entrance to one of the old outbuildings. Neglect had overtaken the orchard for too long; why hadn't she known that? Why hadn't her aunt asked her for her help? If she wanted to bring the orchard back to life, she had to start somewhere. Cleaning up the outbuildings seemed like a logical place to begin—at least until she'd stumbled upon the mess inside.

Jenna cleared away the debris only to find stacks of old wooden crates, broken ladders, and rusted tools filling the dimly lit space. Although she had already removed the worst rot, several precarious stacks of crates leaned against the back wall. One wrong move, and she would be buried by a mountain of splintered wood.

Jenna pressed her hands to her hips, taking a steady breath. "Alright, let's do this."

Grabbing one of the top crates, she hauled it forward, ignoring the creak of the unstable pile as she tossed it toward the doorway. The next one came down easier, dust swirling in the beams of sunlight filtering through the cracks in the walls.

She barely had time to react when the entire stack lurched forward.

Her instincts screamed, but she wasn't fast enough to jump clear. The heavy wooden crates came crashing down, a blur of movement in her peripheral vision.

Then, suddenly—arms.

A solid, unyielding body slammed into her, knocking her sideways and out of harm's

way. The impact sent them both to the ground, and Jenna barely registered the sound of wood splintering inches from where she had just been standing. For a moment, all she could hear was her own breathing and the echo of her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Then she felt him—not just physically, but in a deep primal way she had only read about in shifter lore.

Flint pressed his body against hers, the heat of his skin searing through the thin fabric of her shirt. He braced his arms on either side of her, shielding her from the last of the debris. His chest rose and fell in deep, steady breaths, his gaze locked onto her.

Jenna's fingers curled against the dirt floor, her entire body aware of the way he hovered over her—too close, too warm, too dangerous.

“Are you hurt?” His voice was low, rough.

“I’m fine,” she said, forcing her own voice to stay level, despite the way her pulse thundered.

His eyes flicked over her, as if assessing for himself whether she was telling the truth. He didn’t move, didn’t retreat, and Jenna became acutely aware of the way his weight still pinned her down.

The scent of him filled the air—earthy, wild, completely intoxicating.

She swallowed, forcing herself to focus. “You can get off me now.”

Flint’s lips quirked—not quite a grin, but close enough to make her temper flare. “You sure you don’t want to stay like this a little longer?”

Jenna shoved at his chest, and he let out a deep chuckle before pushing himself upright. He offered her a hand, but she ignored it, climbing to her feet on her own.

She brushed the dirt from her jeans, ignoring the way her skin still burned from where he had been touching her. “What the hell are you even doing here?”

Flint crossed his arms, looking entirely too satisfied with himself. “Making sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

Jenna let out a slow breath through her nose. “I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“You keep saying that,” he said, stepping closer. “And yet, every time I turn around, you’re in danger.”

Jenna refused to back down. She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze head-on. “I had it under control.”

Flint’s eyes darkened, his expression shifting from amusement to something heavier. “No, you didn’t.”

The air between them crackled—not just with frustration, but with something more. Jenna hated the way a thousand bees seemed to buzz in her skull, how aware she was of him, how the warmth of his body still lingered, how the scent of him had wrapped around her like a second skin. Even though she was normally hard to rattle, Flint Mercer unsettled her in ways she refused to acknowledge.

And worse? He knew it.

“I can take care of myself,” she repeated, her voice sharper this time.

Flint watched her for a long moment, his jaw ticking as if he was biting back

whatever he really wanted to say. Then, finally, he stepped back. “Sure. Keep telling yourself that, Jenna.”

Jenna gritted her teeth, but before she could snap back, he was already turning toward the door, his broad shoulders filling the space as he moved.

He paused just before stepping outside, glancing over his shoulder. “Next time, don’t go into a collapsing building alone.”

Then he was gone, leaving her standing in the middle of the wreckage, fuming. Jenna kicked one of the broken crates, flinching as it resisted before skidding across the floor. That had hurt. She could still feel Flint’s presence like an imprint against her skin, the heat of his body a memory she didn’t need. She didn’t need Flint Mercer to save her.

She just wished her body would stop reacting like it wanted him to.

She grabbed a piece of broken wood and tossed it to the side with more force than necessary. Damn him. The way he had hovered over her, that cocky edge to his voice, like he had single-handedly prevented her untimely demise.

It had been nothing but a freak accident, but Flint didn’t see it that way.

She turned toward the open doorway, expecting him to be gone, but of course, he was still there. Standing just outside, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching her with that unreadable look.

“You gonna stand there all day, Mercer, or are you planning to help?”

He didn’t move. “That stack didn’t just fall, Jenna.”

She blew out a breath and yanked another crate upright. “Wood rots, things crumble. Pretty sure that’s how decay works.”

“That’s not what happened here.”

Jenna looked up, locking eyes with him. “Let me guess. You think it was sabotage?”

Flint didn’t blink. “Yeah.”

She snorted, pushing hair from her face. “Who would go out of their way to kill me with vintage storage crates?”

He stepped inside, boots crunching against the debris as he crouched near the remains of the fallen stack. He ran a hand over one of the larger pieces, his fingers skimming over jagged splinters. “We don’t know if it was meant for you, but these weren’t just rotted through,” he said. “Someone loosened the base, probably knowing that the second you, or Maribel, touched it, the whole thing would come down.”

Jenna crossed her arms, suddenly aware of just how serious he looked. Flint didn’t seem like a man prone to paranoia, at least not in a way that wasn’t earned. Still, she refused to let fear dictate her next move.

“If someone’s trying to kill me, they’re going to have to do better than a pile of wood,” she said, keeping her voice steady.

Flint’s gaze snapped to hers, something feral lurking within the depths of his eyes. “You think this is funny?”

“No,” she admitted, holding his gaze. “But I also don’t scare easy.”

Flint straightened, stepping toward her, his presence too much in the small space.

“Then maybe you should. Because this? This wasn’t random. First, the note. Then the claw marks. Now this? Someone doesn’t just want you gone, Jenna. They want you dead.”

The way he said it—calm, absolute—sent something sharp through her chest.

Jenna held his stare, refusing to give an inch. “Then let them keep trying.”

Flint let out a long breath, shaking his head. “You are impossible.”

She grinned. “So I’ve been told.”

He looked ready to say something else, but then his gaze flicked toward the ceiling, listening. Jenna heard nothing at first, but a second later, the faint rustling of leaves outside caught her attention. Flint moved toward the door, scanning the orchard like he expected something to jump out of the trees.

“Problem?” she asked, keeping her voice casual.

“Maybe,” he muttered, but after another moment, he stepped back inside. “I’m not letting you stay out here alone.”

Jenna barked out a laugh. “You planning to move in, Mercer? Because I don’t recall inviting you.”

“I don’t need an invitation,” he shot back, his voice edged with warning. “This isn’t a game, Jenna.”

Something in his intensity sent heat licking up her spine, but she forced herself to ignore it. “I’ll be fine.”

Flint didn't look convinced, but he didn't argue. Instead, he turned toward the exit, his muscles coiled like he was waiting for something to happen.

Jenna forced herself to ignore the lingering chill of his words as she returned to clearing the wreckage.

That night, the farmhouse was too quiet.

Jenna sat on the back porch, feet propped up on the railing, a thick blanket draped over her shoulders. The whiskey bottle beside her remained mostly full, but she needed something to anchor herself.

The orchard stretched beyond the house, endless and shadowed beneath the silver glow of the moon. It should have felt safe. It didn't.

Flint's warning played through her mind, and for the first time since she'd arrived, she let herself consider that maybe he was right. Maybe someone was trying to scare her off—or worse.

She lifted the whiskey bottle, tilting it toward the sky. "Nice try," she murmured, as if whoever was out there could hear her.

Then she saw them—glowing eyes from the darkness between the trees.

Her stomach tightened, every instinct in her body screaming danger. But she forced herself to remain still, her pulse steady. It wasn't Flint. He was inside; besides, she knew his presence, could recognize his energy anywhere.

This was something else. The eyes didn't blink, didn't move. They just watched.

Jenna's fingers curled around the neck of the bottle, her other hand gripping the butt

of the gun that sat in her lap. Flint might think she was incapable of protecting herself, but she'd lived alone in the city too long to not know how to defend herself.

A low growl rumbled from the tree line, deep and guttural, vibrating through the still night air. Then—just as suddenly—it was gone. Something was out there. Something was watching, waiting, but for what?

CHAPTER 4

FLINT

The morning air carried the scent of damp earth and ripening apples as Flint left the orchard, headed into town and strode into the sheriff's office, his boots heavy against the hardwood floors. The place had changed little over the years—an old brick building with an open floor plan, a few desks pushed together in the center, and a single office at the back where Sheriff Beckett Grey handled most of Silver Falls' problems.

Not that he was handling this one fast enough for Flint's liking.

Beck looked up from his desk, his blue eyes narrowing as he stepped into the doorway. Alpha to the local wolf pack, he didn't spook easily. But he also wasn't quick to move when politics got involved, and Flint had a feeling that's exactly what was happening now.

"If you're here to complain about Maribel's death, save it," he said, leaning back in her chair. "I already told you, Flint. I don't have any evidence of a crime."

Flint braced his hands on his desk, holding her gaze. "Then you're not looking hard enough."

Beck sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. "You think someone's sabotaging her, fine. But what do you want me to do? The note? No fingerprints. The scratches on her door? Could've been any number of things, including a pissed-off bear. And that little

accident at the outbuilding? No way to prove it wasn't just age and decay."

Flint clenched his jaw, his lion pacing in his mind. "That stack didn't fall on its own."

Beck sat forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "You think McVey's behind this?"

Flint didn't answer right away, because that was the part that wasn't adding up. McVey was a calculating snake. He wouldn't resort to something so reckless when he had politicians and money to do the dirty work for him.

"I don't know," Flint admitted. "But I know Jenna isn't safe."

Beck studied him, his sharp gaze unreadable. "You're all in on this, aren't you?"

Flint straightened, his expression hardening. "If someone's trying to hurt her, they're gonna have to go through me first."

Beck sighed again, shaking his head. "Fine. I'll make another round through town, see if anyone's talking. But Flint..." he gave him a pointed look, "If you're wrong about this, I'm not gonna be able to keep chasing ghosts just because you're feeling protective."

Flint turned without another word and walked out the door. He wasn't wrong.

And whoever was out there wasn't done yet.

Late in the afternoon, the orchard stretched wide before him, a patchwork of gnarled trees, overgrown pathways, and forgotten history. Flint prowled its perimeter in his mountain lion form, his golden coat blending into the dappled sunlight. The scent of apples and wet grass filled the air, but beneath it, something else lurked.

Something wrong.

He moved with silent precision, his instincts razor-sharp, his muscles fluid as he navigated the uneven terrain. The orchard had always been a place of life, but now, it felt different. Stagnant. Shadowed. Then he caught it—a scent that didn't belong.

Flint stilled, his ears flattening. The scent was faint but distinct—a mix of sweat, old leather, and something metallic, like rusted iron. He followed it, weaving between the trees, his paws sinking into the damp soil. The trail led him toward the farthest edge of the orchard, near the ridge where the land dropped off into thick forest.

He crouched low, sniffing the air again. Whoever had been here had lingered. Watching? His lion growled deep in his chest. A snapped twig echoed in the silence, and Flint spun just in time to see movement at the tree line. A shadow—tall, broad-shouldered, fast—slipped into the cover of the woods.

Flint launched forward, his powerful limbs propelling him toward the intruder, but the moment he reached the spot where the figure had been, the scent vanished. Gone—like they'd never been there at all. Flint knew better.

His muscles bunched, his tail lashing once before he turned back toward the farmhouse. Whoever had been watching the orchard wasn't a stranger to this land, and it seemed they weren't at all afraid of being caught.

Flint padded back toward the farmhouse, shifting just outside the sightline; he donned his clothing before proceeding. The second he caught the scent of fear, Flint didn't think—he moved, his mind sharpening as he sprinted the rest of the way. His boots barely touched the earth as he covered the distance, his pulse hammering in his ears.

Jenna was in danger. He knew it in a way only her fated mate would. He'd rejected Sybil's suggestion that she was his mate, but he'd known better from the first

moment he saw her. There'd been a terrible buzzing in his head as if a flight of really pissed off bumble bees had taken up residence.

Those glowing eyes watching from the trees had been a warning, but this was different. The wrongness that had settled over the orchard was stronger, closer. Someone had gotten too close. His gut twisted as he ran.

The house came into view, the porch light flickering against the soft twilight of the evening. Jenna stood at the bottom of the steps, clutching a piece of paper in one hand, her other balled into a fist at her side. She squared her shoulders, her spine rigid—defiant. But he didn't miss the way her fingers clenched tighter around the note.

Flint slowed, scanning the area before closing the last few feet between them. The orchard stretched out behind her, the woods beyond it nothing but black shadows against the horizon. Whoever had been out there watching was gone, but the unease in the air hadn't faded.

“What happened?” Flint demanded, his voice sharp.

Jenna didn't look at him right away. Instead, she lifted the paper; her gaze still locked on the trees. “Looks like my secret admirer left me another note.”

Flint took the note from her, scanning the words scrawled in jagged, uneven handwriting.

You were warned. Leave before it's too late.

A slow, dangerous burn lit in his chest.

Jenna's laugh was cold, humorless. “You'd think they'd come up with something

new. This is getting old, really old.”

Flint ignored the bite in her tone and turned his gaze back to the orchard. “Where’d you find it?”

Jenna finally looked at him, her eyes flashing. “Taped to my damn door.”

Flint’s fingers tightened around the paper. “They were that close?”

She nodded, her expression unreadable. “Apparently.”

His mountain lion seemed to crawl beneath his skin, barely contained. Someone had walked right up to her home, left a threat in plain sight, and vanished without a trace. That meant one of two things—either they were incredibly stupid, or they were overly confident. And confidence meant they thought they had the upper hand.

Flint wasn’t about to let that stand. He swept his gaze over her, checking for any sign of injury. She was still in the same clothes she’d worn earlier, her dark hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. She looked pissed, not shaken, but Flint knew better.

“Did you see anyone?”

“No.” She let out a frustrated breath, running a hand through her hair. “I was inside for maybe fifteen minutes. I came out, and there it was. No footprints, no sound, nothing.”

Flint cursed under his breath, scanning the tree line again. The scent was already fading, blending into the orchard’s natural musk. Whoever had been here knew how to cover their tracks.

Jenna crossed her arms. “So, go ahead. Tell me how reckless I am for staying here.”

Flint turned back to her, his jaw tight. “I wouldn’t say that, but I would point out it seems to be a family trait.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Really? Because you were thinking it.”

His lips pressed together, the fire inside him smoldering. Of course he’d been thinking it. She should have called him, should have waited before stepping outside. But Jenna was far more like Maribel than Flint would have liked. She wasn’t the kind of woman who waited for backup, and if he was being honest, that’s what scared him the most.

“Whoever this is,” Flint said, his voice controlled, “they’re not done.”

Jenna tilted her head. “And you figured that out all on your own?”

His patience snapped. “Damn it, Jenna. Would you just...” He stopped himself, exhaling sharply. “This isn’t a joke.”

Her expression hardened. “You think I don’t know that?”

Flint stepped closer, closing the space between them. “Then act like it.”

Jenna’s eyes flashed, her lion rising just beneath the surface. “I’m still standing, aren’t I?”

He clenched his fists, forcing himself to breathe through the frustration. “For now.”

They stood like that for a beat, energy crackling between them, neither willing to be the first to step back. Then Jenna shook her head, muttering something under her breath as she turned away. Flint reached out, his hand closing gently around her wrist. She stilled, and when she looked back at him, something shifted between them. The

fight was still there, the fire—but underneath it was something else.

“Let me help you,” he said, quieter this time.

Jenna hesitated, and for the first time, he saw something flicker in her expression. Doubt. Maybe even fear. Then it was gone, replaced with the same stubborn resolve he expected from her.

She pulled her arm free. “Fine. But don’t get in my way.”

Flint watched as she walked back up the porch steps, his fingers still tingling from where he’d touched her.

Something dark was moving through Silver Falls, and it had its sights set on Jenna.

Flint watched Jenna disappear into the farmhouse, the screen door snapping shut behind her like a challenge. She wasn’t running. Not from the threats, not from the unknown danger stalking her, and sure as hell not from him.

His lion paced inside him, barely contained. She should be afraid. Any sane person would be. But Jenna wasn’t sane—she was fierce, stubborn, and too damn proud for her own good. And if she wasn’t careful, it was going to get her killed.

He stormed up the porch steps and followed her inside. Jenna was already in the kitchen, yanking open a cabinet and pulling out a bottle of whiskey. She set it on the table with deliberate care, as if she needed something to do with her hands before she punched something.

She turned to face him, her eyes gleaming with challenge. “Let’s get something straight, Mercer. I’m not leaving.”

Flint dragged a hand through his hair, his patience wearing thin. “I don’t want you to, Jenna, but damn it...”

“No.” She pointed a finger at him, stepping closer. “I’m not some scared little girl. I don’t need you—or anyone—telling me what to do.”

Flint narrowed his eyes, stepping into her space, meeting her head-on. “Then wake up. Someone is playing a long game here, and you’re smack in the middle of it.”

Jenna tilted her chin, refusing to back down. “Then let them come.”

His jaw clenched. “You’re impossible.”

She let out a sharp laugh, one without humor. “And you’re infuriating.”

Flint barely noticed the distance closing between them. One second, he was ready to strangle her; the next, he was drowning in the scent of her—apples, rain, and something deeper, something wild. She must have felt it too. The energy between them shifted, humming in the air like a live wire. Jenna’s breath hitched, but she didn’t move away.

Flint’s gaze dropped to her lips. Full. Tempting. Too damn close. He should step back. Should remind himself why this was a bad idea. But he didn’t, and neither did she.

Her fingers curled against the edge of the counter, knuckles white, as if fighting herself.

Flint wasn’t fighting. Not anymore. His hand came up, brushing against her jaw, slow and deliberate. Jenna didn’t flinch. Didn’t stop him.

Instead, she leaned in. The space between them disappeared, heat crackling like a wildfire waiting to consume them both.

Then, just as fast, she yanked herself back, her breath unsteady. “No,” she murmured.

Flint stilled, his lion snarling in frustration. “No?”

Jenna’s eyes flickered with something—something dangerous. “This can’t happen.”

“Because?” he asked.

“Because it complicates things.”

Flint let out a slow breath, dragging a hand through his hair. “Jenna...”

“No.” Her voice was firm, her walls slamming back into place. She took another step away, putting distance between them. “Whatever this is, it’s not happening.”

Flint didn’t like that answer. But he knew a battle line when he saw one.

His gaze hardened, his voice dropping to something rougher. “Fine... for now.”

Jenna nodded once, as if that was that, then turned back to the whiskey, pouring herself a drink. But the way her hand shook, the way she wouldn’t meet his gaze—Flint knew damn well this wasn’t over, and if she thought she could keep fighting this, she was dead wrong.

Outside, the wind picked up, rustling through the trees. He could feel something watching, waiting, and Flint had a feeling they weren’t the only ones about to make their next move.

CHAPTER 5

JENNA

Jenna wasn't one to wait around for someone else to save her. If someone was trying to scare her off Cold Creek Orchards, they were in for a damn rude awakening.

She'd spent the morning making calls, knocking on doors, and pulling together a work crew. The orchard needed more than her two hands, and although she wasn't raised there, she was beginning to understand that Silver Falls had its own unique rhythm—a rhythm still deeply influenced by favors, alliances, and old grudges.

By early afternoon, a handful of locals had gathered near the barn, ready to work. Some she recognized from town, others had identified themselves as friends of Maribel's. They weren't doing this for her. They were doing it for her aunt. And Jenna was fine with that—for now.

One couple stood out. Marty and Ellen Yost.

The elderly orchard owners had a quiet grit to them, the kind of people who had seen Silver Falls change over the decades and had survived more than their share of hardship. Marty was wiry, with sharp blue eyes and a slow way of speaking that made every word feel important. Ellen, on the other hand, had the warm but no-nonsense air of someone who had spent years keeping her husband and their business in check.

"You're Maribel's girl, all right," Ellen said, wiping her hands on her work gloves as

she took in Jenna. “Stubborn as a mule and looking to prove a point.”

“I don’t scare easy,” said Jenna lifting her chin.

Marty chuckled. “That’s what she said, too.” He leaned on his cane, eyeing the orchard. “Shame what’s happened here. Cold Creek used to be the best damn orchard in the valley.”

Jenna’s stomach tightened. “Used to be?”

Marty met her gaze. “Your aunt held on longer than most, but she wasn’t the only one having problems. Some of us got bought out, some had ‘accidents.’” His voice dropped slightly. “Some just disappeared.”

Jenna frowned. “You think what happened to Maribel wasn’t an accident?”

Ellen shot him a warning look, but Marty didn’t back down. “You ever hear about the old land feuds?”

Jenna shook her head, and Ellen sighed, clearly irritated with her husband’s loose tongue. “Most of it’s just town gossip. Before the land was divided, some families believed they had a stronger claim to certain parcels than others. There were disputes. Some settled legal. Some... not so much.”

Jenna crossed her arms. “And you think that still matters now?”

Ellen glanced at Marty before answering. “It always matters, darlin’. Especially when there’s money involved.”

Jenna’s grip tightened. That wasn’t just a warning. It was a reminder—one she would not ignore. Whatever had started years ago, it wasn’t over.

The work went smoothly for most of the day. They pruned the trees and cleared the debris, allowing Jenna to see progress for the first time since her arrival. The orchard wasn't just land. It was Maribel's legacy. And now it was hers.

She wasn't about to let it rot.

Late in the afternoon, she stepped inside the barn, searching for more tools. The place smelled of aged wood, hay, and dust. Sunlight streamed through cracks in the old beams, casting long shadows across the packed dirt floor.

She ran her hands along a workbench, picking up a rusted hammer. Years of neglect had overtaken the barn and the rest of the orchard, though the barn showed signs of past use. As she stepped further inside, her foot hit something solid beneath the dirt.

She froze.

The barn floor was supposed to be nothing but compacted earth.

Frowning, she crouched and brushed away a layer of dust, revealing the edge of something wooden. A plank—no, a hatch.

Jenna sat back on her heels. It was some kind of cellar door.

Her pulse kicked up. She had walked through this barn dozens of times as a kid, had played in the rafters while Maribel worked, but she had never seen this before, which meant her aunt had kept it hidden.

Jenna pushed to her feet, dusting off her hands. Secrets. More of them. She wasn't leaving until she found out what Maribel had been hiding.

Jenna stared at the hidden cellar door as if it were a snake ready to strike. The dust

still coating her fingertips. Time had worn the old wooden planks, but iron hinges reinforced them, and they remained solid. Someone had built this to last. And someone—Maribel—had wanted it kept out of sight.

Her gut twisted with anticipation. She reached for the rusted handle.

Before she could lift it, a large, calloused hand clamped over hers. “Don’t.” Flint’s deep, steady voice cut through the quiet barn like a warning bell.

Jenna bit back a curse and turned her head. He stood just behind her, towering, radiating heat, his eyes locked onto the cellar door with predatory focus.

“You have a habit of sneaking up on me,” she muttered, trying to ignore the way her body still reacted to him.

“I have developed a habit of keeping you from making bad decisions,” Flint corrected, his grip firm. “And this?” He glanced at the hidden door. “This is a bad decision.”

Jenna snorted. “It’s a trapdoor, Mercer, not a damn bear pit.”

His jaw flexed. “You don’t know that.”

Jenna wrenched her hand free and crossed her arms. “What exactly do you think is waiting for me down there? Booby traps? Ghosts? A time bomb?”

Flint didn’t blink. “If Maribel hid this, she had a reason.”

Jenna knew that, but she wasn’t going to stand around debating it. She squared her shoulders. “I’m opening it.”

Flint let out a slow breath through his nose, his eyes darkening with warning. “Not alone, you’re not.”

She grinned. “What, you gonna wrestle me for it?”

His lips twitched—just a fraction—before he stepped around her and gripped the handle himself. “That might be fun if there weren’t a lot of other people here. But since there are, I’m inspecting it first.”

Jenna opened her mouth to argue, but before she could shoot him down, he yanked open the hatch. A rush of stale air rolled out, thick with damp earth and something older—something forgotten. Flint crouched, scanning the darkness below. A wooden ladder descended into the space, disappearing into the shadows.

Jenna peered over his shoulder. “Well? See any bear traps?”

Flint shot her a look, grabbed a flashlight, then moved down the ladder with the ease of a man who’d spent his life navigating danger. The second his boots hit the dirt floor, he scanned the space.

Jenna wasn’t about to stand there twiddling her thumbs. She climbed down after him, landing lightly beside him.

The cellar wasn’t large, but someone had built it deliberately. Wooden shelves lined the stone walls, stacked with dust-covered crates, faded ledgers, and bundles of yellowed documents. A single table sat in the center, an oil lamp still resting on it, long since burned out.

Jenna moved toward the shelves, brushing away cobwebs. “Maribel hid all this?”

Flint flipped open a crate, revealing neatly bound records—land ownership, historical

claims, old maps of Silver Falls. His fingers traced the weathered parchment, his brow furrowing.

“This isn’t just history,” he murmured. “These are land disputes. Some of them go back over a century.”

Jenna’s pulse kicked up. “And Maribel had them?”

Flint didn’t answer immediately. He pulled another ledger free, flipping through pages covered in looping cursive. Then he froze.

Jenna moved closer, scanning over his shoulder. The handwriting was familiar. Not from the past. From Maribel. She snatched the journal from his hands, flipping to the first page.

Cold Creek is more than just an orchard. It’s the last piece of something they want. And if they think I’ll roll over and sell, they don’t know me as well as they think they do.

Jenna’s grip tightened.

Flint’s voice was low, edged with something she couldn’t quite place. “She knew.”

Jenna met his gaze. “And whatever she knew? It got her killed.”

Retrieving the journal from Jenna, Flint tucked it into his shirt before leading her back to the ladder. The second they were back above ground, Flint tried to stop her.

“Jenna...”

She didn’t let him finish. “Don’t.”

He stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “You need to be careful.”

She tilted her chin. “Careful is what gets people nowhere.”

Flint’s eyes focused on her. “Maribel was careful, and she’s dead.”

The words hit harder than she expected, but she refused to show it.

Jenna grabbed the journal and shoved it into her jacket. “I’m not Maribel.”

Flint’s gaze swept over her, assessing, challenging. “No, you’re not.” His voice dropped. “But you’re walking the same road she did.”

Jenna brushed past him, already forming a plan in her head. She didn’t need Flint Mercer to stop her. She needed to find out who the hell wanted her dead—and why—and if they had killed her aunt. She wasn’t waiting around for another threat to land on her doorstep.

Jenna had ensured the volunteers would be fed—thanks to Sal at the pizza joint in town. Jenna figured if people were going to work to help bring the orchard back, the least she could do was feed them. It had been a fun day. She’d been able to forget here and there the suspicious circumstances of her aunt’s death and the fact that someone appeared to be after her—regardless of what she told Flint she suspected.

Everyone had left, and she had the farmhouse to herself. Knowing Flint, he was hanging out somewhere in the dark, and there was some comfort in that. Even knowing that, the night was too still.

Jenna lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting. Sleep hadn’t come easily—not with everything she’d uncovered in Maribel’s journal. words had burned into her memory, looping in her mind like a warning.

Cold Creek is more than just an orchard. It's the last piece of something they want.

But who were they?

She'd spent hours going through what she'd found in the hidden cellar, tracing land disputes back to when Silver Falls had been nothing more than wilderness and warring families. The orchard had always been valuable, always contested. But Maribel had held on, refusing to sell, surrender, or cave to the pressure.

And now, Maribel was gone. Jenna wasn't naïve enough to think that was a coincidence. She rolled onto her side, glaring at the bedside clock. 2:47 AM. With a frustrated sigh, she threw back the covers and sat up, rubbing a hand over her face. Maybe she'd go downstairs, make tea, do something other than lie here waiting for answers to fall from the sky.

Then she felt it. A shift in the air. Jenna froze, every instinct going razor-sharp. The house was silent, but something was... off. The kind of off that made her she-cat prowl beneath her skin, restless and uneasy. She pushed to her feet, grabbing the gun from her bedside table, barely making a sound as she crossed the room.

The farmhouse wasn't old enough to creak under every step, but she still moved carefully, her senses tuning in to the quiet. It wasn't until she reached the front window that she saw it. She looked toward the barn and could see the cellar door was open.

Her stomach clenched. She'd placed a lock on the door and had locked it. Double-checked it.

Jenna didn't hesitate. She left the farmhouse through the back door, circling around the house silently, sticking near the shadows. She thumbed the safety off her gun as she approached the barn, crouching near the entrance, pulse steady. The air in the

barn seemed charged with a kind of malevolent energy. The scent of damp earth and age still lingered, but there was something new—a presence.

Someone had been here. She moved toward the gaping hole in the barn floor. Someone had gone down there. Jenna gritted her teeth and took the first step down the ladder.

A creak echoed beneath her boots. The old wooden ladder groaned slightly under her controlled descent. The moment her feet hit the ground, she scanned the small, cluttered space, keeping the gun close.

Nothing looked different—at first. Then she saw it.

A single file, pulled from one crate and left open on the table. Her breath hitched. The paper inside wasn't from Maribel's collection. It was newer. The name at the top sent a cold rush through her veins.

Jenna Hartford.

Someone had added her to this mess.

A growl rumbled low in her throat, but she forced herself to focus. Someone had come onto her property, into the hidden cellar, gone through the records, and left this on purpose.

Jenna flipped through the file, eyes narrowing. It was thin, but the implications were loud and clear. Property ownership records, legal cases tied to Cold Creek Orchards, even a redacted report on Maribel's death.

Her hands tightened around the edges of the pages.

Who the hell was watching her this closely? A creaking noise from above made her whip her head up. The barn doors were open. The wind stirred the night air, whispering through the trees. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

Then came the growl. Not from her. Not from a single source.

Jenna lifted the gun, stepping away from the table and crept up the ladder. The last thing she wanted was to get trapped down here, especially if someone set fire to the barn. As she reached the top, she peeked out, scanning the shadows as she crept into the barn and moved toward the door.

She flattened herself against the wall and snuck toward the barn door, searching the darkness beyond the barn. The growl came again—this time closer, deeper. She stared out the open doorway just in time to see them.

Two sets of glowing eyes, low to the ground, watching her from the edge of the woods. Not one threat, but two.

Jenna's pulse didn't spike—it slowed, steady, measured. Her she-cat bristled, pushing at the edges of her control.

The figures in the darkness didn't move. Didn't run. They were watching. Waiting. Hunting.

Jenna tightened her grip on the gun, her voice steady when she finally spoke. "Come on then," she murmured, voice carrying just enough to reach them. "Let's see what you've got."

CHAPTER 6

FLINT

Flint's paws hit the damp earth with silent precision as he prowled the orchard's edge, every muscle coiled, every sense sharpened. The wind carried a mix of scents—apple wood, rain-dampened soil, and something else. Something wrong; something that didn't belong.

He had felt it before he'd seen them—two sets of glowing eyes in the woods, watching Jenna.

The second she challenged them, daring them to come closer, Flint had launched into action.

His mountain lion tore through the shadows, a silent predator slicing across the orchard in a deadly sprint. He wasn't alone. Whatever had been lurking bolted the second it caught his scent, vanishing into the thick forest like a ghost.

But Flint was faster.

The scent hit him like a punch to the gut. Shifter. Not from Silver Falls. Lynx. Lynx-shifters had not been in Silver Falls for centuries. Outsiders. His instincts burned. Intruders weren't welcome here.

He relentlessly pursued the outsiders—one male, one female—through the dense, tangled underbrush, the chase transforming into a ferocious and primal battle of

predator and prey. Tension electrified the air, snapping like a taut wire as they split, each darting in separate directions like panicked deer. Flint's instincts locked onto the male, perceiving him as the more immediate threat. The stranger sprinted with desperate speed, his feet pounding the earth, but he wasn't fast enough. Flint closed in with predatory precision, his senses acutely zeroing in on the scent—male, alien, a sharp metallic tang mingling with the musky odor of sweat and adrenaline.

Flint's snarl erupted, a deep, resonant roar that reverberated through the forest and ignited his muscles with explosive power. The intruder barely vaulted over a fallen log before Flint collided with him, his claws slicing through the outsider's flank with savage ferocity. The lynx's growl was guttural and raw as they twisted mid-air, their bodies a whirlwind of motion crashing into the dirt with a bone-crushing impact.

The stranger clawed at him with frantic desperation, but Flint was a force of nature—stronger, larger, more ruthless. He drove his massive shoulder into the other cat's ribs with relentless force, sending him sprawling sideways and propelling them both down a small embankment. They hit the ground hard, a chaotic maelstrom of limbs, snapping jaws, and raw, untamed fury.

The outsider landed at a brutal angle, hissing with sharp pain, but before Flint could deliver the lethal blow, the shifter clawed into the earth, launching himself backward with a powerful thrust. He didn't flee toward the town. He didn't seek the safety of any roads. Instead, he plunged deeper into the looming, shadowy mountains.

Sonofabitch.

Flint started to give chase, but something in his gut told him to stop.

The stranger could wait.

Jenna couldn't.

He turned sharply, sprinting back toward Cold Creek Orchards, his lion moving like wildfire through the trees.

By the time Flint reached the barn, Jenna was standing at the entrance, gun still in hand, eyes scanning the woods like she expected a full-scale battle to drop into her lap.

She hadn't run. Hadn't called for help. Of course, she hadn't.

Flint shifted back the second he hit the shadows of the barn, the mist of transformation rolling over him. He didn't even stop to breathe. He just grabbed the emergency stash of jeans near the back wall, yanked them on, and strode toward her.

Jenna spotted him immediately, assessing him with a sharp gaze.

"Well?" she asked, lowering the gun slightly but not putting it away. "Did you catch them?"

Flint clenched his jaw. "No."

She raised her eyebrows slightly, as if surprised. "That's not the answer I expected."

Flint ignored that. "You saw them?"

Jenna nodded. "Two of them. Watching."

"They weren't human," he said, stating what they both already knew.

Jenna didn't flinch. "No, they weren't."

Flint took a slow step closer, lowering his voice. "Both of them are shifters, one of

them is a lynx.”

She tilted her chin, something defiant sparking behind her eyes. “And?”

Flint hated that part of him liked the fight in her. Liked that she wasn’t afraid.

“It means this isn’t just about the orchard,” he said. “It’s bigger than land deals and property rights.”

“Care to clue me in?”

Flint shook his head. “There’s a legend that long before Silver Falls was a town, before roads carved through the forests and steel and stone claimed the land, there was a proud clan of lynx-shifters, known as Ghost Walkers. They roamed the misty valleys and shadowed peaks of this area, their lives woven into the rhythms of the wild. The land was their sanctuary, the spirits of their ancestors whispering through the trees, guiding their hunt, blessing their young.”

“I’m not going to like how this ends, am I?” she asked.

“Probably not. Similar tales can be told of most indigenous people and shifters. When the settlers came, the Ghost Walkers watched from the edges, wary but unseen. But when settlers felled trees and dammed rivers, when they burned sacred groves and destroyed dens, the Ghost Walkers knew they would never again possess the land. Silver Falls rose where their elders had once gathered beneath the moon, and with its rise came blood. Hunters, fearing the unknown, branded them monsters. They slaughtered those who resisted. Those who survived scattered into the deep wilderness.”

“That’s horrible.”

Flint snorted. “That’s the price of civilization and manifest destiny. For generations, people said the Ghost Walkers roamed, never lingering too long, never calling any place home. People thought the Ghost Walkers extinct, but some say whispers still linger in the trees, shadows remain on the ridgeline, and eyes gleam in the dark. Some say they dream of taking back what they believe was stolen from them. Others believe they are nothing but a legend.”

“Do you think the Ghost Walkers are connected to the orchard?”

“Could be,” he said with a shrug.

Jenna held his gaze, unshaken. “I thought there was more to it than just a land deal when I found my name on a file in the cellar.”

Flint bristled. “And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“I just found it. I was planning to.” She met his glare without hesitation. “But you were busy playing bloodhound in the woods.”

Flint didn’t blink. She was impossible. Stubborn. Reckless. And, if they weren’t both careful, she was going to get herself killed.

Jenna tucked the gun into the back waistband of her jeans and stepped toward him, close enough that he could see the faint pulse at the base of her throat.

“So?” she asked. “Who do you think our new friends are?”

Flint’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “Someone who shouldn’t be here.”

Her lips curved slightly, almost like she enjoyed this—the thrill, the danger.

Flint took another step, closing the last bit of space between them. “This isn’t a game, Jenna.”

“I never said it was,” she shot back.

He ran his hands over her arms, around her waist, needing to feel that she was whole, that she was here. “Did they touch you?” His voice was gravel and thunder, barely restrained.

Jenna tilted her head up, her eyes bright and unreadable. She breathed out in a long sigh, but she didn’t push him away. “I’m fine.”

That wasn’t enough.

Flint cupped her jaw, tilting her face toward his. “I need to hear you say it.”

Something flickered in her expression. A softening, an understanding.

“I’m fine,” she said again, slower this time. “They didn’t come near me.”

The way she looked at him—like she was challenging him to prove something—sent something hot through his blood. Jenna didn’t fear the fight. She welcomed it.

The question was, who was she more dangerous to? Him? Or whoever had just trespassed into his territory?

Flint let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, but he didn’t let go. His fingers still framed her face, his thumb tracing over her cheekbone. She was fire in his hands, and he was too damn close to burning alive.

Jenna didn’t step back. She stood her ground, chin raised, body pressed against his in

a way that sent heat curling through his blood.

He should move. He needed to move. Instead, he slid his hand down to the curve of her waist, holding her there. Holding her still.

Her pulse thrummed against his fingers.

He lowered his head, his breath fanning against her skin. “I should be furious with you,” he muttered.

“This is you not furious?” Jenna snorted. “Remind me to avoid you when you are furious.”

Damn her. “This isn’t funny.”

She was fearless. Reckless. Addictive.

Flint was half a second away from doing something they’d both regret. Then, from deep in the woods, a low howl shattered the quiet.

Jenna’s gaze snapped toward the sound, and Flint instantly went rigid, his protective instincts slamming back into place. The enemy hadn’t left. They’d circled back and were still watching... still waiting.

He let go of Jenna, but his promise was clear. This wasn’t over. Flint’s pulse still pounded like a war drum, his muscles tight, his instincts screaming at him to do something.

Jenna stood in front of him, stubborn, steady, and completely unfazed, despite the fact that two unknown shifters had been circling her property like wolves at the edge of a firelight.

The woman had no sense of self-preservation, and it was slowly driving him insane.

Flint stepped in closer, his body crowding hers, forcing her to acknowledge the heat that still lingered between them. She didn't back away. Of course, she didn't. Jenna Hartford never backed down from a challenge.

"What were you thinking?" His voice came out low, barely restrained.

Jenna's gaze flickered with something sharp. "That I don't need a damn babysitter."

His hands curled into fists at his sides, his entire body still coiled from the fight, from the scent of the enemy still lingering in the air. "You were standing out here, gun in your hand, challenging them."

Her jaw tightened. "And?"

"And you don't know what the hell you're dealing with," he ground out.

She lifted her chin, fire in her eyes. "Neither do you, but I'm pretty damn sure a couple of well-placed bullets would stop them in their tracks."

Flint could barely breathe. The scent of her—apples, steel, and something entirely Jenna—wrapped around him, making it damn near impossible to think about anything but the fact that she was alive, fierce, and entirely too reckless for her own good.

His lion was still growling within his mind, demanding he do something. Mark her, claim her, remind her she wasn't alone.

But Jenna wasn't a woman who wanted saving, and he had no interest in taming her.

Instead, he moved even closer, so close that their breath mingled in the cool night air.

“You want to fight, Hartford?” His voice was like gravel and heat. “Then fight me. But don’t stand out here alone like you’ve got a death wish.”

It was probably good that she’d put her gun away as she felt like she’d have liked to have shot him just for standing so damn close. “I can take care of myself, Mercer.”

His lips curved slightly, but there was no amusement in it. Just something darker.

“Yeah?” His voice dropped, almost a growl. “Because from where I was standing, you were damn close to being hunted.”

Something flickered across her face—not fear. Jenna didn’t know fear. But she knew what he was saying was true.

Flint pressed in, his body nearly brushing hers, the heat between them crackling like a live wire. “You might not be scared, Jenna. But I damn well am.”

For a second, just a second, something in her hardened stance wavered. Flint saw it—the way her breath caught, the way her fingers twitched like she was fighting the pull between them. Then, just as fast, she shut it down.

She pushed past him, her shoulder brushing his bare chest, and started toward the house. “I’m not your problem, Mercer.”

Flint watched her walk away, his jaw tight. That’s where she was wrong. She was his biggest damn problem.

JENNA

Jenna didn’t slam the door behind her, but it was a near thing.

Her pulse was still too high, her skin still burning from where Flint had stood so damn close, crowding her like he had every right to.

Damn him. Damn his protectiveness, his frustrating, infuriating need to throw himself between her and anything that looked remotely like a threat. She'd never needed saving before, and she wasn't about to start now.

But the worst part? The part that made her want to throw something just to hear it break? She had wanted him to stay close. She had wanted him to keep touching her. And that? That was dangerous.

Jenna strode to the kitchen, yanked open the cabinet, and pulled out a glass, pouring herself a drink from the bottle of whiskey she'd started keeping on the counter. The glass was in her hand before she even realized what she was doing.

She poured a drink. Didn't sip. Just swallowed. The burn didn't make the heat inside her go away. Didn't make her forget the way Flint had looked at her. Like she was his to protect. His to fight for. His.

Jenna closed her eyes, her fingers tightening around the glass. No. She wasn't his. She wasn't anyone's, and she would not let Flint Mercer make her forget that.

FLINT

In the oppressive cloak of night, Flint lingered beneath a canopy of stars, his eyes fixated on the faint, flickering glow emanating from the house's windows. The light barely sliced through the inky darkness, casting an eerie, supernatural aura that writhed upon the walls, a haunting whisper of the life inside. It was a scene both compelling and deeply disconcerting.

Jenna believed she could defy him, defy this magnetic force, binding them together

with an unbreakable chain. She felt she could wage a relentless war against the inevitable, yet her resolve faltered with every heartbeat, each moment an agonizing test of her will.

Flint had endured countless battles before—grueling wars that tested every fiber of his being, fights to shield his family and his people with an indomitable spirit. But this was unlike any conflict he had ever faced. This was about her, about them, and he was being torn apart by the clash between respecting her fierce defiance and his own relentless determination. He felt anchored here, yet uncertainty gnawed at his soul as he pondered whether his presence represented a solemn vow or a crushing burden in the face of whatever harrowing challenges lay ahead.

CHAPTER 7

JENNA

The Silver Falls Public Library was quaint, the kind of place that smelled like old books and polished wood. Its location was between a bakery and an antique shop on Main Street, and its large bay windows admitted the soft morning light. A bell chimed as Jenna pushed open the door, the sound oddly comforting.

She had spent little time in libraries since college, but after everything she'd uncovered in Maribel's journal, she needed more than gut instincts and cryptic warnings. She needed proof.

A cheerful-looking woman in her sixties stood behind the front desk, glasses perched at the end of her nose as she flipped through a thick book. She wore a floral cardigan over a button-down shirtdress, her silver hair pinned up in a neat bun. When she looked up, her face lit with recognition.

"Well, now," she said, setting the book aside. "You're Maribel's niece, aren't you?"

Jenna approached, offering a polite nod. "That obvious?"

The woman laughed, the sound light and warm. "You have her eyes. And that look about you—like you're about to dig up secrets that half this town would rather stay buried."

Jenna grinned. "Wouldn't be the first time I've annoyed the locals."

“Then you are most definitely Maribel’s niece and in the right place.” The woman extended a hand. “Marian Dewhurst. I run this little archive of ours. My mother named me after the character in *The Music Man*. She had an unnatural love for Robert Preston, and I’ve been suffering for it ever since.”

Jenna shook her hand, biting back a grin. “I take it you don’t burst into a spontaneous song about libraries?”

“Not unless someone’s willing to pay me for it.” Marian chuckled, then leaned on the desk. “So, what can I help you with?”

Jenna hesitated for a fraction of a second. Trusting people hadn’t exactly been her strong suit lately, but Maribel had trusted this town once. And if there was anyone who might have answers about Cold Creek Orchards’ past, it was probably the woman standing in front of her.

“I need to know about land disputes,” Jenna said. “Specifically, anything related to my aunt’s orchard.”

Marian’s gaze sharpened, the warmth in her expression fading just a fraction. “I should have known you’d come looking. Flint Mercer stopped in a few days ago and told me not to help you, but then I’ve never been one to do as I’m told.” She straightened, then gestured for Jenna to follow her. “Come on, then. Let’s see what we can find.”

She led Jenna through a narrow aisle lined with towering bookshelves, the scent of aged paper thick in the air. The back of the library opened into a research area filled with microfilm machines, old newspaper clippings, and stacks of town records.

Marian pulled out a heavy ledger, flipping through it with practiced ease. “Orchards and blood feuds built this town,” she mused. “People like to pretend Silver Falls is a

quiet little place, but this land? People have fought over this land since the first settlers staked their claims.

Jenna crossed her arms. “And Maribel’s orchard?”

Marian slid the book toward her. “She was one of the last holdouts. Refused to sell, no matter what offers they dangled in front of her.”

Jenna frowned as she skimmed the records. Cold Creek Orchards had been in her family for generations, but what caught her attention was the number of attempted buyouts. Developers, private buyers—hell, even the town itself had tried to get Maribel to sell over the years.

“She had a lot of offers,” Jenna muttered.

“More than you’d think. These are just the ones we know about.” Marian sat back, watching her closely. “Most of the other orchard owners sold off their land bit by bit when times got tough. Maribel never budged. Said she’d rather let the land die before she handed it over to the wrong people.”

Jenna stilled.

She’d seen those exact words in Maribel’s journal. I’d rather let the land die than hand it over to the wrong people.

Jenna tapped the ledger. “Do you know who she was talking about? The ‘wrong people’?”

Marian sighed, folding her hands over the desk. “I can guess. But I don’t have proof.”

Jenna’s pulse ticked up. “Guess, then.”

Marian glanced around the empty library before lowering her voice. “Connor McVey has been after that land for years. And not just him. The Calloways, too. The mayor’s family has been sitting pretty in this town for a long time, and they don’t like losing.”

Jenna clenched her jaw. The mayor had tried to convince her to sell. That wasn’t a coincidence.

Marian scrutinized her. “You should be careful, Jenna. People have a way of disappearing when they ask too many questions.”

Jenna’s spine stiffened, her instincts kicking in. “Maribel didn’t disappear. She died.”

Marian’s lips pressed together. “And how sure are you that was an accident?”

Jenna’s stomach turned. “Not sure at all.” She exhaled slowly, closing the ledger. “Can I borrow this?”

Marian studied her for a long moment before nodding. “Just bring it back in one piece.”

Jenna tucked the book under her arm, her mind already spinning. She had a name. She had a lead, and she wasn’t about to stop digging.

She spent the rest of that day doing some grocery and other essential item shopping. One of those items had been a new shotgun and another handgun. Maribel had kept a shotgun in the house, and Jenna had brought her Glock with her from New York. She wanted one of each in her bedroom and in the kitchen/main room.

Back at the farmhouse, she put together some food and began looking through the records she’d brought from the library. Later that evening, she spread the documents out on the kitchen table and began to really study them.

McVey. Calloway. The same names, over and over.

Her aunt had been fighting this battle alone—not anymore. Her aunt might be gone, but Jenna would ensure her aunt’s legacy lived on. But why hadn’t Maribel asked for her help or at least let her know what was going on?

A creak sounded outside. Jenna’s head snapped up, her she-cat stirring beneath her skin. She walked to the sideboard. Retrieving the shotgun, she moved silently toward the door.

The night was quiet. Too quiet. Then she saw it. A shadow by the barn, just at the edge of the light. Watching.

Jenna lifted the gun, steady and sure. “You wanna try me?” she called. “I assure you, I’m an excellent shot.”

The shadow didn’t move. Didn’t seem to blink. It made no noise, but then, slowly, it backed away into the trees.

Jenna stood there, gripping the gun, heart steady and cold. If they hadn’t finished with her, she certainly hadn’t finished with them. She went back into the house and returned to researching the records. She’d barely had time to finish her second cup of coffee before the unwanted knock came at the front door.

She set her mug down with deliberate care, staring at the wooden surface separating her from whoever thought it was a good idea to show up uninvited. She had a damn good guess, though.

Grabbing the ledger she’d borrowed from Marian, she tucked it under one arm and swung the door open.

Connor McVey stood on the porch, dressed in a tailored dark suit far too polished for a man who claimed to understand the town's roots. His hair was perfectly styled, and he had a practiced smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Ms. Hartford." He greeted her as though they were old friends. "I was hoping we could have a chat."

Jenna leaned against the doorframe, blocking his path. "You mean another attempt to convince me to hand over my aunt's land?"

Connor's expression didn't waver. "I'd call it an opportunity."

"I'd call it a waste of both our times."

His practiced smile widened, but Jenna wasn't blind to the flicker of irritation in his gaze. "I don't think you understand what I'm offering you."

"Oh, I understand perfectly." She crossed her arms. "You've been trying to buy out this orchard for years, long before my aunt died. And now that she's gone, you think I'm an easier target."

Connor tsked, shaking his head like she was a troublesome child rather than the woman standing between him and whatever the hell he wanted. "That's not what this is, Jenna."

She bit back the urge to roll her eyes. "Then why don't you tell me what this is?"

Connor exhaled sharply through his nose, clearly done pretending this was just friendly business. "I'm offering you a way out. Many people would kill for the kind of deal I'm prepared to give you."

Jenna didn't miss the intentional phrasing. "Interesting choice of words."

She let the silence stretch between them, watching him, waiting. Connor might be used to bullshitting his way through negotiations, but she had spent years dealing with corporate sharks in New York. He wasn't anything special.

When it became clear she wasn't jumping to respond, he pulled an envelope from his jacket and extended it toward her.

"Take a look," he said.

Jenna didn't. Instead, she held his gaze and took a slow step forward, closing the space between them just enough to watch the way his throat worked to swallow.

"I don't know what fantasy you've been playing out in your head," she murmured, "but let me clear something up for you. I'm not selling. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever."

Connor's jaw ticked, his fingers tightening around the envelope. "I'd reconsider if I were you," he said, his voice lower now. "This land isn't what you think it is."

"Then why do you want it so badly?"

His lips parted slightly, just a flicker of something he hadn't meant to reveal. But he recovered quickly, too quickly. "I want it because it's wasted potential," he said smoothly. "And because you don't belong here."

Jenna smiled, slow and deliberate, because she wanted him to feel it like a slap. "Then you're in for a real disappointment."

Connor studied her for another long moment, then, finally, he tucked the envelope

back into his jacket. “This is a limited-time offer,” he warned.

“So is my patience, which is running thin. I suggest you leave.”

He said nothing else. Just turned and walked down the porch steps, moving with a businessman’s precision rather than the rage she knew was simmering just beneath the surface. As he reached the door of his vehicle, she called, “And next time, Mr. McVey, call for an appointment before you just show up on my doorstep. I might not be in as hospitable a mood as I was earlier.”

Jenna grinned at the way he slid into his car, slamming the door closed. She waited until his shiny black car disappeared down the dirt road before shutting the door. Connor McVey wanted something buried in this land. And he wouldn’t stop until he got it. Whatever it was he wanted, he wasn’t going to get it. She meant to find and protect it.

A few hours later, Jenna sat cross-legged on the floor of the farmhouse, surrounded by old maps and ledgers spread across the worn wooden planks.

The map she had found was unlike anything she’d seen before. It was hand-drawn, delicate in some places but bold in others, the ink faded from age. It mapped out Cold Creek Orchards in excruciating detail—every tree, every structure, every natural landmark.

And then there was the symbol—a strange marking, deep in the orchard’s heart, half-hidden beneath the curling lines of the map. Jenna traced it with her fingertips, her she-cat stirring at the back of her mind.

Maribel’s journal had mentioned nothing like this. And yet... someone had drawn it. Marked it. Buried it in these records, hidden for who knew how long.

She flipped through the pages, scanning for anything else that might explain what she was looking at. Near the bottom of one ledger, she found something else.

A name. Calloway.

Jenna's breath steadied, slower now. Marian had explained that the mayor's family had been connected to this land for generations. And if she was reading this correctly, there had been a dispute over the very land she was sitting on.

Maribel had refused to sell. And now, Jenna had a symbol, a map, and a gut feeling that she wasn't just inheriting an orchard—she was inheriting a war.

A noise creaked outside. Jenna snapped her gaze up, her muscles going taut. Her pulse slowed, sharpening to a deadly rhythm as she reached for the gun on the table.

Through the window, she saw movement. A shadow near the barn. Not Flint. Someone else. She rose slowly, her fingers steady on the gun's grip, her body tense but controlled.

They were back. Whoever was haunting this land wasn't finished with her yet. She was growing tired of their cat-and-mouse game.

Jenna was used to being alone. After years in New York, her world had become a well-curated isolation. Work, power moves, late nights where she existed on whiskey and sheer will. She had controlled everything.

Now?

She was sitting in the farmhouse she'd inherited, flipping through a map covered in secrets, a name she didn't trust, and a history someone clearly wanted buried.

And she was not alone.

A sharp knock rattled the front door. Not tentative. Not polite. She recognized that knock before she even moved. Flint.

Jenna let out a slow breath, pushing to her feet. The moment she cracked the door open, her stomach tightened.

Flint stood in the doorway, bare-chested, blood streaking down his side, the scent of adrenaline clinging to him. His jeans hung low, his muscles flexing as he braced a hand against the frame. His eyes scanned her as if he was assessing her to determine if she was injured, scared, or ready to fight him.

“You look like hell,” she said, masking her concern.

Flint’s lips curled slightly. “You should see the other guy.”

Jenna pushed the door open wider. “Get inside before you bleed all over my porch.”

He didn’t argue, stepping past her, bringing the heat of him, the scent of forest and musk and something darker.

Jenna closed the door and turned, arms crossed, gaze sweeping over him. His torso was all muscle and tension, his skin streaked with dried blood and dirt, a long gash slicing across his ribs.

“What the hell happened?” she asked, already moving toward the first aid kit tucked beneath the sink.

Flint sat heavily in one of the wooden chairs at the kitchen table, his body too big, too powerful for the small space. “Found your visitor,” he muttered.

Jenna froze, her fingers tightening around the first aid kit. “And?”

“He won’t be back tonight.”

She wasn’t stupid. That meant Flint had done something violent.

Jenna walked over, dropping the kit on the table before gripping his chin, tilting his face toward her. His skin was hot, his jaw covered in faint stubble, a bruise already blooming along his cheekbone.

His eyes locked onto hers, challenging, testing.

“You’re bleeding like a dumbass,” she muttered, releasing him before she did something even dumber.

She grabbed a cloth and a bottle of alcohol, kneeling beside him, pressing the damp fabric to the wound on his ribs. Flint hissed, his muscles jumping beneath her touch.

“Hold still, Mercer.”

“You’re bossy,” he murmured, his voice rougher, deeper.

Jenna rolled her eyes but didn’t stop working. “And you’re reckless.”

Flint watched her, his gaze too intense, too consuming. “It wasn’t reckless. It was necessary.”

Jenna swallowed, trying to ignore the heat coiling in her gut. She could feel his body vibrating with tension, his bare skin so damn warm under her hands.

“This could’ve been worse,” she muttered.

Flint huffed a laugh. “I’ve had worse.”

Jenna wiped at the gash, her fingers grazing the hard muscle beneath. Her she-cat stirred, restless, demanding. She ignored it.

“You keep fighting my battles, Mercer,” she said, her voice low, “and I’m going to start wondering who you’re trying to impress.”

Flint’s hand shot out, gripping her wrist, halting her movements. Her breath hitched. His eyes burned with something deeper than the attraction simmering between them.

“I’m not fighting for you, Jenna,” he said, voice rough. “I’m fighting with you.”

Her pulse slammed. The space between them vanished.

Flint’s fingers tightened just slightly, his grip firm but not demanding. His chest rose and fell, his body still coiled with the energy of the fight he’d left behind.

Jenna’s gaze flicked to his lips—just once, and then he moved.

Flint’s hand slid to the back of her neck, his fingers tangling in her hair, pulling her toward him. The first brush of his mouth against hers sent heat pooling low, sharp and consuming.

Jenna didn’t resist. She met him, her fingers gripping his shoulder, digging into the muscle as she tilted her head, deepening the kiss. Flint let out a low growl, his other hand gripping her hip, dragging her closer, spreading fire through every inch of her body.

It was too much. Too hot. Too dangerous.

Jenna ripped herself away, breathing hard. Flint's eyes flashed, his jaw tight, his chest rising and falling like he was fighting something primal.

Jenna swallowed, her lips tingling. "That was a mistake."

Flint leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his gaze locked onto hers like he could still taste her.

"No, it wasn't."

Jenna forced her shoulders back, shoving the first aid kit toward him. "Clean yourself up."

Flint didn't move. Didn't argue. Just watched her with a smoldering gaze that made her feel like she was standing too damn close to the fire.

Jenna turned on her heel, leaving him there, alone in her kitchen, bleeding, shirtless, and entirely too dangerous to her sanity. But as she climbed the stairs, her lips still tingling from the kiss she'd just thrown away, she knew one thing.

She wanted more, and that scared her more than any enemy lurking in the woods.

CHAPTER 8

FLINT

Flint sat on Jenna's porch as the sun crawled over the horizon, bringing with it the crisp bite of early morning. He hadn't slept—not that he needed to. His body had healed from the fight last night, but the ache in his muscles wasn't from the wounds.

It was from her.

The feel of her lips still lingered, a ghost of a kiss that shouldn't have ended, but she had pulled away, her body tense with restraint. She was fighting it—fighting him.

Flint wasn't a fool. He knew what this was. His instincts had never been louder, his lion pacing beneath his skin with a restless demand. Jenna Hartford was his.

And she had no damn idea. Or maybe she did, and she just didn't want to believe it.

Flint had never been one to push fate. He didn't have to. When something was meant to be, it happened.

But Jenna was resisting the bond, denying the fire between them. That wasn't something he could let stand. He wasn't ready to force the issue yet, but he also wasn't adamantly against it.

His fingers curled around the porch railing. The need to claim her rode him hard, primal, and unrelenting. She was his mate. He wondered if she knew she was his

fated mate. If not, she would.

Flint glanced toward the orchard, the land still drenched in morning mist. The symbol he'd seen on the map Jenna had found gnawed at him. If there was something buried on this land—something of power tied to the past—he needed to find out what it was.

Because if it was connected to the threats against Jenna, he was done playing defense. It was time to hunt.

Leaving the porch, Flint prowled through the orchard, boots treading carefully over damp leaves, the scent of apples thick in the morning air. This place held history, power, and knowledge. The kind that whispered through the trees, through the land itself, and he vowed to uncover it.

He reached the marked spot on the old map—a clearing near the heart of the orchard, where the ground dipped slightly, forming a shallow basin of earth and gnarled roots. It wasn't a place he had ever noticed or given much thought to before. But as he crouched, pressing a palm to the soil, he felt it—a hum surging through his veins. Not human. Not natural. Something old. Something dangerous.

Flint dug his fingers into the dirt, brushing away the loose soil. Beneath it, just barely visible, was stone. Not just any stone—etched stone.

His pulse kicked up.

Runes. Not modern, not even from the last few centuries. Ancient.

His people had once carved these symbols into sacred ground, into places of power, places that held significance. That Jenna's orchard sat atop something like this meant one thing.

This land wasn't just valuable. Someone had claimed it.

Flint ran his fingers over the markings, their edges worn by time but still potent. He knew some of the symbols—protection, bloodline, warning. Warning. His jaw clenched.

Maribel had known. She must have. That had to be at least part of the reason she'd never sold.

The orchard wasn't just family land. It had once belonged to others—the Ghost Walkers, which explained the lynx-shifter he'd fought. It explained why the two shifters hadn't moved on, why they appeared as though they were willing to kill for it. Whatever was or had been buried here, whatever had been marked for generations—it was still waiting.

By the time he returned to the farmhouse, Jenna was awake, standing on the porch, arms crossed as she watched him approach. Her dark hair was loose, tousled from sleep, her blue eyes sharp.

“You went wherever it was you went without me?” she asked, her voice dry. “Did you find whatever was marked on the map?”

Flint climbed the steps, stopping too close, just enough for her to feel the heat still rolling off him. He nodded. “I did.”

Jenna didn't blink. “Tell me.”

The corner of his lips tugged up into something dangerously resembling a smile. “You might want to sit down for this one, Jenna.”

Her gaze narrowed, but she didn't step back. Didn't flinch. “Tell me.”

Flint's chest rumbled with satisfaction. She could fight their bond all she wanted, but she was his.

"Runes. Buried. You can feel the residual power humming off them."

"Runes? My aunt died for ancient pieces of worthless stone?"

"She didn't think they were worthless, nor do those who threaten you. We need to find out more."

"Do we talk to Marian, the librarian?" Jenna shook her head. "Good god, I'd have changed my name or profession."

Flint chuckled. "Talk to her. I asked my sister to do some research. I need to check in with her, anyway. Keep your Glock handy. You're right, a well-placed bullet will do some damage, regardless of what kind of creature it is."

Flint strode into Silver Mist Cider Mill, his boots heavy against the wooden floor. The scent of apples, oak barrels, and fermenting cider filled the air, grounding him as he made his way toward the back office.

Sybil was already waiting, arms crossed, her sharp amber eyes locked on him the second he entered. "You look like hell," she muttered, leaning against the edge of the desk.

Flint ignored the jab. "Good to see you too, baby sister. What do you know?"

Sybil didn't waste time. She tossed a folder onto the desk. "Everything about this situation is wrong, Flint. The attacks on Jenna aren't random. And it's not just about forcing her to sell."

Flint's jaw tightened. He already knew that. The runes he found buried in the orchard made it damn clear that this was about something more than money.

"What's the angle?" he asked.

Sybil pushed a hand through her dark hair. "Maribel wasn't just holding onto that land out of family loyalty. The orchard is sitting on something old, something tied to shifters—maybe even before our clans settled here. If those runes are what I think they are, then someone's been after that land for longer than we realized."

Flint rolled his shoulders, the tension coiling there impossible to shake. "Someone's been trying to take that land for generations."

"Yeah." Sybil's voice dropped lower. "And whoever they are? They're getting desperate."

Flint clenched his fists. His mountain lion prowled in the recesses of his mind, restless and angry. Jenna was in the middle of this without a clue as to what was happening.

"What's McVey's play in all of this?" he asked.

Sybil scoffed. "McVey? He's an opportunist. A damn parasite. He doesn't care about history or bloodlines. But if someone's been whispering in his ear, feeding him the right incentives?" She shook her head. "I wouldn't put it past him to play a part in pushing Jenna out."

Flint didn't like the sound of that. He pushed away from the desk. "I'm heading into town."

"Flint..." He turned back. Sybil's expression had shifted from frustration to

something closer to worry. “She’s in more danger than we thought,” she said. “I know you already feel it. Just... don’t let her face this alone.”

Flint met his sister’s gaze and gave a single nod. That was a given.

In town, Flint found Jenna locked in an argument with Connor McVey. The second he saw McVey close to her, his thoughts turned lethal. Jenna stood her ground, fire burning in the depths of her eyes, her body language screaming dominance. McVey, with his slick grin and tailored suit, leaned just a little too close, his expression smug.

Bad move.

Flint crossed the street, every step controlled, deliberate. He caught the last part of their conversation as he neared.

“You’re being stubborn, Jenna,” McVey drawled. “I’m offering you a way out. A profitable one.”

Jenna tilted her chin up, her voice edged with steel. “I don’t need a way out. I need you to stop acting like you’re entitled to something that doesn’t belong to you.”

McVey chuckled, but the amusement in his eyes was fake. “Come on, sweetheart. You don’t belong here. You’re a New York executive playing farmer. That orchard will not miraculously start thriving again. Why not take the money and run back to the city where you belong?”

Flint had heard enough. His voice cut through the space between them like a blade. “She belongs wherever the hell she wants.”

McVey stiffened just slightly before turning.

Flint stopped beside Jenna, his presence a wall of unwavering dominance. He didn't have to touch her for McVey to get the message.

Jenna arched an eyebrow at him and grinned. "You just love dramatic entrances, don't you?"

Flint ignored her, his gaze locked on McVey. "You got something to say to her, McVey?" His voice was calm, measured.

McVey smoothed his suit jacket, flashing that slick grin again. "I was just reminding Jenna of her options."

"She knows her options," Flint said. "And she doesn't need your advice."

McVey let out a low chuckle, but there was an edge of unease behind it.

"You Mercer boys," McVey mused. "Always so territorial."

Flint didn't blink. "Only when it's something or someone worth protecting."

The words hung between them.

Jenna crossed her arms, unimpressed. "Why not just whip 'em out and measure them? By the way, I'm still standing here, and I don't appreciate being talked about like I can't handle myself. I can assure you that isn't the case."

McVey tilted his head, smirking, but his eyes flickered with irritation. "Of course, Jenna. But think about what you're really up against. This town has a way of deciding who stays and who doesn't."

Flint could hear his mountain lion rumbling. "Is that a threat?"

McVey's smile didn't budge, but something flickered behind his eyes. Something calculating. "Just an observation," he said smoothly. "Good seeing you both." He turned on his heel and strolled away, casual as ever.

Flint waited until he was out of earshot before he turned to Jenna. "You shouldn't be dealing with him alone."

Jenna sighed, rubbing a hand over her forehead. "Flint, I don't need..."

"Yes you do."

She dropped her hand and met his gaze. The frustration was there, but beneath it? Something else.

Flint stepped closer. "You're not alone in this, Jenna." His voice was low, steady. "At least you don't have to be. Think about all the folks who came out to the orchard to help. Maribel was well-liked in this town. McVey isn't. You're Maribel's niece. You don't have to take them on single-handedly."

For a second, just a second, something flickered across her face. Then she squared her shoulders. "I know."

But Flint wasn't sure she did, and until she accepted that, he'd just have to keep proving it.

Flint watched Connor McVey's retreating form, his lion coiled inside him like a beast ready to strike. The bastard was smug, too smug. The kind of man who thought he could lay claim to everything he laid eyes on—land, power, people.

But Jenna wasn't McVey's to claim; she was Flint's. He turned back to her, the fire in her eyes still burning from their exchange. She was a fighter. He respected that. But

she didn't see what he saw—McVey was circling. He wasn't just some businessman looking for a straightforward deal.

Flint closed the space between them, his voice dropping low. "McVey won't stop."

Jenna lifted her chin. "Neither will I."

Damn if that didn't make his blood heat in more ways than one. She was so damn stubborn, so damn sure she could handle this on her own. But this wasn't just a land dispute. It wasn't just about money or contracts. McVey wasn't acting alone, and the danger circling her was bigger than some overconfident real estate developer.

Flint let his gaze flicker down the street before settling back on her. "You need to stay the hell away from him."

Jenna crossed her arms, her expression unreadable. "What do you care?"

A growl rumbled in his chest before he could stop it. "Because you're mine to protect."

Jenna's breath hitched—so quick, so subtle that if he hadn't been watching her so closely, he might have missed it. She didn't deny it. She didn't fight it. For the first time since she set foot back in Silver Falls, she didn't immediately try to push him away.

But just as fast, she steeled herself again. "I'm not some thing to be claimed, Flint."

He tilted his head slightly. "No, but you're some one worth fighting for."

Jenna's throat worked as she swallowed, her jaw tightening, like she wasn't sure if she wanted to argue or not.

Flint held her gaze, unwavering. “If McVey gets too close again, I won’t just warn him.” She rolled her eyes, but there was no real frustration in it. Flint shook his head. “I think you need someone who’ll have your back when shit gets ugly.”

Something flickered in her eyes. Something that told him she wasn’t as unaffected by all this as she wanted to be. Finally, she turned away, her voice quieter than before. “I can take care of myself.”

He let her go for now, but that didn’t mean he had finished proving she wasn’t alone.

That night, Flint prowled the edge of Jenna’s land. His lion was restless, pacing in his mind, agitated in a way it had never been before. This wasn’t just instinct. It wasn’t just the need to protect someone under his watch. It was her. His mate.

Every damn time he got close to her, the pull got stronger. It was there in the way she challenged him, in the way her scent settled into his lungs like a drug he couldn’t quit. Flint didn’t blame her for fighting it. The bond could be terrifying when you weren’t expecting it. It meant giving up control, giving up the idea that you could walk away untouched.

Jenna didn’t let people in easily. She built walls and reinforced them with steel. But walls didn’t mean shit where a mate bond was involved. It would catch her eventually. The problem was, he wasn’t the only one feeling the pull.

Something else was circling. He caught the scent just beyond the orchard. Faint but distinct. The same scent from the night before. Flint bared his teeth, his lion pushing at the edges of his control.

Whoever the hell this intruder was, they were watching Jenna too closely. He’d let them escape once. He wouldn’t do so again.

Crouched low, his muscles coiled, he watched the darkened tree line. Just before the scent vanished, he heard it—a low, rumbling growl. Not a warning. A challenge and his lion answered back.

CHAPTER 9

JENNA

The acrid scent of smoke wrenched Jenna from sleep. She sat bolt upright, heart slamming against her ribs, the darkness of her bedroom fractured by flickering orange light bleeding through the curtains.

Not possible.

Throwing back the covers, she grabbed the handgun from the nightstand and bolted to the window. Flames licked at the night sky, devouring the old barn. Panic surged, but she crushed it down. This wasn't an accident.

Shoving her feet into her boots, she grabbed a jacket but didn't bother with anything else. There wasn't time.

Jenna sprinted through the farmhouse, skidding to a stop at the front door as she unlocked it with frantic fingers. Heat pulsed against her skin as she ran outside. A furious inferno engulfed the barn's interior after someone threw open its doors. Sparks crackled, embers carried on the wind as the fire raged higher.

Damn it!

She took off toward the barn. If she could at least get the tractor out, maybe... a dark blur tackled her mid-stride. One second she was running, the next, she was airborne, knocked sideways into the dirt with enough force to steal her breath.

Flint.

His human form melted away in a swirling mist of thunder and color, his golden fur emerging as his lion took over in one smooth motion. Before she could shout, he circled her, his massive form braced between her and the fire, ears pinned, teeth bared.

The hell he was keeping her down.

Jenna shoved to her feet, her palms scraping against the gravel, heat from the flames clawing at her exposed skin. “What the hell, Mercer? The fire...”

Flint shifted back in a heartbeat, his human form reappearing as he grabbed her shoulders, forcing her gaze to his. “You do not run into a burning building, Jenna!”

She barely heard him over the roaring flames, barely felt him with adrenaline surging through her veins. “The tractor...”

“Is metal. It won’t burn like you will.” His grip tightened. “If you think I’ll stand by while you play hero, you don’t know me.”

She met his gaze, unflinching. “And if you think I’ll stand by while everything Maribel built goes up in flames, you don’t know me.”

The sound of sirens split the night. Flint dashed towards the house where he had left clothes and pulled them on. Returning to her, he stepped between her and the fire again as a fire truck roared up the dirt road, tires kicking up dust.

The rig barely had time to stop before firefighters jumped out, dragging hoses toward the blaze. A tall, broad-shouldered man in heavy gear stomped toward them, his helmet tucked under one arm.

“Shit, Jenna, are you okay?”

Jenna blinked. She knew that voice.

“Ridge?”

Ridge Lawson—former high school football star, now the head of Silver Falls’ mostly volunteer fire department. It had been years, but he still had the same rugged build, the same sharp blue eyes that missed nothing.

He gave her a once-over. “You look like you tried to run straight into it.”

She bristled. “Because I did.”

Flint let out a low sound of warning, but she ignored him.

Ridge’s gaze flicked to Flint. “You keeping her from getting herself killed?”

“Trying to,” Flint muttered.

Ridge exhaled hard. “Figured.” He turned, signaling his team. “We’ll contain it, but the barn’s going to be a total loss.”

Jenna’s stomach twisted, but she nodded, jaw tightening. There was no saving the structure now. But she needed to know how this started.

Ridge read her mind. “You think this was arson?”

Flint answered before she could. “No doubt.”

Ridge frowned, then gestured to the side of the barn, where the fire had burned

hottest. “Then you’ll want to see this.”

Flint went first, but Jenna was right behind him.

Scorch marks were visible near the side entrance, but the fire did not start from inside the barn. A dark stain marked where someone had poured gasoline; its scent still lingered.

Jenna’s hands clenched into fists. “Someone set this.”

Ridge’s jaw ticked. “And they made sure you saw it.”

That was the part that burned more than the flames. This wasn’t just about destroying property. It was a message.

Flint’s gaze darkened. He turned to Ridge. “Anything on security cams?”

Ridge grimaced. “You think the town funds cameras on back roads? I’ve got a couple in town, but nothing out this far.”

Flint muttered a curse. Jenna understood the frustration. No cameras meant no immediate leads.

Ridge straightened. “I’ll file an official report, but you both know how this goes. Unless we catch someone red-handed, there’s not much we can do.”

Jenna’s nails dug into her palms. “So, I’m just supposed to wait for them to try again?”

Flint’s voice was dark steel. “No.”

She met his gaze, something unspoken passing between them.

Ridge watched them for a beat, then sighed. “Look, I’ll do what I can. But you might want to start sleeping with a shotgun closer to the bed.”

Jenna scoffed. “Already do.”

Flint didn’t laugh like Ridge did. He was too busy staring at the flames, his expression unreadable.

Ridge clapped him on the shoulder. “Good luck keeping her out of trouble.”

“I’d have better luck stopping the wind,” Flint muttered.

Ridge chuckled before moving back to his crew, shouting orders. The firefighters battled the remaining blaze, but Jenna barely registered it.

Flint was still watching the fire, his shoulders tense.

Jenna nudged him. “You gonna brood all night?”

His gaze snapped to her, eyes burning in the flickering light. “Someone tried to kill you tonight.”

“No,” she said patiently, as if speaking with a petulant child. “If they’d been trying to kill me, they would have set the farmhouse on fire, not the barn.” She put her hand on his forearm. “I’m fine, Flint.”

His jaw worked, something deeper raging behind his expression. Then, without warning, he reached out and cupped her face. The calloused warmth of his hands sent a jolt through her.

Flint leaned in, his voice a low, possessive growl. “I won’t let them take you from me, Jenna.”

Her pulse skipped. She should push him away. She didn’t. Not even when his thumb brushed over her cheekbone. Not when the heat between them built something too strong, too inevitable.

But before she could say something—before she could make a choice—Ridge called over his shoulder.

“Fire’s out.”

Something shattered the moment.

Flint pulled back, his gaze still locked on hers, unreadable but full of something dangerous. Jenna forced herself to breathe, shoving down the wildfire threatening to consume her. Whoever had done this had made a gigantic mistake.

Jenna stood outside the charred remains of the barn the following morning—her arms crossed, fighting the urge to snap at the uniformed figures milling around her property. The acrid scent of burned wood and soaked hay clung to the cool air, swirling in thick tendrils of smoke that hadn’t quite settled.

Anger consumed her. Not just at whoever had set fire to her barn, but at the fact that someone had burned her barn down. She could have been killed if it hadn’t been for Flint. The heat, the smoke—none of it had been accidental.

Sheriff Grey stood a few feet away, speaking in hushed tones with a couple of deputies. Tall and strong, he stood with his uniform shirt tucked into worn jeans. The only indication that he’d been up half the night was the dark smudges beneath his sharp eyes.

“You’re sure you didn’t see anyone?” Grey asked, flipping his notebook shut as he turned back toward Jenna.

Jenna shook her head, jaw tight. “Not a damn thing. I woke up, smelled the smoke, and by the time I got out there, the flames were already too high.”

Grey’s gaze flicked to the smoldering ruins, then back to her. “Whoever did this knew what they were doing. Someone set fire to multiple points inside and outside the barn. That kind of thing doesn’t happen by accident.”

Jenna barely resisted rolling her eyes. “Yeah, no shit.”

Flint, who had been standing a few feet away, his arms crossed like an immovable wall, let out a low growl of frustration. His jeans were still singed from his having come between Jenna and the blaze, and his bare chest was streaked with soot. He hadn’t left her side since stepping between her and the fire, and while she wanted to appreciate his presence, she was too damn angry.

Grey ignored Flint’s irritation and continued, “I’ll have my deputies comb through what’s left to see if we can’t find out anything else. I’m going to be straight with you, Jenna. If this was arson, someone who knows how to cover their tracks did it.”

Jenna forced herself to take a slow breath, clenching her hands at her sides to stop from pacing. “And what’s the plan while they’re out there covering them?”

Grey didn’t blink. “We keep an eye on things. Increase patrols near the orchard. But I need you to consider that this might not be just about the land anymore.”

Jenna’s brow furrowed. “What the hell else would it be about?”

Grey hesitated, just for a second, then sighed. “The people in this town loved

Maribel. She also had enemies. Some old, some new. But you? You're an outsider. And someone wants to make sure you know it."

Jenna met Grey's gaze, holding it steady. "Yeah, well. Message received. Too bad for them, I'm not leaving."

Flint made a sound in the back of his throat that might have been approval, but Jenna didn't look at him. She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of knowing she was standing her ground.

Grey clicked his pen once before tucking it away. "If you think of anything else—anyone who might have a reason to go this far—call me."

Jenna nodded, though she wasn't hopeful. This had Calloway's stink all over it, but she had no proof. And until she did, calling out the mayor or McVey for arson would just make her sound paranoid.

Grey turned toward Flint. "I assume you're not going to let her stay here alone."

Flint gave a slow, deliberate shake of his head. "No."

"There's really no need for you to stay."

Flint shot her a look that brooked no argument. "Your barn just got torched. You think I'm letting you stay out here like bait?"

Jenna pressed together her lips in a stubborn line. "I think it isn't your decision to make."

Grey grinned as he took a step back. "I'll leave you two to sort that out."

Jenna watched the sheriff and his deputies move toward their vehicles, their presence leaving behind a silence that made her pulse tick higher. She turned back to Flint. “I can handle myself.”

Flint let out a slow breath, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “I know you can. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t accept help.”

Something about the way he said it softened the edge of her temper. But only slightly.

Flint ran a hand through his hair before nodding toward the truck parked by the driveway. “You’re coming with me.”

Jenna narrowed her eyes. “Where?”

“My place. Above the cider mill. No one’s getting to you there.”

Jenna folded her arms. “And you think I’m just going to agree to that?”

Flint stepped into her space, towering over her, his eyes filled with frustration and something darker. “Yeah, Jenna. I do. Because for once in your life, you’re going to be smart and not make this harder than it has to be.”

Jenna glared up at him, her pulse pounding. “You’re an arrogant ass, you know that?”

Flint’s lips twitched. “And you’re the most stubborn woman I’ve ever met. Now get in the damn truck.”

Jenna should have fought him on principle. She should have stayed, just to prove that no one could scare her out of her own home. But as she glanced at the burned-out barn, the blackened remains of what had once been part of her family’s legacy, she knew Flint was right.

Whoever had done this wasn't done with her., and if she wanted to fight back, she needed to be alive to do it.

With a huff, she grabbed a couple of things, shoving them into her bag, slung it over her shoulder, and stomped toward the truck. Flint's eyes followed her the entire way, a quiet, satisfied rumble vibrating through his chest.

Jenna climbed into the passenger seat, slamming the door shut behind her. "Don't get any ideas, Mercer. This is only temporary."

Flint slid into the driver's seat, a slow, satisfied grin curling his lips. "Whatever you say, Hartford."

But they both knew better. Nothing between them had ever been temporary.

And this fight? It was just getting started.

The drive to Flint's place was silent. The kind of silence that crackled with things unsaid.

Jenna sat with her arms crossed, her body still vibrating from adrenaline and fury, but also from something she'd rather not define. The heat of Flint's presence filled the cab, thick and heavy, curling around her like wildfire.

She should be focused on the barn fire, on the fact that someone had just tried to burn her out of her own home. Instead, she was hyper-aware of the man sitting beside her—of the tension radiating off him, of the way his hands flexed around the steering wheel, controlled, restrained.

Like he was barely keeping himself in check.

When they pulled up to the old cider mill, she barely had time to take in her surroundings before Flint was out of the truck, slamming the door behind him.

Jenna followed, her steps sharp, her temper bubbling over.

“You think dragging me here is going to fix things?” she snapped.

Flint rounded on her so fast she nearly stumbled. His eyes burned as he stalked toward her, his hands curling into fists at his sides. “No,” he growled. “I think it’s going to keep you alive.”

Jenna clenched her jaw, refusing to back down even as he loomed over her. “I don’t need you protecting me, Mercer. I am not part of your clan, and you are not my alpha.”

Flint let out a sharp breath through his nose, then grabbed her wrist, pulling her flush against him. His body was scorching, his muscles taut, vibrating with barely leashed energy. Her breath caught as the full force of his presence hit her. His grip wasn’t tight, wasn’t painful. But it was absolute.

“No. You are my fated mate. You are mine to protect,” he said, voice rough, guttural. “You can fight me all you want, but that doesn’t change the truth.”

Jenna’s heart slammed against her ribs. Something inside her shuddered, resisting, but another part of her—the part that had been drawn to him from the moment she stepped back into Silver Falls—leaned in.

She felt it in the way her body recognized his. The way her she-cat prowled beneath her skin every time he was close, desperate for his touch, but surrendering to him meant something more than just accepting his help. It meant acknowledging the fire between them, acknowledging that what she wanted—what she needed—was him.

Her pulse thundered.

Flint's gaze dropped to her mouth, his restraint thinning with every shallow breath. "Say it," he rasped.

Jenna licked her lips, her voice coming out as something just shy of a challenge. "Make me."

Flint snapped. In one fluid movement, he had her pinned against the side of the truck, his hands gripping her waist, his thigh pressing between hers. He crushed his mouth to hers, stealing her breath, devouring her like a man who had been starving for too damn long.

Jenna gasped, but she didn't resist.

She kissed him back with just as much fire, just as much demand, tangling her fingers in his hair and yanking. Flint groaned against her lips, his hands tightening, pulling her flush against him until there was no space left between them.

"You're playing with fire," he muttered against her skin, dragging his lips down the column of her throat.

Jenna arched into him, her nails raking across his shoulders. "Good thing I don't mind getting burned."

Flint let out a low growl before lifting her, carrying her inside without breaking the kiss.

The moment they were in his space—a wide, loft-like room above the cider mill—he had her against the nearest surface, stripping her with ruthless efficiency. She didn't even have time to be embarrassed before his hands were on her, mapping her skin,

claiming her inch by inch.

Pressed against the wall, his lips moved against her collarbone, his teeth scraping just enough to send a shudder through her. “You’re mine,” he growled, his voice laced with something deeper than possession.

Jenna’s fingers curled into his shoulders, nails digging in as he pressed her harder against the wall. “Show me.”

Flint didn’t hesitate. He took her.

And Jenna? She let him.

She surrendered to the heat, to the storm between them, to the way he moved like he already knew her body, like he had been waiting for this moment his entire damn life.

Jenna barely had time to think before feeling two fingers plunging deep inside her with no preamble as his mouth left hers to suck one of her pebbled nipples into his mouth. Her breath hitched, a mix of shock and sheer delight crashing into her like a tidal wave. This invasion was different, more assertive, as if he was claiming her in ways she’d never dared allow herself to believe she wanted to be claimed.

“Flint...” The name came out as a half-moan, half-whisper, her body betraying any pretense of control as she pushed back against his fingers. He set a merciless pace, each thrust coaxing her inner muscles to tighten around him, drawing out sounds of pleasure she didn’t realize she could make.

“Like that, do you?” His voice was rough, laced with a satisfaction that only fueled her need.

Unable to speak, Jenna nodded, riding the waves of bliss he offered with nothing

more than his skilled hands.

“Good girl,” he praised.

She felt her ego swell with pride, knowing he was enjoying this as much as she was. His fingers curled within her, hitting spots that had her vision blurring, her legs threatening to give out.

“Stay with me, Jenna,” he coaxed, his other hand leaving a blazing trail up her spine. His body heat enveloping her as he leaned into her trembling form, whispering the command like a secret meant only for the two of them.

In that moment, there was no danger, no runes, no one trying to take what was hers, no world outside this room, just Flint and the promise of oblivion in his touch.

The moment his fingers plunged into her, her world was reduced to the sheer force of his touch. He didn’t hold back, each thrust hard and fast, a punishing rhythm that should’ve scared her, but it didn’t. Her body rose up to meet him, hips instinctively pushing back against his hand, seeking more.

“Flint!” she cried out, the sound torn from her throat as an unexpected orgasm shattered through her body. The intensity of it rocked her to her core. She knew in that moment that she was his, body and soul, in ways she could never have imagined.

Her breath came in ragged gasps as she drifted back to reality, the aftershocks of pleasure still coursing through her veins. And then she felt him, Flint, the man who had haunted her dreams since the day she’d arrived in Silver Falls. He lifted her up and in one swift move was inside her, filling her so completely she could scarcely breathe.

“Ah, fuck,” she gasped, feeling stretched and consumed by his size. His fingers found

her clit, circling with a practiced ease that had her spiraling towards another peak despite her sensitivity.

“You’re such a good mate.” Flint’s voice was gruff, each word punctuated by a deep thrust that left her barely clinging to sanity.

She nodded frantically in agreement, caught up in the dual sensations of his cock driving into her and his fingers coaxing her body to respond.

The depth of Flint’s thrusts altered suddenly, urging a guttural moan from deep within her. But he wasn’t satisfied. It wasn’t deep enough for him, or for the hunger in his eyes. With a firm grip on her thighs, he hoisted her up onto the table just inside the front door, pulling her ass to the edge and holding her in a place that was both exhilarating and demanding.

Jenna knew this was her reality now, yield to his every command, to mold herself to his desires. The thought alone sent a twisted thrill down her spine. God help her, she loved it, the power he wielded, the control she surrendered. It was a dance of shadows and need, and she had become his willing partner.

“Flint...deeper,” she panted, almost unable to form words as he complied, driving into her with a force that bordered on pain.

“Like this?” His voice was a rumble of dark promise, and then he sank into her, one powerful thrust that pushed the edge of discomfort into a realm of raw pleasure. She felt the texture of his cock change, becoming covered in small nubs that increased the pleasure beyond measure. But as he drew back, the nubs distended into barbs that scored her pussy.

“Fuck. Yes!” she cried out, the sensation teetering on unbearable. Her body stretched to accommodate him, each inch of his thick length sending lightning strikes of delight

through her pussy.

“Look at you, taking it all,” he praised, and she couldn’t hold back the scream that clawed its way up her throat.

Pleasure consumed her, a tidal wave crashing over the banks of her restraint. Jenna called out his name, a mantra, a plea, a declaration, as her world narrowed to the pulsing ecstasy he forged within her.

“God, Flint!” Gasping, groaning, she clung to the precipice, her breath hitching in erratic bursts. The intensity built, spiraling out of control until she was lost in the cataclysm, convulsing around him as if her body sought to draw him deeper still.

He held her there, impaled on paradise and pain, his groans mingling with her cries, a symphony of primal satisfaction. And as the crescendo hit, stealing her breath, robbing her of thought, she knew she had found her possible ruin and salvation in the arms of someone she could never have imagined back in New York.

His hands, rough yet somehow tender, slid over the curve of her hip, grounding her to the here and now, a place where she’d never thought she’d find herself. Flint’s groans vibrated through her, a deep, guttural sound that resonated with her own need.

“I’m coming, Jenna.” His voice was strained with pleasure, his breath hot against her skin. “I’m going to fill you up. God, you feel so fucking good.”

The words were crude, but they lit a fire within her, stoking the embers into a blaze. It was raw, it was primal, and it was exactly what this moment was about. Stripped of pretenses, of feuds, just two people lost in a physical conversation where bodies spoke louder than words ever could.

As he thrust into her, her inner walls shook and quivered as she tried to wrap her head

around the intense pleasure she was experiencing as another orgasm approached faster than she could comprehend.

As he continued to pound into her, she suddenly fell over the edge and screamed in ecstasy, her pussy spasming as she clamped down hard, her legs trembling as she writhed in his hold, greedily milking his cock, savoring every bit of pleasure as he held her in his arms.

He stood there between her legs, panting, and then scooped her up and carried her through the main room into the bedroom. By the time they collapsed onto the bed, sweat-slicked and breathless, Jenna's body still hummed with satisfaction, with something deeper, something primal that she wasn't ready to put a name to.

Flint's arm was draped over her waist, his fingers idly tracing patterns along her hip. It was intimate in a way that made her feel too exposed, too seen.

She needed to move. To break the moment before it became something more. Jenna sat up, reaching for the blanket—then froze. Her breath hitched as she saw the marks on his back. Deep, jagged scratches—fresh enough that they hadn't fully healed yet.

And they weren't from her.

Flint stilled, sensing her shift in energy. "Jenna?"

She ran a finger lightly over one of the marks, her voice tight. "Where did you get these?"

Flint sighed, rolling onto his back, his eyes darker than before. "It doesn't matter."

Jenna's gaze snapped to his. "The hell it doesn't."

Flint let out a long breath, his jaw tightening. “I ran into someone the other night. Another shifter. Not from Silver Falls.”

Jenna’s stomach turned. “Was it the same one from before?”

Flint’s silence told her everything she needed to know.

Jenna’s fingers clenched around the edge of the blanket. “They’re hunting this land.”

Flint nodded slowly. “And they’re not done.”

Jenna swallowed hard, forcing herself to breathe through the sharp stab of unease twisting in her gut.

She had known this wasn’t over. That whoever wanted this land—whoever had killed Maribel—wasn’t finished. But this? This proved they were getting bolder.

Jenna met Flint’s gaze, her voice steady. “Then we fight.”

Flint’s lips twitched, his eyes gleaming with something dark, something deadly. “Damn right we do.”

Jenna exhaled slowly, already knowing that whatever was coming next—it wouldn’t just be a battle for the orchard. It would be a war.

CHAPTER 10

JENNA

Jenna stepped into the Silver Falls Public Library with Flint by her side. The scent of aged books mingled with the subtle polish of oak wood, wrapping around her like a comforting embrace from an old friend. The morning sun streamed through the expansive bay windows, casting golden light across the room. It highlighted the rows of wooden shelves, each one groaning under the weight of countless volumes. Dust motes danced in the sunbeams, and the neglected records whispered stories long held secret.

Marian sat at her usual post behind the circulation desk, reading glasses perched on the bridge of her nose as she scribbled something in a leather-bound notebook. The woman's gaze lifted the second they walked in, sharp as ever.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite troublemaker." Marian set her pen down and leaned back in her chair, eying them with knowing amusement. "I heard about the fire. You're lucky you didn't get hurt, Jenna."

The reminder of last night's arson attempt was still too fresh, the smell of burned wood and soaked ashes lingering in her senses even now. She forced a casual shrug. "Lucky? Or just too damn stubborn to go down that easy?"

Marian let out a dry chuckle. "You sound more and more like Maribel every day."

Jenna ignored the lump that tried to form in her throat. Instead, she reached into her

bag and pulled out the map and the notes she'd copied from the records she'd found. "Thank you. We need your expertise."

Marian's expression sobered as she took the map Jenna handed her, her fingers brushing over the aged paper. Her gaze narrowed, scanning the strange rune-like symbols they had found carved into the hidden stones on Jenna's property.

"Interesting," she murmured, flipping through a few more pages. She pushed up her glasses and glanced up at them. "Where did you find this?"

"On my land," Jenna said. "Buried under layers of dirt and time, hidden like someone didn't want it to be found."

Marian exhaled, pressing her lips together as she tapped the paper. "These markings aren't just old. They predate Silver Falls."

Jenna exchanged a glance with Flint. "Meaning what, exactly?"

Marian folded her hands together. "Meaning this land has belonged to others before your family's clan of mountain lions."

"Do you mean the Ghost Walkers?"

Marian nodded. "Could be. These are ancestral markers, Jenna. Bloodline indicators. From a time when the Ghost Walkers didn't just claim the land—they protected it."

Jenna frowned. "Protected it from what?"

"I don't know," Marian said. "Stories about them are old and contradictory. It's kind of a hobby of mine so I'm still working trying to separate fact from fantasy."

Flint crossed his arms, his gaze locked onto Marian like he was already piecing together the missing links. “Do you know which bloodline these runes belong to?”

Marian nodded slowly. “I do. But it’s not just the Ghost Walkers, it’s Calloway.”

Jenna’s breath hitched. “The mayor’s family?”

Marian’s expression turned grim. “Not just the mayor. The Calloway name is one of the oldest in Silver Falls. Their line was once... different. Stronger. More dominant.” She tapped the runes again. “They’re bobcat-shifters. But somewhere along the way, something changed. They buried this, hid it, pretended their power wasn’t tied to this land at all.”

Jenna’s grip on the table tightened. “You think Maribel knew.”

Marian nodded. “I’d bet my last breath she did.”

Flint’s voice was low, laced with that quiet, lethal certainty Jenna was coming to recognize all too well. “Then someone killed her for it.”

Before Jenna could respond, the library door swung open, and a familiar scent of wild energy and mischief swept in like a storm.

“Well, shit,” a voice drawled from the entrance. “I take my eyes off Silver Falls for a few weeks, and you’re already setting things on fire, big brother.”

Jenna turned as a tall, broad-shouldered man sauntered inside, his easy stride and cocky grin an unmistakable contrast to Flint’s quiet intensity. He had the same golden eyes, the same rugged features, but where Flint was all brooding control, this man was pure charm.

Flint let out a low breath. “Wes.”

Wes Mercer smiled—no, Jenna corrected herself, grinned—with all the reckless confidence of a man who’d never met a problem he couldn’t talk his way out of. He tilted his head at Jenna.

“You must be the woman Sybil told me about... the one giving my brother fits.”

Jenna arched an eyebrow, unimpressed. “And you must be the brother who’s a pain in the ass.”

Wes let out a bark of laughter. “I like her.”

Flint rolled his eyes, but Jenna caught the way his shoulders tensed, the subtle way his stance shifted—protective, possessive. He didn’t like his brother’s attention on her. Interesting.

Wes leaned against the counter, his gaze flicking between the two of them with a knowing glint. “Damn, Flint. You got it bad, don’t you?”

Flint’s expression darkened. “Shut up, Wes.”

Wes didn’t. “What happened to keeping your distance? You always said mates were a liability.”

Jenna stiffened. Flint shot Wes a look that promised pain. “That’s enough.”

Wes held up his hands in mock surrender, but his grin never wavered. “Just saying. This is new for you.” He turned to Jenna, eyes twinkling. “You making him crazy yet?”

Jenna crossed her arms. “Oh, I don’t have to try. He does that to himself.”

Wes let out a long whistle, shaking his head. “This is gonna be fun.”

Flint let out a growl of irritation, but Marian cut in before he could throw his brother through a bookshelf. “Much as I enjoy watching family drama unfold in my library, I think we have bigger problems.”

Jenna refocused. “Right. The Calloways. The land.”

Marian nodded. “If the mayor knows about this, if he’s been keeping this buried all these years, then he’s got more to lose than just property.”

Jenna’s mind raced. If Calloway was hiding his family’s history, if McVey was working with him, then Maribel’s death wasn’t just about the orchard. It was about bloodlines. Power.

And now, it was about Jenna.

Flint stepped closer, his warmth a steady force at her side. “Whatever they’re hiding, we’ll find it.”

Jenna met his gaze, something electric sparking between them. “Damn right we will.”

Wes clapped his hands together. “Great. Now that we’ve established we’re going to piss off the most powerful family in town, who’s buying me a beer?”

“It’s not even noon yet,” said Flint.

“You know what they say, ‘it’s five o’clock somewhere.’”

Jenna laughed despite the storm brewing inside her. She had questions—too many—but at least now, she had allies.

And if Calloway thought she'd back down, he was in for one hell of a surprise. As for the Ghost Walkers? What did they want?

Jenna didn't waste any time. As they left the library, she made a beeline for the mayor's office.

"You sure you want to do this now?" Flint asked as they walked down the sidewalk, past the quiet hum of Silver Falls' mid-morning bustle.

"Yes," she said, voice clipped. "I don't have time for games."

Flint studied her, assessing her with his eyes. "I don't like you going in alone."

"I'm not alone," she shot back. "You're with me."

He shook his head. "That's not what I meant."

She knew exactly what he meant. Confronting the mayor wasn't just a conversation—it was a declaration of war. But she wasn't in the mood to be careful. Not when there was no doubt that Maribel's death had not been an accident.

Flint seemed to know that arguing with her would be pointless, so he fell into step beside her. They reached the mayor's office in less than ten minutes, the sleek stone building standing in stark contrast to the rustic charm of the rest of Silver Falls. It was meant to impress. It didn't. Jenna was used to the architecture of New York City. This didn't impress her, she only found it irritating.

Inside, the receptionist barely had time to open her mouth before Jenna pushed past

her and threw open the heavy oak door to Calloway's office.

Mayor Calloway sat behind a massive desk, a phone to his ear, looking entirely too smug for a man who had a hell of a lot to answer for. His gray eyes flicked up to her, irritation flashing before he covered the receiver with one hand.

"Ms. Hartford," he said smoothly, "I don't recall having an appointment."

She said nothing but held her ground. The mayor studied her for a moment, then exhaled in exaggerated patience and set the phone down. Flint closed the door behind them, his presence a silent wall of authority at her back.

Calloway leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Jenna stepped forward, planting her hands on his desk. "Cut the act. We both know why I'm here."

Calloway tilted his head. "I assume this is about the fire?"

"This is about a hell of a lot more than the fire," Jenna growled. "You've been circling Cold Creek Orchards for years. So has McVey. And now, suddenly, my barn goes up in flames, and people are talking about 'forgotten' bloodlines, Ghost Walkers and buried secrets." She narrowed her eyes. "What do you know about my aunt's death?"

Calloway's expression remained neutral, but something flickered in his gaze. "That's a dangerous accusation, Ms. Hartford."

Jenna didn't back down. "Not an accusation. A question. And I'd really love an answer."

Calloway sighed, steepling his fingers. “Maribel was... difficult.”

Jenna’s nails dug into the wood of the desk. “Try again.”

The mayor’s lips pressed together, and then, finally, he spoke. “She was looking into things she shouldn’t have.”

Jenna’s breath hitched. “Like what?”

Calloway stood, straightening his suit. “This town has history, Ms. Hartford. And not all of it is kind. Maribel dug too deep. She was warned to leave it alone.” He met her gaze, his own eyes darkening. “You should too.”

Jenna let out a slow breath, forcing herself to stay calm. “Was she killed?”

Calloway’s silence stretched just long enough to confirm her worst fears.

Jenna’s pulse pounded. “Who?”

The mayor shook his head. “That’s not a question to which I can provide you with an answer.”

Jenna stepped closer, voice low and sharp. “You’re covering for someone.”

Calloway didn’t blink. “I’m protecting Silver Falls.”

Jenna’s laugh was bitter. “Bullshit.”

Calloway exhaled, shaking his head. “You don’t understand what you’re dealing with.”

Jenna met his gaze head-on. “Then why don’t you enlighten me?”

Calloway stared at her for a long moment before shaking his head. “Some things are better left buried, Ms. Hartford.”

Jenna clenched her jaw. “Not to me.”

The mayor’s gaze flicked to Flint, then back to her. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

Jenna folded her arms. “Not a chance in hell.”

Calloway sighed, rubbing his temple. “Then watch your back.”

Jenna turned on her heel and strode toward the door.

Flint stood for a moment longer. “If anything happens to her, I will hold you personally responsible.”

“Are you threatening me, Mercer?” the mayor asked.

Flint smiled malevolently. “Not at all. Just giving you a heads up.”

Once they were outside the building, Flint pulled out his phone. “Let’s head over to the fire station. If anyone knows what that fire was really about, it’s Ridge.”

Ridge Lawson’s truck was parked in front of the Silver Falls firehouse when Jenna and Flint arrived.

Ridge was leaning against the side of the rig, arms crossed, watching as one of his crew prepped a hose. He spotted them immediately and pushed off the truck with a

sigh.

“I had a feeling I might see you today,” Ridge muttered.

Jenna got straight to the point. “Tell me what you found.”

Ridge didn’t make her wait. “The fire was deliberate. Accelerants were used. It wasn’t about burning down your barn—it was about drawing you out.”

Jenna’s stomach twisted. “Why?”

Ridge’s jaw tightened. “That’s the part I don’t know yet. But whoever did this wasn’t looking to destroy property. They were looking for you.”

Jenna swallowed hard. “So they wanted me outside.”

“Yeah,” Ridge said grimly. “Which means if Flint hadn’t been there...”

Jenna forced herself to take a steady breath. “But he was.”

Ridge nodded, but his gaze was sharp. “Which means they’ll try again.”

Jenna didn’t flinch. “Then let them.”

Ridge let out a long breath. “Damn, Jenna. You’re as stubborn as your aunt Maribel.”

Jenna grinned, though there was no humor in it. “You have no idea.”

Ridge studied her for a second before shaking his head. “I’ll keep digging. But you need to be careful.”

Jenna nodded, but she wasn't leaving this alone. She glanced at Flint, who had been unusually quiet during the exchange.

He tilted his head, watching her with something close to admiration. "You're really not scared, are you?"

"I don't have time for fear," she said lifting her chin.

Ridge gave her one last warning look before heading back inside the station. "If I were you, I'd stick close to Mercer."

Jenna met his gaze. "Good thing I'm already doing that."

But even as she said it, she knew one thing. Whoever was hunting her wasn't done. And next time, they might not just be satisfied with setting fire to her barn.

"I need to check in with my sister at the Cider Mill."

"Okay, I can get a ride back to the Orchard."

Flint took her elbow and steered her into his truck, taking a deep breath and exhaled slowly as he started the engine and headed toward the cider mill. "Are you out of your damn mind?" His voice was low and sharp, vibrating with the kind of frustration that sent a thrill up her spine.

She turned to him, crossing her arms, already bracing for the fight. "I walked into the mayor's office, not a damn gunfight."

Flint's hands tightened on the steering wheel. His eyes burned with something darker than anger. "You cornered Calloway in his own office and accused him of covering up a murder. That's not just poking the bear, Jenna. That's walking into its den and

smacking it across the face.”

“He’s not a bear. He’s a bobcat. And the last time I checked, bobcat versus mountain lion, the mountain lion wins,” said Jenna stubbornly.

Flint seemed to be working hard to rein in his temper. She didn’t really want to go to the cider mill with him, but this didn’t seem to be a good time to point that out. They rode in silence and once they had arrived, Flint directed her into the old mill, all but dragging her past his sister and upstairs to his loft.

Once they were alone, he turned on her, his jaw tightening. “You can’t just go around picking fights with the town’s mayor.”

“I think I just did.”

His nostrils flared. “I noticed. My point is you can’t just do that without telling me.”

She laughed, but it was humorless. “Since when do I answer to you, Mercer?”

Flint let out a rough sound, something close to a growl. His hands shot out, gripping her arms—not hard, but firm enough that she felt the heat radiating off him. “Since the moment someone set fire to your damn barn. Since the moment you started hunting for answers that could get you killed.”

Jenna’s pulse pounded, but she refused to let him see it. “I can handle myself.”

Flint’s grip tightened just a fraction. “You keep saying that like it changes anything.”

Her heart was beating too fast. The space between them was nonexistent now, his body a furnace of restrained energy, his eyes flickering like he was seconds away from losing control.

Jenna swallowed hard, but her voice stayed steady. “Let me go.”

Flint’s jaw flexed, but he didn’t move.

Jenna stared at him, defiance curling in her gut. “I said...”

His mouth crashed against hers.

Jenna gasped, her body betraying her as she melted into the heat of him. His hands slid down her arms, one gripping her waist, the other threading into her hair as he angled her head, deepening the kiss. He was everywhere, consuming, the taste of him sending a violent shudder through her.

Damn him. Damn him for knowing exactly how to unravel her.

Her fingers curled into his shirt, holding him there even as her mind screamed at her to stop this before it went too far. But she didn’t stop. She opened for him, let him claim her mouth like he had every right to it.

It was fire and hunger, dominance and surrender.

And it was too much.

Jenna tore herself away, her breath coming fast and uneven. “No,” she whispered, forcing her hands to unclench from his shirt. “Not like this. Not again.”

Flint’s chest rose and fell in sharp, ragged breaths. His pupils were blown, his golden eyes feral, like he was fighting the same war she was.

Jenna shook her head, stepping back, needing space before she did something stupid. “We can’t.”

Flint's jaw tightened. "Why the hell not?"

Because if I let this happen, I'll never be able to walk away.

She forced her expression into something steady, controlled. "Because I'm not going to let you be my distraction."

Flint's nostrils flared, but he didn't argue. He just stood there, looking at her like he was seconds away from dragging her right back into his arms. Jenna turned on her heel, walking away before she could let herself stay. She walked past Sybil without saying a word, taking Flint's truck and driving back to the orchard, fighting her need to turn around the entire way.

That night, she couldn't sleep. The farmhouse felt too quiet. Too isolated. She lay in the antique bed, staring at the ceiling, forcing herself to breathe in slow, even breaths. But her mind wouldn't settle. The argument. The kiss. The fire. The mayor's cryptic warning.

She sighed, throwing off the blanket and sitting up. She wasn't used to feeling this unsettled, this out of control. She needed air.

She grabbed an oversized sweater that fell to her knees and padded downstairs, grabbing her Glock before stepping out onto the porch. The night was crisp, the scent of apples and wood smoke curling through the air. It should have been peaceful, but the remnants of the burned barn kept it from being so.

Her attention was drawn to the tree line that lay beyond. Her skin prickled. It felt as if someone was watching. Jenna's whole body went still, every hair on the back of her neck rising.

Then she saw them. Two glowing eyes, low to the ground, just beyond the tree line. It

wasn't Flint. Her breath slowed, her instincts screaming at her to stay still. The eyes didn't move. They just stared, unblinking, waiting.

A second pair appeared beside the first.

Jenna brought the Glock up to bear. This bullshit was getting really old. Then, just as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone. The night swallowed them whole; the forest returning to eerie silence.

Jenna released a slow breath, lowering her gun, forcing her heartbeat to steady. Whatever—or whoever—was out there, they weren't done watching her. But she was done waiting for them to make the next move.

CHAPTER 11

FLINT

Flint hadn't slept—not that he needed much sleep, but what little he usually took had been ruined by worrying about Jenna being back at the orchard. He could've followed her. Should have. But he hadn't. Jenna Hartford wasn't the kind of woman who enjoyed being chased.

Instead, he'd spent the rest of the night prowling the perimeter of the cider mill—his lion restless. The scent of the intruders from the orchard still lingered in his memory—distinct, unfamiliar. Lynx. It gnawed at him, an itch he couldn't scratch, a puzzle missing too many pieces. Lynx-shifters had been gone from Silver Falls for centuries.

By dawn, Flint gave up trying to force sleep and made his way downstairs, heading for the one person who might have answers—his sister.

Sybil was already in the back office, hunched over a stack of old books and papers, her dark hair twisted into a messy bun, glasses perched on the end of her nose. His younger sister had always been the smartest of them—sharp, quick, and relentless when something caught her interest.

She didn't bother looking up as he walked in. "I assume you're here for an update and not just to glare at my research like an overprotective caveman."

Flint ignored her jab and leaned against the doorway, arms crossed. "Tell me what

you found.”

Sybil sighed, rubbing at her eyes before sitting back in her chair. “You’re not gonna like it.”

“I already don’t like it. What are we dealing with?”

She pushed a book across the desk toward him. It was old, leather-bound, the edges worn from years of use. Flint glanced at the faded title— Legends of the Valley.

Sybil tapped a page filled with ancient runes, their symbols eerily similar to the ones Flint had uncovered at Cold Creek Orchards. “These aren’t just old. They’re Ghost Walker markers.”

His chest tightened. Damn it.

“You sure?”

Sybil shot him a look. “Would I say it if I wasn’t?” She tapped the book again. “The Ghost Walkers were protectors of something buried deep beneath Cold Creek Orchards. Something important enough that they marked the land, tied their bloodline to it. And if they’re still around or have returned?” She exhaled slowly. “They haven’t forgotten.”

Flint ran a hand through his hair, his mind working fast. The Ghost Walkers were a myth, a story whispered among shifters. But if they were real, if they were back... What the hell were they protecting?

“You think Jenna’s run-in last night was with one of them?” he asked.

Sybil nodded. “Or someone working for them.”

Flint clenched his jaw. “And what exactly do they want?”

“That’s the real question, isn’t it?” Sybil leaned forward. “If Jenna’s aunt found something she wasn’t supposed to, that could explain why she was killed. And why Jenna was suddenly a target.”

His gut twisted at the thought. Jenna didn’t deserve this. She sure as hell hadn’t asked to inherit a land war that went back generations. But whether or not she liked it, she was in the middle of it now. That meant he was in the middle of it too.

Before he could respond, the scent of something foul curled through the air. McVey. Flint turned, muscles coiling as Connor McVey strode into the cider mill like he owned the place. He wore one of his too-perfect suits, the kind that belonged in a boardroom, not a small town nestled in the Colorado Rockies. His slick confidence set Flint’s teeth on edge.

McVey’s gaze swept the room before landing on Flint, his expression smug. “Well, well. Fancy running into you here, Mercer.”

Flint didn’t move. “It shouldn’t be all that surprising. I own the place. You’re trespassing.”

McVey chuckled, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Relax. I just came to have a little chat.”

Flint’s patience wore thin fast. “I’m not in the mood for your bullshit, McVey.”

McVey tilted his head, pretending to be hurt. “Bullshit? Flint, I thought we were friends.”

Flint’s lip curled. “You thought wrong.”

McVey sighed, pacing a few steps. “Pity. Because I’d hate for things to get ugly between us.”

Flint stepped forward, close enough that McVey had to tilt his head up to meet his gaze. “You threatening me?”

McVey’s smirk widened. “Of course not. I’m just saying... Jenna’s out of her depth. She’s playing with forces she doesn’t understand. And if she’s not careful?” He shrugged. “She might end up like her aunt.”

Flint snapped.

In one swift move, he grabbed McVey by the collar and slammed him against the nearest wall—the sound echoing through the mill. Sybil barely flinched, but the tension in the room crackled like a live wire.

McVey let out a strangled laugh. “Touched a nerve, did I?”

Flint’s voice was a deadly growl. “You don’t get to say her name.”

McVey’s grin didn’t falter, but his pulse thrummed wildly against Flint’s grip. “Careful, Mercer. You wouldn’t want to do something you’ll regret.”

Flint leaned in, his voice low, lethal. “The only thing I’d regret is letting you walk out of here in one piece.”

McVey’s bravado slipped—just for a fraction of a second. Then he forced a chuckle. “Jenna isn’t yours to protect.”

Flint’s grip tightened. “She’s mine to protect whether or not she likes it. And I’ll tell you the same thing I told your buddy the mayor: if anything happens to her—if she so

much as gets a damn paper cut—I will come for you.”

McVey swallowed hard. For the first time, a sliver of uncertainty flickered in his eyes.

Flint shoved him back. McVey stumbled, adjusting his suit with exaggerated care. “Noted,” he murmured, rolling his shoulders. He met Flint’s gaze, his smirk creeping back. “But let’s be honest, Mercer. You and I both know this isn’t about business.”

Flint narrowed his eyes.

McVey’s grin sharpened. “You’re just pissed because Jenna’s slipping through your fingers.”

Flint took a step forward, but Sybil’s voice cut through the thick air. “That’s enough.”

Both men turned. Sybil hadn’t moved from her chair, but her expression was ice.

McVey let out a low laugh. “Fine. I’ll go.” He straightened his suit, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles. “But just remember, Mercer—I’m not the only one watching.”

With that, he turned and walked out—the door swinging shut behind him.

Flint let out a slow, controlled breath, his hands still curled into fists.

Sybil shook her head. “You keep threatening people like that, and you’re going to end up in a shallow grave before Jenna even gets the chance to shoot you herself.”

Flint exhaled through his nose. “If McVey so much as looks at her wrong, he won’t have to worry about a grave. There won’t be anything left to bury.”

Sybil sighed. “So we’re going with the overly possessive, neanderthal angle. Good to know.”

Flint ignored her and grabbed his phone. Jenna was at the orchard, alone. Now, more than ever, he needed to be there.

McVey was a problem.

A problem Flint wanted to eliminate, but throttling the bastard in broad daylight wasn’t going to do Jenna any favors. Sybil watched him closely as he stared at the door McVey had just sauntered through. She didn’t say anything at first, just leaned back in her chair, arms crossed, waiting.

Finally, she sighed. “You’re running hot, big brother.”

Flint forced his muscles to relax, adjusting his posture to release the tension. “Yeah, well, people keep threatening my mate. Hard to stay calm.”

“Your mate, huh?” Sybil teased.

Flint clenched his jaw. “You know damn well she is.”

Sybil tapped her fingers against the desk, considering him. “Does Jenna know that?”

“I’ve told her, but she doesn’t believe. Not yet.”

Sybil snorted. “So, you’re just gonna growl at every man who looks at her until she figures it out? Great plan. Real enlightened.”

Flint didn’t bother answering. Instead, he grabbed the go-bag he always kept stashed under the counter, slinging it over his shoulder. It had spare clothes, a knife, and a

burner phone. He wasn't about to hunt in his human form.

Sybil straightened. "Where are you going?"

"Hunting."

Her expression turned serious. "You think they'll come back?"

"I don't think they ever left."

He pushed open the back door of the mill, stepping into the cool air. The sun was climbing in the sky. His blood hummed with the need to move, to run, to find them.

Sybil's voice followed him. "Be careful."

Flint didn't answer. He moved into the trees and stripped, tucking his clothes into his go bag and letting his lion take over. A low growl rumbled in his chest as the heat of his shift coursed through him. A swirling mist enveloped his body, crackling with lightning and shards of color as thunder rumbled through the air. The transformation was near-instantaneous—one moment, he stood on two legs, the next, the mist dissipated, revealing the powerful form of his mountain lion. His senses were sharpened with colors becoming richer and scents flooding his nose.

He galloped toward the orchard, carrying his go bag. When he was close, he dropped the bag and prowled toward the tree line, his large paws silent against the earth. Seek. Hunt. Find.

He started along the edges of the orchard, where the forest thickened. The scent trails from the fire had mostly faded, but something else lingered. Something was wrong.

It was faint but unmistakable—shifter, but not one with which he was familiar... at

least not a local one. Not a mountain lion. Not a bobcat, but it was vaguely familiar.. Flint's ears twitched, muscles tensing as he followed the scent, winding deeper into the woods. He'd smelled it before, but he couldn't quite place where.

The trail led toward the northern edge of the property, near the ridge overlooking the valley. The undergrowth thickened, the trees closing in, casting long shadows across the ground.

Then he heard it. A footstep—too light for a human, too heavy for prey.

Flint went still, every muscle locked as he waited. A figure moved just ahead, slipping between the trees. He didn't hesitate. He lunged, bursting from the underbrush in a blur of tawny fur, aiming to take the bastard down before he could run. But the intruder was fast. Too fast. It dodged at the last second, rolling to the side as Flint's claws raked through the empty air.

The shifter sprang to its feet, revealing a lithe form—a lynx. Ghost Walker.

Flint snarled, lunging again, but the shifter twisted away, its movements fluid, almost unnatural. It didn't fight, didn't make a sound. Just ran.

Giving chase, his powerful legs ate up the distance. The lynx darted through the trees, faster than any natural creature had a right to be, but Flint was bigger, stronger. He closed in, jaws snapping—almost—when the shifter suddenly leapt straight up.

Flint skidded to a halt, growling in frustration as the lynx landed on a low-hanging branch, crouching just out of reach. Its glowing eyes met his, unblinking, assessing.

For a moment, neither of them moved. The lynx's mouth formed what could only be called a grin. Flint's hackles rose.

Before he could make another move, the Ghost Walker twisted, launching itself higher into the canopy, disappearing into the dense branches. Flint snarled, leaping after it, but the lynx was already gone, vanishing into the forest like a damn ghost.

Flint stood in the middle of the forest, heart pounding, claws still extended, his eyes scanning the trees. Every instinct in him screamed to chase the Ghost Walker down, to run them to ground and force them to answer for why the hell they were hunting Jenna.

But another instinct was louder. Jenna. His lion roared inside him, demanding he go back, that he make sure she was safe, that she wasn't alone out there with shadows circling her.

Grinding his teeth, Flint forced himself to turn away from the direction the lynx had vanished and sprinted back toward the farmhouse. His paws barely made a sound against the damp earth, his muscles burning as he pushed himself faster. By the time the house came into view, he could see the porch light glowing in the darkness.

He knew Jenna would be inside, probably pacing, stubborn as ever, thinking she had control of this situation. She didn't.

He stalked to where he'd left his bag behind a tree, shifting back and yanking on his jeans as he stormed toward the front door. He didn't bother knocking. He shoved it open, stepping inside like he owned the place.

Jenna was in the kitchen, her gun on the counter beside her, a fresh cup of coffee steaming in her hand. She barely flinched at his sudden entrance. Instead, she lifted an eyebrow, casually taking a sip. "Well, you're still alive. Guess that means you didn't find them."

Flint slammed the door shut behind him. "I found one."

That got her attention. She straightened, eyes sharpening. “Who?”

He crossed the room, his movements controlled but barely. “A Ghost Walker. One of the lynx shifters.”

Jenna exhaled hard, setting her coffee down. “That explains the glowing eyes.”

He nodded, jaw clenched. “They were toying with me, Jenna. And they’ve been watching you.”

She didn’t look surprised, but her lips pressed together like she wasn’t happy about hearing it out loud. “Why?”

Flint ran a hand through his hair, his muscles still vibrating with adrenaline. “That’s what I wanted to find out, but the bastard escaped before I could get answers.”

Jenna tilted her head, studying him. “And why aren’t you out there hunting them down?”

Flint stepped closer, the frustration he’d been holding back finally boiling over. “Because you were here. Alone.” His voice was low, edged with the growl of his lion. “I figured he’d be coming here next.”

Jenna narrowed her eyes, but he didn’t miss the way her pulse jumped. “I can handle myself.”

Flint let out a rough sound, closing the distance between them in a single step. “Damn it, Jenna. Would you stop saying that like it changes anything?”

She straightened, her jaw tightening, fire flashing in her eyes. “It does change things. I’m not some fragile little thing that needs you running in to save me.”

“No,” Flint agreed. “You’re not. But that doesn’t mean you should be out here alone while an entire clan of Ghost Walkers stalks you like prey.”

Jenna crossed her arms, refusing to back down. “So what? You’re going to play \bodyguard? Move in? Keep me on a leash?”

Flint’s fingers curled into fists at his sides, his control hanging by a damn thread. “I’m going to make sure you don’t get killed, Jenna.”

She glared up at him. “I never asked for that.”

Flint leaned in, his voice dropping lower. “Doesn’t matter.”

Her breath hitched just slightly, but her stubborn streak kept her from backing off. “And what, exactly, is your plan?”

Flint exhaled sharply through his nose. “We work together.”

Jenna scoffed. “That’s what I’ve been doing.”

“No, it’s not,” he said, frustration clawing at him. “You’ve been running into fire—literally—without telling me what the hell you’re thinking.” She clenched her jaw but said nothing. Flint forced himself to rein in his temper. “This isn’t a game, Jenna. You keep charging ahead like you don’t have a target on your back, and it’s going to get you killed. And I’m not letting that happen.”

Jenna’s gaze flickered, something unreadable passing through her eyes before she looked away.

Flint took a slow breath, forcing himself to calm down. “We figure out what the Ghost Walkers want. We find out what’s buried on the land. And we deal with

Calloway and McVey before they get the chance to make another move.”

Jenna tapped her fingers against the counter, then sighed. “Fine. We’ll work together, but I won’t let you shut me out and set me aside where you think I’ll be safe.

Flint held her gaze. “I can agree with that.”

But she wasn’t done. “And I decide how much protection I need, not you.”

Flint’s lip curled. “That I won’t agree to.”

Jenna muttered something under her breath and turned away, but Flint wasn’t about to let her shut him out again. Before she could take another step, he caught her wrist, spinning her back toward him. Her breath hitched as she collided with his chest.

Flint didn’t let her go. His eyes locked onto hers, his grip firm but not unyielding. “You can deny it all you want, Jenna,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “But the bond between us? It’s already forming.”

Her lips parted slightly, but no sound came out.

Flint leaned in, just enough that his breath brushed against her lips. “You feel it. I know you do.”

Jenna’s pulse pounded against his fingers. “That doesn’t mean I’m ready to accept it.”

Flint’s jaw tightened, but he nodded once. “Whether or not you accept it has no relevance. It’s already happening.”

Jenna swallowed hard, but she didn’t pull away. She held his gaze, stubborn and

unyielding, but for the first time, he saw something else behind her defiance. Fear. Not of him. Not of the fight ahead. But of this. Of them.

Flint released her wrist slowly, his fingers lingering for half a second before he stepped back. “Get some sleep, Jenna.”

She blinked, her walls snapping back into place. “Yeah,” she said, voice tight. “You too.”

Flint didn’t answer. He just watched as she turned and headed for the stairs. He let her go—for now. But this wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER 12

JENNA

The morning sun cast golden light through the farmhouse windows, but Jenna had been awake for hours, staring at her phone. She'd spent the night locked in her own head, running over every revelation, every warning, every damn sign that she wasn't just fighting to keep an orchard—she was fighting a war that had started long before she was born.

And yet, for all the ancient shifter politics, for all the whispers of Ghost Walkers and bloodlines, there was one very human element to this whole damn mess: Connor McVey.

Jenna had spent years navigating corporate boardrooms, picking apart contracts, and digging through financials to expose weaknesses. McVey played the part of a smooth real estate mogul, but she wasn't fooled. He was a predator in a custom suit, and predators had patterns.

She tapped out a message to an old contact—Nola Whitmore, one of the best forensic accountants she'd ever worked with.

Jenna: Need a favor. Dig into Connor McVey. Corporate holdings, past land deals, anything shady.

Nola: Damn, girl. Straight to business, no hello? I haven't heard from you in months.

Jenna: I'll buy you a bottle of Macallan next time I'm in New York.

Nola: Make it one-hundred-year-old, and you've got a deal.

Jenna smiled despite herself. Nola didn't do favors—she did trades. That's why she'd always liked her.

Jenna: Done.

She set her phone down and ran a hand through her hair. Flint was probably still brooding somewhere—the farmhouse, the orchard, the mill—pacing like the overprotective beast he was. After their argument last night, she'd needed space and had headed upstairs without another word. But space didn't mean she wasn't still thinking about him—about the way he'd looked at her, about the way he'd said her name like it meant something more.

Damn him.

A notification popped up on her screen. Nola was fast.

She opened the message, her pulse kicking up as she scanned the attached file.

Nola: You were right to be suspicious. McVey has a pattern. Every few years, he targets landowners, forces them out—sometimes legally, sometimes not. Shell companies, backroom deals, and a few “mysterious” fires along the way. Some of the people who refused to sell? They disappeared.

Jenna's stomach twisted. Maribel.

Nola: Whatever this guy is after, he doesn't stop until he gets it. And once he does, people stop asking questions.

Jenna's grip tightened around her phone. She'd known McVey was dirty, but this? This was something else entirely.

Her aunt had been one of the last holdouts, refusing to sell. And now she was dead. The burn of rage simmered low in Jenna's gut. McVey had played this game before. The difference was, this time, he wasn't going to win.

She needed to get to the library. If McVey had been playing a long game, she had to find out what he was really after.

Jenna had slipped out the back door of the farmhouse before Flint knew what she was about. She was willing to work with him, but right now she needed space. The Silver Falls Public Library smelled even more like parchment and secrets, and Marian looked like she hadn't slept. She was hunched over an ancient-looking ledger, peering through her reading glasses, flipping through pages with quick, sharp movements.

Jenna barely made it through the door before Marian waved her over.

"You're going to want to see this," the librarian said without preamble.

Jenna pulled up a chair and scanned the ledger. The handwriting was old-fashioned, the ink faded, but the name Calloway stood out like a damn warning sign.

"This is a land deed," Marian said, tapping a finger against the brittle paper. "Cold Creek Orchards wasn't always part of your family's holdings."

Jenna frowned. "I know my great-great-grandparents claimed the land. It was homesteaded..."

Marian shook her head. "It wasn't just claimed and homesteaded. It was won."

Jenna's pulse kicked up. "Explain."

Marian turned the page, revealing another document tucked inside the ledger. It was older, the edges crumbling with age, but the words were clear.

The land had originally been part of the Calloway estate. But the Hartfords—her ancestors—had claimed it through a blood-right challenge.

Jenna inhaled sharply. "They fought for it?"

Marian nodded. "Back then, shifters didn't just sign deeds. Blood-right was a legitimate form of land transfer. It meant one family claimed dominance over the land, and the losing family had to relinquish it."

Jenna stared at the page, the implications sinking in.

"Calloway lost," she murmured.

Marian's expression was grim. "And I'd bet every book in this library that they never forgave your family for it."

Jenna sat back, trying to process it all. This wasn't just about money. This was history. This was power.

And McVey? He was Calloway's ally. Which meant he wasn't just trying to buy the orchard—he was trying to take back something the Calloways thought was stolen from them.

Jenna's mind spun. "Is this even legal? Could they..."

Marian cut her off. "Legally? In this day and age? No, but legality doesn't matter

when people are willing to kill for what they believe is theirs.”

A cold dread settled in Jenna’s chest. McVey had a history of making people disappear. The Calloways had never accepted losing the land. And Maribel had been sitting on secrets that had gotten her killed.

Jenna rubbed her temples. “This is bigger than I thought.”

Marian’s gaze softened. “You sure you’re ready for this fight?”

Jenna met her eyes. “I don’t think I have a choice. They killed my aunt. They came after me. They burned my barn. They tried to scare me out.” She closed the ledger, steadying herself. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Marian smiled, a flicker of approval in her eyes. “Good. Because my guess is they’re just getting started.”

Jenna exhaled slowly, pushing back from the table. She needed to tell Flint.

Jenna hadn’t wasted time after leaving the library. Armed with the knowledge that her family had taken Cold Creek Orchards by blood-right and that the Calloways had never truly let it go, she knew one thing for certain—Maribel had been keeping something hidden.

And she was going to find out what it was.

Flint was waiting for her at the orchard, leaning against his truck with his arms crossed, his eyes unreadable. The wind rustled through the apple trees, carrying the scent of earth and something older, something beneath the land itself. She hadn’t told him much over the phone—only that Marian had found something big—but he must have sensed the urgency in her voice because he’d waited for her.

Jenna stalked toward him. “We’re looking for an entrance.”

Flint didn’t blink. “To what?”

She shook her head. “That’s what we’re going to find out.”

His gaze flicked over her face, assessing. “You’re sure?”

Jenna clenched her jaw. “My family didn’t just own this land—they fought for it. And they didn’t win because of the orchards. There’s something buried here, something that scared Maribel and everyone before her enough to keep it hidden for years.”

Flint straightened, his muscles tensing beneath his T-shirt. “Then let’s go.”

They set out through the orchard, winding between gnarled trees as the sun climbed higher. Jenna had spent enough time walking these fields as a child to know every inch of the land, but now, it felt different. Like something unseen was watching, waiting.

Flint moved beside her, his presence steady, controlled. “You think this has to do with the Ghost Walkers?”

Jenna nodded. “Marian said they were protectors of something buried here. And if they’re back, my guess is it’s because that something is waking up.”

They reached the spot where she had found the runes—etched into the stone beneath the soil, ancient and untouched for who knew how long. Flint crouched, running his fingers over the markings, his expression darkening.

“These aren’t just warnings,” he murmured. “They’re a seal.”

Jenna frowned. “A seal?”

Flint traced the lines with his fingertips. “Shifter clans used to carve these into sacred ground. To bind something inside.”

The words sent a shiver down Jenna’s spine. She crouched beside him, brushing loose dirt away, and felt it—the faintest vibration beneath her palm.

A low growl rumbled in Flint’s chest. “There’s something below us.”

Jenna’s she-cat stirred violently, slamming against her control with a suddenness that took her breath away. Recognition. Hunger. A need she didn’t understand.

Her vision blurred for half a second, and suddenly she wasn’t kneeling in the dirt anymore—she was somewhere else. Somewhere dark and ancient, the scent of blood and stone thick in the air. Voices whispered in the shadows, distant and mournful.

‘Blood calls to blood.’

Jenna sucked in a sharp breath and snapped back to the present, her fingers digging into the earth as the sensation faded.

Flint was watching her, his expression taut. “Jenna?”

She shook her head, pushing past the lingering haze in her mind. “Something’s here.”

Flint’s jaw ticked. “I know. I can feel it too.”

They stood, scanning the area. Then Jenna spotted it—a depression in the earth, partially obscured by a tangle of roots. Flint must have seen it at the same time, because he was already moving.

When he reached it, he knelt, pulling away the loose branches and soil, revealing what had been hidden for centuries. A door—not of wood, but of stone.

The surface was weathered and scarred with deep claw marks—like something, or someone, had tried to tear it open.

Jenna's pulse pounded. "This isn't just an old cellar, is it?"

Flint's gaze cut to her, sharp as a blade. "No."

Jenna took a step closer, the energy radiating from the door crawling over her skin like static electricity. In the corners of her mind, her she-cat paced restlessly, ears flattened, fangs bared.

She reached out, pressing her palm against the cold surface. The moment she did, the symbols carved into the stone flared—not with light, but with power.

Flint's breath came rough beside her. "Jenna..."

A sudden pulse of energy shot through her arm, and she stumbled back, her body vibrating with something old. The she-cat inside her roared, not in fear but in recognition. She wasn't just standing in front of an ancient door. She was standing in front of something her blood remembered.

Jenna met Flint's gaze, her voice barely above a whisper. "I think... I think this was meant for me."

Flint's hands curled into fists, his muscles coiled like he was seconds away from tearing the damn door off its hinges. "Then we find out why."

Jenna swallowed hard, steadying herself. Whatever was on the other side of this door

had been buried for a reason. And someone had been trying to get to it for a long time.

Maribel had protected it.

The Ghost Walkers were hunting it.

And now, it was calling to Jenna.

“We need more information,” said Flint. “I know Sybil and Marian have been working on this together as a kind of joint project. I want to make sure we have as much information as possible before we try to open this thing.”

Jenna stood staring at the hidden stone door like it personally owed her an explanation. They’d spent hours, hell, days, trying to uncover the orchard’s secrets—combing through records, consulting every resource they could find—and yet, they were no closer to opening the damn thing than when they’d first started.

Flint stood beside her, his arms crossed over his broad chest, his eyes narrowed in frustration. “Tell me again why we thought this was a good idea?”

Jenna let out a sharp breath. “Because we were idiots who thought we were onto something.”

He chuckled, his gaze fixed on the ancient markings carved into the stone. “We are onto something,” he muttered. “We just don’t know what the hell it is.”

She huffed a laugh, though there was no humor in it. “So, to summarize: we’ve spent a ridiculous amount of time and energy chasing answers, only to be standing here with nothing to show for it.”

Flint shot her a look. “Not nothing. We know it’s old. We know it’s tied to the Ghost Walkers. And we know something sure as hell doesn’t want us getting inside.”

Jenna turned to him, arching an eyebrow. “Great. That is not something new. We knew most of that when we started.”

Flint ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, well. Thought saying it out loud might make it sound like progress.”

“It doesn’t.”

He sighed. “Didn’t think so.”

They stood in silence, both glaring at the unmoving door, the weight of their failure pressing down on them. Finally, Flint broke it with a muttered, “I hate this damn thing.”

Jenna shook her head. “Not as much as I do.”

Flint let out a low chuckle, glancing at her. “What now? Wanna kick it and see if it magically opens?”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “Tempting, but I think I’d rather set something on fire.”

His lips twitched, amusement flickering despite the frustration. “Let’s save that for Plan C.”

“What are Plans A and B?”

“We’re working on Plan A and Plan B is kicking it open.”

Jenna exhaled slowly, forcing herself to step back. “We’re missing something. And standing here staring at it like it’s gonna give us an epiphany isn’t helping.”

Flint nodded, cracking his neck. “Agreed. Let’s call it a day.”

She took a step back, nodding. “We better. Because if this thing wasted my time for nothing, I really am setting something on fire.”

They covered the doorway, trying to disguise what lay beneath, and headed back to the farmhouse. The rest of the afternoon was spent going back through the information Maribel had amassed, searching the internet and conferencing with Sybil and Marian.

Finally after a dinner made of blueberry pancakes and bacon, they called it a day. Jenna slipped up the stairs, going into her bedroom. She changed into her normal sleepwear—a silky camisole and boy shorts and sat on the bed in the dark. She couldn’t figure out if she wanted Flint to join her or not, so she just waited. At one point, she heard footsteps approaching her door. The knob started to turn but then stopped before she heard him retreat to the other bedroom.

Crawling under the covers, exhausted, Jenna waited for sleep to claim her, but it didn’t. She had tried—tried shutting her mind down, tried drowning out the day’s discoveries, tried ignoring the burning ache under her skin that had nothing to do with danger and everything to do with the man down the hall—but it was no use.

She lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, the sound of the night pressing in around her. The farmhouse felt too big, too empty, despite knowing Flint was somewhere inside. But that was part of the problem, wasn’t it? Flint was always near, always watching, always in her head, under her skin, unraveling her defenses.

And now, after what they had found in the orchard—that door—she couldn’t shake

the feeling that everything was about to change.

Her blood knew that place—and that terrified her more than anything.

Throwing back the blanket, Jenna pushed to her feet, slipping a sweater over her camisole before padding barefoot down the stairs. She needed air. Maybe even a drink, but mostly she just needed to breathe.

The moment she stepped onto the porch, she froze. Flint was there. She hadn't heard him going down the stairs. He leaned against the wooden railing, facing the orchard, bare-chested, his jeans slung low on his hips. Moonlight cast silver over his skin, highlighting every defined ridge of muscle, the sharp cut of his jaw. He was still, too still, the tension in his body coiled tight as if he was waiting for something... or someone.

Her pulse kicked up. She should have turned around. Should have gone back inside. Should have done anything but what she did next. Jenna closed the distance between them.

Flint didn't turn at first, didn't speak, but she knew the second he sensed her. The air thickened between them, charged with something electric. He exhaled through his nose, still watching the orchard like the trees themselves held the answers.

“You should be asleep,” he said, his voice a rough rumble.

Jenna leaned against the opposite side of the railing, folding her arms as she studied him. “So should you.”

His gaze flicked to her, and damn if she didn't feel the impact of that stare. She didn't know what she expected him to say, but when he did speak, it wasn't what she was ready for.

“You felt it today, didn’t you?” His voice was quieter now, but no less intense.

Jenna’s gut tightened. She could have lied. Could have played it off, brushed it aside like it was just another mystery she would solve. But they both knew better.

“Yeah,” she admitted. “I did.”

Flint turned fully toward her then, hands braced against the railing. He was so close now—too close—his body radiating heat, scent wrapping around her like a drug.

“You know what that means, don’t you?”

Jenna swallowed, refusing to break his gaze. “No. But I have a feeling you do.”

Flint’s jaw flexed. “I have theories.”

Jenna tilted her head, her own frustration bubbling to the surface. “Then why don’t you stop playing riddles and start explaining?”

His lips parted like he might actually answer, but then something shifted—not in the air, not in the night, but between them. Flint’s gaze dropped to her mouth. Jenna’s breath caught. She saw the exact second he made his decision.

Flint moved fast, closing the last inch of space between them, crowding her against the railing, his body pressing against hers. One arm came up, gripping the wood beside her head, trapping her there—but it wasn’t just about physical dominance.

It was about possession. A warning. A demand.

Jenna should have pushed him away. She should have fought back. She didn’t.

Instead, she lifted her chin, challenging him with her eyes. “What are you doing, Mercer?”

Flint’s lips curled—not a smile, not even close. “Something I should have done the second you walked back into this town, and that I should have been doing since that night in the loft.”

Then he kissed her. It wasn’t soft. It wasn’t slow. It was fire, all-consuming, searing her from the inside out. Flint kissed like he fought—with purpose, with strength, with a demand Jenna wasn’t sure she wanted to deny.

She kissed him back just as fiercely, digging her nails into his shoulders, feeling the raw power in his body coil under her touch. Flint growled into her mouth, biting at her lower lip, forcing her head back as he devoured her.

The railing dug into her back as Flint lifted her, forcing her legs apart until she was straddling his hips, her thin sleep shorts doing nothing to shield her from the thick, hot press of him.

She moaned, the sound swallowed by another kiss. His hands gripped her thighs, fingers digging in, leaving no room for second thoughts.

“Tell me to stop,” he rasped against her throat, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there. “Tell me now, Jenna.”

She couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

Instead, she arched into him, rolling her hips against his hardness, reveling in the way he hissed through his teeth. Flint cursed. Then he lost control completely. Reaching between them, he unbuttoned his jeans, freeing his cock, before ripping her shorts off in one fluid motion.

He lifted her just enough to line himself up before thrusting inside her in one deep stroke. Jenna gasped, her nails raking down his back, her body clenching around him like she'd been made for this. For him. Flint groaned, head dropping to her shoulder, his entire body shuddering as he stilled inside her.

“Fuck,” he ground out.

Jenna barely heard him over the pounding of her own pulse. Then he moved. He pulled back and then slammed into her, hard, deep, claiming her with every drive of his hips. The porch railing creaked under the force of their passion, but neither of them cared.

Jenna's legs locked around his waist, her hands gripping his hair, pulling him down to kiss her again—all teeth and tongue and wild, untamed hunger.

“Mine,” Flint growled against her lips. “You're fucking mine, Jenna.”

Jenna should have fought the words, should have argued.

Instead, she clenched around him, dragging him even deeper, and whispered, “Prove it.”

Flint did as the predatory instincts of his mountain lion took over and he tore away the last vestiges of Jenna's clothing, exposing her raw, trembling skin to the unforgiving glare of the night. His hands roamed over her bare breasts with feral intent, pinching her hardened nipples as if they were a coveted prize. He lowered his head, sucking each one into his mouth and suckling before giving it the edge of his teeth. He inhaled deeply, the mingled scent of her arousal fanning the flames of their ravenous, untamed lust.

In one savage, decisive motion, he flipped her around and bent her over the cold,

jagged railing. The impact sent shockwaves through her body, igniting shudders as his two forceful fingers plunged into the sultry heat between her thighs. Her tortured, involuntary moan rent the night air—a raw, unfiltered sound that both betrayed her inner torment and exalted the relentless passion raging between them.

Without a single word, Flint gripped her hips, delivering a brutal kick that forced her legs apart as he positioned himself between them. In that suspended heartbeat, Jenna's mind churned with conflicting torrents—a fleeting, desperate impulse to resist clashing with a surging, overwhelming adrenaline that only magnified her need for him.

Every nerve in her body screamed for the commanding touch she craved. Her already aching nipples demanded not tender coaxing but the savage, unrelenting force of dominance. She did not yearn for gentle affection, but for the raw intensity of the man who had placed himself in danger to protect her. The splintered, biting wood of the railing dug into her hips with every movement, a constant reminder of the stark, brutal reality of their encounter, even as the wild, primal desire inside her eclipsed every other sensation.

Deep within, a searing heat built like a pulsing inferno—a wet, relentless invitation longing for the conquest she knew loomed ahead. Her body trembled with a kind of twisted desire at the thought of his overwhelming presence, of the way his virile arousal might mercilessly scrape along every hidden contour of her being.

Flint's calloused hands burrowed deeper into her hips, pinning her with unyielding force against the harsh railing as he stepped up and with one savage, unbridled thrust, he mounted her, erasing any trace of tenderness. Instead he answered her challenge with an all-consuming, primal dominance steeped in the ancient language of fierce desire. Their collision was animalistic and merciless—a torrential meeting of raw need that scorched away any veneer of civilized restraint.

A guttural cry tore from Jenna as the first searing wave of orgasm overwhelmed her. Even as he launched into a frenzied series of long, relentless strokes, each crushing thrust drawing her closer to the abyss of submission, her body convulsed uncontrollably in a cascade of shattering, successive eruptions of raw ecstasy. Her ragged gasps and desperate cries punctuated the primal rhythm of their union, each movement more forceful than the last.

In that brutal, terrifying moment, every shred of doubt disintegrated under the relentless surge of need to be utterly consumed by him. Each grunted command and searing cry from him heralded an inevitable climax. Finally, with one last brutal thrust that shattered all remaining restraint, she felt the overwhelming force of his release—a molten, devastating flood that spilled into her, merging irrevocably with the pulsing echoes of her own fierce desire.

Flint lay over her back, breathing heavily into her ear, as they both tried to catch their breath until neither of them could deny what had already been written in fate.

CHAPTER 13

FLINT

After their intimate encounter on the porch, where the night air had cooled their skin after their primal embrace, Flint had effortlessly lifted her into his arms. Once they reached the sanctuary of the bedroom, they had surrendered to the magnetic pull between them, losing themselves in a world where only they existed, wrapped in each other's presence.

Jenna's warmth was curled into his side, her bare skin pressed against his, her scent filling every damn part of his senses. The mate bond pulsed between them—stronger, undeniable, and completely unrelenting. It was more than lust, more than want. It was fate. And yet, he sensed her resistance.

Even in sleep, her body had molded itself to his, her hand resting against his chest, her fingers curled like she'd held onto him in the night and forgotten to let go. But she would. The moment she woke, she'd put distance between them, shove those walls back up like she hadn't shattered them just hours before.

Flint exhaled through his nose, dragging a hand through his hair as he stared at the ceiling. He knew what this was. He'd known the second he laid eyes on her the day she arrived in Silver Falls. She was his, and she knew it, even if she wouldn't say the words.

Jenna stirred, and he felt the second she realized where she was. Her body tensed for a fraction of a second before she forced herself to relax, pulling away just enough to

create space.

“Morning.” Her voice was low, husky, still thick from sleep, and he wanted nothing more than to drag her right back under him, to keep her where she belonged.

Instead, he turned his head to meet her gaze. “Morning.”

She was already pushing up, reaching for the robe she’d left at the end of her bed.

“You planning on running?” His voice was rougher than he meant it to be, but he didn’t care.

Jenna shot him a look as she tugged the fabric over her head. “Not running. Just not lying around all day like some lovesick teenager.”

Flint sat up, the sheets pooling around his waist. “That what you think this is?”

She didn’t answer. Didn’t have to. He saw it in her eyes—the refusal to acknowledge what they both knew was happening.

Flint pushed forward, bracing his hands on either side of her hips, crowding her against the edge of the mattress. “You can keep pretending, Jenna. Keep telling yourself this is just lust, that it’s nothing more than a temporary distraction.” He leaned in, breathing against her skin as he dragged his mouth just shy of her ear. “But it won’t change the fact that the bond is forming.”

Jenna swallowed hard, her pulse kicking up, but she still met his gaze without backing down. “Maybe it is. But that doesn’t mean I have to do anything about it.”

Flint let out a low, humorless chuckle. “You keep telling yourself that.”

Before she could respond, his phone vibrated on the nightstand. He swore under his breath, snagging it and glancing at the screen. Sybil.

Jenna took the opportunity to slip off the bed, and he let her go—because if he didn't, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from dragging her right back into it.

He answered, his voice still thick from the night before. "What?"

Sybil sighed. "Good morning to you too, sunshine."

Flint ran a hand through his hair, already irritated. "Unless you have news, I don't need this call."

"Oh, you need it," Sybil shot back. "Because Wes, Ridge, and I are all standing at that place in the orchard, and we think we might know what's behind that damn door."

That got his attention.

Flint met Jenna's gaze across the room, reading the same curiosity and suspicion in her eyes. "We're on our way."

The air at Cold Creek Orchards was thick with the scent of damp earth, the lingering smoke from the burned barn still faint but present. The orchard stood tall, stretching in all directions, but Flint's focus was on the group gathered near the rune-covered stone door buried in the heart of the land.

"You're late," Wes drawled, crossing his arms as he leaned against a tree. He glanced between Flint and Jenna, a knowing grin creeping up his face. "Busy morning?"

Flint ignored him, but Jenna shot Wes a look that could have made a lesser man take

a step back.

“What do you have?” Flint asked, getting straight to the point.

Sybil crouched by the stone door, brushing dirt from the markings. “This thing is old. Older than the Calloways, older than the town itself. And it’s tied to a bloodline.”

“What bloodline?” said Jenna, stiffening beside him.

Ridge sighed. “That’s the thing. It should be Calloway’s, right? The land was originally part of their family holdings before Maribel’s ancestors claimed it through blood-right. But this?” He gestured toward the door. “This isn’t Calloway’s. It’s something else.”

Flint frowned. “The Ghost Walkers.”

Sybil nodded. “That’s what we think. This door is a seal—meant to keep something in. Or keep people out.”

Jenna took a step closer, her gaze locked onto the stone like it was calling to her. “Then why does my she-cat feel like it knows what’s inside?”

Flint snapped his attention to her, watching the way her breath shallowed, her fingers twitching at her sides. He could feel her energy shifting, her instincts clawing at something unseen.

He moved closer, his body brushing against hers. “What do you feel?”

Jenna’s voice was quiet, distant. “It’s not fear. It’s recognition. Like... this place belongs to me.”

Sybil exchanged a glance with Wes before looking back at Jenna. “That’s because it might.”

Flint’s jaw clenched. He didn’t like where this was heading.

Jenna turned toward Sybil, her eyes blazing. “Explain.”

Sybil hesitated before finally saying, “Maribel’s bloodline might not just be connected to the land. It might be tied to what’s inside that door.”

Flint’s instincts roared to life, his protectiveness spiking like a damn wildfire. Jenna was tied to whatever was buried beneath them. And that meant she was in more danger than any of them had realized. Sybil’s revelation had ratcheted up the tension in Flint’s chest, and it showed no sign of letting down.

Jenna was tied to whatever was buried beneath Cold Creek Orchards. That single fact rattled him more than he cared to admit. He didn’t need another damn reason to feel protective over her. The mate bond was already digging its claws into him, making every instinct scream to keep her close, to keep her safe.

After the group had dissected every theory they could imagine, they’d all agreed on one thing—until they figured out how to get past that sealed door, standing around speculating wasn’t going to do them any good. Flint needed to burn off the frustration pulsing through his veins, and from the way Jenna’s fingers twitched, he could tell her she-cat was needing the same.

The group agreed to disburse and do some more research, then meet the following day. After serving everyone lunch at the farmhouse he stood behind Jenna, his arms on either side of her braced against the porch railing as the others left.

Nuzzling her neck he whispered, “Let’s run.”

Jenna blinked at him. “What?”

Flint tilted his head toward the woods, where the dense forest beckoned. “You need it. I need it. Let’s run.”

For a second, she hesitated. But then, something in her eyes sparked—an unspoken challenge. “Fine,” she said, already reaching for the hem of her sweater.

His blood heated.

Jenna didn’t hesitate when she wanted something. And right now, she wanted to run. She shed her clothes with effortless efficiency, the sharp autumn air doing nothing to cool the heat rolling off her.

Flint followed suit, yanking off his shirt, stepping out of his boots, shucking off his jeans and leaving behind everything but the drive to move.

Jenna met his gaze one last time before letting go. The air crackled with power as the change overtook her, a swirling mist enveloping her body. Thunder rumbled low, lightning flashing in the thick fog of the shift. Colors shattered, bending in strange, unnatural patterns. And then, where Jenna had stood, a sleek mountain lion emerged, her fur a shade darker than his own, her eyes blazing like a wildfire.

Flint called forth his own mountain lion, embracing the shift as the same crackling mist surged around him. When it dissipated, he landed on four paws, muscles coiled, senses sharper than any human could imagine.

Jenna let out a low growl, stepping closer, nudging her muzzle against his shoulder in a teasing, almost loving gesture. His lion rumbled in response, a low, vibrating sound of acknowledgment.

But without waiting, she bolted, jumping off the porch and landing in a full-out gallop. Flint didn't hesitate. He launched after her, his powerful body cutting across the barnyard and charging toward the undergrowth in the orchard and forest. He chased her through the orchard. She was fast. Damn fast. But he'd expected that. Her she-cat had been caged too long.

She leapt over fallen logs, twisting through the trees with an agility that sent a thrill through his blood. Flint gave chase, pushing harder, his muscles flexing with every bound. He caught up to her near the ridge, their fur nearly brushing as he ran beside her, matching her stride for stride.

She let out a playful growl, bumping against his side before surging forward again, daring him to keep up. Flint's lion rumbled with satisfaction. She was testing him, pushing him. And hell if he wasn't going to meet that challenge.

They raced deeper into the forest, their surroundings blurring into streaks of autumn gold and evergreen. The crisp mountain air filled his lungs, the scent of pine, damp earth, and wild energy sharpening his focus.

And then he caught it. The scent. His paws dug into the dirt as he skidded to a stop, muscles tensing, his lion snarling a silent warning.

Jenna didn't miss the change in his energy. She turned, ears flicking forward, her body going still. She scented the air, her eyes narrowing as she caught it, too.

Ghost Walkers.

Only this time, they weren't running. A rustle in the underbrush was the only warning they got before the first attack came.

A blur of silver fur launched at Flint from the left, aiming for his throat. He dodged at

the last second, twisting to avoid the lynx-shifter's claws. But another came from behind, forcing him to spin, his own claws flashing as he lashed out.

Jenna was already in motion. She met the first attacker head-on, slamming into the smaller shifter with enough force to send them both rolling through the dirt. Snarls and growls filled the night, the quiet forest now a battlefield.

Flint dug his claws into the earth, launching himself at the second Ghost Walker. The lynx was fast, but Flint was bigger, stronger. He slammed into the shifter mid-leap, sending them crashing to the ground. Claws raked at his side, but he barely felt it as he bit down, aiming for the shoulder.

Jenna let out a furious growl as she pinned her opponent, her powerful hind legs raking across the lynx's belly. The shifter yowled, kicking her off, but she landed on all fours, poised to strike again.

Flint twisted, flipping his opponent onto their back, his teeth bared, ready to end this. But before he could land the killing blow, a sharp, piercing whistle cut through the air.

The Ghost Walkers froze—then, as quickly as they'd attacked, they retreated.

The lynx beneath Flint squirmed, slipping free and darting into the trees. The other followed, their agile bodies disappearing into the darkness like smoke.

Flint let out a growl of frustration but didn't chase. He turned to Jenna, his breath still heaving, his lion still thrumming with adrenaline.

She looked just as fierce, her fur bristling, her eyes locked onto the shadows where the Ghost Walkers had vanished.

They had been testing them. But why?

Jenna let out a short, irritated chuff before padding closer, bumping her head against his flank in a silent question. He brushed his muzzle against hers, a silent reassurance. They weren't done with this fight. Not by a long shot.

He turned toward the direction of the farmhouse, letting out a low rumble. Jenna huffed but followed, her sleek form moving beside his as they began the trek back.

Whatever game the Ghost Walkers were playing, they'd just made one thing clear. They weren't afraid to fight. What he and Jenna had shown them was that neither were they.

Flint breathed heavily, his mountain lion demanding pursuit, demanding blood. They had come so close—so damn close—to getting answers. But those bastards were slippery. Jenna let out a low, irritated chuff beside him, her frustration mirroring his own. But beneath it, she was buzzing, her she-cat still thrumming with adrenaline. She turned toward him, her eyes locking onto his.

They loped back to the farmhouse, side-by-side, simply enjoying one another's company and the cool, crisp air.

When they arrived at the farmhouse, Flint let out a rough breath before stepping onto the porch. The swirling mist of his change surrounded him, the crackle of lightning and shifting colors breaking through the night. When the mist dissipated, he stood naked in the afternoon light, muscles tight, breathing heavy, his body still vibrating with the need to fight.

Jenna followed a second later, her own form emerging from the mist. She barely seemed winded, but her hands clenched at her sides, her jaw locked with barely restrained fury.

“They were playing with us,” she muttered, her voice sharp.

Flint ran a hand through his hair, eyes scanning the forest. “Yeah.”

Jenna’s fingers curled, her frustration practically radiating off her. “They weren’t just looking for a fight. They could’ve killed one of us if they’d wanted to.”

Flint nodded, stepping closer, the heat of his bare skin brushing against hers. “Doubtful. As you pointed out, in a contest between a lynx and a mountain lion, mountain lion wins. I think they were just sizing us up... testing how far we’d go.”

Jenna let out a slow breath, her gaze narrowing. “They wanted us to know they’re not afraid.”

Flint’s muscles coiled. “Good.”

Jenna blinked. “Good?”

He turned, facing her fully. “Fear makes people reckless. Somewhere deep down, they must be afraid of us, which means they’re making mistakes. And mistakes?” His eyes burned into hers. “That’s how we win.”

She stared at him for a long moment before letting out a low, humorless chuckle. “You really are a cocky bastard, aren’t you?”

Flint’s lip curled. “You already knew that.”

She huffed, shaking her head, but she didn’t argue. The energy between them was still crackling, too much, too sharp. The adrenaline hadn’t fully left either of their systems, and his lion still wasn’t ready to let her go.

Flint reached out before he could stop himself, his fingers grazing her wrist. “You’re staying with me now.”

Jenna paused. “Flint...”

“I’m not asking.” His voice dropped, his grip tightening just slightly. “From now on, you’re staying with me.”

She didn’t pull away. Didn’t argue. For the first time, she simply looked at him—truly looked at him. Like she saw everything, every unspoken demand, every instinct, every need buried beneath his words. And for once, she didn’t fight it.

Her throat bobbed with a hard swallow, but her nod was firm. “Okay.”

Flint felt something settle deep inside him, something old, something permanent. His lion rumbled in satisfaction. Finally.

CHAPTER 14

JENNA

The following day Sybil joined them when the group returned to the site of the attack. Jenna crouched low, fingers pressing into the damp earth, eyes narrowed at the dark smear of blood trailing through the underbrush. The metallic scent clung to the cool morning air, sharp against the earth and pine.

It should have led somewhere. Instead, it just stopped.

She glanced up at Flint and Sybil, who stood a few feet away, both of them scanning the area with the same grim determination. Sybil had one hand resting on her hip, the other adjusting her glasses as she peered at the broken foliage ahead. Flint, still vibrating with residual aggression from the fight the day before, stood with his arms crossed, eyes burning with the need for answers.

“The trail didn’t just vanish,” Jenna muttered. “Someone helped them.”

Sybil let out a frustrated sigh, kicking a rock near her boot. “I hate when the enemy gets backup. It’s bad enough we’ve got McVey and Calloway sniffing around. Now we’ve got Ghost Walkers covering their damn tracks.”

Flint crouched beside Jenna, running a finger through the congealing blood on a broken leaf. His jaw tightened. “They were hurt bad. That lynx was barely standing when he ran. No way he made it far without help.”

Jenna scanned the area again. No drag marks, no signs of an unconscious body being carried. Whoever had intervened had been quick, efficient, and careful.

“They had a plan,” she said. “This wasn’t just some lucky escape. They knew exactly where they were going.”

Flint’s gaze flicked toward her. “And that means they’ve been watching us for longer than we thought.”

That truth sat heavy in her gut. She’d already known the Ghost Walkers had their eyes on her, but this confirmed something worse—they weren’t just reacting. They had a strategy. A purpose. And now, they had a reason to escalate.

Sybil crossed her arms. “I’m guessing tracking them is a dead end?”

Flint nodded once, his frustration clear in the sharpness of his movements. “The trail goes cold. Whoever pulled them out of here made sure they weren’t followed.”

Jenna’s jaw tightened. “Then we make another move.”

Both Flint and Sybil looked at her.

She straightened, brushing dirt off her hands. “McVey.”

Sybil snorted. “That slimeball isn’t going to talk.”

Flint smiled, but there was no humor in it. “He will for me.”

Jenna studied him, something unreadable flickering across her expression. “You’re treading into dangerous territory.”

Flint met her gaze. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not afraid of getting my hands dirty.”

She put her hand on his arm. “Tell you what? Why don’t I try talking to him first.”

She didn’t wait for their approval. She turned on her heel and headed toward town, already knowing exactly where she’d find McVey.

The bar at the Silver Stag was the kind of place Jenna had never had the patience for—full of overpriced whiskey, cigar smoke, and old money clinging to its last desperate threads of power. McVey, of course, fit right in. It reminded her far too much of similar places in New York, Chicago and London.

She strode into the private lounge without hesitation, ignoring the startled looks from the bartender and the few lingering businessmen nursing their morning drinks. McVey sat near the window, perfectly dressed in another one of his designer suits, a glass of very expensive bourbon in hand despite the early hour.

He looked up as she approached, a slow grin creeping onto his face. “Well, well. If it isn’t Silver Falls’ most stubborn little problem.”

Jenna dropped into the chair across from him, draping an arm over the back, her every movement deliberately casual. “I’d say the same about you, McVey. But I’m starting to think you’re less of a problem and more of a symptom.”

His grin faltered for just a second before he took a sip of his drink. “That supposed to mean something?”

Jenna leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “I know you’re not just after my land.”

McVey’s amusement didn’t fade, but something in his gaze sharpened. “And what

exactly do you think I want?"

Jenna didn't blink. "I think you know a hell of a lot more about the shifters in this town than you let on."

McVey chuckled, setting his glass down with a soft clink. "I have no idea what you're talking about." He tilted his head, playing the perfect picture of skepticism.

She let her smile widen, but her voice turned ice cold. "Cut the act. I'm not some clueless outsider, and you're not just a real estate developer with an overblown ego." She leaned in, her voice dropping lower. "You've been involved in land grabs before. Ones that ended with a lot of bodies. And I have the receipts."

McVey stilled, his grip tightening ever so slightly around his glass. It was subtle, but she caught it.

"New York's got a long memory," she continued. "And my old contacts have very good records. You've done this before. The question is—who are you working with now?"

McVey's gaze flickered—just a fraction—but it was enough to confirm she'd hit a nerve.

He exhaled, swirling the amber liquid in his glass before lifting it to his lips. "You really are your aunt's niece."

Jenna's stomach twisted, but she didn't let it show. "Why thank you. That's the nicest thing anybody's said to me in a long time. Speaking of my aunt, I think I've convinced the sheriff that she died under suspicious circumstances. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

McVey chuckled, but it was hollow. “You want the truth, Hartford?”

She tilted her chin up, waiting.

He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Some things are bigger than business. Bigger than you, me, or this little town.” His eyes gleamed with something dark, something knowing. “And if you keep digging, you’re going to find out exactly what your aunt did.”

Jenna’s pulse kicked up, but she kept her face impassive. “And what’s that?”

McVey smiled, slow and deliberate. “That she was playing with fire.”

Jenna stared at him, her mind racing.

McVey leaned back, finishing his drink in one swallow. “But hey, don’t take my word for it.” He signaled the bartender, standing smoothly. “Keep digging. See where it gets you.”

Jenna watched him walk away, her skin buzzing with unease, because for the first time, she wasn’t sure if she was getting closer to the truth—or walking straight into a trap.

Jenna stalked out of the Silver Stag, her mind still spinning with McVey’s words. He hadn’t told her anything outright, but he’d confirmed what she already suspected—her aunt had been caught up in something dangerous, something that went beyond a simple land dispute.

And now, Jenna was following in her footsteps.

She climbed into Flint’s truck, gripping the steering wheel tighter than necessary

before letting out a sharp breath. She had to stay focused. Had to figure out what Maribel had been onto before it got her killed.

By the time she pulled up to the cider mill, her pulse had steadied, but her irritation hadn't faded. As she slammed the truck door shut, she caught sight of Wes leaning against a stack of crates near the loading dock, a lazy grin on his face as he spoke to someone Jenna didn't recognize immediately.

Tall, curvy, with long dark hair pulled into a loose braid and piercing blue eyes. She stood with her arms crossed, unimpressed with whatever Wes was saying.

"You keep looking at me like that, Ember," Wes drawled, "and I might start thinking you're interested."

The woman scoffed, shifting her weight to one hip. "If you took half the energy you put into flirting and used it to do something useful, maybe you wouldn't be such a damn handful."

Wes placed a hand over his heart in mock offense. "You wound me. I'm incredibly useful. Just ask..."

"I'd rather not," the woman interrupted, rolling her eyes before turning toward the open bay doors. "Flint around?"

Jenna grinned at the way Wes watched her walk away, eyes flicking down her body before he caught himself and quickly turned back to Jenna.

"You sure you didn't drive here just to watch me get verbally abused by a gorgeous woman?" Wes asked, flashing a lazy grin.

Jenna crossed her arms. "Not at all, but I do have to say, watching her shut you down

is a highlight of my day. Who is she by the way?"

"Ember Lawson, Ridge's younger sister. But don't worry about me," he chuckled, "she'll give in, eventually. I have patience."

Jenna snorted. "She's got your number, Mercer."

He wagged his eyebrows. "And I'm waiting for her to use it."

Jenna shook her head but didn't push the conversation further. She had bigger things to deal with. Inside, she found Flint at the office desk, pouring over another one of Maribel's old journals. Sybil sat across from him, flipping through a separate notebook, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Flint looked up the second Jenna walked in. "How'd it go?"

She tossed her bag onto the desk and slid into the seat next to him. "McVey all but admitted Maribel was getting too close to something. He knows more than he's saying."

Sybil made a sound of disgust. "That man's like a cockroach. He'll survive whatever hell we rain down on him."

Jenna ignored the comment and leaned over, scanning the pages in front of Flint. "Find anything useful?"

Flint slid one of the journals toward her. "More of Maribel's notes. She knew about the runes, the Ghost Walkers... all of it."

Jenna's stomach twisted as she skimmed the handwriting. It was hurried, frantic in some places. Words underlined, whole paragraphs scratched out as if Maribel had

second-guessed herself.

“She was trying to piece together what they were guarding,” Sybil said. “Looks like she started connecting dots between the orchard, the Calloways, and whatever’s buried beneath it.”

Jenna’s pulse kicked up. “Does she say what’s down there?”

Flint exhaled sharply. “No. But she knew it was important.” He tapped a line of text near the bottom of the page.

The land is blood-bound. They can’t take it from me. Not legally. But that won’t stop them. If I disappear, Jenna must finish what I started.

Jenna’s breath caught.

Maribel had known.

Not just about the danger—but that Jenna would be the one left standing when the dust settled.

Flint’s voice was steady, but she could hear the undercurrent of frustration beneath it. “She knew someone would come after her for this.”

Jenna swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to focus. “Then we finish it.”

Sybil pushed a hand through her hair. “Easier said than done. We still don’t know exactly what we’re dealing with.”

Jenna drummed her fingers against the desk. “Then we keep looking.”

Flint's hand closed over hers, grounding her, steadying her. "We're not doing this alone, Jenna."

She looked up, meeting his gaze, something silent and unyielding passing between them. No, they weren't. Not anymore.

Later that night, Jenna found herself kneeling beside Flint as he picked the lock on Mayor Calloway's office door, her pulse steady but her mind buzzing. She wasn't used to breaking and entering—at least, not like this. In the corporate world, you stole secrets with legal loopholes and insider whispers, not by slipping into an office under cover of night.

But if Calloway thought she was going to sit back and let him and McVey steal her land out from under her, he was sorely mistaken.

The lock clicked, and Flint pushed the door open, scanning the dimly lit office. "Stay close," he murmured.

Jenna rolled her eyes. "This was your idea, Mercer, not mine."

He flicked his gaze to her, but instead of arguing, he stepped aside, letting her go in first.

The mayor's office was exactly as she remembered—too polished, too perfect. The dark mahogany desk was positioned strategically, the leather chair behind it oversized, meant to intimidate. The shelves were lined with books no one had ever read, and a bar cart in the corner held half-empty bottles of expensive whiskey.

Flint closed the door behind them, moving to the large filing cabinet while Jenna circled the desk. She ran her fingers over the surface, eyes scanning for anything useful.

“If he’s smart, anything incriminating won’t be left out in the open,” she murmured.

Flint didn’t respond, already yanking open drawers with precise efficiency. Jenna moved to the computer. It was locked, of course, but that was the least of her concerns. She had learned plenty of tricks in New York—ones that made digging into secrets easier than it should’ve been.

She pulled a flash drive from her pocket and plugged it into the tower beneath the desk. The screen flickered, lines of code scrolling as her program began extracting files.

“Two minutes,” she said, glancing at Flint.

He grunted in acknowledgment, pulling open a lower drawer. “Bingo.”

Jenna rounded the desk, crouching beside him as he lifted a thick folder. The papers inside were crisp, too new compared to the rest of the cluttered files.

She flipped through them quickly, her stomach twisting.

Land transfer agreements.

Legal disputes.

A detailed history of Cold Creek Orchards.

At the bottom, clipped together, was a series of emails between Calloway and McVey. Jenna scanned the contents, bile rising in her throat.

McVey: The girl’s stubborn. She won’t sell.

Calloway: Then we make her. She has no idea what she's inherited. If she digs too deep, we handle it like we did with Maribel.

McVey: She's got Mercer in her corner. That's a problem.

Calloway: Then we eliminate the problem.

Jenna's blood went ice cold.

"They killed her," she whispered. "Maribel didn't just die—Calloway and McVey had her taken out."

Flint's jaw clenched, his knuckles going white as he gripped the folder. "And they're planning to do the same to you."

A beep from the computer signaled that her extraction was complete. Jenna yanked the flash drive out, shoving it into her pocket. "Then we hit them first."

Flint's gaze darkened with approval. "Damn right."

She was about to stand when a sound made her freeze. A low creak. Flint was up in a second, body shifting subtly into a predator's stance. Jenna followed his gaze toward the window. The street outside was empty, but she knew better than to trust appearances.

"They know we're here," she whispered.

Flint didn't hesitate. He grabbed the folder, tucking it into his jacket, then turned toward the door. "We move fast and quiet."

Jenna nodded, adrenaline kicking in as she followed.

They barely made it into the hallway before the first impact hit.

The door behind them shattered inward, wood splintering as a figure burst through. Not McVey. Not Calloway.

Ghost Walker.

Jenna caught a flash of sharp teeth, glowing lynx eyes, and then Flint moved, intercepting the attack with a brutal shove. The shifter crashed into the wall, but before Jenna could react, another shadow lunged from the opposite end of the hallway.

Jenna spun, instincts firing. She ducked, just barely avoiding the claws that swiped at her.

They weren't just randomly attacking. They were here for her.

Flint roared—the sound half-human, half-mountain lion—grabbing the first shifter and throwing them down the hallway. The Ghost Walker rolled, already recovering, but Flint was faster, lunging forward, his fist connecting with a sickening crack.

Jenna didn't waste time watching. The second Ghost Walker was circling her, waiting for an opening.

Too bad for them, she didn't wait.

She struck first, twisting into a brutal kick that caught the shifter in the ribs. It hissed, stumbling, and Jenna followed with a blow to the jaw. It wasn't expecting her to fight like this.

The Ghost Walker regained its balance and came at her harder. Jenna dodged, barely,

but their claws caught the sleeve of her jacket, tearing fabric. She swung again, but this time, the Ghost Walker was too damn fast.

Flint roared behind her, something breaking as he took down his opponent. The eyes of the Ghost Walker darted toward the sound—just for a fraction of a second.

It was all she needed. Jenna lunged, grabbing the Ghost Walker by the collar and slamming it into the nearest wall. Its head hit the plaster with a dull thud, and its body slumped. Flint was at her side a second later, blood splattered across his jaw, his breathing heavy.

“They came for you,” he ground out.

Jenna met his gaze, her chest rising and falling. “I know.”

And that meant they weren’t just watching anymore.

Flint wiped blood from his knuckles and exhaled slowly, his eyes gleaming with something dark. “We’re going to end this.”

Relocking the mayor’s office, they slipped away into the night.

CHAPTER 15

JENNA

Jenna stormed into the farmhouse, barely restraining the urge to slam the door behind her. Flint followed, his heavy boots thudding against the wooden floor. The sound was a warning, the same way his presence was—heated, close, overpowering. He was right on her heels, his energy crackling against her back like an impending storm.

“Do you have some kind of death wish?” Flint’s voice cut through the silence.

She rolled her shoulders, but didn’t turn to face him. Not yet. She needed a second to breathe, to collect herself before she said something she couldn’t take back.

“Nothing to say?” he pressed. “That’s a damn first.”

Jenna spun, planting her feet. “What exactly do you want me to say?”

Flint stood toe-to-toe with her now, his arms crossed over his chest, biceps flexed beneath the snug fabric of his shirt. “You almost got yourself ripped apart by Ghost Walkers. You know what that makes you? Reckless.”

Her fingers twitched. “I handled myself just fine.”

“No, you got lucky,” he snapped, his voice lowering. “And if you’re not careful, that luck is going to run out.”

Jenna arched an eyebrow, fighting the pull of his dominance. “You’re the one who wanted to break into the mayor’s office. I don’t need you playing overprotective alpha with me. I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time.”

His jaw ticked. “That’s not the point.”

“It’s exactly the point.” She stepped closer, invading his space the way he so often did to her. “You think because we’ve had sex and seem to share some kind of connection, that you get to make decisions for me? That doesn’t work for me. I decide what I do. I decide what risks I take.”

He breathed hard through his nose, his frustration rolling off him in waves. “You’re not the only one in this, Jenna. That fight isn’t just yours alone.”

“She was my aunt...”

“Who you hadn’t seen in years, and she was my friend. I was with her when she died.”

Her heart knocked against her ribs, but she ignored it. Ignored the warmth of his body so close to hers, ignored the sharp, masculine scent of him wrapping around her senses.

“I never asked for your help.”

“You don’t need to ask, it’s yours by right,” he ground out.

“What right?” she challenged.

“By right of being my fated mate.”

Jenna felt something tighten in her gut. He wasn't wrong, and she knew it, but that didn't mean she was going to admit it.

The door creaked open, breaking the moment. Wes strolled in with Ember and Ridge on his heels. Sybil entered last, scanning the room like she could still feel the anger lingering in the air.

“Well, if y'all are done measuring whose claws are bigger, maybe we can get to the part where we figure out how to keep Jenna from ending up in a shallow grave,” Wes drawled, dropping into a chair.

Jenna took a deep breath and forced her focus back to the bigger picture. She perched on the arm of the couch, arms folded, back straight. “McVey and Calloway are working together, but they aren't just after the land. They need me to access whatever it is that's buried underneath.”

Ridge frowned. “You mean that chamber you found?”

“Exactly,” Sybil chimed in, flipping open a notebook. “Maribel wasn't just holding onto Cold Creek because it was family land. She was protecting something. Something ancient.”

Ember crossed her arms, her sharp blue eyes narrowing. “And McVey and Calloway think Jenna is the key?”

Jenna nodded. “Their emails made that clear. I'm the last of the bloodline tied to the orchard. Whatever's buried under that chamber is tied to me, and if they can't get me to open it, they'll take the land by force and figure out another way.”

Ridge ran a hand down his face. “Shit.”

“That’s not even the worst of it.” Sybil leaned forward, pushing her glasses higher on her nose. “The Calloways were never the rightful guardians of that chamber. The Ghost Walkers were.”

Flint’s brow furrowed. “How did they lose control of it?”

Sybil nodded. “Centuries ago, Calloway’s ancestors betrayed them. They stole whatever was down there and used it for themselves. But they never fully unlocked it. They couldn’t.” Her gaze darted to Jenna. “Because it wasn’t meant for them. It was meant for someone of your bloodline.”

The room fell silent. Jenna’s stomach twisted. The way the runes had responded to her, the way the chamber had called to her—it all made sense now.

“And the Ghost Walkers want it back,” Ember murmured.

Sybil nodded. “They don’t just want it. They need it. And if we get in their way, they won’t hesitate to take us out.”

Flint pushed off the wall, his gaze locked onto Jenna. “Which means we have to stop playing defense. We hit first.”

Wes grinned. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

Jenna shook her head. “We need more than just brute force. We need leverage.”

Sybil tapped her notebook. “Calloway’s legal claims are flimsy at best. If we can discredit him before he moves, we might be able to stall.”

Ember leaned against the table. “And McVey?”

“I’m going to make him regret ever setting foot in Silver Falls,” said Jenna in a voice that held grim determination.

Flint’s eyes darkened, something unreadable flashing behind them.

Ridge sighed. “This is going to get bloody.”

Jenna met Flint’s gaze, unflinchingly. “Then we make sure we don’t lose.”

The challenge hung between them, the same unspoken electricity that had been there from the beginning.

Flint’s expression hardened, his voice dropping to something low and dangerous. “We won’t.”

And this time, Jenna almost believed him.

Jenna had just finished pouring herself a cup of coffee when the front door rattled under a heavy fist. Everyone in the farmhouse turned toward the noise.

“Who the hell...” Wes started, but Jenna was already moving.

Flint was faster. He strode past her and yanked the door open. A uniformed man stood on the porch, a clipboard clutched in one hand, the other resting nervously at his side. The instant Jenna recognized the Silver Falls town seal on the document, she knew exactly what this was.

The messenger cleared his throat. “Miss Hartford?”

Jenna took the paper before he could finish. Flint moved closer, a looming presence at her side.

“You’ve been served,” the man said, though he looked like he regretted every second of it. Without waiting for a response, he turned on his heel and hurried back to his truck.

Jenna scanned the document, reading each word carefully.

“Calloway’s pulling eminent domain,” she muttered.

Silence.

Flint took the paper from her, his jaw set tight as his gaze flicked over the legal jargon.

“What’s the justification?” Sybil asked, moving in to read over his shoulder.

Jenna folded her arms. “Historical preservation. They’re claiming the orchard needs to be protected due to ‘significant cultural importance’ to the town.”

Ridge let out a sharp laugh. “Bullshit. If Calloway gave a damn about history, he wouldn’t have spent the last decade trying to knock down every original building in Silver Falls.”

Flint’s fingers tightened around the paper. “If you fight this in court, it’ll take months. Maybe years.”

“That’s the point,” Jenna said. “They want me tangled in legal battles, draining my time and resources. And if that doesn’t work, they’ll escalate.”

Flint didn’t argue. He knew it as well as she did.

“So what’s the play?” Wes asked.

Jenna set her mug down with a deliberate click. “We don’t let them make the next move. We make it first.”

Flint’s gaze snapped to her. “What does that mean?”

She met his eyes head-on. “It means we go after McVey now. We go to McVey’s estate...”

“No.” The word was hard, immediate.

“Excuse me?” Jenna asked, turning to look at Flint with feigned innocence.

Flint stepped closer, towering over her, but she refused to back down. “Breaking into McVey’s estate is a suicide mission.”

“It’s not breaking in if I have an invitation,” she countered.

Silence stretched.

“Jenna,” Sybil warned.

Jenna grabbed her phone and held it up. “McVey wants to meet. Tomorrow night. Private dinner at his estate.”

Flint’s expression darkened. “And you were planning to mention this when?”

“I just did.”

His hands fisted at his sides. “That bastard is baiting you.”

“Of course he is.” Jenna tilted her chin up. “Which is why I’m going.”

Flint stepped closer, voice dropping to a growl. “No, you’re not.”

Jenna’s lips curled into something close to a smile. “You don’t get to tell me what to do, Flint.”

Frustration radiated off him in waves. “If you walk into McVey’s house alone, you might not walk out.”

“Then I won’t be alone.”

Wes cleared his throat. “I’m just gonna throw it out there—this plan sounds stupid as hell.”

Ember leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. “She’s not wrong, though. If we wait, we lose the advantage.”

Flint’s glare was lethal. “You’re not helping.”

Jenna grabbed the eviction notice and folded it neatly. “McVey is the key. Calloway’s a puppet, but McVey? He’s the one with all the money and pulling the strings.”

Flint braced his hands on his hips, staring her down. “You don’t have to do this.”

Jenna stepped in, close enough to feel the heat rolling off him. “Yes, I do.”

Their eyes locked, neither willing to back down.

Finally, Flint swore under his breath. “Fine. But if you think I’m letting you go in there without backup, you’re out of your damn mind.”

Jenna's lips parted, but before she could argue, Flint was already moving, issuing orders.

"Wes, get me everything we have on McVey's security. Ridge, I need blueprints of that estate. Sybil, dig into McVey's connections. If there's anyone inside we can use, I want to know."

Jenna stared at him. "You're planning an infiltration."

Flint met her gaze, steady, determined. "We're planning an infiltration. Because if you're walking into the coyote's den, Jenna..." He reached out, brushing his fingers along the inside of her wrist. The touch was fleeting, but it sent something electric skittering through her veins. "Then I'm walking in with you."

Her breath caught for half a second before she masked it with a slow nod.

"Fine," she murmured.

Flint's mouth curved into something fierce. "Then let's get to work."

The farmhouse became a hive of activity—the air crackling with barely contained aggression as plans were made. Maps covered the dining room table, laptops hummed with digital blueprints, and voices overlapped as they worked through every angle.

Jenna stood at the center of it all, arms crossed, jaw tight, her mind working through scenarios faster than the group could speak them aloud.

"We need an exit strategy," Sybil said, tapping at her screen. "McVey's estate has two primary access roads, but they're both monitored. If things go sideways, we can't be scrambling for a way out."

Ember, scrolling through security reports on another laptop, nodded. “His private security isn’t just muscle—they’re ex-military, shifter-trained. If they catch a scent of something off, we’ll be in deep.”

Jenna barely heard them. Her focus was on the eviction notice still lying on the table. Calloway was making his move, and McVey was waiting to sink his teeth into whatever lay beneath her land.

She wouldn’t let them take it. She sure as hell wouldn’t let them take her. A heavy presence filled the space behind her, heat pressing along the length of her back, but she didn’t turn.

“Five minutes,” Flint murmured.

She set her jaw. “I’m busy.”

His fingers curled around her wrist—not harsh, but firm. “Not a request.”

Conversation faltered as the others picked up on Flint’s tone. Wes whistled low. “Here we go.”

Flint ignored him, already steering Jenna out of the room and onto the back porch. The second they were out of sight, he spun her, backing her against the wall.

“You’re not going alone,” he said, voice low and cutting.

Jenna snorted. “We already covered that.”

Flint stepped closer, barely an inch between them. “You can walk into this fight, but I swear to God, you don’t get to walk away from me.”

The promise in his words sent something wild humming beneath her skin. Not fear. Not hesitation. Possession.

Jenna lifted her chin, meeting his gaze, unflinching. “I’m not. You’re going with me.”

Flint’s hands flattened against the wall on either side of her, his body caging hers in a way that was meant to be intimidating. For anyone else, it would have been. For her? It was fuel.

“You think this is a game?” he growled.

She tilted her head, voice soft but laced with fire. “You think I’m playing?”

Flint’s gaze dropped to her mouth, his restraint a living thing between them. For half a second, she thought he might finally close the distance, finally give in to whatever the hell was raging between them. Then he swore under his breath and shoved back, pacing like a caged animal.

Jenna folded her arms. “If you’ve got something to say, Mercer, now’s the time.”

Flint turned, his eyes sharp. “This isn’t just about McVey. It’s about you. You walk into that house, you put yourself in his sights, and I have to sit there and pretend I’m okay with that?”

“You don’t have to be okay with it,” she said. “You just have to back me up.”

Flint let out a short laugh, though there was no humor in it. “You really think I can just ‘back you up’ like you’re some soldier on the ground and I’m the guy in the tower?”

Jenna pushed off the wall, stepping into his space. “That’s exactly what I think. He

isn't going to deal with you. I'm the person standing in his way."

Flint's hand shot out, gripping her waist, the hold tight enough that her breath stuttered. Not from pain. From the heat, from the sheer force of him.

"I protect what's mine," he said, voice barely above a whisper.

Jenna's pulse kicked up. "Is that what I am? Yours?"

Flint's fingers flexed, his eyes darkening. "Yes and you damn well know it."

They stood like that, a breath away from something dangerous, something unstoppable. Then the kitchen door opened and Wes stuck his head out. "Are y'all done growling at each other, or should we leave you alone to work it out?"

Flint didn't move, didn't let her go.

Jenna shook her head. "Looks like we'll have to table this discussion."

Flint's grip tightened for the briefest second before he finally let her go, stepping back. But the heat between them didn't fade. Not even a little.

CHAPTER 16

FLINT

Flint crouched in the dense undergrowth just beyond the estate's perimeter, every nerve in his body stretched tight. The wrought-iron fence surrounding McVey's mansion wasn't just for decoration—motion sensors lined the edges, and the patrols walking the grounds were shifters.

Predators.

Wes huffed beside him, adjusting his earpiece. "Sybil, tell me you've got eyes on this place."

The radio crackled. "I'm in," Sybil's voice came through, crisp but tense. "Their security system is top-tier, but I can give you a five-minute window before they notice I'm in their feed. After that, you're on your own."

Flint nodded, eyes scanning the grounds. "Five minutes is plenty."

Jenna, crouched between them, let out a short laugh. "I swear, if I had a dollar for every time a guy overestimated his performance..."

Flint cut her a look. "You done?"

Her grin was wicked, but her eyes were sharp. Focused. "Not even close."

She was too calm. Too eager. And it pissed him off, because while she treated this like just another power play, his gut was screaming that this was a trap. He wanted to grab her, make her listen, make her stay close. But Jenna didn't take orders. Not even from a man who wanted nothing more than to keep her safe.

He hated that he respected the hell out of that about her.

"Cut the flirting," Wes muttered. "Clock's ticking."

Jenna didn't hesitate. She darted out first, weaving through the shadows like she was born for it. Flint followed, sticking close, instincts on high alert. He could hear the hum of the security system, the faint buzz of electric currents running along the fence's edges.

Sybil's voice came through again. "Now."

They slipped through the blind spot she'd created in the cameras, moving swiftly toward the mansion's rear entrance. A security panel blinked red beside the door. Jenna pulled a device from her pocket and connected a wire. Flint held his breath, scanning the area as she worked to override the system.

Flint's gaze snapped to Jenna. "Tell me again why you know how to bypass security locks?"

Jenna's lips twitched. "Because I bore easily and have a bad habit of ignoring locked doors. You'd be surprised about how some elite business deals are put together."

The lock beeped, the light turning green.

They were in. The hallway beyond was dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of polished wood, old money, and something that made Flint's mountain lion stir

uneasily. Jenna moved ahead, her boots silent against the marble floor. Flint stayed at her back, keeping a hand close to the knife at his hip.

"Where are we headed?" Wes whispered.

"McVey's study," Jenna answered. "That's where men like him keep their secrets."

Flint hated that she was right. The deeper they went, the more wrong this felt. McVey was prepared for something. Flint could feel it in his bones.

They reached the study, its massive oak doors slightly ajar. Flint pushed inside first, gun raised, scanning the room. Empty. But the scent of McVey still lingered, along with something older. Something that didn't belong.

Jenna wasted no time, moving to the massive desk and yanking open drawers. She rifled through folders, scanning pages, tossing useless ones aside.

Wes moved to the bookshelves, running a hand along the bindings. "If he's got a safe, it's either behind the desk or..."

A click. One of the bookshelves swung open. Flint stiffened, every muscle locking as the hidden compartment revealed itself.

Jenna turned, her eyes gleaming. "Bingo."

Inside was a steel filing cabinet, its top drawer unlocked. Jenna yanked it open, flipping through file after file. Flint moved beside her, his gaze catching on one folder in particular.

Hartford.

He grabbed it, flipping it open. The blood in his veins ran cold.

Jenna inhaled sharply beside him as she scanned the papers. "They knew. They knew the whole damn time."

The files detailed McVey and Calloway's real objective. It wasn't just about Cold Creek Orchards. It was about what lay beneath it.

The Ghost Walkers had once been guardians of whatever was buried beneath Jenna's land. But Calloway's ancestors had betrayed them, stolen the knowledge, and tried to harness it for themselves—they had failed.

As they read they saw the reason for the failure. The only person who could truly unlock it was Jenna.

Flint clenched his fists. "This is why McVey needs you. Not just your land. You."

Jenna's lips pressed into a thin line, but her hands trembled slightly as she flipped to the last page. A bloodline requirement. Only direct descendants could access the chamber's full power.

Flint swore under his breath. "This isn't just a land grab. This is a goddamn ritual. Some kind of weird ass sacrifice."

His fingers clenched around the file as Jenna scanned the pages with laser focus. The dim light of McVey's study cast sharp shadows over her face, highlighting the controlled fury in her expression.

"This is it," she murmured, flipping through the last few pages. "This is why they need me."

Flint didn't need to read the words again—he'd already memorized them in the span of seconds. Only a Hartford could fully unseal the chamber. It wasn't the land McVey wanted. It was her.

"We need to burn those files," Flint growled.

Jenna shot him a sharp glance. "And let this proof disappear? Hell no. This is leverage."

He shook his head. "It's a target painted right between your damn shoulder blades."

Before she could argue, Sybil's voice crackled in their earpieces. "We've got a problem. The estate's entire security grid just activated."

Flint's muscles locked. "What?"

"I was in their system for less than four minutes, but something was buried deep. A hidden alert. McVey knows you're inside."

A rush of adrenaline shot through him.

Jenna cursed under her breath, stuffing the papers into her bag. "So much for a clean exit."

"Get out now," Sybil urged. "You've got about ninety seconds before armed guards flood the house."

Wes was already moving, gun drawn. "Back entrance. It's the fastest route."

Flint grabbed Jenna's wrist, dragging her toward the door. "Move."

She yanked free, not missing a step. “I can run, you know.”

That wasn’t the point. He needed to feel her close. Needed to know she was still breathing. If McVey got his hands on her, there’d be no getting her back.

They sprinted down the hall, boots silent against the thick carpet. Flint’s ears picked up the sound of approaching guards—four, maybe five, closing in fast. He slowed as they neared the service entrance, gesturing for Wes to take point.

Jenna pushed past him, pressed flat against the wall. She peeked around the corner before jerking back, eyes flashing. “Two guards. Armed.”

“Lethal force?” Wes asked.

Flint nodded. “No time for clean kills. Just drop them fast.”

Jenna shifted her stance, relaxing her shoulders. “I’ve got the one on the right.”

Before he could argue, she moved, silent and precise. The guard barely had time to register her presence before she drove her fist into his throat, cutting off his air. As he stumbled back, she swept his legs out from under him, straddling his chest and slamming the butt of his own rifle into his temple. He went limp.

The second guard whirled, gun raised... Flint was already on him. He snapped the man’s wrist, sending his weapon clattering to the floor. The guard let out a strangled yelp before Flint drove a fist into his gut, knocking the air from his lungs. He caught him by the collar, twisted—and broke his neck.

Silence.

Jenna rose to her feet, shaking out her hands. “Damn. You could’ve let me have a

little fun.”

Flint shot her a look. “This isn’t a game, Hartford.”

Her expression turned unreadable, but before she could reply, Sybil’s voice cut in.

“Shit! Incoming—west corridor!”

Flint’s head snapped toward the hallway. A squad of men—heavily armed, moving like professionals—poured into the corridor.

“Run,” he barked.

Wes didn’t need to be told twice. He bolted through the service door, Jenna right behind him. Flint followed, slamming the exit shut behind them. The yard was wide open. Flint hated open spaces. No cover, no angles, nowhere to funnel an attack. McVey’s men were already in pursuit.

“SUV is on the east side,” Sybil panted through the comms. “But they’ll cut you off before you make it.”

Flint’s mind worked fast. The perimeter fence was straight ahead, leading into the dense tree line.

“Forget the vehicle,” he ordered. “Woods. Now.”

Jenna didn’t hesitate. Neither did Wes. They sprinted toward the trees, feet pounding against the grass. Gunfire erupted behind them. Flint turned mid-stride, firing a few rounds over his shoulder to slow their pursuers. One of McVey’s men dropped, another staggered.

Not enough. They were gaining.

Jenna reached the fence first. She leapt, caught the top bar, and flipped over with ridiculous ease. Flint nearly swore at the flash of satisfaction in her eyes as she landed. Wes climbed next, dropping over just as bullets began to ping off the fence beside him.

Flint turned, covering them. Pain seared through his side. Shit. He stumbled, catching himself against the cold metal.

“Flint!” Jenna’s voice cut through the chaos.

He gritted his teeth. The bullet had grazed him, nothing deep, nothing fatal. Didn’t matter. He couldn’t slow down. He vaulted the fence and landed in a crouch. Jenna was already at his side, her hands quick and firm as she checked him over.

"Through-and-through," she muttered. "You’ll live."

"I wasn’t worried."

"Well, I was."

“Aww, that’s sweet,” teased Wes. “She likes you Flint. She really, really likes you.”

“Shut up and move,” barked Sybil.

They took off into the forest, darting between trees, ducking branches. The scent of pine and damp earth filled the air, but all Flint could focus on was the sound of pursuit behind them.

McVey’s men were still following. Closing in.

"Sybil," Jenna gritted out. "Tell me you've got an extraction plan."

The radio crackled. "Yeah. It's called run faster."

Wes let out a breathless laugh. "Great. Love that plan."

The terrain turned rougher, roots snaking across the ground, forcing them to slow just enough...

Flint's gut twisted. He turned just as another squad cut in from the side, boxing them in.

"Shit," Jenna muttered.

Flint shoved her behind him, chest heaving, his lion slamming against his skin. McVey's men advanced, their leader stepping forward.

"Flint Mercer." The man's voice was amused. "Didn't think we'd let you slip away, did you?"

Flint's lips curled back, his hands flexing. "Big mistake coming at me head-on."

The leader smirked. "Who said we were after you?"

Flint's stomach dropped. He turned—too late. Jenna was already moving, her body twisting as she fought off the two men who grabbed her. Flint lunged. A heavy blow slammed into the back of his skull.

Darkness rushed up to meet him. The last thing he heard was Jenna's snarl of fury, and then nothing.

Flint's pulse thundered in his ears as he pushed off the damp earth, shaking off the momentary daze from the blow to his skull. His lion clawed at the surface, demanding he tear through every single bastard who'd dared lay hands on Jenna, but she wasn't beside him.

His breath turned sharp as he scanned the trees. Jenna was gone. A guttural growl ripped through his throat. The men who had surrounded them were still advancing, their weapons drawn, but Flint didn't give a damn about them anymore. His focus was singular—find Jenna.

A familiar scent hit him just before the attack came.

The traitor moved fast, but Flint was faster. He ducked the first strike and lashed out, catching the bastard's wrist before it could connect again. His head snapped toward the face of his attacker, and rage burned through him like wildfire.

Eddie Hayes. One of Silver Falls' own. A local, one of Beck's deputies. It seemed the bastard was now working for McVey.

"You're making a mistake," Eddie panted, his fingers tightening on the knife he'd failed to sink into Flint's ribs.

Flint didn't answer. Instead, he ripped the blade from Eddie's grip, twisting the man's arm behind his back with a savage yank. Eddie snarled in pain, his knee jerking up in an attempt to break free, but Flint slammed him to the ground with brutal efficiency.

"You were one of us," Flint bit out, his voice dangerously low.

Eddie spat blood onto the dirt. "I was never one of you."

Wrong answer. Flint flipped him over, fisting the front of his shirt and hauling him up

so they were nose to nose. His mountain lion roared inside him, demanding vengeance. Demanding blood. He bared his teeth. “McVey paying you in cash, or just selling you the lie that you’ll get a cut of what’s buried under that orchard?”

Eddie laughed, the sound hoarse, desperate. “You’re too late, Mercer. You can’t stop this. We have her.”

The words landed like a blade to the chest. Flint’s body went tight, his grip crushing Eddie’s collarbone. The bastard didn’t even wince.

It was in that moment, Flint felt his mountain lion wrest control, exploding forward, a force of pure instinct and fury. The world tilted as his body was engulfed in a furious maelstrom as Flint shifted, muscle and sinew giving way to the powerful form of his beast. The forest blurred, color sharpening into piercing clarity as his vision turned predatory.

Eddie’s eyes went wide, the first flicker of real fear flashing across his face. He should be afraid. Flint’s claws sliced across the traitor’s chest, ripping through fabric and flesh. Eddie’s howl of pain sent shifters scattering, their scents laced with adrenaline and sheer terror. He pinned the bastard down, jaws snapping inches from Eddie’s throat. One bite. One well-placed tear of muscle and bone, and Eddie would cease to exist.

But Jenna’s voice cut through the haze. “Flint! Stop!”

He froze. She wasn’t here, wasn’t close, but his instincts screamed at him to listen, anyway.

Jenna wouldn’t want this.

Information. They needed information. Not just blood.

Flint's lion fought him every step as he forced himself back into control. He pulled away from Eddie, his claws still pressing deep enough into the man's chest to keep him from getting any ideas about running.

"Take it easy, brother. I've got him covered," said Wes, throwing him the pack. "Shift and get dressed."

Once more a maelstrom of thunder, lightning and color swirled all around him as he resumed control of his dual nature and forced his mountain lion back into the recesses of his mind.

Pulling on his clothes, he looked at Eddie. "You've got one chance," Flint warned, voice thick from the change. "Tell me where they took her."

Eddie coughed, blood spattering his lips. "Too late. You'll never get to her in time."

Flint's vision threatened to darken again, but before he could force another word out of the bastard, gunfire erupted from deeper in the trees.

Jenna.

His head snapped toward the sound, and for the first time since the ambush, he spotted her through the chaos. She was fighting like hell, her movements razor-sharp as she took down two of McVey's men. But more were closing in fast, their weapons drawn, surrounding her like wolves circling prey.

Flint's chest went tight. He lunged, barreling forward?—

A brutal force slammed into his ribs, knocking him off course.

Another one of McVey's shifters, bigger than the last, driving him back just as Jenna

disappeared behind a wall of bodies. Flint didn't feel the pain, didn't register the hit. His lion raged within. He swung hard, tearing through the man's defenses, but more were coming. Too many. They were stalling him.

They weren't trying to kill him. They were keeping him from her. His pulse turned lethal.

He tore through the first attacker, sending him flying into a tree. Another came at him from the left—Flint snapped his elbow into the bastard's ribs, the sickening crunch of bone barely registering before he turned toward Jenna's last known position.

But she was gone. The forest had swallowed them whole, the scent of McVey's men the only thing left in her wake.

He let out a roar that sent every enemy within ten feet scrambling back, but it didn't matter. Jenna was in their hands now.

Wes' hand rested on his shoulder. "We'll get her back but we need to regroup. My guess is they need her alive, at least until they get to that door. We get her back or we burn that damn orchard to the ground to get her back."

CHAPTER 17

JENNA

Jenna's wrists burned from the rough ropes biting into her skin as McVey's men dragged her through the twisting corridors of his estate. Her head throbbed from the blow that had knocked her off her feet during the fight, but she refused to show weakness.

She didn't struggle—not yet. That would be a waste of energy. Instead, she took stock of the situation, memorizing every turn, every doorway, every potential exit. She was still in McVey's house. If Flint was still breathing, he would come for her.

The thought was an icy blade against her spine, but she forced herself to push it aside. Flint was too damn stubborn to die.

Two men led her into a lavish sitting room—one was a man she thought she'd seen around town named Blake; the other was broad-shouldered with a scar slashing across his jaw. The room reeked of wealth and manipulative power. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the sprawling grounds, darkened now except for the occasional security floodlight sweeping across the property. A crystal decanter sat on a side table, half-full of dark amber liquid.

And there, reclining on an expensive leather chair like he owned the world, was Connor McVey.

His gaze slid over her with a slow, assessing look, like he was cataloging her,

dissecting her. “Jenna Hartford,” he said smoothly, his voice dripping with the kind of charm that had probably fooled a thousand people before her. “You really don’t know when to give up. You’ve been an impressive thorn in my side... much like your aunt Maribel.”

She lifted her chin, refusing to let her arms strain against the ropes. Refusing to let him see even an ounce of discomfort. “Should I be flattered or disgusted?” she asked, voice flat.

McVey chuckled, swirling the glass of whiskey in his hand before taking a slow sip. “Flint Mercer will come for you,” he mused. “That much is obvious. But I wonder—do you think he’ll succeed?”

Jenna didn’t blink. Didn’t give him an inch. “You know Flint better than I do, why don’t you tell me.”

McVey studied her, then smiled. “He might. I certainly know he’ll try. But I don’t believe in unnecessary bloodshed. So why don’t we talk first?”

She didn’t respond. Let him play his games. She wasn’t biting.

He leaned forward. “You must realize, by now, how this ends. You have something I need. Something only you can give me.”

Jenna tilted her head slightly. “You mean the thing you’ve spent years trying to steal?”

He chuckled again, like they were sharing some private joke. “Your family has been hoarding something that doesn’t belong to them. The Callows understood that. Your aunt understood that.” He set his glass down, eyes sharpening. “And I think, deep down, you understand it too.”

Her stomach twisted, but she didn't let it show. "You talk a lot for a man who had to kidnap me to get my attention."

McVey's smile widened. "I don't need you unwilling, Jenna. In fact, I'd rather have you at my side by choice."

Now he had her attention.

McVey leaned back in his chair, watching her closely. "I can give you something Mercer never will. Power. Control. A future."

Jenna snorted derisively. "You're joking, right?"

"Not at all." He motioned for the guard to remove the ropes. Blake hesitated but obeyed, slicing through her restraints. The moment her arms were free, Jenna rolled her shoulders, ignoring the pins and needles sensation as blood returned to her hands.

McVey didn't react, just studied her like a man who had all the time in the world. "You think I don't see it?" he continued. "You fight like a woman who knows she's alone. Like someone who understands that the surrounding people will eventually turn on her."

Jenna narrowed her eyes, but he didn't stop.

"You can play at alliances all you want, but the truth is, Mercer isn't your mate. You aren't one of his people. And the Ghost Walkers?" He shook his head. "They'll never let you live once they understand what you are."

She felt it then—the first hint of doubt trying to sink its claws into her. She shook her head trying to dispel it.

“Let me guess,” she said. “You’re my only option?”

McVey’s smile was slow, confident. “I’m the only one offering you a choice.”

Jenna let silence stretch between them, forcing herself to look at him like she was considering his words. Let him think he had an edge. Let him think he’d planted a seed. Because if McVey believed he was winning, he’d get careless.

And when he did? She’d bury him.

Jenna leaned back against the velvet-upholstered chair McVey had so graciously allowed her to sit in, stretching out her legs like she had all the time in the world. It was a calculated move—an effort to appear at ease despite the pulse of adrenaline screaming through her body.

She was not at ease.

Flint was out there. Somewhere. Fighting his way through McVey’s security, or worse—bleeding out because she hadn’t been able to keep up when the chaos swallowed them.

She forced those thoughts down. Panic didn’t serve her here. What did serve her was McVey’s arrogance.

“So, let me get this straight,” she said, drumming her fingers along the armrest. “You think that after kidnapping me, tying me up, and threatening my life, I’m just going to throw in with you?”

McVey gave her that look. The one men like him always did—like they were ten steps ahead, and she was just too simple to see it.

“Come now, Jenna,” he said smoothly, like they were having a civilized debate over dinner. “We both know I haven’t actually threatened your life. If I wanted you dead, I wouldn’t have wasted time bringing you here.”

She tilted her head. “No, you just need me breathing long enough to unlock your little treasure. What happens to me after you get what you want?”

McVey sighed, as if he found the whole thing exhausting. “You make it sound like you’re disposable. That’s the problem with your way of thinking. You see enemies everywhere. I see opportunities.”

Jenna forced herself to soften her expression, pretending to let those words sink in. “And what kind of opportunity are you offering me?”

McVey leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “A real future. Not as some forgotten Hartford clinging to dying land, but as the woman who finally takes control of what’s rightfully hers. You could have power, Jenna. Wealth. Security.” He paused, letting his words settle. “You wouldn’t have to fight anymore.”

Jenna let a long silence stretch between them, letting him believe she was considering his offer. She shifted slightly, crossing her legs, tilting her chin just enough to feign thoughtfulness.

She had no intention of siding with him, but she needed time. Flint needed time. She knew he would come. If he was alive, he’d be coming for her, which meant she had to play this just right.

“Let’s say I entertain this,” she said slowly, careful to keep her voice just uncertain enough. “Let’s say I agree. How does this work, exactly?”

McVey’s lips curled. “Simple. You help me open the chamber beneath Cold Creek.

You embrace your role as the rightful heir to what's buried there. And in return, I make sure you're protected."

She arched an eyebrow. "From whom? Calloway? The Ghost Walkers? But who will protect me from you?"

McVey's expression hardened for just a second, then smoothed out again. "From anyone who might misinterpret your power as a threat."

There it was. The big lie. McVey didn't see her as a partner. He saw her as a key—a tool to be used and discarded once the chamber was open.

Jenna forced herself to let the edges of her resolve blur, allowing the smallest flicker of doubt to surface in her expression. "You really think Calloway's people would come after me?" she asked, giving him just enough to encourage him.

McVey leaned back in his chair, relaxing. "I know they would. You're the last of your line. You're standing between them and something they've been after for centuries. Something they believe your people stole from them."

She nodded slowly, pretending to absorb it, but inside, her mind raced. If she could keep him talking, if she could keep him distracted, maybe she could get to a weapon. Maybe she could get out before Flint even had to... A distant explosion rocked the estate, rattling the glass in the windows.

McVey's head snapped toward the sound, eyes narrowing. "What the hell?"

Another explosion followed, closer this time.

Jenna's pulse kicked up. Flint. He was here.

McVey shoved to his feet, barking orders to the guards outside the door. Jenna did the same, moving to stand, but the second she did, one of the men who'd brought her here was on her.

"Sit down," he growled, shoving her back into the chair.

Jenna saw her opening. His grip on her wrist wasn't tight enough. His stance wasn't set.

She snapped her arm free, driving her fist into his throat. He staggered, choking, but she wasn't done. She shot up from the chair, pivoting on her heel, and slammed her knee into his ribs.

The man crumpled to the floor with a groan.

McVey cursed, reaching for something beneath his suit jacket—a gun.

Jenna lunged. She grabbed the whiskey decanter off the side table and swung hard, smashing it across McVey's arm just as he pulled the weapon free. Glass shattered, amber liquid spraying across the floor. McVey stumbled back, cursing, but he didn't go down.

She turned for the door, her heart hammering, but before she could make it two steps, a gunshot rang out. The bullet buried itself in the doorframe inches from her head.

Jenna froze.

McVey straightened, his face a mask of controlled fury. "That was a warning," he said, voice cold. "Next time, I won't miss."

She swallowed hard, her body vibrating with the need to fight, to run... then, another

explosion sounded outside, closer than before. He moved between Jenna and the door.

Gunfire erupted. McVey's expression shifted—not to fear, but to annoyance.

“Mercer,” he sneered, like the name itself was a curse.

Jenna's heart slammed against her ribs. Flint had come. She just had to make sure she survived long enough for him to get there.

Jenna's fingers tightened around the broken glass stem of the whiskey decanter, the sharp edges biting into her palm. She didn't feel the sting—adrenaline had drowned out everything but the need to move.

McVey stood between her and the only exit; his gun still trained on her. His patience had worn thin, his arrogance slipping just enough to reveal the man beneath the polished suit. A man who was beginning to realize he might not win this as easily as he thought.

The explosions outside rattled the walls again, shaking dust loose from the rafters. Somewhere beyond this room, Flint was coming.

McVey took a measured step closer, gaze locked on hers, his grip on the gun unwavering. “I warned you not to make me regret my generosity.”

Jenna tilted her chin up, her mind racing. “Generosity? You tied me to a chair.”

“You're not tied now,” he pointed out. “I'm offering you a way out, Jenna. But if you keep pushing me, I will drag you out of here instead.”

She could see it now—the moment he'd decided she wasn't worth the effort of

playing nice. He wouldn't try to manipulate her anymore. Wouldn't waste more breath on empty promises.

Which meant he was done waiting. She knew she had seconds.

The guard she'd taken down earlier was getting back to his feet, wheezing but recovering. Another two men hovered near the door, waiting for McVey's order to haul her out.

She couldn't let them.

Jenna had always been patient, calculated. She knew how to play the long game. But tonight? Tonight, she was done waiting. McVey reached for her. Jenna struck first.

She twisted in a heartbeat, pulling the blade from the sheath hidden inside her boot. She'd tucked it there when they'd dragged her in, knowing they'd check for weapons at her waist but hoping they wouldn't search her thoroughly.

The knife's edge bit deep into McVey's side. He roared, staggering back, the gun firing wildly as his grip spasmed. A bullet ripped through the air past her shoulder, embedding itself in the wall, but Jenna didn't stop moving.

One guard lunged, reaching for her. Jenna turned the knife, slamming it into his thigh. The man howled, crashing to his knees.

The two guards at the door snapped to attention, their weapons coming up as the door exploded inward.

Flint was there.

Jenna barely had time to breathe before Flint tore through the room, his presence like

a reckoning, his fury an unstoppable force. His lion wasn't just close to the surface—it seemed to be bleeding through his human form in the way his eyes blazed, his muscles coiled, his movements deadly and efficient.

The first guard fired, but Flint was faster, ducking low before launching into him, his fist cracking against the man's jaw with bone-shattering force.

The second guard tried to retreat. Flint ripped the gun from his hands and broke his arm before driving him into the floor with a brutal, merciless efficiency.

McVey stumbled, clutching his side, his eyes flashing with fury as he realized just how badly this was going for him. Jenna saw it happen—the second he made his choice. He turned and ran.

Jenna surged forward, yanking the blade from the man's leg as she did, ignoring his scream. She had the shot—one clean throw and she could end this, drive the blade into McVey's back before he disappeared down the hall.

But Flint was already moving. She caught a flash of his expression, wild and unforgiving, as he took off after McVey, his instincts running hot with the need to end this permanently.

Jenna hesitated for half a second before following him. The alarms blared.

“Damn it,” she snarled, catching up to him. “We don't have time for this!”

But he wasn't listening. Jenna grabbed a discarded pistol from one of the fallen guards, leveling it at the last conscious man still groaning on the floor. “Stay down, or the next one goes between your eyes.”

The man barely whimpered. Jenna spun back to Flint. He had McVey cornered now,

fists clenched, chest heaving. But McVey wasn't stupid—even wounded, he was a snake.

"I wonder what she'll think of you," McVey rasped, blood staining his perfect suit. "When you lose control. When you finally become the monster you keep locked up inside."

Flint didn't move. Didn't breathe. Jenna did. She grabbed his wrist. Flint flinched at her touch, his muscles straining beneath her grip, his lion still clawing for violence.

"Enough," she said, low but firm.

Flint's jaw was tight, his body wired, but he didn't pull away.

McVey laughed, his steps already carrying him toward the side exit, his movements slow but intentional. "Kill me, Mercer," McVey taunted. "See what happens when you..."

"Get out," Jenna cut in, voice like a blade.

McVey's lips curved, mocking, but he moved, slipping through the door and into the night.

Flint shook beneath her touch, his breath ragged, but Jenna kept hold of him.

"Flint," she said, sharper this time. "Look at me."

He did. His eyes still burned, his body tense, but he was listening now.

She squeezed his wrist. "We have to go."

The alarms screamed around them, the estate waking up to war. Flint nodded once. Jenna didn't let go until he did. Then they moved together toward the darkness and what little safety it offered.

CHAPTER 18

FLINT

Flint's knuckles ached from clenching the steering wheel too tight. The headlights of the SUV cut through the darkness, casting eerie shadows against the towering trees lining the winding road back to the farmhouse. Jenna sat beside him, silent, staring out the window, her fingers absently rubbing at her wrist where McVey's men had bound her.

She hadn't spoken much since they'd escaped. Since she'd saved his damn soul from tearing McVey apart with his bare hands.

Flint was still vibrating with the need to hunt that bastard down and finish the job. The only thing stopping him was the woman sitting next to him, bruised but unbroken, her stubborn chin lifted, her fire still burning despite everything McVey had tried to do.

She was his. He knew it, felt it in every inch of his body. But she didn't belong to him. Not completely. Not yet. And that gnawed at his insides worse than any wound.

The farmhouse came into view, the porch light casting a warm glow in the cold night. Ridge's truck was already parked outside. The dragon shifter had beaten them back.

The second Flint parked, Jenna threw open the door and climbed out without waiting for him. He watched her stretch, shaking out her muscles like she was trying to shake off the night itself.

“Wes, you good?” Flint asked as the younger man climbed out from the back seat.

Wes cracked his neck, rolling his shoulders. “I’ve had worse nights. Not by much, but hey, gotta keep life interesting, right?”

Flint huffed, shaking his head, but his attention was already back on Jenna. She was headed for the porch, boots hitting the wooden steps like a woman with a purpose. He followed, his gut warning him that the next few hours weren’t going to get any easier.

Inside, Ridge stood by the fireplace, arms crossed, his eyes darting toward Jenna the moment she stepped inside. Relief flashed across his face, but it was buried quickly beneath something heavier.

“We’ve got a problem,” Ridge said.

Jenna pulled off her leather jacket, tossing it over a chair before pouring herself a drink. “No kidding,” she muttered, knocking back a sip of whiskey like it was water.

Flint took a step toward her, but Ridge’s voice stopped him.

“The Ghost Walkers made contact.”

Jenna’s hand froze mid-pour.

Flint’s stomach went tight. “What do you mean, ‘made contact’?”

Ridge exhaled sharply. “They came to me.”

Jenna turned, her eyes sharp. “You?”

Ridge nodded. “Dragons and Ghost Walkers once shared this valley. They recognize

my kind as part of the old world.” His lips pressed into a thin line. “Which means they don’t see me as an outsider like they do the rest of you.”

Flint wasn’t liking where this was headed. “What did they say?”

Ridge’s gaze cut to Jenna. “That Cold Creek belongs to them. That your family never should have had it. And that they’ll take it back—no matter what.”

The room went dead silent.

Jenna set her glass down with deliberate care. “And by ‘take it back,’ you mean...?”

“They want you,” Ridge said, his voice low but certain. “They need you to open that chamber, just like McVey does. The difference is, they don’t plan on letting you walk away afterward.”

“I have a hot news flash for them, neither does McVey.”

Flint’s hands fisted at his sides. “Over my dead body.”

Ridge didn’t blink. “That’s exactly what they said might happen.”

A muscle ticked in Flint’s jaw. “You tell them to come try?”

Ridge’s golden eyes darkened. “I told them if they wanted to start a war, we wouldn’t be the ones bleeding first.”

Flint’s chest burned with something deep and territorial.

Jenna leaned against the table, arms crossed, expression unreadable. “So what’s their timeline? When do they make a move?”

Ridge sighed. “Soon. They’re watching. Waiting. They want you scared. They want you isolated. They want you to make a mistake.”

Jenna snorted, shaking her head. “I hope they’re holding their breath because it’ll be a long time before I do and they can suffocate.”

Flint admired the hell out of her fire, but he wasn’t fooled. She was still processing everything.

Wes, who had been unusually quiet, ran a hand through his hair. “This just keeps getting better and better.”

“Then we stop waiting. McVey and the Ghost Walkers want the same thing? Fine. Let’s make sure neither of them get it.”

Flint folded his arms. “We can’t just blow the place sky-high. That chamber exists for a reason. We need to know what’s inside before we start burning things down.”

Jenna’s lips twitched. “For once, we agree, but I think we all need to get some rest tonight.”

Ridge stepped away from the fireplace, rolling his shoulders like the weight of this whole damn mess was settling deep in his bones. “I’ll take first patrol over the orchard,” he said, heading out the door. “I’ll fly it. Make sure we don’t have any uninvited guests creeping too close.”

Jenna raised an eyebrow. “Won’t that be a little obvious?”

Ridge grinned, teeth flashing. “Let them see me. Let them wonder.”

Flint liked that plan just fine. Let the bastards know what was waiting for them if they

thought about coming any closer.

Wes grabbed his jacket. "I'll head to the cider mill. Ember and Sybil are holding things down there, and I want to check in."

Ridge clapped him on the shoulder. "Stay sharp."

Flint waited until the door closed behind them before turning back to Jenna.

The firelight cast shadows across her face, highlighting the bruises forming along her cheekbone, the faint smear of dried blood at her temple. She looked like hell. She looked perfect.

"You should rest," he said, knowing damn well she wouldn't.

Jenna met his gaze, something sharp and stubborn flashing in her eyes. "So should you."

Flint closed the distance between them, crowding into her space. "That's not how this works, Jenna."

She arched an eyebrow, unshaken. "No?"

Flint's fingers curled around the back of her chair. "You were taken. You were hurt. And now, we've got two separate factions gunning for you." His voice dropped to something low and dangerous. "You think I'm letting you out of my sight?"

Jenna's lips parted, and for a second, he thought she'd argue. But then her expression shifted. The sharp edge softened just a fraction, and that damn heat between them sparked hotter. Flint's grip on the chair tightened. If he stayed too close, if he touched her the way he wanted to, he'd claim her.

Not just with words. Not just with the truth he already knew in his bones. But with teeth. With the kind of mark that meant no other man would dare touch her.

His control was stretched thin. Jenna must have seen it, must have felt it, because she inhaled sharply and took a step back. Flint let her go.

“Get some sleep,” he murmured. “Tomorrow, we finish this.”

Jenna nodded once, but as she turned away, Flint knew they weren’t done. And when the time came? He wouldn’t let her walk away.

After she had retreated to the kitchen telling him she’d make them something to eat, the farmhouse seemed quiet. Too quiet.

Wes was gone, heading for the cider mill to check in with Sybil and Ember. Ridge had taken to the skies, his dragon form patrolling the orchard like a silent guardian. That left Flint and Jenna alone inside.

She hadn’t said much since the others had left. She stood by the kitchen table, arms crossed, her jaw tight as if she was bracing for a fight.

Flint locked the door, double-checking the security system before stepping back into the dimly lit room. His body still hummed with adrenaline, his instincts raw from everything that had happened. He’d almost lost her.

Jenna laid two plates on the table heaped with some kind of scramble and perfectly browned toast. Her whole body was tense —not from fear, but with something that told him she was just as wired as he was.

“We need to talk,” Flint said.

Jenna's gaze flicked up to meet his. "Talk?" she repeated, her voice flat. "That's what you want to do?"

He took a slow, measured step toward her. "I want a lot of things, Jenna."

She didn't move away. Didn't so much as blink. "Then say it."

His muscles coiled tight. "You almost died tonight."

Her lips pressed together. "I handled myself."

Flint moved fast, closing the distance between them in two strides, his chest nearly brushing hers. "Is that what you think this is about? That you 'handled' it?" His voice was a low growl, his control hanging by a thread. "I watched them drag you away, Jenna. I watched them put their hands on you. And you think I should just let that slide?"

She lifted her chin, her eyes sparking. "I knew you'd come after me. I never doubted it."

His breath came sharp, his pulse hammering as his restraint snapped thread by thread. "You think that matters?"

Jenna's nostrils flared. "You're acting like I was some helpless damsel in distress, Flint. I got out."

"Because I was there," he shot back.

Her eyes narrowed. "So now you're taking credit?"

Flint let out a sharp, humorless laugh, running a hand through his hair as he paced

away from her before turning back, his chest rising and falling with barely contained fury. “That’s not what this is about, and you damn well know it.”

Jenna folded her arms, her stance unyielding. “Then what is it about?”

He strode forward again, towering over her. “It’s about the fact that you’re making it impossible for me to protect you.”

The words landed between them like a lit match on dry kindling.

Jenna’s breath hitched, her pupils dilating. “You’re trying to cage me.”

Flint snarled, slamming a hand against the wall beside her. “I’m trying to keep you alive.”

Flint’s control cracked. He pressed her back against the wall, his body caging hers in. The heat between them ignited, molten and consuming, every nerve in his body screaming at him to take her. To claim her.

Jenna didn’t shove him away. She didn’t flinch. She met his gaze, chin lifted in challenge, eyes burning with something just as reckless as his own need.

“Go on,” she dared, voice husky. “Prove it.”

Flint’s breathing turned ragged. “You want me to prove it?” His voice was thick, dangerous.

Jenna tilted her head, exposing the soft line of her throat. “You’re all growl, Mercer, and no bite.”

A dangerous sound rumbled from deep in his chest. His hand shot out, fingers

wrapping around her wrist as he flipped her around to face the wall. His other hand landed on her hip, his grip bruising, his control barely holding together as he leaned in, his breath hot against her ear.

“You have no idea how close you are to pushing me too far,” he warned.

Jenna shivered beneath him, but not in fear. Flint could smell it—the sharp, unmistakable scent of her arousal, of her body responding to his dominance like she was born for it. His lips grazed the sensitive spot at the nape of her neck. Jenna let out the softest sound. Flint nearly lost himself right then and there. Nearly.

He yanked himself back at the last second, muscles trembling with restraint as he tore himself away from her heat, from the heady pull of her scent. As Jenna turned around to face him, her eyes were heavy-lidded, her chest rising and falling with ragged breaths.

Flint’s jaw locked. “You want me to claim you?” he ground out. “You better be damn sure before you say that again.”

She didn’t look away. Didn’t back down. Flint’s hands fisted at his sides. He turned, shoving a hand through his hair as he forced himself to step back before he did something he couldn’t take back.

Jenna watched him, her lips slightly parted, something unreadable flickering in her expression. After a long, charged silence, she straightened, rolling her shoulders as if shaking off the moment. “We should get some sleep,” she murmured.

Flint’s pulse thundered in his ears as he forced himself to step back. Every muscle in his body rebelled, screaming at him to take what was his. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, nails biting into his palms.

Jenna's scent wrapped around him, intoxicating and infuriating. The way she looked at him—daring, unflinching—made his blood burn hotter. She was playing with fire, and she knew it. Hell, maybe she wanted to get burned.

Flint had spent his life controlling the beast inside him, keeping his mountain lion on a short leash, but Jenna Hartford was tearing through every restraint he had.

If he took her now, it wouldn't just be sex. He would leave his mark on her. It would be forever.

Flint braced a hand against the wall, dragging in a sharp breath through his nose. His gaze locked onto hers, dark and warning. "When I claim you, it won't be in anger," he growled, voice rough with the effort it took to hold himself back. "It won't be because you pushed me into it. It'll be because you beg for it."

Jenna's lips parted, her chest rising and falling in uneven breaths. He saw the way her pupils dilated, the way she clenched her fingers at her sides like she wanted to reach for him but refused to be the first to move.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Then, like a storm breaking, there was a knock on the door and Ridge's voice cut through the thick silence.

"We've got a problem," said Ridge as Flint snapped his head toward the doorway. Ridge and Ember stood just inside, their expressions grim. "Baby sister insisted on joining me."

Ember's arms were crossed, her sharp eyes flicking between them before settling on Jenna, like she already knew exactly what the hell had been happening before they walked in.

Jenna turned away from Flint, her posture tight as she straightened. "What kind of

problem?”

Ridge stepped forward, his tall frame casting long shadows in the dim farmhouse light. “It seems Calloway has decided McVey can’t help him so he’s making his own move. The Ghost Walkers are massing, and they aren’t waiting any longer. They want what they believe is theirs.”

Flint swore under his breath, his frustration with Jenna momentarily taking a backseat to the fresh surge of danger. “How many?”

“More than enough,” Ridge said darkly. “They’ve been gathering in the forests outside the orchard, waiting. Calloway is in league with them. He must’ve given the order.”

Flint’s jaw clenched. “They’re after Jenna.”

Ridge’s expression darkened. “And they’re willing to take her by force.”

Jenna crossed her arms, her stance defensive but steady. “Let them try.”

Flint’s temper flared all over again. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

She shot him a glare. “Oh, I’m taking it seriously. I just don’t plan on running.”

Flint scrubbed a hand down his face, forcing himself to focus. This wasn’t the time to get into it with her. “What else?”

Ember took a step forward. “Ridge spoke with one of their scouts. It knew what he was. It was wary but it talked.”

“Why would it talk to you?” Jenna asked Ridge, suspicion lacing her voice.

Ridge's expression was unreadable. "Like I said, dragons are old, just like the Ghost Walkers. We shared this valley once, long before humans claimed it."

The weight of his words settled over the room like a lead blanket.

Flint's fingers twitched. "And?"

Ridge let out a breath, his gaze cutting to Jenna. "The Ghost Walkers think you're the key to everything—the only thing standing between them and what was stolen from them centuries ago."

Jenna's voice was calm, too calm. "So what you're saying is, Calloway's unleashed them."

Ember nodded. "They'll come for you soon."

Silence stretched between them. Flint could hear the distant wind rattling the windows, the distant sound of leaves rustling in the orchard outside.

Jenna didn't waver. "Then we take the fight to them first."

Flint turned to her, his frustration rearing up again. "Damn it, Jenna, you're not an army."

Her eyes flashed. "Neither are you, but that hasn't stopped you from acting like one."

Ridge cleared his throat, cutting in before the argument reignited. "We don't have much time to decide."

Flint pushed down the need to grab Jenna, to shake some sense into her. He turned back to Ridge. "What's the smartest play?"

Ridge's expression darkened. "We either fortify and fight them here..." His gaze flicked to Jenna. "Or we move before they can come knocking."

Jenna squared her shoulders. "I'm not leaving."

Flint swore under his breath. Of course, she wasn't.

Ember leveled a look at Jenna. "Then you better be ready for war, because they're bringing one straight to your front door."

Flint glanced back at Jenna, at the fire in her eyes, the stubborn set of her jaw. This fight wasn't just about land anymore. It wasn't about the orchard or what lay beneath it.

It was about her. The storm was coming. And this time, no one was walking away unscathed.

CHAPTER 19

JENNA

Jenna stood at the orchard's edge, the wind curling through the trees like something alive, carrying the scent of rain and something else—something old. The earth beneath her boots vibrated with the quiet hum of power, a presence she couldn't see but could feel deep in her bones.

The chamber was calling her... and she was done ignoring it.

Behind her, the others were gearing up. Wes checked the magazine in his rifle, Ridge stood near the tree line, his sharp gaze fixed on the dark horizon, waiting for any sign of movement. Sybil paced, restless energy rolling off her in waves. Ember had taken to the skies in her dragon form.

Only Flint wasn't moving.

He was standing just beyond the entrance to the underground chamber, arms crossed, his body radiating a different kind of tension—one that had nothing to do with battle preparations and everything to do with her.

"We should go in now," Jenna said, keeping her voice even. "Before McVey or the Ghost Walkers force our hand."

"No," Flint said flatly.

Jenna clenched her jaw, refusing to look away. “You want to wait until they get here? Until we’re backed into a corner?”

Flint’s expression was carved from stone. “I want to wait until we have a damn plan.”

“We have a plan,” she countered. “You just don’t like it.”

His jaw flexed, frustration rolling off him. “You have no idea what’s down there.”

“Neither do they,” she shot back. “That’s the point. I’m not giving them the chance to find out first.”

Sybil cleared her throat. “She’s got a point, Flint.”

He cut a sharp glare toward his sister, who responded by crossing her arms and sticking her tongue out at him, providing a much needed moment of comic relief.

“Whether we open that chamber or not, the fight is coming,” Jenna pressed. “Would you rather walk into it blind, or take control now?”

Flint didn’t answer, but the muscle in his jaw ticked again.

Jenna stepped closer, dropping her voice. “You know this is the only move we have left. If I don’t open it, someone else will. Someone who won’t give a damn about what they have to do to me to get it opened and unleash whatever is in there.”

“I don’t like it,” Flint snarled.

Jenna reached out, brushing her fingers against his arm, barely a touch, but enough. “I know, but I can do this, Flint.”

He let out a breath through his nose, his body tight with resistance. Then, after a long, measured silence, he nodded once. “We do this my way. No heroics, no rushing in blind. The second things go sideways, we get the hell out.”

Jenna swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Deal.”

Flint turned toward the others. “Move out.”

They worked fast, positioning themselves around the clearing. Ridge joined his sister in the skies, shifting into his dragon form with a silent, predatory grace. The rest of them followed Jenna to the entrance, where the stone door loomed, covered in intricate carvings—ancient runes that no one had been able to decipher.

Until now.

Jenna’s heart pounded as she stepped forward. The moment the soles of her boots touched the stone threshold, the air crackled. Something deep beneath them stirred. The runes ignited in a rush of golden light, pulsing with an energy that made the hair on her arms stand on end.

Behind her, Flint cursed under his breath. “That’s new.”

Jenna lifted a hand, fingers hovering just over the carvings. The closer she got, the stronger the pulse became, syncing with the rhythm of her heartbeat.

“It recognizes me,” she murmured.

“Yeah?” Wes muttered. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

Jenna wasn’t sure. She inhaled sharply, then pressed her palm against the stone.

The world tilted.

Power surged up through the ground, slamming into her like a tidal wave. Jenna staggered, but Flint was there in an instant, steadying her with a firm grip on her waist.

“Jenna,” he growled.

“I’m fine,” she said, even as the power wrapped around her like invisible chains, dragging her deeper, demanding something—something only she could give.

The runes burned brighter. The stone beneath her hand grew warm.

And then, with a deep, grinding groan, the entrance to the chamber began to open.

A gust of stale, ancient air rushed up to greet them as the heavy stone doors slowly began to part. The ground trembled, the trees shivering as if the very earth was resisting what was happening.

Jenna pulled her hand back, her breath coming fast.

“Holy shit,” Wes breathed. “That actually worked.”

Jenna turned toward Flint. His face was unreadable, but his hand was still on her waist, holding her steady.

She met his gaze. “There’s no turning back now.”

His fingers tightened slightly, just for a moment. Then he nodded. “No, there’s not.”

The chamber had been waiting for her.

And whatever was inside... was waiting too.

As the chamber doors cracked open wide, the world seemed to hold its breath. The golden light from the runes flickered, pulsing in time with Jenna's heartbeat, casting shifting shadows against the jagged stone walls inside. The stale air reeked of old magic and forgotten things. The energy pressing down on her wasn't just power—it was history, waiting to be claimed.

But before Jenna could take another step forward, a sound cut through the night. Not the wind. Not the quiet hum of the earth waking up beneath her feet. Something else. Something coming.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose. "Flint," she said, voice low.

He was already turning, already reaching for his weapon. Then the forest exploded.

The Ghost Walkers didn't come like raiders, howling and reckless. They moved with silent precision, slipping through the trees like wraiths. Dozens of them, their bodies nearly invisible against the night, their forms flickering in and out of sight as if they were part of the darkness itself.

Jenna barely had time to move before the first one lunged for her. Flint was there in an instant, his gun roaring as he put two bullets in the attacker's chest before it could touch her.

"Stay behind me," he ordered, voice sharp.

Jenna ignored him, already drawing her knife.

"Here we go," Wes muttered, lifting his rifle and taking aim.

The fight ignited like a powder keg. The Ghost Walkers swarmed in, silent and lethal, their weapons flashing in the dim light of the chamber's entrance. Flint, Wes, and Sybil met them head-on.

Ridge landed and moved in front of the entrance, guarding like Cerberus at the gates of hell. He was like a storm, tearing through enemies with inhuman speed, his claws raking through flesh. Sybil darted through the chaos, wielding two knives that flashed in the moonlight, her movements efficient and deadly.

Flint was a force of nature. Jenna had seen him fight before, but not like this.

He moved with brutal precision, his body coiled with the lethal grace of a predator fully unleashed. He didn't waste energy, didn't play with his enemies. He cut them down fast and without hesitation, his gun and blade working in tandem, his mountain lion a breath away from breaking free.

She could feel him, could feel his rage burning hot, the primal drive to protect her overriding everything else.

But there were too many Ghost Walkers. Jenna caught movement from the corner of her eye—a Ghost Walker breaking past their defenses, slipping around Ridge and moving toward the chamber entrance.

No. She lunged forward, twisting her knife in her grip. The Ghost Walker turned just in time to see her coming. Jenna feinted left, then pivoted, bringing the blade up in a swift arc. It caught it across the throat, cutting deep. Blood sprayed as it staggered back, gurgling.

Jenna didn't stop to watch it fall. The chamber was wide open.

She turned, breath coming fast, and stepped inside.

The moment her foot crossed the threshold, the runes blazed with renewed light, and the air changed. The chamber didn't just contain the dead; it wasn't just a tomb. It was something else. There was something alive.

Power thrummed through the stone walls, humming beneath her skin like a second heartbeat. The energy wrapped around her, curling into her senses, whispering things she didn't understand but felt deep in her bones.

At the center of the chamber, resting atop an ancient pedestal, was the source of it all. The artifact. It wasn't some rusted relic or crumbling piece of history.

It hummed with power, with a kind of life—an object that had no business belonging in the human world. Made of obsidian and gold, its shape was deceptively simple—a thick, circular disc, smooth as glass, yet fractured with thin, glowing veins of molten amber. The closer Jenna stepped, the brighter the veins pulsed, like something inside was waking up.

Ancient runes carved along its outer rim morphed beneath the glow, rearranging themselves in patterns Jenna's mind couldn't quite comprehend—but somehow, her blood did. The power inside the artifact wasn't just reacting to her presence. It recognized her.

It was waiting for her.

Strange symbols—not Ghost Walker, not Calloway's stolen scripts, but something older—flashed along its surface in steady pulses, keeping time with her racing heartbeat. The energy in the chamber thickened, the very air charged, making the hairs on her arms rise.

Jenna swallowed hard. The artifact wasn't a key, it was a gate, and she was the key.

And if McVey or the Ghost Walkers had gotten here first, they would have torn the world apart, sacrificed her to whatever gods they believed in, to force it open.

It was a living thing. It pulsed, glowing with an eerie, molten light. The shape wasn't fully solid, shifting between forms as if deciding what it wanted to be. It wasn't magic in the way she'd always understood it. This was something older, something deeper.

And it knew her. The second she stepped closer, the artifact's glow intensified.

Jenna sucked in a sharp breath. It wasn't reacting to her presence. It was reacting to her blood.

Understanding slammed into her like a freight train—this was never meant for the Calloways.

The Ghost Walkers had been wrong.

McVey had been wrong.

This power had never belonged to them.

It had always belonged to the Walkers—not the Ghost Walkers, although the name now made more sense—but to her mother's ancestors. It belonged to her.

Jenna lifted a trembling hand, reaching toward the artifact. The second her fingertips brushed against its surface, the chamber shook.

A blinding surge of light erupted outward, slamming into the stone walls, sending cracks racing through the ancient carvings. The power roared, burning through her veins, demanding something—Outside, a voice shouted her name.

Flint.

Jenna's head snapped up just in time to see a figure rushing toward her. A Ghost Walker, breaking past the chaos of the battle outside, its blade raised. Jenna spun, power still racing through her, and met it head-on.

FLINT

The world blurred. Flint didn't think, didn't breathe, didn't hesitate.

One second, he was locked in a brutal fight, his knife buried deep in the ribs of a Ghost Walker who had gotten too close. The next, he saw her.

Jenna.

A blade arcing toward her chest.

One of the Ghost Walkers had broken through, slipping past the others while they fought tooth and nail outside the chamber. Flint saw the gleam of metal, the way Jenna spun to face her attacker, the shock in her eyes as the blade came down.

Something inside him shattered.

Flint lunged.

He didn't register the bodies he tore through, the scent of blood thick in the air, the sounds of dying Ghost Walkers gurgling their last breath. His mountain lion pushed closer, an overwhelming force crashing into his human side, but Flint didn't let it take over. Not yet.

His only focus was her.

The Ghost Walker lunged. Jenna twisted, fast—too damn fast for someone human. The energy pulsing through the chamber had changed her. He could feel it, even from a distance. But she wasn't invincible. She was still his to protect.

Flint reached them as the blade slashed downward. Jenna barely dodged, the tip catching her shoulder. Her mouth tightened, but she didn't falter. She pivoted on her heel, her own knife flashing up, slicing deep across the Ghost Walker's abdomen.

Not enough. Flint hit it. He didn't just knock the bastard back—he destroyed it.

His body slammed into the Ghost Walker, tackling it to the stone floor with a force that cracked bone. Flint's hands gripped the thing's skull, slamming it against the ground once, twice, until there was nothing left but a broken mess.

Inside his mind, his mountain lion roared for more. More blood. More violence. More vengeance.

Jenna was bleeding. Flint turned, vision tunneling as he spotted another Ghost Walker lunging toward her. Flint's blade whistled through the air, embedding deep in the thing's throat before it could even make it two steps. It gurgled, fingers clawing at its neck, before crumpling.

Then silence.

The last enemy fell and with its fall, Flint watched as Mayor Calloway scurried off into the night—the last rat deserting the ship. The Ghost Walkers lay scattered in the dirt, some still groaning, most dead. Ridge was heaving for breath, blood streaking his scales, his dragon shimmering and then enshrouded in mist as he shifted back. Wes leaned against a rock, panting, his rifle still gripped in his hands. Sybil wiped her blade on her pants, her face a blank mask as she kicked over a corpse to make sure it stayed dead.

But Flint couldn't process any of that.

Because Jenna was still standing. Alive. Barely.

She was swaying slightly, one hand pressed to the wound on her shoulder, her breathing uneven. Her dark eyes locked onto his, something unreadable flashing there, something that burned into his soul.

He didn't think. Didn't care. Flint closed the distance, his blood still coursing with the fury of the battle. He grabbed her, hard, hauling her into his chest, his hands shaking as they slid over her arms, her back, checking—making damn sure she was still whole.

Jenna sucked in a breath, stiffening for half a second before relaxing against him, her fingers curling into the front of his shirt.

Flint buried his face against her hair, breathing her in, the metallic scent of blood mixing with something uniquely Jenna—fire, defiance, the scent that had been driving him insane since the moment they met.

“Never again,” he growled, his voice low, guttural. The promise rumbled through his chest, into her skin, binding itself into the very fabric of the night.

Jenna didn't pull away. Didn't argue. She knew.

Flint lifted her without another word, one arm bracing her legs, the other curling around her back. She let him. Didn't fight him for once.

She wasn't just his responsibility. She was his, and he was done waiting.

The battlefield was still littered with bodies as he walked past—the scent of blood

thick in the air, but none of it mattered. Not McVey. Not Calloway or the Ghost Walkers. Not even the power still pulsing beneath the earth. The only thing that mattered was the woman in his arms, her fingers fisting in his shirt, her breath uneven against his throat.

Flint turned, heading toward the farmhouse. The others watched, but no one spoke. No one dared.

Jenna belonged to him. And now? The whole damn world was going to know it.

At the farmhouse he crossed the porch, pushing through the door with a single-minded purpose. His heart thundered, his grip unbreakable because she would never be without his protection again. Never.

Jenna moved against him, tilting her head until her lips brushed the rough edge of his jaw. “Then stop waiting,” she whispered.

Flint stilled as the door swung shut behind them.

CHAPTER 20

JENNA

He carried her up the stairs, and once they reached the bedroom, he stripped her with deliberate precision, tracing his hands over her body, checking for anything other than perfunctory wounds. Finding none, he led her into the steamy shower, where they engaged in an almost sacred exchange of cleansing, their bodies entwined in unspoken devotion.

"You're so breathtaking it nearly hurts to take you in," he murmured in a raw, husky tone as he held her tight.

Leading her into the bedroom after they'd dried one another, he laid her gently on her back, his strong hand caressing her breast with a firm yet tender squeeze. As Flint's low, animalistic purr filled the air, Jenna felt an intense stirring—a warmth that dissolved every scrap of tension even as desire surged powerfully through her veins. Within her, delicate butterflies erupted into a frenetic storm, their wings aflame with consuming lust.

Reclining on his side, Flint rested his head against his bent arm while his fingers traced intricate, mesmerizing circles around her areolas, patterns that echoed the complexity of the ancient runes that had brought them together. His measured, concentric movements took him tantalizingly near her hardening nipples without ever quite connecting—until finally, his expert digits rolled them between his thumb and forefinger before delivering a delicate pinch. Though the pressure was sharp, it unleashed a torrent of relief and deep, abiding longing that left her craving even

more.

When he positioned his mouth over her sensitive tip, Jenna's head fell back in surrender and her eyes closed in ecstatic bliss. Soft, rhythmic moans filled the space as she savored his relentless attention—his lips lavishing her breasts with a mix of delicate licking, fervent sucking, and teasing nips that alternated with exquisite precision. Every inch of her areola and nipple was worshiped with unyielding passion.

Her breathing grew erratic and shallow as his mouth wandered from her breasts upward along her neck, playful nibbles igniting sparks until he reached her own inviting mouth. His tongue slipped in, igniting a fierce dance of desire, while his throbbing erection pressed insistently against her hip—a silent promise of the raw intensity still to come.

"Flint..." she breathed, the word a soft plea mixed with undeniable arousal.

"On your belly," he growled, his voice dark and commanding. His hand slid decisively between her legs, parting her delicate folds with possessive ease. "So wet for me," he purred, his fingers slipping inside her and beginning to stroke with expert precision.

She adjusted her position slightly, hoping to align his thumb with that singular spot that had her trembling, but he skillfully readjusted, drawing an even louder moan from deep within her. The moan swelled into a gasp as his finger traced delicate circles around her swollen nub, soon joined by his thumb which pinched her clit with an intensity that quickly transformed sharp sting into soaring, overwhelming pleasure.

Moving behind her, he hoisted her onto her knees, encircling her hips with a firm grip to steady her. In an electrifying moment, Jenna felt the head of his cock hover at her entrance before he thrust in with a force that filled her entirely. A primal scream erupted from her as his determined movement claimed every fiber of her being,

shaking her to her core.

Clutching the sheets as if they were lifelines, she wrung them in perfect rhythm with Flint's relentless thrusts. The faint barbs along his length, barely noticeable on entry, stiffened and raked her on withdrawal, only to soften again as he surged forward with renewed vigor. Each grunt and growl emanating from behind her was an unapologetic exclamation of the raw, unbridled passion that consumed them both.

His growls morphed into savage, primal roars as he drove relentlessly into her. There was no room for gentleness or languor in his lovemaking today—it was fierce and untamed, a force of nature unleashed. She envisioned herself being claimed with the raw intensity of ancient peoples—only they hadn't known the exquisite savagery of the barbs.

Jenna pushed back with equal fervor, her body tightening around the barbs as she climaxed once more, her cries a tumultuous mix of pleasure and desperation. Flint plunged deep, a brutal withdrawal nearly breaking their connection, only to slam back into her with unyielding force.

There was nothing refined or tender in his possession of her—it was a wild, consuming fire. She felt another orgasm rising, a formidable wave far stronger than any before. As it crashed over her, she felt the piercing bite of Flint's powerful jaws clamping down on the nape of her neck. Her scream tore through the room, a blend of ecstasy, pain, and surrender that blurred into a singular, overwhelming sensation. He held her captive in his teeth, his hands a vice around her as he thrust one final time, grinding his hips against her with a feral intensity as he released his very essence into her.

Flint collapsed onto her back, a heavy, anchoring weight. For a fleeting moment, he seemed to be utterly content and completely satiated, and she reveled in the knowledge that she could bring him to such a state. His weight pressed her further into the mattress, and for that sweet, suspended moment, they were an inseparable

unity. He nuzzled her neck, tenderly kissing the mark he had left. She drifted into sleep with him still embedded within her, his exhausted form draped over hers, his hands cradling her breasts with a possessive tenderness.

FLINT

Flint stood at the edge of the orchard as the first rays of morning light stretched across the valley, painting the land in muted gold and soft violet. The air smelled like damp earth, lingering smoke, and blood. The battle was over, but the war wasn't finished. Not yet.

Jenna walked beside him, her steps steady, her shoulder wrapped in fresh bandages, but she wasn't moving like someone nursing an injury. She carried herself like a warrior, like a woman who had just faced death and come out the other side sharper, harder, more certain than ever.

He'd barely left her side since carrying her into the farmhouse hours ago. He hadn't been able to. She had slept—fitful but deep. He had watched over her, unwilling to close his eyes until the last of his adrenaline had burned itself out. Now, with the sun rising and the chamber still wide open, they had one last move to make before they could breathe.

The others were already gathered at the stone threshold. Ridge stood near the entrance, his massive frame still streaked with dried blood, his eyes scanning the tree line. Ember was next to him, her gaze locked on the sky, her dragon instincts still wound tight from the battle. Wes and Sybil were positioned near the trees, rifles slung over their shoulders, looking like they hadn't slept at all.

Ridge turned as they approached. "We've been rotating guards all night," he said, his voice gravelly. "One dragon, one mountain lion at all times. We wanted to make sure no one got near that thing without us knowing."

Flint nodded. “Good.”

Jenna stepped up to the chamber’s entrance, eyeing the still-open stone doors, the pulsing artifact at its center. The power inside hummed in the early morning quiet, waiting, watching.

“It’s still open,” she said, more to herself than anyone else.

Wes snorted. “Yeah, we noticed. You going to close it now or let it sit there glowing like a ‘come rob me’ sign?”

Jenna lifted her chin, ignoring the jab. “We have to seal it right,” she murmured. “Permanently. If McVey or anyone else detects a weakness in the seal, they’ll find a way to force it open again.”

Flint didn’t argue. He knew she was right. This wasn’t just about stopping McVey anymore. This was about making sure no one—Ghost Walkers, Calloway, anyone—could use this power ever again.

She turned to Ridge. “And the Ghost Walkers?”

He rolled his shoulders. “What’s left of them scattered. Calloway’s gone, probably licking his wounds somewhere, but I don’t think he’ll be dumb enough to come back. Their numbers are too low to risk another fight.”

“So that just leaves McVey,” Flint said.

The name alone sent a fresh surge of anger through him. That bastard was still out there, and until he was dead, none of them could lower their guard.

“I don’t like that he’s quiet,” Ember muttered. “Feels wrong.”

“Because it is wrong,” Sybil said, flipping the safety off her rifle. “He’s waiting for something.”

Jenna’s expression darkened. “Or he’s planning something.”

The words had barely left her lips when the shot rang out.

The crack of gunfire shattered the morning stillness. Flint moved on instinct, shoving Jenna aside as a bullet hissed through the air, missing her by inches.

“Get down!” Ridge roared, his dragon senses reacting faster than sight, scanning the trees. Wes dove behind the stone ruins, Sybil already lifting her rifle, searching for the shooter.

Flint rolled, pressing Jenna against the ground, covering her body with his own. “You good?” he rasped.

She nodded, her breath coming fast. “Where...”

Another shot. It sparked against the stone behind them. Flint’s muscles coiled. He caught movement near the tree line—just enough for his sharp shifter vision to pick up the gleam of a rifle barrel tucked between the branches.

McVey—the sonofabitch wasn’t done yet.

Flint’s blood boiled. His lion roared inside him, clawing for release. No more games. No more near-misses. He was ending this. Now.

“I see him,” Ridge growled. “Southwest tree line, thirty meters out.”

“I got him,” Wes said, already sighting down his scope.

Jenna pushed against Flint's chest, trying to sit up. "Let me up."

"No." His voice was a low snarl, primal. He wasn't letting her go until McVey was dead.

Jenna glared at him. "Flint..."

He ignored her, twisting to Sybil. "Circle around. Ridge, give us cover."

Ridge nodded, his pupils flashing reptilian before his body shimmered and was enshrouded in a swirling mist that crackled with power and light. In a single breath, Ridge was airborne, his dragon form launching into the sky, wings slicing through the dawn. He let out a warning growl, loud enough to shake the trees.

McVey fired again, but Ridge's presence had rattled him. His shot went wide, giving Sybil time to move.

Flint turned back to Jenna. "Stay here."

She scoffed. "Like hell."

Before he could stop her, she rolled away, grabbing her own weapon. Flint swore under his breath, rage and admiration warring inside him. He should have known she wouldn't stay put. Fine. Then they'd end this together.

He took off, staying low as he moved toward the trees, his feet silent against the damp earth. Jenna was at his side, moving just as fast, her blade already in her hand.

McVey must have seen them coming. He dropped his rifle, retreating deeper into the woods.

Flint chased him down.

Branches snapped beneath his boots as he ran, closing the distance between them. McVey was fast for a human. He must have known shifting to a coyote wouldn't help at all. No coyote had ever been the victor in a contest with a mountain lion. If McVey was fast, Flint was faster. His lion was rising, his instincts tuned to the kill.

McVey stumbled, panting, blood streaking down his arm from where one of Wes' bullets had clipped him. He turned, a knife flashing in his hand. "You really think you're going to win, Mercer?" he spat. "You think this ends with me?"

Flint bared his teeth. "No. It ends with you dying."

McVey lunged. Flint sidestepped, catching his wrist, twisting it hard enough to hear the snap of bone. McVey howled, but Flint wasn't done. He drove his knee into the bastard's gut, sending him crashing to the ground.

Flint was on him in a second, his boot pressing against McVey's chest, the blade at his throat. "You put a knife in my mate," he said, voice cold. "Did you really think I'd let that slide?"

McVey's breath came fast, his face twisted in pain, but he still had the nerve to laugh. "You kill me, and someone else will take my place."

"Maybe," Flint replied. "But whoever it is won't be you."

And with that, he drove his blade deep. McVey gasped, choking, eyes wide as blood bloomed across his chest. Jenna didn't move, didn't look away as the life bled from his body.

Then, it was over.

Jenna pulled him back, wrapping her arms around him as he stood. Flint didn't resist—just breathed, staring down at the man who had tried to destroy his mate.

It was done. McVey was dead, and they were still standing.

Jenna cupped his face, forcing him to meet her gaze. “You with me?”

Flint swallowed, his eyes burning. “Yeah.”

She pulled him in, holding him close. “It’s over.”

The earth was still humming beneath his feet, vibrating with the remnants of power from the chamber, from the battle, from whatever the hell Jenna had just done.

McVey was dead. Calloway was gone. The Ghost Walkers had scattered, their ancient claim shattered by the blood they’d spilled. But the fight wasn’t over yet—not until she sealed the damn thing for good.

Jenna stood at the chamber entrance, wind lifting strands of her hair, her shoulders squared as she faced the glowing artifact one last time. She was steady, but Flint saw the way her fingers curled, the tightness in her jaw.

For all her bravado, for all her sharp edges, Jenna had been through hell, and she wasn’t coming out unscathed. Neither was he, but they were coming out of it together.

“You sure about this?” Flint asked, stepping up beside her, their arms brushing.

Jenna inhaled deeply, her gaze never leaving the artifact. “Yes.”

She crouched down, brushing dirt off the worn leather-bound journal she’d carried with her into the chamber. It had been Maribel’s once. Now, it belonged to Jenna. Inside were the notes her aunt had hidden, scribbled warnings, half-finished translations—everything Maribel had pieced together over the years about what lay beneath Cold Creek.

The chamber had always been waiting for Jenna, but not to be used. To be protected.

Jenna flipped through the pages, fingers trailing over the faded ink. “She knew,” she murmured. “Maribel knew what the artifact really was. What it could do.”

Flint watched as she traced a section of script, her expression tightening.

“She spent her whole life keeping this buried,” Jenna continued, her voice steady, but Flint could hear the emotion underneath. “Calloway and the Ghost Walkers wanted to claim it. McVey wanted to twist it into something else. But it was never meant to be theirs.”

Flint’s chest ached at the quiet pain in her words. He wanted to tell her she wasn’t alone, that she didn’t have to carry the weight of all this by herself. But Jenna wasn’t the type to accept empty reassurances.

Instead, he reached out, sliding a hand over the small of her back, grounding her. “So, let’s finish it,” he said.

Jenna nodded. She rose to her feet, stepping closer to the artifact. The power inside pulsed brighter, sensing her presence, responding. The chamber walls shuddered, the runes along the stone flaring with golden light.

She lifted her hands, speaking the words Maribel had left behind. The ones written in a language lost to time, one that only a Walker, from whom Jenna descended, could call upon.

The moment the last syllable left her lips, the chamber reacted.

A rush of energy burst from the artifact, racing up the walls, sinking into the stone-like veins of molten gold. The air thickened, vibrating with unseen force. The entrance began to close. Jenna stumbled back, breathing hard. Flint caught her,

pulling her against his chest as he removed her from the chamber.

Standing at the entrance, just outside the doors, they watched as the artifact pulsed one last time, before it dimmed and then faded into nothing as the doors sealed themselves shut. The last of the chamber's power was buried beneath the earth, locked away forever.

Jenna sagged against him, her body warm, her pulse rapid beneath his touch. "It's done."

Flint's grip tightened around her. "It's done," he echoed.

And this time, there were no more threats waiting in the dark.

Silver Falls Cider Days Festival

Several Weeks Later

The town was healing.

The wreckage McVey had left behind—both physical and emotional—was slowly being rebuilt. Calloway's influence had been stripped away, leaving Silver Falls to finally breathe. The Ghost Walkers had retreated, their claim on Cold Creek broken.

And Jenna? She had taken her place, not as some hidden heiress; not as a pawn in someone else's game. She was Cold Creek Orchards now. The last of the Walker/Hartford line, the only rightful guardian of the land.

Flint had never given a damn about destiny, but if he did, he'd say the orchard had been waiting for her just as much as he had.

The festival lights twinkled across the town square, lanterns glowing in the crisp

autumn air. Music floated through the streets, the scent of cider and warm cinnamon twisting around them.

Flint leaned against the wooden railing of the town's center gazebo, a fresh beer in one hand, the other wrapped around Jenna's waist. She stood between his legs, her back pressed to his chest, her body fitting against him like it was made to be there.

The tension that had been knotting her shoulders since she'd arrived had finally eased. There was still healing to do—there always would be—but for now, she was here, warm and his.

Jenna sighed softly, her fingers tracing idle patterns along his forearm where it rested against her stomach. "So what now?" she murmured.

Flint grinned against her hair, pressing a kiss just behind her ear, inhaling the scent of apples and the lingering spice of her perfume.

"Whatever the hell we want," he murmured back, his grip tightening.

He kissed her, slow and deep, pouring everything into it—the battles they'd fought, the things they'd survived, the promise of everything still ahead of them. Jenna kissed him back, stealing his breath, his thoughts, his damn soul.

And Flint knew, without a doubt, that this? This was exactly where he was meant to be.

RIDGE

Thick, acrid smoke filled Ridge Lawson's lungs as he shoved through doors of the abandoned barn just outside of town. The place was supposed to be unused, but the inferno inside suggested otherwise. Flames chewed through wooden crates, climbing the metal shelves like hungry vines. The heat pressed against his skin, even through

his turnout gear.

He shouldn't have gone in alone, but as the only paid firefighter in Silver Falls, he didn't have much choice. Protocol demanded he wait for backup, but the fire had been spreading too fast. The Silver Falls Volunteer Fire Department was still five minutes out, and in that time, the whole building could collapse and could start a forest fire. If someone was inside, they didn't have that kind of time.

Crouching low, Ridge moved deeper into the blaze, his boots crunching over debris. His radio crackled.

"Ridge, hold your damn position! We're almost there," Ember's voice snapped through the speaker.

His sister was always trying to keep him in check. Too bad she knew damn well he wouldn't listen.

"Smoke's too thick. I need to check for victims," he responded.

No answer, just a frustrated hiss of static. The fire roared overhead, twisting in unnatural patterns. Something about it gnawed at him—a gut instinct honed by years on the job in Denver. This wasn't just an accident.

A loud crack split the air. Ridge barely had time to move before a flaming beam crashed down, sending sparks flying. One seared across his exposed wrist, and pain flared, sharp and immediate. He gritted his teeth, shaking it off. No time for that now.

Then he heard it. A faint coughing, past the towering flames.

"Hey!" Ridge called out, pushing forward. "I'm coming to get you!"

A figure slumped against the far wall, barely visible through the shifting orange glow.

Ridge surged forward, adrenaline overriding pain. He reached the man—a middle-aged wolf shifter, by the scent of him—and hoisted him up, supporting his weight.

“Come on, let’s move.”

The man wheezed but nodded. Ridge guided him toward the exit, shielding them both as the fire raged around them. The barn groaned, metal and wood straining against the heat. Almost there.

The moment they cleared the threshold, Ridge’s team was there. Ember grabbed the injured shifter, dragging him to safety as two other volunteers took over. Ridge staggered back, chest heaving. His pulse pounded in his ears, the scent of charred wood clinging to him.

Then Ember was in front of him, hands on her hips, eyes flashing like ice over fire. “You’re a goddamn idiot, you know that?”

He exhaled sharply, bending over to rest his hands on his knees. “Yeah. Not exactly breaking news.”

Her gaze flicked to his arm. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing,” he muttered, but the raw sting told a different story. His skin was an angry red, a fresh burn stretching from his wrist up toward his forearm where his sleeve had pulled back.

Ember crossed her arms. “You’re going to Urgent Care.”

“Not necessary,” he grumbled, but he already knew he was fighting a losing battle.

“You’re the Fire Chief,” she shot back. “Set an example, dumbass.”

Before he could argue, she grabbed his good arm and started dragging him toward her truck.

The Silver Falls Urgent Care was new, shiny, and entirely unwanted in Ridge's opinion. It was tucked into an old storefront along Main Street so at least its outward appearance wasn't too jarring. The town was small, the kind of place where shifters relied on their natural healing and local healers when needed. But a few bad accidents had convinced the Council they needed modern medicine, which was how Dr. Sela Mitchell had landed here.

Phoenix shifter. Medical professional. Pain in his ass.

Ember all but shoved him through the front doors, earning a curious glance from the receptionist, a young bear shifter named Callie.

"Hey, Ember," Callie said, eyeing Ridge's soot-covered state. "What's up?"

"He decided to play firefighter without backup. Needs that burn checked."

Callie winced. "Ouch. Dr. Mitchell's available. I'll take you back."

Ridge sighed, but followed, knowing resistance was pointless. The small exam room smelled like antiseptic and something else—a faint, warm scent that made his shifter instincts perk up before he shoved them down.

He dropped onto the paper-covered exam table, arms crossed, jaw tight. The burn throbbed, but he ignored it.

Ember grinned. "Try not to breathe fire at the doc."

"No promises," he muttered.

Then the door opened, and in walked Sela Mitchell. She was fire in human form, although her scent wasn't that of a dragon. Deep auburn hair, sharp green eyes, and a presence that demanded attention. She took one look at him and arched an eyebrow, already unimpressed.

"Well," she said, stepping inside and closing the door. "If it isn't Chief Lawson. Let me guess—you ignored protocol, got yourself burned, and now you're here acting like it's no big deal."

Ridge huffed a laugh, despite himself. "You get all that from one look?"

Her lips quirked. "You're predictable."

She stepped closer, her gaze shifting to his arm, assessing. Warm fingers brushed his skin, and his breath hitched. He told himself it was just the burn, but deep down, he knew better.

Sela met his eyes, something unreadable flickering in her expression. "This is going to sting."

Ridge held still. He could handle fire. But something about Sela Mitchell felt more dangerous than the flames he'd just walked through.

Sela, Ridge and the other residents of Silver Falls will return later this year in **RIDGE'S FATE**.