



Howling Night (Soulmarked #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I crossed a line I didn't know existed.

Some things couldn't be unseen, and one forbidden secret could cost me my life.

I was tangled in a world I was never meant to know. There were strict rules, and breaking them meant blood.

I thought I was just going to have a quiet life in a small town, but when I stumbled into the woods behind my house and saw something I shouldn't, everything changed.

One wanted me silenced.

The other saved me.

Ryder was dangerous, closed off, and too intense for my own good. But when his world collided with mine, something primal ignited between us — something impossible to control.

I was human. He wasn't.

It was never supposed to happen between us.

But fate didn't care about the rules.

And I didn't know if I could survive in a world that was never meant to let me live in it. How do you run from a world that refuses to let you go?

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Chapter One

I didn't look back when I left my little apartment in downtown Chicago. To hell with big cities and to hell with all the people in them.

With a satisfying thud, I dropped the last cardboard box on the kitchen counter. Dust particles danced in the late afternoon sunlight, streaming through the small window of my new home.

My new home.

The phrase still felt strange, like shoes that hadn't been broken in yet. In the city I rented, which meant I had neighbors... noisy neighbors. I had a landlord and someone to take care of things when they broke.

Now, I had a house. It was cozy, but it was a house, and it was all mine. It's too bad it took a good chunk of my savings just for the down payment.

"Welcome to Birchwood Hollow, Everly," I announced to the empty house, my voice echoing slightly against the bare walls.

The house wasn't much — two bedrooms, one bath, a combined kitchen and dining area with a small living room at the front of the house. The wood paneling in every room hadn't been updated since at least the 1970s, but the whole place was mine. Or at least it would be when I finished paying it off in thirty years.

I shuffled to the couch I'd managed to position against the living room wall earlier

today with help from the moving company. My muscles screamed in protest as I flopped down, a cloud of dust rising from the cushions. The six-hour drive from Chicago had been grueling enough without the subsequent unpacking marathon.

“That’s everything, Miss Montana,” the muscular man said as he tapped a knuckle on the door frame.

“Oh!” I said, pushing myself up. I handed him two folded twenties. “Thanks for your help.”

“Very kind of you, ma’am,” he said, tipping an invisible hat. “Have a good rest of your day.”

I pressed my lips into a forced smile. “Thanks, you too.”

I closed the door, watching them start the truck and drive off from the small window at the front of the house. The tires spewed dust and gravel as they sped down the driveway and onto the road that would take them to town or the highway.

From where I stood, I could see the neighbor’s house across the road. It wasn’t in the best condition, with stained siding and all sorts of junk piled up around the property. The windows were dark, and I wasn’t even sure if anyone lived there.

Birchwood Hollow was already a drastic change from Chicago, and I hadn’t done more than drive down the main drag of the small town with a population of not more than 5,000. The nearest big city... St. Paul.

It was so small that the woman at the gas station immediately knew I was the young woman who bought Old Man Harrison’s place. He moved to Florida to enjoy his retirement.

It was also remote enough that my cell service had been spotty since I crossed the state line. But that was perfect. It was exactly what I wanted... to disappear.

My house sat at the edge of town, backing up to the woods that eventually led down to one of the many lakes' shorelines. From the kitchen window, I could just make out a sliver of blue between the trees. It wasn't the lakefront view I'd had from my Chicago apartment, but at least it was quiet and I was alone. Far away from assholes.

I kicked off my shoes and stretched out on the couch, staring at the ceiling. Tomorrow I'd start looking for a job. Something simple. Cashiering at the local market, maybe. Or waitressing at the diner I'd passed on my way into town.

Nothing like my old, stressful corporate position. Nothing that would require me to dress up in my business clothes and boss people around. That wasn't me anymore. That was never me.

I closed my eyes. That's exactly what I'd come here to escape. Those thoughts. Those memories. That woman I'd become.

I was sick and tired of putting up with all the bullshit, both in business and in my personal life. Especially when it came to men. I was done with men. All men. I hadn't met one that wasn't a selfish bastard who wasn't also controlling and emotionally manipulative.

Exhaustion washed over me like a tide, and I surrendered to it gladly. The boxes and mess would still be there when I woke up.

A persistent ringing dragged me from the depths of sleep. My phone buzzed angrily on the coffee table, bouncing bit by bit toward the edge. Through the window, the light had shifted to early evening.

I fumbled for the phone, squinting at the screen.

“Annie,” I said, sounding out of breath. “Shit, sorry. I meant to call.”

“Everly Rose Montana,” she scolded. “You had me worried sick.”

My brow wrinkled. “Worried about what?”

“I don’t know... that a bear or a wolf ate you or something,” she said, her voice cracking with the fading service.

“There are no bears here,” I said, glancing toward the kitchen as my stomach rumbled.

“The hell there isn’t,” Annie said sharply. “Google it.”

I covered my yawn. “Okay, I will. It’s not like I was napping outside.”

“You probably didn’t even lock your front door,” Annie said, clicking her tongue.

I glanced over at the door, noticing she was right. “I’m fine, Annie.”

“Well, you should have called,” she said, drawing in a breath. “How’s the frozen north? Have you seen any moose yet? Or is it meese? What’s the plural for moose?”

“No meeses yet,” I said with a laugh. “You know I’m really not that far from you. It basically looks the same, but with trees instead of buildings.”

Annie and I had been friends since college, and her energy had always been both comforting and exhausting. We hadn’t worked together in the city, but we’d been in neighboring buildings and had lunch almost every day.

That was the only thing I was going to miss. Well, not just lunch with Annie, but Annie too.

“There was a very judgmental bluejay that watched me from the tree when I was unpacking my car,” I said, narrowing my eyes toward the window.

“Send me pictures of the house,” Annie said, squeaking slightly. “Is it charming? Or is it giving murder cabin vibes? Because I warned you?—”

“It’s perfect,” I said, pacing the creaky floor. “Small, but very quiet.”

There was a pause on the other end. When Annie spoke again, her voice had lost some of its buoyancy.

“I miss you already,” Annie said, sighing. “It’s going to be unbearable here without you.”

“You’ll survive,” I said, moving into the kitchen to gaze out between the trees toward the lake. “Besides, you can visit me anytime.”

“Can I? Really? Because I was thinking maybe in a few weeks?—”

“Annie.”

“I know, I know.” She sighed. “You moved to the middle of nowhere to get away from everything. To clear your head. I get it, I do. But just so you know, I will visit. Eventually. When you’re ready.”

I bit my lip, hesitating. “Thanks for understanding. It’s not like I’m trying to get away from you.”

“I know,” Annie said.

“But I need to unpack and get settled,” I said, turning to face all the boxes. “I promise to send pictures when I get things in order, okay?”

We chatted for a few more minutes... she talked about work, gossip I’d already missed over the last twenty-four hours since I’d left. Then we said our goodbyes.

The silence that followed felt heavier than before. I glanced around at the boxes stacked in every corner, at the mammoth task of unpacking that awaited me.

I wanted to crawl into bed, but I wasn’t even sure which box had my sheets. The walls suddenly seemed to close in.

I needed air.

The backdoor opened onto a small wooden deck overlooking a yard that had seen better days. The grass grew in patchy clumps, interspersed with dandelions, and what I hoped wasn’t poison ivy. At the back of the property was a concrete birdbath, cracked and empty, near an oak tree.

Beyond the neglected yard, the woods beckoned. Tall pines, evergreens, and birch trees stretched in both directions, creating a natural fence line at the edge of my property.

I stepped off the deck, the grass cool against my bare feet. The evening air had a crisp edge to it, carrying the scent of pine and something else — something mineral and maybe slightly fishy that could only be the lake.

At the edge of the tree line, I hesitated. City instincts told me not to wander into unfamiliar woods as dusk approached. But this was my property now. My woods. My

escape. It wasn't like I'd go far.

I walked closer to the trees and discovered what I hadn't noticed from the house — a narrow dirt path, barely visible among the undergrowth, winding its way into the forest. It was somewhat hard to see with all the foliage, but it had been used enough that nothing grew on the path itself.

"Huh," I said, glancing back at the house and then up to the sky. "It must just go to the lake."

Curiosity overcame caution. I followed the trail into the woods, the temperature dropping slightly under the canopy of leaves. The setting sun filtered through in golden shafts, illuminating patches of ferns and wildflowers.

The path curved gently downhill. I filled my lungs with the fresh air, feeling a strange calmness as I walked through nature.

The trail forked unexpectedly, one path continuing downward to the lake, one veering to the left, and the other to the right, deeper into the woods.

I paused at the junction as the light from the sun faded faster. I hadn't brought my phone, and getting lost in unfamiliar woods on my first night in town wouldn't be the fresh start I was hoping for.

Before I could choose a path, I heard distant voices. It sounded like a heated discussion. An argument.

My eyes narrowed. "What the hell?"

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Chapter Two

I stepped toward the voices, carefully placing each foot to avoid twigs and dried leaves. The path became slightly narrower, winding between a large oak and a tall birch that gleamed pale in the dimming light.

The voice grew more distinct. Male voices. Angry voices.

This wasn't what I signed up for. I came to Birchwood Hollow for peace and quiet... for safety, not to wander into the middle of some confrontation in the middle of the woods on my first night in town.

I hesitated, then made an abrupt decision. I needed to go back for my phone. If this were something serious, something I didn't want near my property, I'd need to call the police.

I turned toward my house, but paused before taking a single step. Curiosity won out, and instead of going back to the house, I crept closer to take a better look at what I was dealing with. The last thing I wanted was to bother the cops and be known as a pest. I'd lived in Chicago and never once had to call the police.

As I got closer, I positioned myself behind a thick tree trunk and peered out into a small clearing. Two men stood face to face — only inches apart — backlit by the darkening sky.

They were both big, muscular men, well over six feet tall with broad shoulders. One had a full beard, neatly trimmed, and the other had short, dark brown hair. The man

with the beard wore a red flannel shirt, making him look like a lumberjack in the middle of the woods.

“You’re making a mistake,” the bearded man growled, his voice deep and authoritative. “We have boundaries for a reason.”

“They need our help,” the dark-haired man shot back. “We can’t just?”

“You’re not thinking clearly,” the bearded man said, poking his finger into the man’s chest. “We have to protect our brothers first and foremost. Remember your place.”

The dark-haired man shoved the bearded man hard. His eyes glimmered, almost glowed, a brilliant amber. “They were our family once, Ryder, were they not?”

“That was a long time ago,” the bearded man, Ryder, said through his teeth. “Why are you fighting me on this?”

“I’m sick of it, Ryder. I’m sick of all of it,” the dark-haired man spat. “I didn’t ask for this life. I want out.”

The dark-haired man took a step back, running his hand through his short hair as he stared at Ryder. He shook his head before lunging forward, knocking the slightly bigger man to the ground.

“You’re going to regret that,” Ryder roared, his voice dropping to something almost inhuman. “Don’t you see I’m trying to protect all of us?”

“Screw you,” the dark-haired man said, spitting on the ground near where Ryder was pushing himself back to his feet. “And screw the pack. I’m done.”

Ryder brushed himself off. “Take it back while you still can.”

None of their argument made any sense to me. It sounded like they were talking in some kind of code. My stomach dropped. I hadn't left Chicago to find myself in the middle of rural gang disputes.

Ryder glanced up at the sky, and I followed his gaze. I hadn't realized how quickly darkness had fallen, and the only thing lighting the surroundings was a bright, low-hanging moon.

"I'll give you a minute to think this through," Ryder said, his eyes glued to the dark-haired man. "You know what happens if you want to leave."

"I know what it means and I don't care," the dark-haired man said, jerking abruptly. His body contorted in a strange and unnatural way. His shoulders hunched, and his head dropped forward as a guttural sound escaped from his throat.

From the trees behind him, three enormous wolves emerged, and I blinked hard to be certain I wasn't seeing things. They were massive — nothing like pictures I'd seen. Their shoulders rose higher than my hip would stand, and their eyes gleamed with an unsettling intelligence.

This wasn't possible. Wolves this size didn't exist. And even if they did, they wouldn't just calmly walk into a clearing with two arguing men.

I needed to leave. Or maybe I was still on the couch, dreaming.

As I shifted my weight to back away, my foot caught on an exposed root. I stumbled backward, crashing through a cluster of dried branches. The sound was deafening in the quiet forest.

I could see enough between the trees to notice the wolves were melting back into the shadows. The dark-haired man stopped his strange convulsions. He looked hard in

my direction, then turned and strode away toward the lake, his movements stiff and awkward.

My breaths came quickly as Ryder kept his eyes on me. His face was filled with rage as he moved toward me with impossible speed, crossing the distance between us in seconds.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” he growled, his nose wrinkling as his breath washed over my skin.

I scrambled to my feet, holding up my hands as I backed away. “I... I live here.”

“You don’t live here,” he said, his bright blue eyes almost glowing.

“No, I mean, I live in that house,” I said, pointing back over my shoulder. “I moved in today. The path from my house leads here.”

He stopped, and his eyes narrowed as he studied me. “Old Man Harrison’s place? That sold?”

“Yes,” I said, my heart hammering. I forced a smile and stuck out my hand. “I’m Everly Montana, the new homeowner.”

What the hell was I doing giving this beast my name? And my location. I wasn’t thinking clearly... in fact, the only thing I was thinking about was how I was going to get back to the house and lock my door before he caught me. The big man was fast.

“Where are you from?” he asked with a grunt as he looked down at my nice jeans and what had been a clean t-shirt.

“Chicago.”

“What did you see?” Ryder demanded, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

I shrugged. “Nothing. I didn’t see anything.”

“Lies,” he said, his eyes flashing with something primal.

“Okay,” I said, swallowing hard. “A little spat between two grown men, but if I learned anything living in Chicago, it’s that you don’t see anything. But to be fair, I have no idea what the fight was even about.”

It was the honest truth.

He sniffed the air as he studied me. “You shouldn’t be wandering the woods at night.”

“Well, it wasn’t night when I came out here,” I said, taking a careful step backward. “Not to mention, I thought I was moving somewhere that it would be safe to be out at night.”

I could tell by his expression that he didn’t find me even a little amusing.

“Please, sir, I’m sorry,” I said, taking another step back. “I didn’t mean to intrude. I heard voices, and I was just exploring my new property.”

“You’re too nosy for your own good,” he said, grabbing my arm and turning me back toward my house.

“Please remove your hand from my arm,” I said, keeping my voice firm.

He let go, rolling his eyes. “Whatever you think you saw tonight, forget it. All of it. Mention it to no one, or we’re going to have problems. Is that understood?”

“I know how to not make someone else’s problems my problems,” I said, meeting his eyes. “And to be totally honest, I don’t care.”

In the city, there were many times I had to look the other way — drug deals, gang violence... suspicious people and activity. It was just insane that I was still going to deal with all that, even in a small town.

“See that you do,” Ryder said, following me. “I’d hate to have to make it your problem.”

“Right,” I said, pushing my shoulders back. “Neither of us wants that.”

He stepped back, and I felt like I could breathe again. “Go home. And stick to daylight walks from now on.”

I nodded, already backing away. He stepped along with me, staying back several feet.

“Please stop following me. I know my way back,” I said, drawing in a shaky breath.

He pressed his lips together. “I’ve got my eyes on you.”

I paused, feeling a flare of indignation cut through my fear. I’d moved here to escape men who thought they had any right to control me or make threats.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” I said, surprised by the steadiness in my voice. “Instead, it might be better if we just avoid each other going forward. I’ll pretend I never met you, and you pretend you never met me.”

His eyes widened slightly, and for a brief moment, I thought I saw the corner of his mouth twitch into almost a smile. But it was gone so fast, I might have imagined it.

“You didn’t meet me,” he said, slinking back into the shadows.

Then... he was gone. He was right, though. I didn’t meet him, and I hoped that I never would. Next time, I might not be so kind, especially if I’m not cornered in the middle of the woods.

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Chapter Three

The morning sunlight streamed through my open windows, illuminating dozens of half-opened boxes scattered across the living room floor. After I'd gotten back home, I'd spent most of the night in a fog after my strange encounter in the woods.

I'd slept on the couch and gotten up in the middle of the night several times to make sure the door had been locked. Today, though, was about making this house feel like mine. I wasn't going to let that brute scare me off from... from whatever he was trying to scare me away from.

I sliced open another cardboard box and started unpacking the mismatched mugs I'd collected over the years. The kitchen was small but functional, with outdated appliances, but the size wasn't much different from what I was used to back in the city. I arranged my sparse collection of pots and pans, wondering if I'd actually use them more often now that I wasn't working fourteen-hour days.

"Ugh," I groaned, rubbing my back as I moved to the next box.

I placed books on the shelves, pillows on the couch, and then arranged the small collection of framed photographs on the end tables. There was a picture of me and my mom on one of her good days, and another of me and Annie.

I hung my favorite painting — a stormy lake scene — above the fireplace, then stood back to assess. Not bad. This place could actually feel like home.

Hours passed in a blur of box cutting, unwrapping, and arranging. I lost myself in the

methodical work, pretending I didn't keep replaying the argument over and over in my head. At least the physical labor was somehow more satisfying than anything I'd accomplished in my glass-walled downtown Chicago office.

When I finally paused, muscles aching, I glanced at my phone to check the time. Nearly four in the afternoon.

My stomach let out an angry growl, and I pressed a hand to it in an attempt to silence it. I hadn't eaten anything since the toaster pastry I'd scarfed down with my morning coffee. I rubbed my temples, trying to think through the hunger-induced headache that had crept up on me.

"Ugh, must eat," I muttered to myself as I walked to the fridge and pulled the door open. The empty white interior looked back at me, reminding me I needed to add the grocery store to my to-do list. "Shit."

I grabbed my purse and keys, giving myself a quick look in the mirror. My hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, but I decided it was good enough. It wasn't like I'd moved here to impress anyone.

Birchwood Hollow's main street was exactly what you'd expect from a small town — charming storefronts with hand-painted signs, diagonal parking spots, and flower pots with white and purple carnations at every corner.

I pulled my SUV into one of the many spots out front of May's Diner. Even though it was getting close to dinnertime, it wasn't very busy.

The bell above the door jingled as I entered. A couple of older men at the counter turned but quickly went back to their food when they realized it wasn't anyone they knew.

A waitress in her late fifties gestured at the booths. “Sit wherever you like, honey. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Thanks,” I said, picking a booth at the far end.

In less than a minute, she was back with a pot of coffee and a menu. “I’m Sheila, and I’ll be helping you today. Well, really, it’ll be me pretty much anytime you stop in unless Tonya is covering me. Anyway, coffee?”

“Please,” I said, flipping my mug over.

“You’re new here,” Sheila said, her nearly white curly hair bouncing as she shifted her weight.

It wasn’t a question. I smiled. “Is it that obvious?”

“It’s a small town, honey. We notice new faces.” She tapped her pen against her order pad. “You need a minute?”

“Yeah, sorry,” I said, opening the menu to an endless array of options. “What do you recommend?”

Sheila tapped her pen to her chin. “Cheeseburger and fries.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said, watching as she scribbled on her pad. “Actually, I was wondering... are you hiring? Or do you happen to know of any places in town that might be?”

Sheila tilted her head. “We’re not, but Black Construction was looking for a receptionist a couple of weeks back. Not sure if they filled the position or not.”

“Excellent,” I said, turning to the window. “And where is that?”

Sheila laughed. “You can find anything here with just a little wandering.”

Boy, was she right about that.

“But it’s just down the street,” she said, pointing out the window with her pen.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“No problem, hon. I’ll get your order in.”

When my food arrived, I realized just how hungry I was. The burger was thick and juicy, and the hand-cut fries were crispy perfection. I practically inhaled everything on my plate, barely coming up for air.

I looked up, my eyes meeting with a man two booths over. I picked up my napkin and wiped my mouth, hoping I’d be able to remove the redness from my cheeks as well.

“Haven’t eaten all day,” I said, setting the napkin on my empty plate.

“Been there,” he said, smiling. “And they make one hell of a burger here, too.”

I nodded. “You can say that again, but to be fair, I was so hungry that green beans would have tasted good.”

“Ew,” he said, his nose wrinkling. “There isn’t anything they can do to green beans to make them good.”

“Butter?”

“Nope.”

I cocked my brow. “Are you one of those guys who won’t eat vegetables?”

“I’ll eat broccoli,” he said, smiling. “Oh, and carrots, but not if they’re cooked.”

“Picky,” I said, clicking my tongue.

“Indeed,” he said, folding his hands. “You just passing through?”

I shook my head. “I bought what everyone is calling Old Man Harrison’s place.”

“Oh,” he said, head bobbing. “Nice.”

“It’s cozy.”

The man with neatly cut light brown hair smiled again. He appeared to be in his early thirties, and when he smiled, his teeth were perfect and white enough to light the room.

“Where are my manners?” he asked, getting to his feet. He walked over to me and stuck out his hand. “Dean Quinn, the town’s one and only dentist.”

I shook his hand. “Everly Montana.”

“Excellent to meet you,” he said, flashing me his brilliant smile again. “That’s a nice property out there, but the woods can be a bit scary at night. Make sure you keep your doors locked and your shades drawn.”

My shoulders involuntarily tensed as the memories of last night’s encounter flashed in my mind. “Did I move to the wrong place? I was hoping for something quiet and

safe.”

“Oh, dang, sorry. Not at all,” Dean said with a gentle laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. “I wasn’t trying to scare you or anything. Just wanted to make sure you stay safe. The local teens can get into all sorts of rowdy trouble out by the lake.”

“Is that right?” I asked, raising a brow.

“Drinking in the woods, playing pranks... that sort of thing.”

I relaxed slightly. “I’m not too worried about wild teenager shenanigans.” I leaned closer, lowering my voice. “Once upon a time, I was one myself.”

That made him laugh again, a genuine sound that made me smile in return. The waitress brought over a cup of coffee in a to-go cup.

Sheila looked from Dean to me and back to him. “I see you’ve met the young lady who moved into?—”

“Yeah,” Dean said, taking a sip and pulling his lips away from the cup. “Hot.” His cheeks turned pink. “The coffee.” He glanced at his wrist, where a watch may or may not have been. “I need to get to work. It was nice meeting you, Everly. Welcome to Birchwood Hollow.”

“Thanks.”

The bell jingled, and he was outside before I could tell him it was nice meeting him, too... or ask if he knew where I could find a job.

“He’s a sweetheart,” Sheila said, winking. “If I weren’t married, he’d be at the top of my list.” She laughed and held up her left hand. “But I am married, so I guess he’s

available.”

“Oh, no,” I said, shaking my head as I waved my hands in the air. I’d seen that look before. It wasn’t that long ago Annie wore that expression when she wanted to set me up with some guy from her office. “I’m not interested. I’m here to get away from all that.”

“Away from all what?” Sheila asked, pressing her lips together as she crossed her arms.

I bit my lip. “Relationships. Dating. All of it. I’ve never been very good at that stuff.”

“I see,” Sheila said, ripping my check from the pad of paper. “I think you just haven’t met the right person.”

“That’s obviously true, but in my experience, people always want something from you, and love is just the bait they use to take it,” I said, taking the check from her. “I know that sounds horrible, but I just really need a break from all that bullshit. One too many horrible relationships. You know how it is, right?”

Sheila shook her head. “Sorry, I don’t. I’ve been married thirty years to the sweetest man. Sure, he leaves his clothes on the floor, but he takes good care of me and makes me laugh.”

“Consider yourself lucky,” I said, clearing my throat. “Where do I pay?”

“This way,” Sheila said.

I paid my check at the counter and thanked Sheila for the meal and the job lead before heading back to my SUV. The late afternoon sun was turning golden as I slid behind the wheel.

I drove slowly down the main street, scanning the storefronts for Black Construction. Sure enough, just as Sheila had mentioned, I spotted it several blocks down, near the end of the busy street.

It was a weathered building with a faded sign and dusty windows. It wasn't exactly the picture of a thriving business, but then again, none of the businesses in town looked like they were raking in the big bucks.

The door creaked as I pushed it open, revealing an empty reception area with buzzing lighting. Blueprints were scattered across the counter, and the air smelled of sawdust and coffee.

"Hello?" I called, approaching the desk with a little bell.

Before I could tap the little button, footsteps boomed from the open office just behind the desk. A man stepped out, wiping his hands on a shop rag as he looked up.

It was him. The man from the woods. Oh, fuck.

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Chapter Four

His bright blue eyes widened slightly in recognition, and I felt my body tense, ready to bolt for the door. He looked different in the light, a little less menacing perhaps, dressed in a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing muscular forearms dusted with sawdust. But there was no mistaking that face, the strong jaw now set in a hard line as he stared at me.

“Um,” I stammered, my voice coming out stronger than I expected. “Hi, I’m Everly Montana, and I just moved to town. I heard you’re hiring?”

The silence between us crackled with tension, and I wondered if I’d made a terrible mistake coming here. I should have just backed out of the office without uttering a single word instead of pretending I had no idea who he was. It was painfully obvious he wasn’t fooled.

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat. “We filled that position two weeks ago.”

I cocked my head, looking at the empty space behind the desk. “I see. Looks like that’s going well.”

At least he was playing along instead of getting in my face and confronting me about snooping on his private conversation. He felt it was better to just lie to get me to leave.

“The teenager I hired hasn’t shown up for the last three shifts,” he said, running his hand through his brown hair. “It would be an understatement to say it’s not going as

well as I'd hoped."

I waved my hand. "Sorry, I bothered you. It's just that I'm new to town and am looking for work."

"Really?" he said, stuffing a rag into his back pocket. He stuck out his hand. "I'm Ryder Black, the owner of this company, and I'd be glad to take down your information. What are your qualifications?"

"With all due respect, are you seriously concerned I won't be as qualified as the teenager you hired?" I asked, raising a brow.

"Sorry," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets. "It's a habit to ask."

I waved a hand in the air as if brushing away his words. "It's fine. I was a Senior Marketing Director at one of Chicago's top luxury real estate firms."

"Uh," Ryder said, his eyes narrowing. "So just barely qualified then."

I laughed as I looked around the small office. "Yeah, I used to sell perfect lives to the fabulously wealthy. Looks like that's what you do here, too."

"I certainly can't match that kind of sal?—"

"Oh, no," I said, shaking my head. "I wasn't thinking I'd earn... I mean, it's just... I'm looking for something... else."

Ryder blinked twice before moving back behind the desk. He pulled open a drawer and extracted a single sheet of paper.

"I don't know if I'm going to hire someone new or not, but you're welcome to fill

this out,” Ryder said, handing me the form. “It’s not like we get a lot of applicants.”

I took the paper, giving it a quick once-over. The application was simple, clearly designed for someone not too serious about their career.

“Thanks,” I said, folding it carefully and slipping it into my purse. “I appreciate it.”

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. The sawdust on his forearms caught the light streaming in from the window, making him look almost ethereal for a moment. The image didn’t match the hard man I’d seen the other night.

“You don’t happen to know of anywhere else that might be hiring, do you?” I asked, folding the paper.

“Not really,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll let you know if I hear of anything.”

“That’s kind of you,” I said, offering him a professional smile. “Nice meeting you.”

“Have a good day, Ms. Montana,” he said, his voice neutral but his eyes watchful.

“You too, Mr. Black.”

I turned and walked out of the office with what I hoped was casual confidence. As I crossed the gravel parking lot toward my car, the hair on the back of my neck prickled. I didn’t need to turn around to know he was watching me from the window. I could feel his gaze tracking my every move as I got into my car and pulled away from Black’s Construction.

Only when I turned onto the main road did I start breathing normally again. Whatever game Ryder Black was playing, I wasn’t sure I wanted to be part of it. What the hell was the owner of a construction company doing out in the middle of the woods

arguing with a twitchy man, anyway?

Never mind!

I didn't want to know.

Not my business, and I sure as hell didn't want to involve myself.

I drove directly from the construction office to the small grocery store just off the main road. One good thing about the small town was that it wasn't hard to find anything.

It was a huge mistake stopping at Black Construction, but if I had known he'd be there, I would have never stepped foot inside. Now, it just seemed to him that I was stalking him.

Ew. No.

I pulled into a parking space at the grocery store, my mind still stuck on Ryder. As much as I wanted to dismiss him as just another small-town jerk with a chip on his shoulder, I couldn't deny there was something kind of magnetic about him.

His beautiful blue eyes had an intelligence behind them, set perfectly on a face that could have been sculpted — all sharp angles and strong lines. There was no denying he was strong with his broad shoulders and those muscular biceps. Construction work clearly had its benefits.

But good looks only went so far, and whatever appeal his physical appearance held was seriously undermined by what I'd witnessed in the woods. A man who was that angry, that intimidating, clearly had issues I didn't need in my life.

Though, oddly enough, in the office, he'd been almost civil — gruff and suspicious, but not the menacing figure I'd seen that night. It was like meeting two different people wearing the same face, which only made him more unsettling.

Attractive? Unfortunately, yes. Worth the trouble that seemed to follow him like a shadow? Absolutely not.

Not that I was even thinking about anything like that. Ryder was another man I would never have any interest in. He was just like the city guys, only he was dressed differently and ruggedly handsome instead of that manicured, groomed look.

Ugh.

My goal now was simple. I'd stock up on enough supplies to minimize future trips into town. I had enough savings that I didn't need to find a job immediately. Maybe I'd be able to find something I could do from home, and I'd never have to run into him again.

The market was quaint — just ten long aisles with worn linoleum floors and a perpetual smell of cinnamon that seemed to originate from nowhere in particular. I pushed my cart methodically down each aisle, grabbing essentials: coffee, pasta, canned goods, fresh produce, toilet paper, and enough chocolate to get me through at least two weeks of unpacking, arranging, and decorating.

“You must be the new girl,” the elderly cashier said as she slowly rang up my items.

“That would be me,” I said, forcing a weak smile. “Unless you get a lot of people moving here.”

“Oh, no,” she said with a laugh. “More people leave this town than they settle here.”

I glanced at the young bagger, whose eyes widened. “That’s hard to believe.”

“Yes, yes,” the woman said, her head bobbing along with the beeping scanner. “Not sure why anyone would want to leave. It’s just so peaceful here.”

“It’s because there’s nothing to do here, grandma,” the young man said, rolling his eyes.

She pressed her lips together. “One-Seventy-Nine and twenty-three cents. But that’s what makes this place so wonderful.” I paid with my card, and she patted my hand. “You’ll love it here. You’ll see. Everyone is kind, and nothing to worry about here.”

“Good to hear,” I said, putting the last bag in my cart.

“Have a good day, sweetie,” she said, handing me a receipt.

“You too.”

Back at home, I unloaded the groceries, organizing everything in the small kitchen. Once finished, I pulled the folded job application from my purse, staring at it for a moment before crumpling it up and tossing it into the trash can with perhaps more force than necessary.

Working for Ryder Black was absolutely the last thing I needed right now, especially after witnessing whatever shady business he was involved in. It wasn’t like I needed to find a job immediately, since I had enough savings to last at least a year, especially if I was frugal. Maybe I’d be able to find a work-from-home position, so I’d never have to bump into that guy again.

With a deep breath, I turned my attention back to the half-dozen boxes still waiting to be unpacked in the living room. As I opened the boxes, I pushed away thoughts of

those dark eyes fixed on me. I came to this remote little town to escape complications, not to find new ones. Whatever Ryder was mixed up in, it had nothing to do with me, and that's exactly how it was going to stay.

I was putting away a stack of dishes when a sharp knock at the door made me jolt... the plates clicking together loudly. I froze, listening. The sound had felt jarring in the quiet house.

I walked across the floor and peered out through the curtained window beside the door. The porch appeared empty — just the wooden railing and steps leading down to the gravel driveway, no car in sight.

Twilight was settling in, painting the trees with long shadows. Strange. I let the curtain fall back into place, wondering if I'd imagined it.

Then it came again, three distinct raps, unmistakable this time. My pulse quickened as I glanced around for something I could use as a weapon, settling on an umbrella propped by the coat rack. So much for the cashier's promise about this town being perfectly safe.

Nothing was ever really safe.

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Chapter Five

“Hello?” a sweet, soft voice called out like a bird chirping in the morning. “Anyone home?”

I opened the door to find a petite woman with bouncy blonde hair and bright green eyes standing on my doorstep. She held a plate piled high with chocolate chip cookies and wore a smile that seemed to light up her entire face.

“Hi!” she said, thrusting the plate toward me with such enthusiasm I had to step back to avoid being hit. “Welcome to the neighborhood. I meant to stop by yesterday, but time got away from me, and then it was nine and I figured that would be too late.”

“Hi,” I said, glancing past her to the empty street, unable to tell where she’d come from. I accepted the plate of cookies that would last me at least a week. “And thanks.”

She turned, following my gaze to the junk yard house across the street. Her eyes widened, and she waved vaguely down the road.

“Oh, no,” she said, letting out a melodic sound that matched her appearance. “I’m Courtney. Courtney Cross. I live a mile down the road... not in that house.”

“I’m Everly, and I wasn’t sure if anyone lived in that place,” I said, still looking at the house.

“Believe it or not, someone does live there,” Courtney said, blinking several times.

“That guy, though, he keeps to himself. Barely ever see him come and go, other than his truck going up and down the road once in a while during the night. It’s a loud old piece of junk. Never really sure where he’s going, though. Pretty sure he’s retired.”

I set the cookies down on the table beside the door. “Um, well, I’d invite you in, but the place is an absolute disaster.”

Also, I didn’t want to let a stranger into my home.

“That’s okay,” she said, twisting her fingers. “I know you’re busy and stuff, and I didn’t mean to intrude. I really just wanted to say hi and let you know I’m just down that way, should you need anything.” She grimaced, her nose wrinkling. “I’m sorry. I know I can come off strong. I just talk a lot when I’m nervous.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be nervous.”

“Are you kidding? Look at you!”

I cocked my head.

“Gosh darn. I’m so sorry,” Courtney said, taking a step back. “I also sometimes just say what I’m thinking when I shouldn’t. It’s kind of a real problem, but I’m not really sure there is anything I can do about it, you know? Really, though, you’re absolutely gorgeous. It’s like you have it all together.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry about it, and I wish that were true. If I had it together, I probably wouldn’t have moved away.”

“That’s a story, isn’t it?” she asked, raising a brow before quickly holding up her hands. “Sorry again! I’m being nosy.”

“It’s okay, really,” I said, glancing back into my messy house. “It’s not much of a story, really. I just needed a change. Chicago was getting too... um... much.”

Her eyes widened. “Chicago. Gosh, I can imagine. I visited once and was so anxious that I didn’t leave the hotel room. That place is busy. Insane. So much going on. I like it here, and you will too.”

“How long have you lived here?” I asked.

“Born and raised,” she said, proudly pushing her shoulders back. “Left for college but couldn’t stand that, dropped out, and moved back. There’s just something about this place that gets in your blood. Or something. I can’t imagine being anywhere else, even though I don’t know how I’ll ever find a husband when the pickings here are somewhat slim. There is a bar not too far and a club in the other direction, but as you might have noticed, I’m not really good at the whole social thing.”

I smiled at her, and she seemed to relax for a second before tensing her shoulders. She looked down at her phone and powered it on.

“Oh, shoot,” she said, sighing. “I should go. I just wanted to say hi and meet the person who moved into Old Man Harrison’s place.”

“Thanks again for the cookies,” I said, placing my hand on the door.

She turned but glanced back over her shoulder. “This is stupid, but I can’t stop myself from saying it. I have a feeling we’re going to be good friends, Everly.” Her smile was infectious. “Feel free to stop by anytime, like if you need a cup of flour or sugar... oh! Maybe we could do lunch sometime? There is a diner not far that serves the best cheeseburger in a hundred-mile radius. You’ll love it.”

“May’s?”

“That’s the place!”

“Had it today.”

Courtney seemed to deflate slightly. “Oh.”

“Well, maybe sometime. It was a good burger,” I said, not committing. I wanted my solitude, but telling her that would clearly break her heart. “I should get back to unpacking, and eventually I’ll have to find a job.”

“Oh! I heard Black’s Construction is hiring.”

I shook my head. “I checked. Pretty sure that position’s been filled.”

“Aw, bummer,” Courtney said, puffing out her bottom lip. “Too bad, though. Every single woman in a hundred-mile radius would kill to work for Ryder Black. I don’t get it, though.”

“What do you mean?”

She leaned in. “Everyone thinks he’s just the best thing since sliced bread. Sure, he’s attractive, but he’s just so... um... tall.”

“Tall, yeah,” I said.

“Like, even if I were twice as tall as I am, I’m not sure I’d even reach his shoulders. Anyway,” Courtney said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. “I’ll see you around, right?”

“Sure.”

“I’m just down the road, okay?”

I gave her a quick nod. “Okay. Thanks for stopping by.”

I closed the door after her, leaning back against it. The cookies on the side table called my name, and I grabbed one, biting down into the still-warm gooeyness.

“Oh,” I said, closing my eyes.

It was utterly divine, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d said about Ryder. Every single woman would kill to work for him, but I bet if they’d met him in the woods surrounded by wolves, they’d feel differently.

But that was not my problem, and I really needed to stop thinking about it. I grabbed another cookie and headed back to my unpacking. At least one person in this town seemed mostly normal and friendly. That was something.

I’d barely closed the door behind Courtney when my phone started buzzing. Annie’s name flashed across the screen, and I sighed, letting it go to voicemail.

After meeting the overly enthusiastic neighbor, stopping at May’s Diner, and the uncomfortable meeting with Ryder, I just didn’t have the energy. Sorry, Annie. I knew she, of all people, would understand.

And besides, I didn’t want to talk to her because I might break down and tell her that I thought I might have made a mistake moving to Birchwood Hollow. Hearing her beg me to move back wasn’t what I needed right now, because I’d probably jump in my car and drive back.

I grabbed another one of Courtney’s cookies — they really were incredible — and continued unpacking boxes and putting things away. The sun had already set, making

shadows in the living room deeper than anything I'd ever seen in Chicago.

In the city, lights were everywhere. Out here, it was all darkness. The quiet was almost too much after all the years of city noise. There were no distant sirens or neighbors shouting at one another through thin walls and no constant hum of traffic... just complete, unsettling silence.

"This is what you wanted, Everly," I said, sucking in a breath as I walked around the house, turning on every light I could find.

After another hour of half-hearted unpacking, I decided to call it a day. I dug through a box labeled "BEDROOM" until I found my sheets and comforter. All I wanted was to crawl under the covers with my book and forget about everything.

Clear my head.

That's why I was here.

As I tucked in the last corner of my fitted sheet, Dean's warning about locking up echoed in my mind. Because of where I used to live, locking doors was an automatic thing. Still, I checked them nonetheless.

I walked through the house, checking each window latch and testing the front and back doors. I peeked out the back window, staring off toward the pitch black woods where I'd first run into Ryder.

He'd been scary and intimidating when we met in the woods, but he was a business owner in this small town. It wasn't like he was going to try to break into my house to threaten or interrogate me.

I shook my head and checked the door again, and with everything locked up tight, I

changed into my pajamas, brushed my teeth, and slipped into bed. The mattress felt like heaven after the long day. I opened my book — a thriller I'd only started a week ago — and tried to lose myself in the pages.

The quiet made it easy to concentrate, at least until my thoughts kept drifting back to Ryder standing in the woods, tall and imposing, with the wolves coming out from behind the trees. He hadn't even been scared. What kind of person has wild animals that are comfortable around them?

I was just starting to get absorbed in my book again when I heard it.

A howl.

Long, mournful, and much closer than I was comfortable with. I froze, my finger marking my place on the page as I listened. The sound came again, joined by another, then another — a chorus of wolves calling to each other in the darkness surrounding my house.

Another howl, this one sounded as though it were near the back of the house. I turned to the window, the bright full moon lighting up the sky through the curtains. It felt like I was being watched.

I swallowed hard, my voice soft. "Go away."

Chapter Six

I set my book down and pulled the covers up higher, telling myself there was nothing to worry about. They were just animals doing what animals do. The howls continued, like they were having some kind of midnight conversation right in my backyard.

I reached over and turned off my bedside lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Somehow, it felt safer not to advertise my presence, even though that was ridiculous. I lay still, listening to the wolves, wondering if one of them was the same animal that had stood next to Ryder in the woods.

It was probably something that happened when you lived out in the boonies, but it was definitely not something I was used to. In the city, you heard cars and horns, out here, I guess it was crickets, owls, and wolves.

The howling continued, sometimes sounding like it was right outside my window, other times fading into the distance. I pulled my pillow over my head, but it did little to muffle the noise.

Tomorrow, I'd stop by Courtney's place and ask her about the wildlife. If she'd lived here her whole life, she'd know what it was all about and whether I needed to worry.

My eyelids finally grew heavy around three in the morning when the howling tapered off. I drifted into an uneasy sleep, dreaming of glowing eyes watching me through the trees.

The warm spring morning sunlight streamed through my curtains, pulling me from a

deep sleep. I groaned and rolled over, glancing at my phone. Nine thirty and I was still tired. It was also a lot later than I'd planned to wake up, but after last night's wildlife concert, I needed the extra sleep.

I dragged myself out of bed and shuffled into the living room to tackle the last few boxes before heading to Courtney's house. By eleven, I'd finally emptied everything, broken down the boxes, and stacked them by the door. My new house was officially unpacked, but I still had a lot to put away. At least, for the most part, it felt like home.

I grabbed one of Courtney's cookies for my early lunch and headed out the door. The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of pine and fresh wildflowers. Since the weather was more than pleasant, I decided to walk instead of driving the mile to her place.

Her house was easy to find since it was the only other house on the stretch of country road. It was a normal white two-story building with the most whimsical yard I'd ever seen. Cute lawn ornaments were scattered everywhere — cheerful garden gnomes, spinning flowers, a plastic flamingo, and more. Near one of the trees stood a black silhouette of Sasquatch, positioned as if he were trying to hide.

I walked up the stone path to her front door and knocked. A moment later, the door swung open to reveal a small boy with Courtney's green eyes and a mop of light brown hair. He looked about four or five, if I had to guess.

"Mommy!" he called over his shoulder. "There's a stranger at the door!"

"Mason!" Courtney scolded as she appeared behind him. "What have I told you about opening the door?"

"She knocked," the boy said with wide eyes.

Courtney gently pulled him back, but smiled when she saw it was me. “Oh, Everly! Hello! I didn’t expect a visit so soon. It kind of seemed as though maybe I was bothering you when I stopped by. I’m pretty good at reading people.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for disturbing you this early.”

“Early?” Courtney said, looking down at the boy. “I’ve been up since five. This is not early.”

“Well, sorry for dropping by unannounced.”

Courtney waved her hand in the air. “Are you kidding? I invited you... I said anytime, remember? I’m so glad to see you. It’s been quite a busy day here already, and I need to talk with an adult.” She looked down at the boy again. “No offense, Mason.”

He stared at me without blinking.

“Mason, this is Miss Everly from down the road. She just moved in and now she’s our neighbor,” Courtney said, a smile brightening her face. “She’s not a stranger, okay? She’s our friend. Well, at least I hope she will be. Oh, gosh. I’m doing it again.”

“Mommy, you are good at talking,” the boy said, his head bobbing.

“Nice to meet you, Mason,” I said, shocked at how easily I went from stranger to friend.

In Chicago, no mother would tell their child a neighbor they’d just met wasn’t a stranger. I wasn’t even sure it was a good idea out here in the middle of nowhere.

“Come in, come in!” Courtney sang as she stepped back. “Please, make yourself at home and forgive the mess. We played with blocks, then colored, drove cars, and were going to settle in for a TV show with our lunch. Would you like something to eat?” Her nose wrinkled. “It’s just mac and cheese. Although I have coffee. Want coffee?”

“Coffee would be great, but I can’t stay long,” I said, following her into the kitchen. The floor plan was open, and she could see Mason on the couch from behind the kitchen counter. “Wow, this is nice.”

“Thanks,” she said, pouring coffee into a to-go cup. “It was remodeled like four years ago. I have these handy to-go cups for when I had to rush off with Mason and needed my morning coffee. Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat? Do you take cream? Sugar?”

I shook my head. “Really, I only stopped by to ask you about the area. And black, please.”

She handed me the cup and eyed me as I took a sip. “Too cold? I could pop it in the microwave?—”

“It’s fine, thank you.”

“What did you want to ask me?” she asked, leaning back against the counter.

I let out a quick breath. “This is probably going to sound weird, but like, did you hear those wolves last night? It sounded like there were a lot of them. Is that normal for this area?”

“Oh!” Courtney’s face lit with recognition. “You heard them, huh? They can get pretty vocal some nights. I guess you are a lot closer to the woods than I am over

here, but we hear them some night, too.”

“And you’re not worried about it?” I asked, glancing toward her son.

“Not at all. They hang out in the woods behind your place. I think they like to be near that lake or something,” Courtney said, turning to the stove to scoop some mac and cheese onto a blue plastic plate. “It’s been like this my whole life. Just more wildlife out here in the country. Nothing to worry about. I mean, I wouldn’t let Mason play outside at night alone, but I wouldn’t do that even without the wolves.”

She brought the plate to Mason and set it down on the coffee table. “Thank you, mommy,” he said, smiling up at her. “Can I have yogurt too? And a banana?”

“Sure,” she said, placing a kiss on his head. She was smiling as she came back into the kitchen and collected the requested items. “His eyes are bigger than his stomach. What were we talking about? Oh yeah, the wolves.” She took out a knife and started chopping the bananas into discs. “They’re mostly harmless, really. Just big dogs. They don’t like being around humans. I mean, I wouldn’t recommend going to the lake at midnight, but Old Man Harrison lived in that house for as long as I can remember and never once had a problem with them. There were rumors that he used to feed them, and that’s why they hang out in those woods, but I doubt that’s true.”

“Mommy? Juice!” Mason shouted from the living room. “Please?”

“Sure, honey. Just a minute, okay?” She turned back to me. “The wolves really keep to themselves. Some locals even consider them protectors of the town, believe it or not. I like to think that’s true, too.”

I frowned. “The real estate agent never mentioned anything about a wolf pack living in my backyard.”

“Probably because they’re not actually living there,” Courtney said, flicking her eyes to me. “Did you actually see one in your yard?”

“No, but it sounded like they were?—”

“Well, there you go,” she said, bringing the rest of her son’s meal to the coffee table. “They will leave you alone. I know they will. They just sound closer than they are. Try to think of them as protectors.”

I nodded and took another sip of coffee. “Sounded like they were just outside my window.”

“They won’t come onto your property,” Courtney said, coming back into the kitchen.

My eyes narrowed. “Well, they could.”

“They’re probably more afraid of you than you are of them,” she said, turning to the counter to wipe it down with a clean towel. “Really, they’ll respect your boundaries. I bet you won’t actually even see one.”

Mason dropped his juice box, sending red liquid across the tile floor. He stood facing the kitchen with wide eyes.

“Oops,” Courtney sighed, grabbing a dishcloth. “The joys of motherhood. Good thing I got that stain-resistant carpet when I had this redone. It’s not perfect, but I bet you can’t find where he spilled the last juice box.”

I watched Courtney kneel to clean up Mason’s spill, feeling a bit like I was intruding on their family time. She seemed so certain about the wolves, but her confidence didn’t completely erase my unease.

“I should probably get going,” I said, holding up my cup. “Thanks for the coffee and the chat.”

“You’re leaving?” Mason asked, looking up from his mac and cheese with wide eyes.

“I am, but it was nice to meet you,” I told him with a smile.

Mason turned to his mom. “Can she stay and watch the cartoon with me?”

Courtney stood, tossing the wet cloth into the sink. “Sorry, baby, Everly is very busy today.”

“Maybe another time,” I said, giving him a smile. He just stared at me, but it wasn’t surprising since I wasn’t very good with kids.

“Seriously,” Courtney said, drying her hands on her shirt. “You don’t need to worry about the wolves. If anything, they’re good to have around. They keep the more dangerous predators away from the area. I know it’s probably a lot different from where you lived before, but there were probably other things you had to worry about there. It’s safe here. You’ll like it. I know you will.”

I paused at the door. “I suppose that’s true, but what do you mean by other predators?”

Courtney stared at me for a long moment, something flickering behind her eyes. “Oh, bears, I guess.” Her hesitation made me wonder if she’d been about to say something else. She shook her head slightly and waved her hand as her bright smile returned. “Thanks so much for stopping by. It’s so nice having another woman in the neighborhood. Please come back again whenever. My aunt babysits for my son a lot while I work, so he’s over there sometimes while I bake. I don’t know why I told you that. Say goodbye to our new friend, Mason.”

“Goodbye, lady,” Mason called without turning from the screen.

“I don’t let him watch TV all day,” Courtney said, noticing he’d turned into a little zombie. “Just while we eat, so I can get a little cleaning done.”

“Perfectly understandable,” I said, drawing in a breath. “I’d do the same. Have a good rest of your day.”

Courtney stepped up to the door and held it for me. “You too. Really, it was great of you to stop by.”

I waved and headed back out onto the road, the sun overhead burning down mercilessly on the top of my head. I was about halfway home when a truck came barreling down the narrow road, forcing me to jump toward the ditch. It roared past, kicking up a cloud of dust that hit me right in the face. I coughed, squinting through watery eyes at the receding vehicle.

Black Construction. Of course.

I raised my middle finger. “Asshole!”

Good thing I threw away that application because now there was no way in hell I’d get that job. His loss. Bastard should look where he’s going.

Chapter Seven

I flinched as the truck's tires skidded to a halt, dust swirling in the air as the engine revved in reverse. My heart was still stuck in my throat when he parked and hopped out of the cab, his boots hitting the gravel with a crunch.

"Hey," he called out, walking toward me. "Are you okay?"

He hesitated when he realized it was me standing there, staring at him. My mouth dropped open, but I couldn't think of what I wanted to say. Did I want to yell at him? Did I want to tell him I was fine? Did I want to tell him to get the fuck away from me?

He shook his head, pushing his hand through his thick hair. "I didn't see you there... my mind is on other shit. I am so sorry about that. I didn't mean to?"

"Attempt to murder me?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he said, glancing back at his truck. "I wasn't that close."

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to look more composed than I felt. "You nearly turned me into roadkill, Mr. Black." My voice came out steadier than I expected, considering my knees were still wobbly from the near-miss.

"That's a bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?" he asked, looking genuinely apologetic. It was just too bad the big ass rubbed me the wrong way.

“It’s... whatever,” I said, shaking my head as I started away from him toward my house.

“Let me give you a ride home. It’s the least I can do,” he offered as he followed a few steps behind me.

I let out a short laugh. “No offense, but I feel safer walking than getting in a big truck with someone who doesn’t pay attention to where he’s going. Kids live out here, you know.”

“To be fair, people aren’t usually out walking on country roads,” he said, his eyebrows drawing together. “Adults or children.”

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t watch where you’re going,” I fired back. “There could be animals, other vehicles... or whatever. Apparently, there is a lot of wildlife out here.”

“You’re right,” Ryder said, shoulders slumping a bit. “I’m sorry. Really, I am.”

For a moment, I almost believed him.

“Look,” I said, letting out a breath. “Just go. You’re a busy man and all that. I’m covered in dust, and I swallowed a pebble, but I’m fine.”

“You did not,” he said, stepping in front of me. He looked me up and down, as if making sure I was still in one piece.

“You don’t know if I did or not,” I said, cocking my head and staring him right in his sparkling blue eyes.

I tensed as Ryder reached out, his calloused fingers lightly touching my cheek. He

brushed a bit of dirt away, his touch unexpectedly gentle for hands that looked as rough as his.

“Dirt,” he said softly as if the one word explained everything.

The moment his skin connected with mine, something like electricity shot through me, starting at my face and racing down my spine. I couldn’t move, breathe, or think of anything except the warmth of his fingertips against my skin. Our eyes locked, and for a moment, the whole world narrowed to just us standing there on that dusty road.

It seemed like Ryder felt it, too. He quickly jerked his hand away like he’d been burned and took a quick step back. Ryder looked out toward the woods as he cleared his throat.

“Are you absolutely sure I can’t give you a ride home?” he asked, his voice rougher than before. “It’s the least I can do after nearly turning you into road kill, right?”

“I’m fine,” I said with an edge to my voice as I fought to regain my composure. “I’m almost back anyway.” I gestured vaguely in the direction of my house, trying to ignore the lingering warmth on my cheek where he’d touched me. “I wouldn’t want to keep you from the fire you were rushing to put out.”

Ryder let out a genuine laugh, the sound surprisingly warm and rich. It caught me off guard how it transformed his face, softening the hard lines around his mouth, making him seem almost... likeable for a second.

My gaze dropped to my shirt, and I noticed the large brown stain setting in the middle. I shot a look back at the road where my coffee cup lay on its side at the edge of the gravel.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered. “I dropped my coffee.”

Ryder winced, rubbing the back of his neck. “Shit. I am so sorry. Really. I hope it washes out.”

“I’m not worried about the shirt,” I said, peeling it away from my skin. “I’m worried about the lack of caffeine.” I stared longingly at my empty cup. “That was my one good thing today.”

He laughed again... the sound doing strange things to my stomach, which I refused to acknowledge. As quickly as it appeared, his laughter vanished with a darting look toward the woods. His entire body tensed like a predator sensing danger.

“I’m sorry again,” he said distractedly, as he backed away toward his truck. “For everything.”

Before I could respond, he was jogging back to his truck. He jumped in with surprising agility for a man his size, the engine roaring to life. Within seconds, his truck was disappearing down the road, leaving me standing there with dust settling around me and coffee soaked through my shirt.

I looked toward the trees but only saw shadows between the pines and birch trees. Perhaps he was late for a meeting or something and just remembered.

I spent the rest of the day trying to make my new house feel even more like a home. I arranged the furniture and found places for everything I’d taken with me from my apartment. By evening, the place was starting to look like someone actually lived here instead of a storage unit with a bed.

After a quick dinner, I double-checked all the windows and doors, worried about what Ryder had seen in the woods that made him flee so quickly. Then again, I’d seen him out at night surrounded by wolves, and that hadn’t fazed him in the slightest.

Living alone in the country was different from my apartment in the city. Every creak and groan of the house settling made me jump. I wasn't used to the symphony of night sounds that drifted in from the surrounding woods — crickets chirping, leaves rustling, and occasional animal calls that I couldn't identify.

I was starting to miss the hustle and bustle of noisy city life, but I couldn't go back. Everyone would say, "I told you so," and that was the last thing I wanted to hear, even though my boss said I was welcome back when I realized I was making a huge mistake.

I settled into my bed and made a mental note to get some better curtains for the bedroom windows. Really thick ones that would block out the morning light and block anyone from looking into my bedroom. Not that there would be anyone out here trying to look into my room.

Ugh! I was seriously losing it.

I fell asleep faster than I expected, probably from the exhaustion of the day's work and the lack of sleep over the last couple of days. It was the best sleep I'd gotten since I'd arrived, which I hoped meant I was getting used to the place.

It was morning when the rumble of an engine pulled me from sleep. I blinked at the ceiling, disoriented for a moment before I registered that the sounds of tires on gravel weren't in my dream. By the time I scrambled out of bed and made it to the window, I caught only the retreating tailgate of a familiar truck pulling away from my driveway.

"What the hell?" I muttered, pushing my tangled hair from my face.

I made my way to the front door, peering cautiously through the curtains before opening the door.

There, sitting on my welcome mat, was a large cup of coffee with steam streaming out of the small opening. Beside it was a small paper bag with the top folded over. I looked up and down the road, but Ryder's truck was long gone.

I picked up the coffee and bag, bringing them inside before closing the door with my hip. The rich aroma of fresh coffee filled my kitchen as I set everything on the counter.

Opening the bag, I found a handful of coffee creamers and sugar packets, obviously swiped from his office break room. Underneath them was something else. I pulled out the fabric, shaking it to reveal a T-shirt with "Black Construction" emblazoned across the front in bold white letters.

A replacement for my coffee-stained shirt. And a fresh coffee to make up for the one I'd lost.

I felt a smile tugging at my lips before I shook my head. Coffee and a free T-shirt weren't going to change my mind about him, but nonetheless, I'd accept the caffeine.

I sipped the coffee, which was surprisingly good — strong and rich, just how I liked it. After a moment's hesitation, I reached for the t-shirt. It was soft and smelled like the construction office, but it was clean. I held it up against me — a bit large, but it would do.

After a quick shower, I tugged on a pair of shorts and the Black Construction shirt since I didn't have plans to leave the property. It hung loose, almost to mid-thigh, so I tied it in a knot at my waist.

I caught myself in the mirror and rolled my eyes. The irony of wearing his company logo after he'd nearly flattened me wasn't lost on me.

I grabbed my paperback and my coffee to sit out on the front porch and enjoy the peace and quiet I'd supposedly moved out here for. The morning air was crisp with just enough chill to make the hot coffee feel perfect between my palms. Birds were singing, bugs were buzzing, and there wasn't a car horn or siren for miles. The calming, sweet, floral scent of flowers filled the breeze, and I sighed. I had to admit, the countryside had its perks.

I settled into one of the chairs, propping my bare feet on the porch railing, and cracked open my book. I'd just found my place when movement caught my eye.

A woman in bright purple leggings and a very unmatching neon green windbreaker was power-walking down the road. She was pumping her arms like she was racing for an Olympic gold medal.

She waved, and it took a second for me to recognize Sheila from the diner. Her white hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, barely holding half of her curls back.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?" she called.

I lifted my coffee mug in greeting, figuring she'd continue marching on by. Instead, she made a sharp turn up my driveway and toward the house.

Great. So much for my quiet morning.

I kept my book open as she approached the porch, hoping she'd take the hint. The woman wasn't even out of breath as she marched in place on my front lawn.

"Already settling in like a local, huh?" she said, her eyes dropping to my shirt. "Did you get the job?"

I shook my head. "He hired someone else."

“Oh, well, I thought of you last night when Steven Perkins stopped by the diner,” Sheila said, still marching.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know who that is.”

“Right,” she said, pumping her fists. “He owns the bar just outside of town and needed help tending the bar tonight, which I can’t do. I guess Laura can’t make it or something, and with it being a Friday, he plans on it being busy, busy, busy.”

I narrowed my eyes. “The bar scene is not really my thing.”

“Oh, no,” she said, shaking her head. “I thought maybe you could help out. He pays real good.”

I blinked, taken aback. “I... I don’t know if I’m looking for?—”

“Before you say no, it’s just for the night. Cash,” she added with a sharp nod. “It’s really easy too. No one orders anything fancy. Pretty much only beer, really, and you won’t be alone. Donna Waterson and Paul Meyers will be there too.”

“I wish I could say that makes me feel better, but I don’t know them either,” I said, pressing my lips together into a thin smile.

Sheila dug into her jacket pocket. She came closer and handed me a business card. “I promise you, it’ll be worth it. Can I tell him to expect your call?”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:13 am

Chapter Eight

“I hope I don’t regret this, but sure,” I said, setting the card inside my book.

“You won’t! Trust me,” Sheila said, backing away. “I’d do it if I could. The Mister and I want a new fridge, but it’ll have to wait. I need to get moving. Have a good day now, okay?”

“You too,” I said, my shoulders dropping as she turned away.

I tucked the card between the pages of my book and immediately felt a pang of regret. Why couldn’t I just say no? It wasn’t like I needed the money right this second, and the thought of that bar scene made me cringe internally. All those people, the noise, the chaos — it would be absolutely dreadful.

I sighed, watching Sheila’s retreating form. She seemed so excited about this opportunity she was passing my way, like she was doing me some grand favor. Probably in her mind, she was.

A new set of chairs for the porch would be nice. Maybe a swing even. The chairs left behind by the previous owner were far from comfortable, and I did hope to spend more time outside enjoying nature. I could use some new clothes, too. Everything I owned was too... well, too nice for all the dirt and bugs in the country.

Still, none of it was worth subjecting myself to whatever rowdy nightmare awaited me at the bar. Maybe I could still back out.

I went inside, my head buzzing with conflicted thoughts. The card felt like it was burning a hole in my book. I pulled it out and tapped the number on my phone.

It rang once. “Steven.”

The voice was gruff but not unfriendly.

“Hi, this is Everly Montana. Sheila from May’s Diner gave me your card,” I said, using my business voice. “She said you were in need of someone to help out at your bar tonight, but I wanted to let you know that?—”

“Ah, yes,” he said, sounding relieved. “Glad you called. I’m in a real bind. What kind of experience do you have?”

I swallowed hard, feeling a bit stunned. “Uh, well, none. So I understand if that’s a problem.”

“Nah, it’s as easy as pie,” he said, immediately dismissing my concerns. “You’ll learn. We’re not serving fancy cocktails or anything here.”

It was obvious I wasn’t going to be able to get out of it. I paced the floor, watching my feet move.

“Just gotta pour beers, maybe mix a Jack and Coke. Can you be here at seven sharp? I’ll show you around right quick before things pick up,” Steve said.

I hesitated for a moment. “What does it pay?”

“Right to the point, huh?” he said with a chuckle. “I like that.”

“Sorry,” I said with a sigh. “This was sort of sprung on me, so I have to move some

things around.”

The only thing I had to move around was what time I’d crawl into bed. But he didn’t need to know that.

“Sure thing. I really appreciate this. I can give you seven hundred for the night since I’m in such a jam.” He paused for a brief moment as if waiting for me to accept. “You can keep your tips, too.”

Seven hundred plus tips for one night of pouring beer was far better than I expected. That would easily cover new chairs and a porch swing.

“Directions?”

“I’ll text you the address.”

“I’ll see you at seven,” I heard myself say before I could change my mind.

“Perfect.” He hung up without further pleasantries.

I stood there with the phone in my hand, wondering what I’d just gotten myself into. Seven hundred dollars for one night of work was too good to pass up, not that he’d even given me a chance to come up with an excuse as to why I couldn’t do it.

Oh, well. I’d gotten through worse things in my life.

I spent the rest of the day trying not to think about my evening commitment and relax. Before I knew it, the afternoon had slipped away.

Standing in front of my closet, I surveyed my options. Most of my wardrobe consisted of tailored business attire, sweats, and pajamas.

I settled on a pair of dark jeans that I'd only worn a few times and a navy silk blouse. It didn't fit quite right, and I'd only bought it because Annie said it looked fabulous on me. I wouldn't be heartbroken if it got ruined.

I pulled my hair back into a simple but cute ponytail and applied minimal makeup. There was no sense in trying to impress anyone at a rural bar, and I certainly wasn't looking to attract any attention.

At 6:45, I grabbed my keys and my phone before heading out to my car. The evening air was brisk, carrying the scent of wild honeysuckle and lilac from somewhere nearby.

With the bar being on the outskirts of town, it didn't take as long to get there as it would have had I been going into town. I passed only two other vehicles on my way, which was somewhat comforting. Maybe the place wouldn't be as crowded as I feared. Then again, if it wasn't going to be busy, why would he need to have someone else come in to tend bar?

As I rounded the last curve, I caught sight of a building that resembled a house more than a commercial establishment. The parking area already contained a handful of vehicles, which probably belonged to the others I'd be working with. A sign reading "The Timber Tavern" hung over the entrance, while a neon light in the window simply flashed the word "Beer" over and over.

I pulled into an empty space off to the side, turned off the engine, and sucked in a deep breath. For some reason, I was more nervous about stepping into the bar than I had been going into a meeting with top executives for an important business meeting.

The difference was at my job in the city, I knew my shit. But out here, I had no idea, and I was sure everyone would notice.

“Seven hundred dollars,” I reminded myself aloud. “Plus tips.”

With a deep breath, I hid my purse under my seat and stepped out of the car. It was just one night... I could handle anything for one night.

I walked into the tavern, struck immediately by the woody scent of aged oak that had been soaked in beer. The interior was actually nicer than I'd expected — rustic but clean with a long bar running along one wall and scattered tables on the other side. It was clear that Mr. Perkins ran a successful business based on decor and how much he was offering to pay me.

Behind the bar stood a woman who could have stepped off the pages of a magazine. Her wavy red hair fell in glossy waves around her shoulders, and she moved with the kind of easy grace I'd always envied. She was wiping down the bar with practiced efficiency, looking up as the door closed behind me.

“Hey there,” she said, her smile warm. “What can I get for you?”

I smoothed my hands nervously over my jeans. “Actually, I'm Everly Montana. I'm supposed to be helping out Mr. Perkins tonight?”

“Oh,” she said, nodding. “You're the one who will be helping me tonight, huh?”

“That's me,” I said, pushing my shoulders back. “Not too busy?”

She shook her head. “Not yet, but it'll pick up.” The young woman, no more than twenty-five, wiped her hands on a towel and reached across the bar. “I'm Donna. Steven said he found someone, but he didn't mention it would be a woman.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, shaking her hand. “I should warn you that I have no idea what I'm doing.”

“Don’t worry about it. Friday nights can get pretty crazy, but it’s not like brain surgery or anything,” she said, turning toward the door. “Steven! Bartender is here.”

“Thanks,” I said, pressing my lips into a thin smile.

She waved a hand. “No problem. I’m just glad you’re not some guy who’s going to brush up against me all night. Or grab my ass.”

I opened my mouth to tell her she had nothing to worry about as far as those things were concerned, but the side door swung open. Steven, wearing a black polo and jeans, came out with an unreadable expression.

“Wasn’t sure if you’d show up,” he said, jerking his head toward Donna. “She’ll show you what to do, but let me give you a quick tour.”

“Sure,” I said, stuffing my hands into my pockets.

I followed Steven as he gave me a perfunctory tour of the small establishment. He pointed toward a hallway off the main room.

“Restrooms are down there. Men’s on the left, women’s on the right. Got a small kitchen in the back. Nothing fancy, we just serve basic bar food. Wings, fries, nachos, that sort of thing. Paul will handle that all himself tonight. You won’t need to worry about it except to maybe bring someone their order.”

“You just want me to make sure glasses stay full,” I said, jerking my chin back toward the bar.

“You learn quick,” he said with a half smile as he gestured toward another door. “That’s a storage room. Don’t go in there unless Donna tells you to get something specific.”

I followed him back to the bar, where a man in his fifties with a trucker hat sat. He glanced over at Steven and then at me before returning his attention to Donna as she set a bottle of beer down on a coaster.

Steven checked his watch and shook his head. "I gotta run, but I'll try to check in later tonight to see how things are going. But Donna could run this place, so she'll get you all up to speed."

"That's right. I probably deserve a raise," she confirmed with a grin, leaning forward and resting her hands on the bar counter. Her extremely low-cut top barely contained her generous cleavage. "It'll be fun."

"Not too much fun. Got a business to run here," Steven said, patting a hand on the man's shoulder. "You doing good, Bob?"

"Oh, yeah," the man said, taking a big gulp from his bottle. "Parked the semi in the yard and hopped in the pickup before my wife could make me do a single chore at home."

Steve laughed. "We're glad to have you. Invite her over."

"I'll think about it," Bob said, taking another drink that was probably at least half the bottle.

"All right, I gotta jet," Steven said, pointing to the bar. "Envelope in the register for you. Take it after we close tonight."

"Thanks," I said.

Steven nodded. "Appreciate the help on such short notice."

“Anytime,” I said, instantly wishing I could take it back.

Donna pushed herself away from the counter. “Let’s get you acquainted with everything. Come on back.”

I stepped behind the bar, feeling like I didn’t belong, as she pointed out the essentials.

“Beer taps are here. We’ve got six local brews and the usual domestics. Wine’s in this fridge, but no one ever orders that. Hard liquor up on these shelves, mixers down below. Glasses are underneath. Cash register’s pretty straightforward.”

She showed me how to operate the register, pointing out the envelope Steven left for me. Next, she showed me how to pour a proper draft beer and where to find the coasters or anything else I might need.

“Most folks order simple stuff,” she said, studying me.

“Okay,” I said, breathing as I wiped my hands on my jeans.

She laughed as she shook her head. “Don’t be nervous. You’ve got this. It’ll be beer, whiskey neat, and maybe a Jack and Coke here and there. Nothing that complicated. If someone orders something you don’t know, just call me over.”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” I said, biting my lip.

“You won’t be,” she said.

Just as she was about to show me where the napkins were stored, the front door swung open with a squeak. I looked up, instinctively straightening my posture.

“That’s Paul. He’ll run the kitchen,” Donna said, turning back to the napkins.

The man was tall with broad shoulders, dressed casually in a T-shirt with the bar's name printed in a small font on one side and his name on the other. He ran his fingers through his dark brown hair and looked up.

I froze as I realized I'd seen the man before... but where? A sharp jawline and those intense eyes... my mind raced, flipping through mental images until it landed on the right one.

Oh God. The woods.

Chapter Nine

Donna lightly touched my arm. “Let me introduce you real quick. Paul,” she said, leading me to the other side of the bar. “This is Everly. She’s helping us out tonight. Everly, Paul.”

Paul glanced up, his gaze flickering over me without any hint of recognition. His eyes were distant, like he was physically present but mentally somewhere else entirely.

“Hey,” he mumbled, giving a halfhearted nod before heading toward the kitchen. “Gotta get back there. A little late.”

“I see that,” Donna said, flicking a look at the clock above the shelves of booze.

I stood frozen as he went to the kitchen, and Donna went back behind the bar. There was no doubt in my mind that it was the man Ryder had been talking to in the woods. Did he really not recognize me, or was he just pretending?

“Everly,” Donna said, waving at me to join her. She arranged some glasses behind the counter, flashing me a quick look as I stepped up beside her. “Don’t take it personally. He’s been in a mood for a couple of weeks now.”

“Oh,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s fine.”

Before I could dwell on it further, the front door swung open and a group of four people walked in, laughing loudly. It almost seemed as though they’d already gotten a head start on the drinking for the night.

“Here we go,” Donna said with a wink.

The group settled at a table near the bar, and within an hour, The Timber Tavern transformed. What had been a quiet, almost empty space became a packed, rowdy establishment that seemed to defy the town’s small population. Country music blared from speakers in the corners, competing with dozens of overlapping conversations.

I struggled to hear orders over the noise, leaning so far forward that I nearly crawled across the bar-top.

“What was that?” I shouted for the third time to a man with a weathered face and a trucker cap.

“Jack and Coke!” he yelled back, holding up two fingers.

I nodded and turned to make the drinks. My hands had found a rhythm — pour, mix, serve — and I was starting to enjoy the fast pace. I was so busy I couldn’t think, and the tips jar was filling nicely too.

Donna worked the other end of the bar, her movements fluid and confident as she fielded multiple orders without missing a beat. Every so often, she’d check on me, offering a thumbs up or a smile when our eyes met.

It was after midnight when the door opened, and my stomach dropped. Ryder Black walked in with three other men, all built just like him — tall, broad-shouldered, and carrying themselves with the same confident swagger. It was probably his crew from the construction company, if I had to guess.

They claimed a table in the corner, and Ryder’s eyes locked with mine for a moment before he gave me a curt nod. I was too busy to even give him a nod back. Besides, for all I knew, it wasn’t even intended for me.

Thank God, when it came time to order, Ryder approached Donna's end of the bar. I pretended to be busy wiping down the counter, relief washing over me. I wasn't ready for another tense interaction with him and probably never would be.

Donna slid four beers across to him, exchanging a few friendly words I couldn't hear. Ryder glanced my way again before returning to his table, but I pretended not to notice.

Surely he was wondering what the hell I was doing there. But maybe not, considering he knew I'd been looking for work. Maybe he'd just assumed I'd found a job.

"Can I get another beer, sweeeetie?" a woman slurred as she leaned across the bar.

I wasn't sure when we were supposed to cut people off, but it seemed as though the woman had to be close. I shot a look toward Donna, who gave me a nod.

"Coming right up," I said, grabbing another of what she'd ordered last time.

Donna scooted closer, tapping her finger on the countertop as she looked the woman in the eyes. "Last one, Mabel."

"Oh, shoot. Already?" the woman said, looking up at the clock, her nose wrinkling as she squinted.

"Nurse it," Donna said, before going back to her side of the bar.

Ryder and his friends didn't linger. They downed their beers in what seemed like record time and headed for the door. As they left, I caught Ryder's eye one last time. Something unreadable passed across his face before he turned away and left the bar. This time it seemed as though he was the one pretending not to notice.

The night continued at its frantic pace. A group of women seated at a high-top table ordered a round of nachos and wings. I wrote the order down and placed it in the small window that connected to the kitchen.

“Order up,” I called, ringing the service bell.

No response.

I rang again, louder this time.

Nothing.

“Paul’s not answering,” I told Donna when she passed by with a tray of shots.

“Give me a sec,” she said, delivering the drinks before heading to the kitchen. She returned moments later, frowning. “He’s not back there.”

“Uh, what do we do?”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. He must have just stepped out for some air, or maybe he’s using the bathroom. I’ll get the wings started. Keep an eye on things, okay?”

I nodded, though my confidence wavered as three people approached, ready to order. I took a deep breath and plastered on a smile when all I wanted to do was crawl into my bed.

By the time Donna returned, I’d served six drinks and started a tab for a boisterous group that had just arrived, even though we were nearing closing time. I walked over to her and chewed my lip.

“Sorry, I didn’t know what to do,” I said, frowning.

She waved a hand. “It’s fine. A little more time to make some tips, right?”

“Right.”

“Oh, Paul’s back. He was just out back getting air like I thought,” Donna said, adjusting her top. “It gets really hot back there.”

“I bet it does,” I said, just as he set the nachos and wings on the pickup counter.

Donna crossed her arms and cocked her head. “You know, I’m going to talk to Steven about hiring you permanently.”

“Oh, no,” I said, shaking my head. “This is too?—”

“Wait until you count your tips. Then you’ll change your tune,” she said, going to the pickup counter to get the food. She walked past, balancing the plates. “Besides, you’re doing really great for a first time. The other guy that helps out would have taken a nap by now and left it all for me to deal with.”

The last hour passed by in a haze of drink orders, clinking glasses, and cash exchanges, all with the music blaring and customers singing at the top of their lungs. My feet ached and my cheeks hurt from forcing smiles.

Eventually, Donna looked up at the clock. “Last call!”

It was shocking how well her voice cut through the noise.

There was a collective groan from the patrons, followed by a rush to the bar. I braced myself for the final onslaught of orders, pouring drinks as fast as I could, while Donna did the same beside me.

The drunk woman tried to get another, but Donna stepped in. “Go home, Mabel. Tomorrow’s another day.”

“Okay,” the woman said, almost tipping over.

As the last drinks were served, the music was turned down, and the harsh overhead lights flicked on. The spell of the evening broke, revealing scuffed floors and sticky tabletops.

“Alright, folks, closing time!” Donna announced, clapping her hands together. “I don’t care where you go, but you can’t stay here!”

People began to filter out, some lingering to finish conversations, others heading straight for the door. Per Donna's instructions, I started collecting empty glasses and bottles and piling them into a bin beneath the bar.

“Not bad for your first night,” Donna said, counting the cash in the tip jar. She pulled out the envelope Steven had left for me and handed it over. “This is yours.”

I accepted the envelope with a smile, tucking it into my back pocket. “Thanks.”

“And here is your portion of the tips,” Donna said, handing me a wad of cash. “We have to split with Paul.”

“That’s fine,” I said, shoving the money into my pockets.

“I hope to see you again sometime,” Donna said, turning off some of the lights.

It was a lot of money in my pocket. “Maybe.”

“You haven’t even counted it yet,” Donna said, laughing. “It’s not like this every

night. Just Friday and Saturday. Not the best time if you want a social life.”

“I don’t have a social life,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “Other than coming here, what kind of social life do people have in Birchwood Hollow?”

Donna shrugged. “There’s a coffee shop and a bookstore, but I don’t live here.”

“Oh?”

She shook her head. “I’m from down the road... Bresco?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Just 24 miles north,” she said, smirking. “It’s not much bigger than this place. Population ten thousand.”

I widened my eyes. “Ooh! Fancy.”

Donna laughed again. “Don’t be jealous. We have two fast-food joints.”

I covered a yawn that I’d been fighting for the last ten minutes, trying to hide it behind my hand. After being on my feet for nearly six hours straight in a noisy bar, exhaustion was hitting me like a freight train. It was by far the most standing I’d done at a job since I was a teenager.

Donna noticed and gave me a sympathetic smile. “You should go home and get some sleep, honey. I can finish up here.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, glancing at the remaining glasses still scattered on a few tables.

“Absolutely,” she nodded firmly. “You’ve been a huge help tonight. I don’t think I’ve had this smooth of a Friday night in months.”

“What about Steven?” I asked, realizing I hadn’t seen the owner return. “Should I wait for him?”

Donna waved a dismissive hand. “Nah. I’m not surprised he didn’t come back. He’s always got stuff going on. He runs like six bars, I think.” She started wiping down the bar. “Don’t worry, I’ll tell him what a great job you did.”

“Thanks,” I said, offering her a tired wave as I headed to the door.

“No, seriously, thank you,” she replied. “If you decide you want more shifts, just let me know.”

I nodded, considering the weight of the money in my pocket. One night of work had probably earned me more than I’d make in a week at most other places in town. It was definitely worth thinking about. It wasn’t like anywhere around here was going to match my last salary.

“Goodnight,” I called as I opened the door, the cold night air slapping me in the face.

“Night. Drive safe,” Donna responded, already busy counting the night’s earnings.

The air felt refreshing after working in the stuffy bar. The parking lot was nearly empty now, just a few cars remaining. I climbed into my SUV, pulling my purse out from under the seat. I shoved my cash into my wallet and started the engine without hesitation.

The drive home was quiet without another car on the road. I rolled down the window, letting the cool air help keep me alert. My eyelids felt heavy, but my heart was still

pounding from the hectic work.

I was about halfway home when I heard a rattle from under the hood. Before I could even process what was happening, the car gave a violent shudder.

“No, no, no,” I muttered, pressing the gas pedal harder as if that might help.

The engine made a horrible grinding noise, followed by a series of rapid clicks. The car lurched once more before the power steering went out. I gripped the wheel tightly, managing to guide the now-coasting vehicle to the shoulder of the road.

As I rolled to a complete stop, I turned the key desperately, but the engine only made a sad whining sound before falling silent. I slammed my palm against the steering wheel in frustration.

I covered my face with both hands. “Son of a fucking bitch!”

Chapter Ten

I popped the hood and got out of the car. When I lifted the hood, I immediately jumped back as a plume of gray smoke billowed out. The acrid smell of burning oil filled my nostrils, causing me to cough and step back further.

“Great,” I muttered, staring at my smoking engine in the dim light from my phone’s flashlight. I had no idea what was wrong, but it clearly wasn’t something I could fix on the side of the road at two-thirty in the morning.

I looked around at the dark, empty road stretching in both directions. Trees loomed on either side, their shadows creating eerie patterns in the moonlight. I was at least three miles from my house, and probably about the same distance back to the bar.

A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the night air. I was stranded in the middle of nowhere, in a town where I barely knew anyone, with only a smoking car for company.

“Well, come on feet,” I said, thankful I didn’t wear heels.

I shivered and started trudging along the shoulder of the road toward home. Three miles wasn’t so bad — I could walk that in less than an hour if I kept a decent pace. The car could wait until morning. I’d call a tow truck after I got some sleep, assuming I even had enough money left to pay for it.

“Ugh!” I muttered, kicking at a stone.

There went all the tips I'd made tonight, probably straight into the pocket of whatever mechanic serviced this godforsaken town. The SUV was only a few years old — it shouldn't be having problems like this already. Maybe Birchwood Hollow was actually cursed. It certainly felt that way since I'd moved here.

A long, mournful howl pierced the night air, freezing me in mid-step. Wolves. Again. Another howl answered the first, this one sounding closer, as if coming from somewhere behind. My heart jumped into my throat.

I wanted to start jogging, but my legs and feet were too sore to do anything more than a brisk walk. The howling continued, seeming to echo from multiple directions. My eyes darted to the tree line every few seconds, searching both sides of the road for anything.

I thought back to how Courtney told me that they're protectors of the town. But it didn't feel that way out in the dark in the middle of the night. Wolves were predators. They hunted in packs, taking down elk and moose and... probably even stupid people who were out walking alone on dark roads.

Annie was fucking right. The wilderness was not for someone like me.

I forced my feet to move faster, even though they were fighting against me. My heart pounded against my ribs as my shoes rubbed against the back of my heels, no doubt forming monstrous blisters.

The eerie chorus seemed to surround me now, coming from both sides of the road and somewhere behind me. A branch snapped in the woods to my right. I jerked my head toward the sound as dark shapes moved between the trees. I blinked, trying to focus, but there was nothing there. Hopefully, it was just my imagination and the shadows playing tricks.

Trembling, I reached into my purse for my phone even though I had no idea who I'd call other than the police. My fingers wrapped around the cool plastic case, and I pulled it out, fumbling to unlock it.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said as I stared at the screen.

No service.

I dropped the phone back into my purse. I had to stop letting my mind play tricks on me so I could make it home without having a heart attack.

A low growl sounded from somewhere to my left, much closer than I expected. I whipped around, my purse swinging into my back, making me jump as if someone touched me.

Another growl from the other side of the road made me turn again. Something large and dark slinked along in the ditch as another shape emerged into the middle of the road, ten steps from where I was.

Would Annie ever find out what happened to me?

The glow of the faint moonlight reflected in their eyes — bright, knowing eyes that seemed to shine with an unnatural light of their own. Small yellow-gold orbs stared at me from the darkness.

The beasts were massive — far bigger than any wolf I'd ever seen. Their shoulders easily reached my waist, maybe higher. I could make out their silhouettes now as they moved closer to the road's edge, their muscular bodies sleek and powerful.

I was surrounded.

Four... five... six, that I could see, all positioned strategically around me. Protectors of the town? They seemed like I was their enemy. Invading in on their territory. These weren't friendly guardians — they were predators, and I was their prey.

“Go away!” I whispered, and the one in front cocked its head as if it understood me.

Its nose twitched and moved, nostrils flaring as it sniffed the air in my direction. The massive beast seemed to be analyzing my scent, determining what kind of threat — or meal — I might be.

Despite their aggressive stance, with hackles raised and teeth occasionally flashing in the moonlight, they hadn't attacked yet. The growling continued, a constant low rumble that made my skin crawl.

“Nice doggy,” I said gently as I took a step forward.

The lead wolf's growl deepened to a threatening snarl as it snapped its jaws in my direction, teeth clacking together with enough force that I could hear it clearly even from several feet away. Its eyes narrowed, almost looking offended.

“I'm sorry!” I blurted out, raising my hands instinctively. “That was stupid. You're not a dog. Definitely not a dog. Not even close to a dog.”

My heart hammered so hard against my ribs I was sure they could hear it. The wolves continued their standoff, not advancing but not retreating, either.

A strange noise behind me made me whirl around. My pulse, already racing, nearly stopped as I saw a man straightening up in the middle of the road. He was completely naked, his chest heaving as if he'd just run a marathon.

I gasped when the moonlight hit his face, and I realized I recognized the nude man. It

was Paul from the bar, the quiet guy who'd disappeared in the middle of his shift.

"This isn't the one," he said, his voice raspy. His eyes darted nervously between me and the wolf behind me. He bent forward at the waist, sucking in breaths. "She's not... the one... we're looking for."

More grunting sounds came from behind, causing me to spin around again. The largest wolf, the one that had been blocking my path, was gone, and in its place stood another naked man.

He had pitch-black hair, and his pale skin was almost luminous in the moonlight. His eyes glowed with an amber fury that seemed to burn right through me.

"You idiot," he snarled at Paul through clenched teeth. "She's seen you now. We don't have a choice."

His voice was deep and commanding, carrying an authority that made even me want to obey whatever he might order next. The remaining wolves seemed to shrink back slightly, though they maintained their positions around us, even though it seemed like they'd rather run away from the situation.

"We can't," Paul begged, holding up his hands. "You know the rules. We shouldn't even be here."

"I haven't seen anything," I blurted out, desperation making my voice crack. "My car broke down while I was just walking home. I don't know what's happening, but I swear I won't say a word to anyone. I'm not even sure I could if I wanted to. There is a part of me that thinks I might be at home having a really, really strange dream."

"Shut up," the big man said.

I pressed my lips together and nodded.

“It’ll be a big problem with you know who if he finds out about this,” Paul said, grimacing.

The big man laughed. “Do you think I am afraid of him? He’s not doing anything to help our brothers with this.”

“No,” Paul said, shaking his head. “It’s just?—”

“You shut up, too,” the big man said, confidently walking closer to me. He looked me up and down. “What to do. What to do.”

“Kellan, no,” Paul said, shaking his head.

The big man’s eyes went wide. “Oh, Paul. That was a big mistake.”

“Shit! Fuck!” Paul ran his hands through his hair. “Please, don’t do this.”

I froze as Kellan took a step toward me. My breath caught as his fingers reached for my throat. When he made contact with my skin, his hand was surprisingly warm despite the cool night air. He wrapped them around my neck, not squeezing hard — not yet — but with enough pressure to make his intentions perfectly clear.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

His amber eyes locked with mine, something primal lurking behind them. I could feel my pulse hammering against his palm as he held me there, seemingly considering my fate.

The distant rumble of an engine broke through the tense silence. Headlights appeared

around the bend, growing brighter as the vehicle approached. Kellan's head snapped toward the sound, his nostrils flaring like the wolf he'd been moments before.

His fingers loosened and fell away from my throat. I gasped, drawing in a desperate breath as he stepped back.

Kellan's eyes brightened for a moment as the headlights reflected in them. "We'll finish this later. Until we meet again."

Before I could respond, he turned and sprinted into the tree line, his pale body jerking awkwardly as he disappeared into the shadows with unnatural speed. Paul gave me one last panicked look before following him into the darkness. The other wolves that had surrounded me were already gone, as if they had never been there at all.

I stood frozen in the middle of the road, my hand at my throat, as the approaching vehicle's headlights washed over me. Ryder's truck came to a screeching halt.

The passenger window rolled down. "Get in."

Chapter Eleven

I stumbled toward Ryder's truck, my legs barely supporting me. My hands trembled so badly that I could barely grip the door handle when I reached it. The door swung open to reveal the cab packed with two large men with Ryder, their broad shoulders taking up every inch of available space.

The man at the end reached out his hand to me, and I took it. He pulled me up, and I awkwardly perched myself sideways on his leg, my back pressed uncomfortably against the window.

He was a burly guy with a red beard and a full head of hair combed back. I made myself as small as possible, which wasn't easy in the cramped space.

"Sorry," I said to the guy.

"No worries," he said with a nod. "I'm Trevor. A friend of Ryder's, and this is Gage."

Ryder glanced over at me, his jaw tight and his hands still on the steering wheel. "What the hell were you doing walking down this road at night? It's like you're trying to get yourself hit by a car?"

I swallowed hard, still feeling phantom pressure around my throat where Kellan's fingers had been. "My car broke down about a mile back. My phone's dead. I didn't have much choice."

“That was your SUV back there?” Ryder asked, glancing in the rearview mirror.

I nodded, pushing strands of hair from my face with shaking fingers.

Without warning, he made a sharp U-turn, causing me to slam harder against the door and then into the chest of the man I was sitting on.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Barely felt anything,” Trevor said, keeping his eyes forward.

“We’ll take a look,” Ryder said, accelerating back the way he’d come from. When we reached my vehicle, Ryder pulled over and put the truck in park. “What happened exactly?”

“It just... died while I was driving. Wouldn’t start again,” I said, my mind still working to figure out what the hell just happened.

He studied me for a long moment in the dashboard lights before bumping his elbow into Gage. “Go check it out. See if you can get it running.”

“Keys?” Gage asked, holding out his hand.

“Uh, sure,” I said, my hand shaking as I reached into my bag.

Ryder let Gage out of his door, and Trevor opened the passenger door as I slid over on the seat where Gage had been. Ryder told them where I lived before jumping back into the truck.

“They’ll try to get it running again,” Ryder said softly.

“Thanks,” I said, hugging my purse. “I can pay them.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ryder said, shifting the truck into drive. “Trevor is a mechanic. Owns a place between here and Bresco.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

The silence stretched between us as we bounced down the road, passing the spot where I’d been surrounded by wolves. I looked out at the treeline, wondering if I’d be able to spot them watching.

“What happened back there?” he finally asked, his voice quieter than I’d ever heard it. “Before I showed up.”

My heart was still beating so fast I wasn’t sure it would ever slow down. I turned forward, staring at the road illuminated by the headlights.

“Everly?” he said.

“Hm?” My body jerked, and I turned to him with wide eyes.

He stared for a moment. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” I said, my voice barely audible. “It was... Paul from the bar. Naked. It seemed like he turned from a wolf into a man.”

Ryder’s entire body stiffened. His knuckles went white on the steering wheel.

“You shouldn’t say stuff like that,” he said after a long pause. “People will think you’re crazy.”

A laugh bubbled up from me, high and slightly hysterical. “Maybe I am crazy.”

“Working the bar this late can?—”

“I must have imagined the whole thing... well, not the whole thing. There were wolves there. And Paul, too. Then this other guy, big with black hair, was naked too.” I brought my hand up to my throat, touching where Kellan had touched. “He put his hand around my throat.”

“He touched you?” Ryder asked, his voice filled with growly anger.

I shook my head. “Yeah, but he didn’t hurt me. And I’m still not even sure that was real.”

“Did you have anything to drink at the bar?”

“A diet soda and some water,” I said, biting my lip. “But I didn’t eat anything.”

His face had gone pale, but his expression remained mostly neutral. “The dark woods can play tricks on you.”

He pulled into the driveway and jumped out of the truck. In a flash, he was opening the passenger door to help me down.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” he said, his eyes darting around the yard.

“Thanks.”

I fumbled with my keys, my hands still unsteady. He took them from me and opened the door.

“Thanks.”

“You can stop saying that,” he said, handing me the keys. “Will you be all right?”

“Can you just wait a second?” I said, setting my stuff down on the table beside the door.

He glanced over his shoulder. “Sure.”

I moved around the house, turning on every light in the place. Ryder stood in the entryway with his arms crossed over his chest. When I finished, I stood in the middle of the living room, staring at him.

“I should get back to my friends,” he said, shifting his weight. “Get the SUV figured out.”

“Oh, sure,” I said, my throat dry. “Um, can I offer you any kind of payment... for the ride and the help?”

“Nah,” Ryder said, his eyes filled with concern. “Completely unnecessary. We’ll get the car back here as soon as we can.”

My head bobbed frantically. “Good, because I’m going to need it to get back home.”

“You are home,” Ryder said, his brow furrowed.

I shook my head, a bitter laugh escaping me. “No. Home is my apartment in Chicago. This...” I gestured around at the house. “This was a mistake. I’m not cut out for living in the wilderness.”

“Birchwood Hollow is hardly the wilderness,” Ryder said, his voice taking on a

defensive edge.

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow. “Because where I come from, wolves don’t surround people on dark roads. Men don’t...” I stopped myself, pressing my lips together.

Ryder took a step toward me. “Everly, whatever you think you saw?—”

“I know what I saw,” I snapped. “I mean, it’s totally insane, and I try to explain it all away to myself, but it’s not working. Paul and that Kellan guy were wolves, and then they weren’t. It makes absolutely no sense, but I’m positive. I’m home now, and I realize I wasn’t dreaming. It wasn’t a hallucination. It happened.”

“Kellan, huh?” Ryder said, drawing in a breath.

“Yes. Paul called him that, and Kellan seemed pretty pissed about it.” I crossed my arms. “It seemed he didn’t want me to know his name.”

Ryder swallowed hard. “Well, if he was harassing you, that makes sense, right?”

“Harassing? He put his hand on me. That’s assault, isn’t it?” I walked to my purse and pulled out my phone. There was service once again. “I should call the police, right?”

“Uh,” Ryder said, running a hand through his hair. “Let me take care of this.”

“What? How?”

Ryder looked away. “I’ll talk to Kellan.”

“You know him?”

“Unfortunately,” Ryder said, letting out a breath.

“I think he was going to kill me,” I said, my eyes wide as they searched Ryder’s face.

Ryder shook his head. “He’s a menace, but I can handle it.”

“It won’t matter because as soon as I get my car back, I’m gone.”

Ryder sighed. “And until then, forget everything you saw tonight.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“For your own safety,” Ryder said, taking a step back. “You should.”

I shook my head. “Safety? What the hell is going on in this place? It doesn’t matter. No one would believe me anyway.”

A wolf howled in the distance.

Ryder took another step back. “I have to go. Lock the door.”

Chapter Twelve

I tossed and turned all night, tangling myself in the sheets. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw those wolves... those men, surrounding me on the dark road. My mind still wasn't able to process what I'd witnessed.

A howl pierced the quiet night, and I jolted upright, unsure if it had been real or my imagination. I strained to listen, but the house had fallen silent again.

I flopped back onto my pillow, staring at the ceiling. Another howl drifted through my window, closer this time. I pulled the covers up to my chin like a child afraid of monsters under the bed.

Except my monsters were in the woods. And they were real.

It was late morning when my phone buzzed on the nightstand. I thought maybe once the sun came up, I'd be able to get some sleep, but it hadn't worked. I picked up the phone, tapping on the notification that Annie had left a message.

Just checking in. Miss you! How's small-town life treating you?

My fingers hovered over the letters for a moment before I sent the phone back down without responding. What could I possibly say? Hey, Annie, turns out you were right. I'm moving back because this town is full of werewolves or something equally insane. The thought of her smug "I told you so" was too much to bear right now. Annie didn't know it, but I'd heard her tell a friend of hers that I wouldn't last a month.

Turned out she was right.

I'd barely made it a week.

By the time I got out of bed, it was midafternoon, and I couldn't have gotten more than two hours of sleep. My eyelids felt like they were made of sandpaper, and my head throbbed.

I shuffled to the kitchen and made coffee strong enough to strip paint after popping two pieces of bread into the toaster. When it was finished, I buttered the bread and brought my small meal to the table.

I stared out at the woods as I took my first bite. It looked so calm and peaceful in the daylight. Birds chirped their gentle songs while butterflies darted frantically between flowers, rushing from one bloom to the next.

The more I thought about it, the more positive I became about what I saw last night. Those men had been wolves, and they turned into men when I wasn't looking. And that one... Kellan was mad about something.

I'd thought I could escape the chaotic city life, the controlling bosses, and the selfish, suffocating relationships. I'd come here to get away, seeking peace and a place I could finally breathe. But apparently it was the same shit everywhere, only here they could also turn into wolves.

I spent the day mindlessly organizing my belongings, but this time, I wasn't unpacking. I was taking mental inventory of everything I'd need to pack again for the return trip to Chicago. The few kitchen items I'd unpacked went back into their boxes. The books I'd lovingly arranged on shelves were stacked on the coffee table, ready to be packed away.

My phone buzzed again. Annie had sent three more texts, each more concerned than the last. I silenced the phone and shoved it in a drawer.

By late afternoon, there was still no sign of my SUV. I paced from window to window, checking the driveway every fifteen minutes. I wanted to get the hell away from Birchwood Hollow while the sun was still shining.

It was probably around dinner time when I finally heard the rumble of a truck coming up the driveway. I rushed to the window and saw Ryder's pickup pull to a stop.

I yanked open the front door before he even had a chance to knock. "Is my car fixed?"

Ryder made his way to my porch with his hands shoved into his pockets. He looked uncomfortable, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Well, I do have news for you," he said, his voice low. "Trevor's been working on it all day, and he'll be able to fix it without much trouble."

"Oh, that's great," I said, looking over his shoulder. "Is he driving it here or should I go with you and?—"

"Unfortunately, it's going to take a few days to get the part he needs to fix it," Ryder said, running a hand through his hair.

My heart sank. "A few days? I can't wait a few days. I need to leave now."

"You don't need to leave," Ryder said, shaking his head. "I took care of the situation."

"Oh good," I said, rolling my eyes. "So he won't try to murder me again?"

Ryder swallowed hard. “He won’t. He thought you were someone else.”

“So he’s looking to kill a different woman, and I should be okay with that?” I asked, raising a brow.

“Well, no, but it’s someone who’s threatening the pack’s safety,” Ryder said, looking down at his feet. “We’ve got it under control. Really. He won’t trouble you again, and if he does, he’ll deal with me.”

I sighed, leaning against the door. “I wish that made me feel better.” I covered my face with both hands and let out a breath. “Ugh. I guess I’m stuck here then.”

“Just a few days,” Ryder said, clearing his throat. “Then, if you really want, you can go. But you’re safe here. I promise.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Safe? After what happened last night? I don’t feel even a little safe.”

“It won’t happen again,” he said with such conviction that I almost believed him. “And if he makes even a small move that tells me otherwise, I will hear about it.”

“It’s not like I have a lot of options here, do I?” I said, crossing my arms. “As soon as my car is fixed, I’m out of here.”

He nodded. “That’s your choice, obviously.”

“It’s the best and right choice,” I said, sticking my nose in the air. “I was stupid for coming out here in the first place.”

“Why did you come here?”

I rolled my eyes. “I was looking to relax and slow down and get away from bullshit. There was this guy?—”

“Why is it always a guy?”

“It wasn’t just a guy,” I said, shaking my head. “It was a guy. It was a boss. It was a job that was making me miserable. I didn’t have any freedom. I didn’t even know who I was anymore.”

Ryder shifted his weight before clearing his throat. “Well, I’m sorry you didn’t find that here. Do you need anything from town? Food or supplies? I could?—”

“I’m good, thanks,” I said sharply.

“Alright then.” He took a step back. “I’ll let you know as soon as Trevor has an update on your car.”

As he turned to leave, I called after him. “Ryder?”

He looked back, eyebrows raised in question.

“What are they?” I asked. The question that had been burning in my mind all night finally escaped my lips.

His face went carefully blank. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do,” I insisted. “Those wolves... those men. What are they?”

Ryder held my gaze for a long moment before looking away toward the darkening woods. “Get some rest, Everly. You look tired.”

With that, he walked back to his truck, leaving me standing in the doorway with more questions than answers. But I wasn't going to stand there and let it go. I was sick and tired of letting things go.

"I know you know about whatever it is that's going on," I said, following him. I realized halfway to his truck that I was still in my pajamas. "I saw you that night, you know. You were out there with them... with the wolves. You were talking to Paul, remember?"

"Everly, don't," he said, turning on his heel to face me.

I stepped back, stunned at his tone. But then something came over me and I pushed my shoulders back.

I stabbed a finger against his hard chest. "You're involved in all this. I know it."

Chapter Thirteen

Ryder's eyes darted around the yard, scanning the area as if expecting someone to be watching us. His jaw clenched tight, and his shoulders tensed.

"This conversation needs to end," he said, his voice rumbling from his chest.

"No," I said, shaking my head.

He studied me for a moment as his breaths came fast. In one fluid motion, he bent down, wrapping an arm around my thighs, and hoisted me over his shoulder like I weighed nothing at all.

"What the hell?" I shrieked, the world suddenly tilting sideways as blood rushed to my head. The feeling of not having control over my body sent a wave of panic through me. "Put me down right now!"

I pounded my fists against his back, which felt like hitting a brick wall. My pajama shorts rode up uncomfortably as he strode toward my front door.

"Ryder!" I yelled, kicking my legs. "Put me down!"

"In a second," he grunted, as he carried me through the doorway with ease. Once inside, he set me back on my feet and closed the door behind us.

I stumbled slightly, disoriented from being upside down. "Don't you ever do that again."

I backed away from him and straightened my clothes. His eyes were on me as my heart hammered in my chest — from fear, from anger, from something I didn't want to examine too closely.

I crossed my arms over my tight T-shirt to cover myself. He leaned back against the door, annoyingly calm compared to my agitation.

“You don't know what you're talking about,” he finally said, his voice even. “You need to let this go.”

“No,” I said, taking a bold step forward. “I won't. After what happened to me and what I saw, no chance. No chance in hell.”

“Everly—”

“And for the record,” I interrupted, pointing a finger at him, “if you ever pick me up like that again, you will seriously regret it. I don't care how big you are.”

Ryder had the grace to look slightly ashamed, running a hand through his hair. “I'm sorry. I just needed to get you inside without arguing about it out there, and you're just so... stubborn and defiant.”

“Me?” I asked, my voice squeaking like a rusty hinge. “Let's start with the truth. How about that? Don't I deserve that after nearly being killed by your friend?”

“He's not my friend,” Ryder muttered.

“Colleague? Associate? Whatever term you want to use, I don't care,” I said, throwing my hands in the air. “Just stop playing games with me. I'm sick of fucking games everywhere I go!”

Ryder began pacing the small confines of my living room. His massive frame made the space feel even smaller. He moved like a caged animal as he ran his hands through his wild hair.

I watched him, mind racing. The pieces were there, scattered but starting to form a pattern. I'd seen him that day in the woods, arguing with Paul — Paul, who could somehow transform into a wolf. There had been other wolves surrounding them that night, massive creatures that hadn't harmed Ryder at all.

"You know all about them. You didn't even seem surprised when I told you," I said quietly as I looked up at him. "The wolves."

Ryder stopped pacing but didn't look at me.

"That day in the woods, when I first saw you," I said, not even thinking as I spoke. "You were talking to Paul about boundaries. About protecting your brothers or something." Each word felt like stepping out further onto thin ice, but I couldn't stop myself. "It was serious. Important. And Paul wanted to be done with it. He didn't ask for this life... those were his words."

"Everly, stop," Ryder said, his shoulders rising and falling with his deep breaths. "Please."

"He said something about a pack," I said, my head bobbing as it came back to me. "Screw you and screw the pack."

A wild, impossible thought hit me, and it made my lips curl into a smile. Somehow, I'd put the scattered pieces together.

"You know about them because you're one of them too," I said, my voice barely a whisper. I stepped up in front of him bravely. "Look me in the eye and tell me you're

not.”

“It’s not what you think,” Ryder said, avoiding my gaze.

“Jesus Christ, how is this real life?” I said, swallowing hard.

He grabbed my shoulders and peered into my eyes. “You have to forget about this. Humans can’t?—”

“Oh, my God,” I said, my mouth dropping open. “I’m right! I figured it out. What the fucking hell, Ryder? How is this possible? Like seriously, how?”

“Calm down, you can’t...” he said, turning away again. He ran his fingers through his hair. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Can you do it now?” I asked, my eyes wide.

He turned sharply to look at me, as if trying to decide if I was serious. His expression quickly turned cold.

“This is a joke,” he snapped, his voice deeper than I’d ever heard it. “I’m not something you get to gawk at.”

I flinched. “I... I didn’t mean anything by that. I just want to understand. That guy wanted me dead. Don’t I deserve to understand what I’m dealing with?”

“No, you don’t,” Ryder growled, turning away. “Nobody does. This isn’t for humans to know about. It’s for your own safety. And ours too.”

“But I already know,” I said, cocking my head.

He stepped toward me so fast that we were only inches apart. His eyes blazed with a fiery intensity that sent fear rushing through my veins.

“You need to forget about this.”

“I can’t! Don’t you understand?”

“Enough!” he roared, his hand convulsing at his side.

I gasped as his fingers stretched slightly, the nails elongating into a claw-like form. It happened so fast that I would have missed it if I had blinked.

“Whoa,” I said, my breaths hitting me so fast I thought I was going to fall over. Part of me wanted to run straight out the door, but the more curious part of me stayed rooted in place. “That was?—”

“Nothing. That was nothing,” he said, his voice fading.

Ryder moved to the couch and sank down into the cushions. The furniture looked comically small beneath his big, muscular body. He buried his face in his hands for a moment before looking up at me.

“We have rules for a reason,” he said, holding my gaze. “I beg you to just let it go.”

I approached cautiously and sat on the coffee table across from him. “It’s too late. I already know. And I can’t just... forget this.”

“You have to,” he said, leaning forward. His eyes locked with mine. “It’s not safe for you to know these things. You’re right that you should go back to the city. Forget about this. Forget about everything.”

“I can’t just pretend I didn’t see what I saw,” I argued, my eyes flicking to his completely normal human hand. “I can keep a secret.”

His expression softened slightly. “Just like you can pretend you didn’t see me in the woods that night? I don’t think you’re as good at looking the other way as you think you are.” He let out a heavy breath and met my eyes. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

The air between us crackled with tension as our eyes locked. I don’t know what came over me, but suddenly I was seeing Ryder in an entirely different light. Not just as the intimidating stranger who tried to run me over with his truck, but as something... something else. Something extraordinary.

I found myself leaning toward him, drawn by some force I couldn’t explain. He moved closer too, his eyes dropping briefly to my lips.

“Everly,” he said, and my heart fluttered.

A sharp knock at the door made us both jump.

Ryder was on his feet in an instant, his body tense and alert like a predator sensing danger.

“You expecting someone?” he whispered, already moving toward the window to peek outside.

“I shook my head.”

Ryder’s eyes brightened as he sniffed the air. “Don’t answer that.”

Chapter Fourteen

Ryder opened the door, and around the side of his body, I could see a dark gray wolf looking up at him. I pressed my lips together to stop myself from making any kind of noise.

“Give me a minute,” Ryder said, without turning to look at me. He stepped outside, pulling the door closed behind him.

The second they were out of sight, I scrambled to the window, pushing the curtain to the side just enough to peek through. Ryder and the wolf were walking toward a bunch of trees at the front of the house.

I pressed my ear against the glass, straining to hear their conversation, but they were too far away. All I could make out was the deep rumble of Ryder’s voice and the occasional sharp gesture of his hands.

The wolf stood tall, ears alert, completely focused on Ryder. I watched as if waiting for it to shift back into human form so they could talk, but it didn’t happen.

When I saw them turning back toward the house, I hurried to the couch, sat down, and crossed my legs in an attempt to put myself in a casual pose. My heart was racing when the front door opened and Ryder stepped back inside, his jaw tight.

“Everything okay?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant as I looked at my fingernails.

Ryder ran a hand through his hair. “The pack crossed into our territory again.”

I leaned forward. “Kellan’s pack?”

His eyes met mine, and he nodded. “Yeah, but I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“Is it bad that he crossed into your territory?”

“Yes,” Ryder said, pacing the floor. “I guess Kellan doesn’t think the rules apply to him anymore. He’s throwing it all out the window. I can’t trust anything he says.”

A chill ran through me. “I’m not safe then? What does he want?”

“Everything.”

I cocked my head. “What does that mean?”

“First, he convinced Paul to leave our pack,” Ryder said, his voice hardening. “But he didn’t stop there. He tried to lure Trevor away, too.”

“Trevor from the truck?” I asked.

Ryder nodded. “Trevor is loyal. Paul was...” He paused, searching for the right word. “Paul was weak. Easily influenced. He never wanted to be like us.”

“Doesn’t Kellan have his own pack?” I asked, chewing my lip. “There were a lot of wolves that night.”

“He’s growing his forces,” Ryder said, his blue eyes intense.

“Why?”

Ryder lowered himself into the recliner, his hands clasped between his legs. “He’s telling them he’ll protect them and keep them safe in ways I can’t. He wants to challenge me. He wants it all. Pushing and pushing to see how far he can go before I react.”

“So you’re not just one of them... you’re a pack... leader?” I scooted forward, leaning toward him.

“Why am I talking to you about this?” he asked, pushing himself out of the chair. “We have rules, Everly.”

“Wait, so how far are you going to let him push you?” I asked, getting to my feet.

Ryder stepped up to the door. “Not much further.”

“What happens if he keeps pushing?” I asked, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

“You ask a lot of questions.”

I smiled at him. “You’re a very interesting man.”

“You didn’t seem to think so before all this,” Ryder said, smirking.

“To be fair, you did try to run me over,” I said, tilting my head.

He sighed. “I did not. Anyway, I should get going.”

“You’re going to leave me alone?” I asked, grabbing his muscular arm. “You said he wouldn’t come but?—”

“You’ll be protected,” he said, jerking his thumb to the window.

“This makes me all so uncomfortable. I didn’t do anything to him!” I said, looking into Ryder’s eyes.

Ryder shook his head. “You saw them shift. That puts you in a bit of danger, but I will do everything I can to keep you safe.”

“I thought you told me I was already safe?”

“You are because I’m protecting you,” Ryder said instantly, stiffening. “Fuck!”

I shook my head. “What?”

“I think when I told him to leave you alone—” Ryder grabbed my hands and looked into my eyes. “I can’t stay. Do not open the door for anyone, do you understand?”

My head bobbed, but I couldn’t speak.

His expression softened as he looked at me. He gently lifted his hand to my face, brushing his fingers against my cheek.

“I know this is a lot?—”

“A fucking shit ton?—”

“I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.” Ryder’s hand was like a heating pad against my skin.

I leaned into his touch without meaning to, my breath catching in my throat. For a moment, neither of us moved. His blue eyes held mine, and something electric passed

between us. My heart pounded against my ribs, and this time I knew it was something more than fear.

Just as quickly as the moment happened, it popped like a bubble floating on the breeze on a hot summer day. Ryder dropped his hand and reached into his pocket. He handed me a business card.

“I’ll be in touch, but if you need me, call,” he said, opening the door. “Lock this behind me and remember, do not open it for anyone. I mean anybody. No matter what they say or how they try to convince you. The only person you let inside is me. Got it?”

“But...” I started to protest, panic rising in my chest.

“I’ll be back soon,” he cut me off. “Just stay inside.”

I nodded reluctantly, locking the door the second he was on the porch. Through the window, I watched his taillights disappear down the drive.

With him gone, the house felt enormous and far too quiet. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to remind myself I was okay, but it was impossible with what I now knew.

I paced the floor, freezing, when a wolf let out a soft howl from the nearby trees. It didn’t sound like a warning... it sounded as though it was supposed to be soothing.

I glanced at the windows, suddenly aware of how thin the glass was and how easily it could be broken. If Kellan wanted to get to me, he’d just have to get through whoever was outside my home.

“This is insane,” I whispered to the empty room. “Completely insane.”

But I knew what I'd seen. I couldn't deny it anymore than I could deny that I was now completely alone in a house in the middle of nowhere, with only Ryder's promise of keeping me safe.

I made sure every window and the back door were locked tight before finally accepting that I need to at least try to sleep. The bedroom felt safer somehow, probably because it was smaller and I could see the whole room from the bed.

Every creak and groan of the old house sent my pulse racing. As I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, I heard every sound the old house made, not to mention I could pinpoint the exact location of every cricket outside.

I rolled onto my side, tucking the blanket under my chin. Ryder's face kept appearing in my mind — the intensity in his blue eyes, the gentle touch of his fingers against my cheek. It had been so long since I'd felt that kind of electricity with anyone. Of course, it would have to be with a werewolf, because my life wasn't complicated enough already.

I wasn't even sure why I was feeling anything at all. Ryder was... Ryder. It was probably only because everything had been so tense and overwhelming. He probably wasn't feeling the same things I was. If he had been, he wouldn't have rushed out of my house so quickly.

I must have finally fallen asleep, because the shrill ring of my phone jolted me awake. Sunlight streamed through the curtains as I fumbled for my phone on the nightstand.

"Hello?" I answered, oddly hopeful to hear Ryder's voice.

But it wasn't Ryder.

Chapter Fifteen

“Everly?” a familiar female voice responded. “Finally!”

I pulled the phone away from my ear to check the caller ID. Annie... that made a lot more sense when I never gave Ryder my number.

“Hey, Annie,” I said, sitting up in the bed and covering a yawn.

“Everly Montana!” Annie’s voice was bright with excitement. “I thought you were avoiding me!”

I laughed, trying to sound casual. “No, of course not. Why would I avoid you? I’ve just been busy with the move and everything.”

“I thought you’d be all settled in by now,” Annie said with a snort. “It’s not like you had that much stuff.”

“Yeah, takes more time to settle into a new place, I guess,” I said, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. I got to my feet and made my way to the kitchen. “I finished unpacking everything, but I’m still working on decorating and settling in. It’s a process.”

I looked over at the work I would have to do when I panicked and started to repack my things. Wait. Was I going to stay here? No. I was still going to go back to the city where I’d be safer. Not that I was about to tell Annie any of that.

“I’m glad to hear it’s going well,” Annie said, sounding a bit distracted.

“Are you at work?”

She said something to someone I couldn’t quite make out. “Yeah, sorry. I’m glad it’s going well.”

“You said that already.” Had I been that annoying when I’d been working?

“Sorry, I meant to ask when I can come visit. I’m dying to see the place that pulled you away from me,” Annie said, typing vigorously on her keyboard.

“No!” The word burst out of me like a bolt of lightning, way too harsh and abrupt.

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“I mean,” I backpedaled quickly, “not yet. The place is still a mess, and I... I need more time to get it ready for visitors.”

“Everly, what’s going on?” Annie’s voice had shifted from excited to concerned. “You sound weird. Are you okay?”

I leaned against the kitchen counter, closing my eyes. How could I possibly explain what was happening? Oh, nothing much. I just discovered werewolves are real, and now I’m being protected by one pack while possibly being hunted by another.

“I’m perfectly fine, Annie,” I said, drumming my fingers on the countertop. “Actually, it sounds to me as if you’re just really busy. I don’t want to keep you.”

“Sorry, we’re working on that big project,” Annie said with a heavy sigh. “I haven’t been sleeping much.”

“Me either,” I muttered.

She drew in a breath. “Well, I should get back to it, and you should rest. Isn’t that part of the reason you moved out to the middle of nowhere? To slow down and get away?”

“Yes, it is,” I said softly. “I promise I’ll invite you over. I just need to settle in properly.”

And make sure you won’t be murdered by angry wolves.

“Okay, well, don’t be a stranger,” Annie said. “Oh, and answer your texts once in a while, so I know you’re still alive.”

“The service isn’t the best.”

“Take care,” Annie said, already talking to whoever was in her office. “Bye.”

I opened my mouth to say goodbye, but the phone went dead. I had no idea when — or if — I’d be able to have friends visit without putting them in danger, too.

I stood in my silent kitchen, feeling more alone than ever. I got exactly what I’d wanted, and now I wasn’t sure if it was the right thing for me after all.

I spent the rest of the day pacing, cleaning already clean surfaces, and obsessively checking my phone. By late afternoon, the walls felt like they were closing in on me. The windows had darkened with the setting sun, turning my supposed sanctuary into something more sinister.

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered, pulling back the curtain to peer outside for the hundredth time.

No sign of Ryder. No sign of anyone. Not even a wolf... at least not one that I could see.

I put the books back on my shelf, although I wasn't sure why I was bothering, if I was going to head back to the city once I got my SUV back. At least it gave me something to do.

By evening, my anxiety had reached a breaking point. Where was he? Had something happened?

The business card he'd given me sat on my coffee table, its edges slightly bent from how many times I'd picked it up and put it down throughout the day. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

I snatched up the card and dialed the number.

He answered after one ring, as if he'd been waiting with the phone in his hand.

"Ryder?" I breathed out.

"Yeah." His voice was low, distracted.

"Where are you?" I demanded, my relief quickly morphing into irritation. "I thought you'd come back."

Through the phone, I heard rustling, muffled voices in the background. It sounded like some kind of heated discussion.

He let out a sharp breath. "Can't talk."

I barely had a chance to set the phone down when it immediately rang again, making

me jolt. Glancing at the caller ID, my brows lifted in surprise at Steven's name.

"Hello?" I answered cautiously.

"Hey, glad I caught you," Steven said, as if he were doing seven other things at the same time. "So Donna told me what a great job you did on Friday at the bar."

"Oh, great," I said, somewhat taken aback.

"She was really saying we could use something a bit more permanent," he said, pausing to clearly do something else. "I trust her call since she basically runs the place these days. I was wondering if you could help out again this coming weekend."

I hesitated. The idea of doing that all over again felt a bit... tiring, but the money was more than great. And now with everything happening, I wasn't even sure if I'd be around, and if I was, would I even be able to leave the house?

"Yeah, I'm not sure," I said slowly. "My car is in the shop and I don't know when I'll get it back."

"That's not a problem," Steven replied quickly. "I could pick you up, and I'm sure Donna wouldn't mind dropping you off after close. I'll check with her, but I don't think it'll be a problem."

I shifted from foot to foot. There was a good chance that Trevor would have my car fixed by then, so I'd have to think of another excuse if that's what I wanted instead of accepting his offer.

"Can I think about it?" I asked, freezing at the sound of something outside. It sounded like someone had stepped up onto the porch, but no one was knocking.

“Yeah, of course,” Steven said, his voice fading. “Just let me know as soon as possible so I can plan accordingly.”

A knock at the door made me jump. I held my breath, clutching the phone harder as my eyes darted to the door.

“Okay,” I said, keeping my voice low.

“Great! Looking forward to hearing?—”

“I have to go,” I whispered, keeping my feet rooted as I instantly clicked to end the call.

Carefully, I walked to the window, doing my best not to make a sound. I pulled back the edge of the curtain just enough to peek out.

My heart thudded so hard my whole body jerked.

A pitch black wolf sat on my porch, looking at the door. Its head slowly turned to the side, its eye gleaming as if it knew I was there watching. A chill rippled down my spine, and I tapped Ryder’s contact information with trembling fingers.

He answered immediately. “I’m really bu?—”

“There’s a wolf at my door,” I whispered urgently, not taking my eyes off the creature.

Ryder made a noise that came from deep in his throat. “I’ll be right there. Don’t open the door.”

Chapter Sixteen

I stood frozen at the door, unable to move as I watched the black wolf. It just sat there, mostly motionless except for the occasional twitch of its ears. Despite the closed door between us, my skin crawled with the certainty that it knew exactly where I stood.

The minutes stretched on into what felt like hours. The wolf didn't growl or pace or scratch at the door. It didn't need to. Its mere presence was enough to make my heart race... to make me feel trapped in my own home. It was almost as if the silent intimidation was worse than an outright threat.

I clutched my phone tighter, tempted to call Ryder to ask what was taking him so long. He probably had to drive all the way to my house from town, and in reality, only five minutes had probably passed.

The wolf's head snapped to the side, its ear rotating slightly toward the road. It rose off its back legs and jogged off my porch, disappearing into the trees.

Once it was gone, I heard an engine in the distance and shortly after, spotted the headlights. With how fast the lights drew closer, I'd guess the vehicle had been doing at least 80 mph on the narrow country road. Ryder's truck pulled into the driveway, the tires skidding on the gravel and kicking up a dust cloud lit by the sliver of light from the moon.

He jumped out before the engine even died and scanned the property. His eyes glowed with intensity as he looked toward the trees where the wolf had left. Ryder's

nostrils flared before he turned toward the house, his shoulder tense beneath his flannel shirt.

His knock at the door was sharp. “Everly! It’s Ryder.”

I yanked the door open and, before I could stop myself, I threw myself against his chest. He wrapped an arm around me, and my body shook with relief and lingering fear.

After a few minutes, I cleared my throat and pulled back. Heat flooded my cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” I said, wrapping my arms around myself instead. “I just... it was...”

Ryder’s expression softened, though his jaw remained tense. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Kellan was here,” he said, his nose twitching. “I could smell him.”

“He was just sitting there,” I said, gesturing toward the porch. “Not doing anything. Just... watching.”

Ryder ran a hand through his hair. “He’s trying to piss me off. He wants my attention.”

“I thought you had this under control?” I asked, hugging myself tighter. “I mean, I’m guessing not, since he was outside of my house!”

He shook his head. “Not as well as I would have liked. Half of the time he lies, and the other half he avoids me. I thought maybe this would be different, but obviously, it’s not. Hard to settle things when he won’t even face me. This is how he is until he gets what he wants.”

“What does he want?”

“Power. Control. The packs. My pack.”

I paced the small living room, anxiety building with each step. I was so far in over my head, and I hadn't even done anything to deserve it other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“I can't live like this, Ryder,” I said, shaking my head. “I came here to get away from bullshit, not to be terrorized by a wolf.”

“I'll settle it,” Ryder said firmly. “Sooner rather than later.”

“How?” I demanded, turning on my heel to face him. “If Kellan's worried that I'm going to talk, what will make him believe I won't say anything about your existence? What's to stop him from just... eliminating the problem?”

Something dangerous flashed in Ryder's eyes. “I'll make him understand.”

“How?” I pressed.

“It isn't your concern how we deal with things like this,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “We know how to put Kellan in his place. It won't be the first time, and it surely won't be the last.”

The way he said it sent a chill through my body. A part of me didn't really want to know the details, but the other, smaller part was curious.

“This has happened before? That a human saw a wolf... um, change?” I asked, my brows raised.

“Shift. And no, not this exact scenario, but other issues,” Ryder said, looking away. “Kellan is always pushing his limits. He won’t ever be happy. Even if he had everything he wanted, he’d still be miserable. That’s just how he is. There is always something more he wants. He will never be satisfied.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to,” Ryder said, dragging his hand down his face as if wiping away his stressful expression. “You’re not supposed to know.”

I studied his face. “Why do you trust me? Why don’t you think I’ll tell the world about all of you and what’s really going on?”

Ryder’s eyes met mine, clear and certain. “It’s a feeling. And it’s never wrong. Kellan lacks that ability, which is just another part of the problem.”

“I won’t say anything. You know that, right?” I said, swallowing hard as I looked up into his eyes. My lips curled slightly at the ends. “Besides, no one would believe it, and Annie would have me put into an institution.”

“Who’s Annie?” Ryder asked, his brow wrinkled.

I waved my hand. “A friend from the city.”

“It’s not just a feeling,” Ryder said, drawing in a breath that pushed out his chest. “I trust you.”

The concept was foreign to me, especially from someone he barely knew. I’d spent my whole life learning the hard way that trust had to be earned, and even then, it could be broken in an instant. Everyone had an ulterior motive in my experience. They took what they wanted, and then they left. That’s how it had always been.

“I don’t understand that,” I admitted quietly. “I never trust anyone.”

“You can trust me,” Ryder said, taking a slow step forward.

I looked down at my feet. “I’d like to but?—”

“Not all guys... people are like the ones you’ve met before. Some people are good... loyal,” Ryder said, taking another step closer.

“I’ve never met anyone like that, and I’m not sure I ever will,” I said, swallowing hard as he hooked his finger under my chin and raised it until I was forced to look into his eyes.

“You have. You just haven’t realized it yet.”

I stared up into Ryder’s eyes, caught in his steady gaze. Something inside me wanted to believe him, to trust that he was different from everyone else I’d known. But years of disappointment and betrayal had forced me to build walls, and I wasn’t sure anyone could break through.

“You make it sound so easy,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “Just trust you... like flipping a switch on or off.”

His hand remained under my chin, warm against my skin. “Not easy. Nothing worth having is ever easy, is it?”

I drew in a shaky breath. “This is just all so crazy. A week ago, I couldn’t get away from city life fast enough. Now I’m out here, and there are actual wolves threateningly sitting on my doorstep.”

“And yet you’re still here,” Ryder said softly. “Most people would have packed their

bags and run off by now.”

I laughed. “I would have, but my SUV was dead.”

“There are buses, planes, rental cars...” Ryder said, his hand moving from my chin to my cheek.

I leaned in, finding his touch more comforting than I’d expected. There were feelings raging through me like a thunderstorm... feelings I hadn’t allowed myself to feel in a long time.

His touch was so warm.

The glow in his eyes was calming.

I felt safe... protected... charged.

My heart hammered against my ribs, a rhythm that both terrified and exhilarated me. When he leaned in, I held my breath, waiting for my instinct to retreat to kick in — but it never came.

His lips brushed against mine, and a burst of electricity tore through my body. Instead of pulling away, I leaned into him.

Chapter Seventeen

My hands slid up his chest, feeling his warm skin and the steady beat of his heart beneath my fingertips. The kiss deepened, and a small sound escaped from between my lips as his hands moved to my waist, drawing me closer.

All my doubts and fears seemed to fall away for the moment, replaced by something I hadn't felt in longer than I could remember. It was almost as if I couldn't refuse whatever it was that was happening.

In the back of my mind, I knew it was a mistake letting someone get close to me again, but for once, I didn't care. There was absolutely no reason I could think of to not just relax for once and enjoy myself, even though I didn't know how we got to this.

Ryder pulled me even closer, his hands gliding around my hips with an urgency that made my breath catch. I reached up, tangling my fingers in his thick hair, allowing myself to get lost in the warmth of his mouth and the sensation of his beard against my skin.

I grabbed his shirt, pulling him back toward the couch. A chorus of howls caused him to stop in his tracks, his eyes darting toward the nearest window.

Ryder broke away from me instantly, his body going rigid. "Son of a bitch."

I dragged my finger across my lips as if I could still feel him there. My pulse was pounding, but this time it wasn't because of the howling wolves nearby.

His eyes darkened as he stepped up to the window. “I should stay tonight.”

“Um,” I said, looking around as if I’d find the right words to say. I mean, kissing was great, but staying the night seemed a bit fast.

He shook his head quickly. “Not that. The wolves. I don’t trust Kellan to leave you alone.”

“Oh,” I said, clearing my throat. “Yeah, right? I just thought maybe the couch was too small.”

“I can sleep anywhere,” he said, flicking me a quick look.

“Good,” I said, twisting my fingers. “I feel safer with you here. Especially without my SUV to run away in.”

His head bobbed. “I’m not going anywhere unless I know for a fact he won’t bother you or I can arrange for someone else to guard the vicinity.”

As the night wore on, it was almost as if I weren’t there at all. Ryder paced from window to window, checking the yard with his phone in his hand. The soft glow of his screen illuminated his face as he fired off text after text. Whatever moment we’d shared earlier had vanished, replaced by this vigilant protector who seemed to have forgotten I was even in the room.

After watching him make his third complete circle around my house, I sighed. “I think I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“Okay,” he said, barely glancing my way.

In the bathroom, I splashed cold water on my face, trying to clear my head. What the

hell was I doing? One minute, I was practically melting into Ryder's arms, and the next, I was being completely ignored. This was just another reason never to let anyone get too close.

I brushed my teeth and quickly changed into a fresh pair of pajamas — a worn soft t-shirt with a deep V-neck and a pair of loose pajama pants that always slid down to my hips. They were incredibly comfortable, and that's all that mattered, even though I had company.

I walked back out to the kitchen to get a drink of water, finding Ryder at the back door tapping an aggressive message into his phone. He didn't even bother to look up, although I was sure he'd heard me two feet away from where he stood.

I rolled my eyes. "Well, goodnight then."

"Night," he said, flicking his eyes up for a second. His eyes widened, and he turned back to me, a low rumbling noise escaping from his throat.

"Wow," he said, the single word carrying more weight than it should have.

My cheeks warmed. "Can I get you anything? Water? Extra blanket? I'm sorry, I don't have any pajamas that would fit you."

Ryder seemed speechless, his eyes lingering on me in a way that made my skin tingle. "I'm fine," he finally managed. His eyes remained fixed on me, traveling from my face down to my loose pajama pants before quickly snapping back up, almost like he was fighting with himself. "I probably won't get to do much sleeping anyway. Usually don't."

"I'll get you a blanket just in case," I said, walking to the hall closet to pull out my softest blanket.

I set it on the couch, smoothing it out more than necessary just to give my hands something to do. Ryder stood, running a hand through his hair.

“Sleep well, Everly,” he said, his voice lower and rougher than before.

“Night,” I said, offering him a gentle smile.

I turned toward my bedroom, feeling his eyes on me as I walked away. I closed the door with a soft click, my hand still on the door.

It was stupid, but I wanted him to crawl into bed with me. Just one night of letting go and not having to worry about feelings or getting hurt. Surrendering to each other.

I crawled into bed, forcing myself to think of anything other than wolves and the extremely attractive man in my living room. Despite my exhaustion, sleep came fitfully, and my dream was a tangled web of howling, kisses, and warm hands on my skin.

I jerked awake a few hours later, disoriented for a few seconds, before realizing I wasn't in my bed in the city. It would have been one hell of a crazy dream, but at this point, nothing seemed impossible. In fact, I wouldn't even be surprised if someone told me vampires were real, too.

The digital clock on my nightstand read 3:17 AM. After trying unsuccessfully to fall back asleep, I threw back the covers and silently walked out into the kitchen for water.

Ryder was sitting on the couch, the blanket folded neatly where I'd left it. He still had his shoes on, but the top two buttons of his shirt had been unbuttoned, revealing his rock-hard chest.

“Everything okay?” he asked, voice quiet in the stillness of the night. He didn’t turn.

“Sorry, I was trying to be quiet,” I said, frowning. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“You were quiet. I just have really good hearing.”

I glanced toward the window and then back toward him. “Are they still out there?”

“No.”

“Then why aren’t you sleeping?” I asked, raising a brow.

He shrugged and set down his phone. “A lot on my mind.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I made things more complicated for you,” I said, sitting on the edge of the couch cushion.

“No,” he said, his hands resting loosely on his wide-spread legs. “It’s Kellan that’s the problem. Not you. What’s keeping you up?”

I leaned my chin on my closed fists. “Everything.”

“He won’t hurt you. Not while I’m around,” Ryder said, his eyes glowing fiercely.

“It’s not just that. I don’t belong here. And Steven called to ask me to help out at the bar again next weekend?—”

“No fucking way! You will not be going there again.”

My eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“That place isn’t good...”

“You were there!”

“I can take care of myself,” he growled. “Not to mention, I wasn’t alone.”

I pushed my shoulders back. “I can take care of myself, too. I’ve done it since I was seventeen.”

Ryder’s eyes pulsed. “It’s not the same thing. You’re human. If they wanted to?—”

“I’m not going to let you or anyone else, for that matter, tell me what I can and can’t do,” I said, sucking a sharp breath.

“This is to keep you safe,” Ryder said, throwing his hands in the air. “We have to be smart.”

“We?”

He let out a slow breath as he stared at his hands. “Promise me that you will at least wait until I know Kellan will leave you alone. Until I know you’ll be safe. I couldn’t handle it if something?—”

“Fine,” I said, pressing my lips together. “Who knows if I’ll even still be around by next weekend? My car will be fixed, and I should really just go home.”

“Maybe that would be for the best,” Ryder said, his mouth dropping as if I’d slapped him across the face. “At least then I’ll know you’re safe.”

I stood up abruptly, my temper flaring. “Great. Perfect. Then I’ll be gone in a few days, and you’ll never have to see me again or worry about me getting destroyed by a

rogue werewolf.”

Ryder got to his feet in one fluid motion, closing the distance between us so quickly I almost stepped back.

“That’s not what I want,” he said, his voice rough. “I don’t want to never see you again.”

My hands balled into tight fists, trying to ignore how having him so close made my pulse quicken. “Really? Because it sounded like you’d be relieved if I weren’t here.”

“What? No,” Ryder said, shaking his head. His eyes locked on mine with an intensity that made it hard to breathe. “I just don’t want anything to happen to you. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I haven’t been able to get you out of my fucking head since I first saw you in the woods that night.”

My hands relaxed, and my mouth went dry as I stared at him. I couldn’t think of a single thing to say in response.

“Everything about you,” he said, his voice dropping lower, “filled this emptiness inside of me.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I wanted to fight it. I’m trying to fight it because I know better. I know what I am.”

“I don’t care what you are,” I said, my breath catching. “I care who you are.”

“I shouldn’t let myself feel this way... not about someone like you,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine. “Someone I could hurt. Someone who shouldn’t know about any of this.”

I reached out, my fingers brushing against Ryder’s arm. Even through the fabric of his shirt, that smallest touch sent shivers racing across my skin and up my spine.

“I already know about it,” I said, my voice soft. “There’s no going back now.”

Ryder looked down at where my hand rested on his arm, his eyes darkening to something primal and hungry. The air between us seemed to crackle with electricity.

“I didn’t realize how weak I was until now,” he murmured, his voice rough with need.

“If you’re weak, then what the hell am I?” I breathed.

He moved fast, lifting me at the hips. I gasped as my feet left the ground, my hands automatically going to his shoulders. For a heartbeat, our eyes locked, and I saw something wild and desperate filling his gaze.

His lips crushed against mine with an urgency that made my head spin. I responded instantly, my fingers digging into his shoulders, my body arching against his as he held me effortlessly in his strong arms.

The kiss deepened, his tongue sliding against mine as a small moan escaped from the back of my throat. Everything outside of this moment — wolves, danger, my plans to leave — all of it disappeared in the heat of his touch, replaced by a need so intense it almost frightened me.

But for once in my life, I wasn’t going to run from what scared me. Not tonight.

Chapter Eighteen

Ryder's strong hands gripped my waist as he slowly lowered me back to the floor, my body sliding against his on the way down. The friction between us sent waves of electricity through me as my shirt bunched up slightly against his chest. His eyes never left mine, holding me captive with their intensity.

My breath came in short gasps as my feet touched the ground again, but I didn't want to break contact. Without thinking, I grabbed the front of his shirt, twisting the fabric in my fist.

"Would you like to see my room?" I asked, my voice filled with raw desire.

"Yes, please," he said, following as I walked backward into my room, never letting go of his shirt.

The moonlight spilled through the crack in the curtains, giving the room a gentle glow. My calves bumped against the edge of my bed, and I ran my hand down his solid chest.

"Nice room," Ryder said, his voice rough.

"Do you like the bed?" I asked, popping the next button on his shirt.

He glanced over my shoulder. "A little small."

A bubbly laugh escaped me, but quickly faded. There was so much heat in his

glowing blue eyes as he watched me undo the rest of the buttons on his shirt.

His hands moved to cup my face, thumbs brushing against my cheeks as he brought his lips to mine. Each stroke of his tongue against mine sent sparks through my body, pooling low in my stomach with a heat I couldn't ignore.

I reached up, sliding my hands to his shoulders and pushing off his shirt. The dim light revealed the sculpted planes of his chest, shoulders, and abdomen, and I ran my hands over his warm skin, feeling the strength beneath.

Ryder's fingers found the hem of my shirt, drawing it upward with agonizing slowness as if he were purposefully torturing himself. His knuckles brushed against my skin as he went, leaving trails of fire. When he finally pulled it over my head, I felt exposed but thoroughly enjoying the way he looked at me... like I was something precious and delicate. Breakable.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispered as he kissed my shoulder.

His hands skimmed down my sides, curving around the sides of my breasts and resting at my hips before he pulled me against him again. The feel of his bare chest against mine drew a small gasp from my lips.

He was so warm. Solid. Hard.

I sat down on the bed, hooking my finger in a belt loop to pull him down with me. He grinned as he carefully lowered himself down, pressing me into the mattress. He kissed down my chest, his warm, wet tongue finding my erect nipple.

"Oh, god," I moaned, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

His hands moved with surprising gentleness for someone so strong, unfastening my

jeans and sliding them down my legs. His fingers trailed back up my thighs, leaving goosebumps in their wake. I reached between us, fumbling with his belt until I managed to get it undone.

He wiggled out of his jeans, tossing them to the floor. The heat of his skin against mine sent vibrations from my head down to my toes.

Ryder's large hand cupped my breast, his rough palm creating the most delicious sensation against my skin. His thumb circled my nipple with torturous precision, occasionally flicking across the hardened peak, sending jolts of pleasure straight to my core.

He kissed my neck and gently pinched and rolled my hard nipple between his fingers. My back arched off the bed, and every inch of my body tingled with a desperate need.

"Ryder," I whimpered as his attention moved to my other breast, kneading the soft flesh before focusing on the neglected nipple.

He alternated between feather-light touches that made me squirm to firm strokes that almost brought me over the edge. His eyes remained locked with mine, watching me respond to his every touch, my chest rising and falling with increasingly ragged breaths.

His hands seemed to be everywhere at once, discovering places I never knew could feel so sensitive. When his fingers finally slid between my legs, I gasped, my hips bucking involuntarily against his touch as my fingers dug into the sheets.

"How does that feel?" he groaned.

"Oh, perfect. Please, don't stop," I begged, my voice catching as his fingers moved in slow, delicious circles.

His mouth claimed mine as he gently circled my clit, swallowing my moans as pleasure built inside me. Growing... and growing. I reached between us, wrapping my fingers around him, feeling his long, hard cock against my palm.

“Oh, Everly,” he groaned against my neck as I stroked him. “Careful.”

My heart hammered against my ribs as Ryder’s fingers worked their magic between my legs. I arched my back, pressing myself harder against his hand, desperate for my release.

Ryder kissed down my neck, across my collarbone, and down my breast, sucking my nipple in his warm, wet mouth before moving to my stomach. Each press of his lips left me more desperate than the last. I didn’t even know how much longer I could hold on before I came.

He moved between my legs, his strong hands gripping my thighs and gently parting them. His lips moved up my inner thigh, stopping to look up at me with lust blazing in his eyes.

“I want to taste you,” he murmured, as his breath teased my skin.

I propped myself up on my elbows, wanting to see his face. The sight of him looking up at me from between my legs nearly undid me completely.

“Oh, god. Yes, please,” I whispered, not caring how needy or desperate I sounded.

He maintained eye contact as he lowered his mouth to me, the first touch of his tongue sending a jolt to the top of my head. I fell back against the pillows, a cry of absolute bliss ripping from my throat. My fingers found their way into his hair as I spread my legs further for him.

His tongue swirled and dipped, as if he knew exactly what I needed. I slid my hand up my stomach, my fingers finding my nipple impossibly hard.

“Ryder,” I breathed, my thighs trembling. “I need you.”

“Go ahead,” he said, breaking slightly.

“I want to feel you,” I said, biting my lip.

He flicked my clit with his tongue. “You think I can’t make you come again?”

“I’ve never had more than?—”

“Well, you’re about to.”

His words were almost enough to send me over the edge, a delicious promise that made every nerve ending in my body fire at once. I’d never been with someone who seemed so determined to utterly unravel me, and so confident in his ability to do so.

As Ryder’s tongue worked against me with precise, deliberate strokes, I couldn’t help but lose myself completely. Each swirl and flick sent tremors through my body, building a pressure deep inside that threatened to shatter me entirely.

My fingers tightened in his hair, my hips moving in rhythm with his mouth as if my body had developed a mind of its own, chasing the release that was so tantalizingly close.

“Oh god, Ryder,” I gasped, my back arching off the bed when he sucked my clit between his lips while sliding a finger inside me.

I clenched around his finger as he curled it upward, finding a spot that made my

breath catch. My thighs trembled uncontrollably, my breath coming in short, desperate pants as I teetered on the edge.

It hit me like a tidal wave... pleasure so intense it bordered on pain, radiating outward until every inch of my being was consumed by it. I cried out as my body convulsed with the intense orgasm that ripped through me with unexpected force.

My consciousness narrowed to nothing but sensation, wave after wave of ecstasy washing over me as Ryder continued his relentless attention, drawing out my climax until I was whimpering, oversensitive, and utterly spent. I'd never come so hard in my life, never felt so completely undone by another person's touch.

But it wasn't done. Something he was doing quickly made something in the background start up again.

Ryder got to his knees and hoisted up my hips to meet him. He pushed inside, and we both froze.

"Oh, fuck," he whispered, his voice rough with desire.

He moved slowly, each movement careful and agonizingly deep. My hands clutched the pillows as I weakly writhed beneath him. There was something almost magical about the way he seemed to know exactly how to move, to make me gasp and shudder beneath him.

His eyes started to glow, and his hair seemed to stand on end as if it were growing. It should have frightened me, but it only excited me more to see what was happening to him.

I didn't want to take my eyes off him, but my body abruptly tensed as if I had no control over it. My eyes closed, and I came so hard it felt like I was being propelled

into another dimension.

I bit my lip, and my head pressed back against the pillow. “Oh my god!”

“Fuck,” he said as a raw, almost animalist sound escaped his throat. He rolled his hips, nearly growling.

I watched Ryder’s face transform as his release took hold of him. His eyes, still glowing that ethereal blue, widened before squeezing shut. His jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck straining as he threw his head back.

His whole body tensed above me, trembling with the force of his orgasm. I’d never seen anything so beautiful, so raw and unguarded, as Ryder in that moment of complete surrender.

After the last waves passed through him, he carefully lowered himself onto the bed beside me. He threw one arm over his eyes as if hiding them.

His chest rose and fell rapidly as he worked to catch his breath. I turned on my side, propping myself up on an elbow to study him.

His hair, which had seemed to stand on end, was now settled back in place, although damp with sweat. Even though he was hiding them, I could see Ryder’s eyes had dimmed, but they hadn’t quite returned to their normal state.

He looked... stunned, as if he had just witnessed something impossible. A smile quickly spread across my face at the sight of him.

“Stop looking at me,” he said.

“Was it good?” I asked softly, tracing lazy patterns on his chest with my fingertip.

Ryder lowered his arm from his eyes and turned his head to look at me. For a moment, he just stared, as if searching for words that wouldn't come.

"Everly," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "That was unlike anything I've ever experienced in my entire life." He shook his head slightly, still seeming dazed. "Nothing comes close. Not even remotely."

"I know what you mean," I said with a sigh. I curled up into his arm, closing my eyes. "And see, I'm in one piece. Fine and dandy. You didn't break me in half."

"I was careful," he said, his voice low.

Ryder's arm was warm around my still humming body. I nestled closer, listening to his heartbeat gradually slow to a steady rhythm.

A long, haunting howl cut through the night air. It was distant, but clear, and Ryder's entire body tensed before he bolted upright.

"Everly, I..." he said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "I hate to do this."

"Seriously?"

His eyes met mine, conflicted and intense. "I know. I'm sorry. I wouldn't leave if it weren't important. I will make it up to you."

"Haven't heard that one before," I muttered, rolling my eyes. A quick look toward the window and I could tell it would be dawn soon.

Ryder was already dressed. "Lock the door behind me."

Chapter Nineteen

After locking the front door, I watched Ryder's truck disappear down the dark road from the window. As his taillight faded, the lingering warmth on my skin cooled rapidly as I stood there in only my thin robe.

"Typical," I muttered, letting the curtain fall back into place.

It's not like I was surprised. Men always had somewhere more important to be. The sex had been utterly mind-blowing, but that urgent howl had shown where his priorities were.

Not that it mattered.

This wasn't the beginning of anything.

It was fun.

I made my way back to the bedroom, combing my fingers through my tangled hair. The sheets still smelled like him — woodsy with a hint of spice and fresh like leaves after a gentle spring shower. I collapsed onto the mattress, pulling the covers up to my chin to push away the chill that was settling in the room.

It was only ever going to be one night. I knew that.

I'd sworn off relationships months ago. Men had consistently proven themselves untrustworthy, selfish, or just plain disappointing. It wasn't like Ryder Black, with his

mysterious pack business and middle-of-the-night departure, was going to be the exception that changed my mind.

Surely he felt the same way about me. So what if his touch had set my body on fire in ways I'd never experienced? So what if that connection had felt like something deeper than just physical attraction? It didn't change anything. I was still leaving Birchwood Hollow once my car was fixed.

He had his life here, and I still had to find a way to escape mine. And as it turned out, living in the country wasn't the answer I'd hoped it would be.

Sleep finally took over, and when I woke, bright sunlight streamed in between the closed curtains. For the first time since moving here, I'd slept soundly through what had been left of the night. No howling, no wolves on my porch, no creepy sensations of being watched. Just peaceful, dreamless sleep.

It was 10:47 when I rolled out of bed, stretching my sore muscles as flashes of the night before hit me hard. I smiled, and it didn't fade as I took a quick shower and got dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

A knock at the door startled me, and I rushed to the window, swallowing the hope I'd find Ryder's truck in the driveway. I mean, it wasn't like... I just... I wouldn't say no to a little more fun in the bedroom.

It wasn't Ryder's truck parked in the driveway, though... it was Courtney's car. She was standing at the door, holding a closed plastic container.

I check the yard before moving to the door and pulling it open. She bounced slightly when she saw me.

"Morning!" she chirped, clearing her throat as if to calm her bubbly self. "Or well, I

guess it's almost afternoon. Have you had breakfast yet? If not, that's okay, because I brought you something!"

"Morning," I said, taking the container she thrust at me.

"It's a new recipe I've been concocting. Lemon, poppyseed, and raspberry pastries with a drizzle of icing. They look pretty, and Mason ate two, but he's a kid. He'll eat anything sweet, and I can no longer properly judge my own baking. I need an honest opinion before I attempt to sell them."

I looked around the yard. "Oh, um, sure. Come on in."

"Thanks," she said, looking around. "Sorry, I tend to overthink my recipes. I shouldn't have just barged in like this. Looks like you're almost all settled in now, huh?"

"Almost," I said, setting the container down on the coffee table.

She reached down and popped the lid off. "Please, try one."

I picked one up and took a small bite, and then another, which had more of the rich, creamy filling. My eyes closed.

"Oh, these are incredible," I said before taking another bite. "You're seriously talented. Where do you sell them?"

"Just around the area," she said, waving a dismissive hand. "It pays the bills. Barely. The lemon isn't too strong, is it? I could tone it down... do more of the raspberry. Are they too sweet, though?"

I shook my head. "They are perfect. Only wish I had brewed some coffee to go with

it. That would have been amazing.”

“Oh! You know what we should do instead?” she said, placing the lid back on the container. “We should go into town for lunch. Get coffee at May’s. Did you say you had breakfast? Well, either way, I bet you haven’t had lunch yet!”

I hesitated, glancing toward the window. “I’m not sure if I…”

Courtney’s eyes narrowed. “What? Of course, you should. It’ll be good to get out of the house, and it’s not that far of a drive into town. You’ll have fun. It’ll be good. I haven’t had lunch yet, although I have had coffee. That’s okay, though, because I can just have a diet soda or something. Probably just water. But then I’m not sure I’ll order the burger?—”

“Fine,” I said, forcing a quick smile. “I’ll go, but my car is?—”

“I’ll drive,” she said, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the door.

I followed Courtney out the door, pausing to lock it behind me. The morning sun was bright, almost harsh after the dimness of the house.

I scanned the tree line, searching the shadows between the pines and birch trees. Part of me half-expected to see a wolf watching from the darkness, but there was nothing but rustling leaves.

“What are you waiting for?” Courtney said, gesturing to the passenger door. “Get in.”

“Right,” I said, sliding into the passenger seat.

I settled against the worn fabric as Courtney started the engine. We pulled away from the house, dust billowing up behind us as she turned onto the country road toward

town.

On the drive to May's Diner, Courtney chatted nonstop about her micro bakery. I nodded along, not understanding most of it because the only thing I could bake was a pre-made pie.

"So, speaking of vehicles... I noticed Ryder Black's truck in your driveway last night. Pretty late too," she said, flashing me a quick look, a hint of a smile curling her lips at the ends. "That's crazy."

I wasn't even sure how we'd gotten on the topic of vehicles. "Um, he's just a friend. He's helping the mechanic with my whole car situation."

"Oh, too bad," she said, shaking her head. "Although I'm not sure what pressing issues would need to be addressed about your car that late at night."

"It was just an update, and he didn't have my number," I said, keeping my eyes forward as visions of what really happened played in my mind as if singing liar, liar, pants on fire. "Guess work finished late. Anyway, the car isn't fixed, and it's going to take some time to get the part, I guess."

"Sure," she said, pulling into May's parking lot. "Well, just remember that in Birchwood Hollow, secrets don't stay secret for long."

If only she knew about the secrets in this town. Apparently, some were able to keep them very well.

May's was bustling more than the last time I'd been there. Courtney waved or said hi to almost everyone in the place before we slid into an empty booth.

"You know everyone, huh?" I asked, taking the menu from a waitress who wasn't

Sheila.

“I mean, everyone knows everyone here,” she said, turning to the young waitress who had her hair pulled into a high ponytail. “Can you bring me a diet soda and a coffee for my friend?”

“Sure thing, Court,” she said before pushing up her glasses and moving to the next table to take their order.

I set down the menu, already knowing I was getting the cheeseburger. My eyes moved around the crowded diner until my gaze landed on someone with amber eyes watching me.

Kellan was sitting at the counter alone, his dark hair swept to the side. He wore a black fitted t-shirt that emphasized his muscular build. Unlike our nighttime encounter, he looked almost normal in the daylight — if you ignored the predatory gleam in his eyes as they locked with mine.

Suddenly, it felt hard to breathe.

“Oh, shoot,” Courtney said, pulling her phone out of her purse. “It’s one of my clients. I need to take this. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Before I could respond, she slid out of the booth and hurried toward the door, leaving me alone. I opened the menu again and kept my eyes down, hoping he’d ignore me.

Courtney hadn’t even been gone thirty seconds when someone slid into her seat. I knew without even looking up that it wasn’t Courtney.

I swallowed hard as I looked up. His lips curled into a smile that made my heart pound and the back of my neck prickle with heat.

His voice was smoother than silk. “So we meet again, Miss Everly Montana.”

Chapter Twenty

“Unfortunate,” I muttered, unable to look away from him. Ryder was going to be fucking pissed off when he heard about this.

Kellan laughed, glancing around the diner with casual interest before waving to someone seated somewhere behind me. His smile never faltered as his attention returned to me.

“You should go,” I said, keeping my voice low. “My friend will be back any minute.”

He rested his clasped hands on the table. “It’ll only take a second. I just wanted to say hi before heading out.”

“Hi. Now go,” I said, my hands balled into fists under the table.

“Aw, don’t be like that,” Kellan said, his voice tinged with false charm. The predatory gleam in his eyes didn’t fool me. “We just got off on the wrong foot the other night. A misunderstanding, if you will.”

I shook my head as I leaned back, putting more distance between us. “There was no misunderstanding. I think it would be best if we just pretend the other doesn’t exist. You won’t come to my house, and I’ll continue to avoid you like the plague. How does that sound?”

“But I don’t want to pretend you don’t exist.” A smile spread across his face, revealing his perfectly straight white teeth. “We could be friends.”

“I don’t have time for friends,” I said, barely moving my mouth.

Kellan gestured toward Courtney.

“Any more friends, that is.”

“I don’t know what Ryder’s been telling you about me, but I’m not the bad guy here. It’s him. He doesn’t like me because his friends keep leaving to be with me.” Kellan shrugged. “He tries to turn everyone against me, and it’s not working. He’s always been like this. Big chip on his shoulder.”

I remained silent, watching him carefully.

“He’s not who he pretends to be, you know,” Kellan said, shaking his head. “But he does have the whole town thinking he’s some kind of saint. Those who know him, really know him, aren’t fooled. Are you going to be fooled too, Everly?”

My stomach twisted with each word. Not because I believed him, but because he was sitting so close, it made me feel violated. This man had cornered me on a dark road and wrapped his hand around my throat. Now he sat across from me in a public place, acting like we were old friends catching up.

“Please leave,” I said, forcing a smile onto my face.

Instead of complying, Kellan leaned even closer across the table. “I can smell him on you,” he whispered, his eyes flashing bright amber for just a second. “You should be more careful who you trust. He’s a dangerous man.”

I leaned forward, matching his aggression. “You tried to kill me.”

“That idiot Paul. You saw us,” he hissed, his eyes narrowing. “We have rules. They

aren't just my rules."

"I don't care about your rules," I said, sneering. "I have rules, too."

Kellan grunted as he gripped the edge of the table. "Ryder broke the rules by allowing you to know the truth. I can't and won't let him get away with it. He holds me to the rules, then he should be accountable as well, right?"

I opened my mouth but found no words.

"Oh my gosh, Kellan? Hi!" Courtney's cheerful voice broke the tension as she stood at the edge of the table, looking down at him. Her smile widened, and her eyelashes fluttered. "I didn't know you two knew each other. How have you been? It's been forever since I've seen you around here. It would be nice to catch?—"

"Courtney," he said, the menace vanishing from his entire body. He slid out of the booth and gave her a quick squeeze. "It's so good to see you."

"You too," she beamed. "Would you like to join us?"

He flashed her a smile that made her cheeks turn pink. "Damn, I wish I could, but I'm so busy down at the lumberyard. It was nice to see you again, Everly. Take care, Courtney. Ladies," he said, rubbing his hands together, "enjoy your lunch."

Kellan turned and strode through the diner before Courtney could open her mouth to say another word. She watched him go, her eyes following his every movement before she slid back into the booth with a heavy sigh.

"Sorry about that... the phone call took a bit longer than expected," she said, tucking her phone into her purse. Her eyes darted to the parking lot through the window as if trying to catch another glimpse of Kellan. "How do you know Kellan?"

I gripped the coffee mug with both hands so she didn't see them shaking. "We met once. Small towns are like that, I guess."

"You can say that again," Courtney said, tilting her head to both sides as she stared out the window. "Everyone knows everyone eventually."

"Do you know him well?" I asked, taking a small sip of the steaming liquid. The bitterness and caffeine would hopefully settle my nerves.

Courtney turned back to me, a smile still on her face. "It was a long time ago, but we had a little fling." She unfolded and refolded her napkin. "I didn't want it to end, but it didn't work out. I think he was interested in someone else at the time, and I just gave up trying to get his attention."

My stomach knotted at the thought of sweet, chatty Courtney with Kellan — a man who'd threatened me just days ago. "That's probably for the best."

Courtney's smile dropped. "What? How would you know if it was for the best?"

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry," I said, realizing how my comment must have sounded. "I didn't mean it the way it came out. I just meant?—"

"Ready to order?" The waitress appeared at our table, looking back and forth between us.

Courtney pressed her fingers against her temple. "Actually, never mind. I have a headache and don't feel well." She grabbed her purse and slid out of the booth. "I'm going to drive you home, Everly. I need to lie down."

"Courtney, I?—"

“It’s fine. I just get these migraines, and they hit fast. I’d like to be home before I throw up,” she said, already heading toward the door. “Let’s just go.”

I followed her out, leaving behind my mug of coffee. The drive back to the country was painfully quiet and felt extra long. Courtney kept her eyes fixed on the road, both hands gripping the steering wheel at exactly ten and two. I tried to think of something to say that wouldn’t make things worse, but nothing came to mind.

As we drew closer to my house, I spotted Ryder’s truck parked in my driveway. He was pacing back and forth across the front lawn, a phone pressed to his ear.

“I’ll let you out here,” she said, stopping at the end of the driveway and not pulling in.

“Uh, okay. Hope you feel better,” I said as I slid out of her car. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Sure,” she said, keeping her eyes forward.

I closed the door and watched as she pulled away without another word. I turned around, my eyes landing on Ryder as he walked toward me.

His body was tense and his hands balled into fists. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Chapter Twenty-One

“Um, what?” I said, my eyes narrowing as I crossed my arms.

“You can’t just go out like that,” he said, shaking his head. “Not without telling me.”

My mouth dropped wide. “Uh, I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“You have to try to understand this isn’t a normal situation you’re in. You know, I’ve been calling you,” he said, holding up his phone. “Why didn’t you answer?”

I pulled my phone from my pocket and saw five missed calls. I’d silenced it last night when I’d been trying to sleep and had forgotten to turn the volume back up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear it.”

“God dammit, Everly,” he said, running his hand through his hair. “I was fucking worried sick. I thought something—” He stopped himself, nostrils flaring as he inhaled deeply. His entire body went rigid. “You saw Kellan.”

It wasn’t a question. I remembered what Kellan had said about smelling Ryder on me. Apparently, it worked both ways.

“I didn’t want to?—”

“Now, do you see why it’s not safe for you? Why don’t you trust me to handle this?”

My arms dropped to my sides as I let out a breath. “It’s not like he’ll do anything in

the middle of the day with witnesses around.”

“Where were you?”

“I’ll talk if you calm down.”

Ryder let out a breath. “I’m calm.”

“No, you’re not,” I scoffed.

“This is likely as calm as I can get at the moment,” he said, exhaling slowly. “Where were you?”

“May’s Diner,” I said, keeping my eyes down. “Courtney stopped by and asked me to go to lunch. I can’t not ever leave the house again, Ryder.”

Ryder’s eyes darkened. “What did he say to you?”

“Nothing specific. Just trying to paint you as the bad guy.” I stepped up onto the porch, but he didn’t follow. “He said you broke the rules... not him.”

“That bastard.”

“What rule did you break exactly?”

Ryder ran his hand through his hair. “When a human finds out... we need to make sure they can’t talk. Ever.”

“That’s why Kellan was going to kill me,” I said, sucking in a breath. The yard began to spin, and I backed up, stopping when I bumped into the door. “I need to... Are you going to... I have to get out of here. Is my car fixed?”

“I’d never hurt you,” Ryder said, taking a quick step forward.

“You said you could hurt me,” I said, my eyes wide.

He shook his head. “Because I’m strong. I would never do anything on purpose, Everly. Whatever this is between us... it’s something bigger than all that. It’s something?—”

“I need to leave!”

“Everly, now you need to calm down.” He glanced over his shoulder at the truck. “Do you know where he was going?”

“He said lumberyard, I think.”

Ryder started to back away. “Stay here. Please, I beg you, don’t leave again.”

“Ryder,” I said, feeling as though I’d just finished running a marathon. “Are you the bad guy?”

Ryder’s shoulders dropped, the tension seeming to drain from his body as he looked at me with those intense eyes. “Everly...”

“Tell me the truth, Ryder,” I ordered, my breaths coming quicker. “Are you the bad guy?”

“I’ve done things I’m not proud of. Things to protect my pack, to defend what’s mine. But no, I am not the bad guy. Don’t you see what he’s doing?” he asked, taking a cautious step toward me, keeping enough distance that I wouldn’t feel trapped. “He’s trying to turn you against me. I need you to believe that. I need you to trust me.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling suddenly cold despite the afternoon warmth. Trust. Such a simple word for something that never came easily to me.

“I can’t ever trust anyone,” I whispered, hating how small my voice sounded.

“This is exactly what he wanted,” Ryder said, pain or maybe it was defeat flashing across his face. “What do you want me to do to prove it to you?”

“I have no idea,” I said, looking down. “I don’t think it’s possible for me to ever trust anyone, no matter what they do or say.”

I stood there, frozen on the porch, unable to move toward him or away. The truth was, I didn’t know what to believe anymore. My life had been turned upside down in the span of a few days, and now I was caught between two men who weren’t even human, each claiming the other was the monster.

“Everly,” Ryder said, as if my name were something fragile. “I know trust doesn’t come easily to you. It’s like someone taught you that people will hurt you if you let them close. I’m not like the person or people that did that to you.”

I swallowed hard, hating how easily he could read me. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“You don’t have to trust me, but please, don’t run. Not yet,” Ryder pleaded, pressing his palms together. “Give me a chance to show you the truth.”

“Why aren’t you following the rules?” I asked, raising a brow. “I know about you... what you are, and if that means I need to die, why aren’t you doing it?”

Ryder grimaced. “They’re ancient rules. I think things have changed. It’s violent. It’s not who or what we are supposed to be.”

The tension in his shoulders and the concern in his eyes all seemed so genuine. But then, I'd been fooled before. I'd believed in people who turned out to be nothing like they presented themselves, all just to get what they wanted.

For all I knew, Ryder and Kellan were both the bad guys. I didn't want to be a fool... not again.

"How am I supposed to know what's real?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "Kellan said you're the one breaking rules. You say he is. You're both... and I'm just caught in the middle with no idea what's going on."

Ryder took another cautious step toward me. "What did your gut tell you when you were with Kellan today? Did you feel safe?"

"No, definitely not," I admitted. "But that's not?—"

"What do you feel now, with me?"

"This isn't proof of anything," I said, shaking my head. "I'm a terrible judge of character. Why do you think I moved out here to be away from people?"

I watched Ryder's face cycle through frustration, worry, and something else that looked almost like hurt. My chest felt tight, my instincts pulled in opposite directions. Part of me wanted to believe him, while the other part screamed to run back to the city.

"Just please, give me a chance," he said, his voice low. "I'll go to the lumberyard and deal with this like I should have years ago. Then, after it's dealt with and I know he won't do anything to hurt you, you can leave if that's what you really want."

I didn't respond... I just wrapped my arms tighter around myself.

“Lock the door behind you,” he said, then turned and jogged toward his truck.

I watched him drive away, the dust kicking up behind his tires. Only when he disappeared down the road did I step inside, locking the door as instructed. It was almost as if I didn’t have a choice... that I knew he was right, but really, it was probably just that I was too scared not to listen.

Trust had never been my strong suit, not after what my ex had done. He’d seemed so perfect at first — charming, attentive, protective. Until “protective” became controlling, and “charming” became manipulative. By the time I’d gathered the courage to leave him, he’d isolated me from everyone I cared about. I’d felt trapped, just like I did in this house at the moment.

Was I walking into the same trap again? Ryder had been nothing but protective since I’d arrived, but was it genuine concern and caring or something darker?

It didn’t matter. I wasn’t going to get involved with anyone. Not Ryder. No one. When my car was fixed, I would say goodbye to Ryder and just head back home. I’d buy new things if I had to, but I was never going to come back to this place.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I paced the living room as the afternoon dragged slowly. I tried to distract myself with a book, my laptop, and TV, but my brain was too busy to focus on anything.

When I remembered I hadn't eaten at the diner, I made a halfhearted decision to prepare something, but after staring into the fridge for five minutes, I settled on another one of Courtney's pastries.

As the sun began to set and the house darkened from the fading light, I moved through the house, turning on all the lights. After I finished, I heard the sounds of a vehicle pulling into the driveway. Relief washed through me as my heart jumped into my throat. I wasn't excited to tell him goodbye, but I would be happy to see him again and hear how things went with Kellan.

I rushed to the front window, peering through the curtains. My SUV rolled to a stop, followed by another truck. Relief flooded me at the sight of my car, but it was quickly replaced by confusion.

The truck wasn't Ryder's, and Trevor was awkwardly extracting himself from my SUV. He looked comically large in my SUV, like a bear trying to escape from a tin can, but I didn't even crack a smile.

It was Gage sitting in the driver's seat in the truck, waving at whatever Trevor called out to him. He looked around the yard as Trevor approached the house. A moment later, the doorbell rang, followed by several loud knocks.

“Uh, hey. It’s Ryder’s friend Trevor,” he called through the door as if Ryder had instructed him how to approach. “You don’t have to open the door. I can just leave the key under the?—”

I pulled open the door, startling him mid-sentence.

“—mat,” he finished, holding up my car keys.

“Thanks,” I said, pressing my lips into a smile as I took them from him. “I really appreciate you fixing my car. What do I owe you?”

He waved a hand, his blue-green eyes sparkling as they caught the light. “Oh, no. Nothing. It was seriously no trouble. Basically, it just sat there while I waited for the part and then took three minutes to actually do the repair once it arrived.”

“Well, still,” I said, reaching for my purse.

“I can’t accept anything,” he said, holding up both hands. “Ryder would just bring it right back.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re running a business, aren’t you?”

“Seriously,” Trevor said with a laugh. “I appreciate it, but this one is on the house. I tried to let Ryder know I was going to drop it off, but I was having trouble reaching him.”

My stomach tightened. “He left earlier to go talk with Kellan about something.”

“Alone?” Trevor asked, his voice dropping an octave. His expression changed, and he shot a quick look toward Gage over his shoulder.

I shrugged, feeling my stomach churn. “I... don’t know. He didn’t say. Is that bad?”

“Well, I just wanted to drop off the car,” Trevor said, ignoring my question. “Everything should be running fine, but give me a call if you have any problems.”

“Sure,” I said, and he gave me a sharp nod before jogging to Gage’s truck.

I closed and locked the door behind him, watching through the window as he climbed into the passenger side of Gage’s truck. They didn’t pull away immediately. Gage looked off toward the trees as if looking for something before reversing out of the driveway.

The worry on Trevor’s face before he’d quickly masked it sent a chill through me. He seemed worried, but didn’t they know Ryder was strong? I didn’t like it, but I shook my head.

I had my car back and could leave now, head back to the safety of Chicago, and pretend none of this ever happened. Ryder had pleaded with me for a chance to show me that he could be trusted, but it didn’t matter. I was done with all of this. He would understand. In fact, he thought it would be for the best.

I went to my bedroom and pulled a duffel bag from the closet. I was getting out of this place before something bad happened. I’d go back to the world I understood, where the most dangerous things were traffic and manipulative people. Those things were annoying and shitty, but I could handle them.

I stuffed clothes into the bag haphazardly — just enough to get by until I could figure out how to get the rest of my stuff back. I’d also need my toiletries, laptop, and phone charger, but anything else I could just buy as needed.

I grabbed my purse and the bag, taking one last look around the living room. Part of

me wanted to stay. This house was supposed to be my fresh start, a place of my own away from the noise and drama and pressure of the city. The other part worried about what would happen if I stayed.

With a deep breath, I stepped outside, locking the door behind me. The night air was cool and crisp, carrying the scent of pine. I tossed my bag into the passenger seat as I slid into the driver's seat.

I locked the doors before inserting the key into the ignition, my fingers wrapping around to turn it... but I couldn't move. My hand was frozen, refusing to make the simple motion that would start the engine and allow me to escape from this place.

What was wrong with me? Kellan wanted me dead because I knew too much, and I didn't know if I could even trust that Ryder was telling me the truth about anything.

I tried again, but something held me back. What was wrong with me? This was what I wanted, wasn't it?

Ryder had been right, though. When I'd been with Kellan and the diner, I'd felt very uneasy, and with Ryder, it was different. Still, like I'd told him, I was a terrible judge of character. My feelings about him meant nothing.

That look on Trevor's face, though... what if Ryder was in danger? What if he needed help?

It shouldn't matter to me. We weren't anything to each other — just a one-night stand born of tension and attraction. I barely knew him, and it wasn't like I could do anything to help him.

Even though I knew better, I apparently couldn't leave until I knew he was okay. I removed the key, grabbed my things, and raced back inside the house, locking the

door behind me.

Oh my God! What the hell was happening to me? I leaned back against the door, trying to make sense of it. I'd wanted to go enough that I'd packed my things, but it was like my hand just wouldn't work.

This wasn't like me. I didn't stick around for men I barely knew, and I sure as hell didn't put myself in danger for them. I'd learned over and over again not to make stupid mistakes... yet here I was, unable to drive away because I was worried about a wolf I'd met less than a week ago.

"Ugh!" I said, slowly sliding down the door to my ass.

It was all so insane.

I wanted to leave. I tried to drive away, but I couldn't... it was like there was a powerful magnet holding me in place.

I reached into my purse, pulling out my phone. Maybe if I told him first that I was leaving, and I knew he understood, it would be different. I stared at his contact info for several minutes before pressing the call button.

Ring... ring... ring.

Ring... ring... ring.

Voicemail.

"Hey, Ryder, it's me. Um, I just wanted to check in with you regarding our recent conversation," I said, sounding like I was making a professional call to a business associate. "If you could call me back at your earliest convenience, that would be

great. Thanks.”

I paced the living room with my phone in hand, waiting for a return call. It was almost 10 PM, and I still hadn’t heard anything from Ryder.

A knot of worry tightened in my stomach. He should have called or texted by now, and considering Trevor hadn’t been able to reach him either, it made it all the more nerve-wracking.

What if something had gone wrong? From what it had sounded like from Ryder and my own experience with Kellan, he didn’t seem exactly stable. If Ryder had confronted him alone, maybe something could have gone wrong.

No.

Ryder could handle himself.

He was a pack leader.

Perhaps his phone died, or he was driving. Maybe he was dealing with something at his business, although that seemed unlikely given the time of day.

I flopped down on the couch, placing my phone on the coffee table where I could see it. I’d give it a little longer before trying to call again. For all I knew, Trevor and Gage had found him, and they were just busy doing whatever the hell werewolves do.

My eyes felt heavy from the stress of the day, and I fought against closing them. Just a few minutes of rest, I told myself, still listening for the sound of a truck in the driveway.

I jolted awake to darkness, momentarily disoriented. The living room was exactly as

I'd left it, except now bathed in shadows. I fumbled for my phone on the coffee table — the screen lighting up to show it was just past midnight.

No calls. No texts.

A cold feeling swept through me. Something wasn't right.

The sounds of shouting erupted from somewhere outside. I got to my feet, moving quickly to the window to see if it was Ryder or someone from his pack.

The voices weren't coming from my yard. Across the street, every light in the neighbor's house was on, and I could see two shadows moving behind the curtains, but I couldn't tell what was happening. My heart crashed hard against my ribs as I pressed my ear to the glass in an attempt to make out any of the words.

None of the words came together until there was one sharp word that cut through the air like a blade. "Help!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

I jerked away from the window, my breath lodged in my throat. There had been no mistaking the word, even though I desperately wanted to deny it.

I walked backward, fumbling my phone as I picked it up off the coffee table. My fingers tapped the numbers for emergency, but when I clicked to call, nothing happened.

“No fucking service again?” I threw my phone onto the couch and returned to the window. I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing, could I?

A man was holding up his hands defensively as someone approached him slowly. As far as I could tell, they weren’t holding a weapon, but he called out for help again, even more desperate than the first time.

“Shit,” I said, searching the yard for wolves as far as I could tell there wasn’t anything out there.

I opened the door and cautiously stepped out onto the patio. I looked carefully into the trees around my yard, checking for any sign of wolves or shadows moving between the trees. The night was still, almost unnaturally so. There was no howling or rustling bushes or anything to suggest supernatural creatures were nearby.

“Hey! If you’re out here, I think someone needs your help across the street,” I whispered into the shadows.

No response.

I didn't want to think about why they weren't there and the possibility that Ryder was in serious trouble. It had to be something else. But why would he leave me unguarded after everything we'd talked about?

Taking a deep breath, I stepped off the porch. The cool night air prickled my skin as I stepped down on the grass, peering through the darkness toward the house.

Ryder would never forgive me if I left after his warning. He'd nearly blown a gasket when I'd gone out with Courtney during the day, but it wasn't like I could just stand here and do nothing either.

My gaze darted left and right, scanning for any movement... any signs of danger or help from the wolves. The quiet pressed in around me, making every step sound thunderous.

Where were my guards... and where was Ryder?

I raced across the street, cautiously making my way closer to the house. All the lights were still on, but there was no shouting, just an eerie quiet that made me question whether or not I'd heard or seen anything at all.

I'd never met the man who lived there, nor had I even seen him, but that didn't mean I could just pretend I hadn't heard anything. If something happened and I didn't do anything, I couldn't live with myself. It wasn't the same as being in the city and looking the other way from gang violence or drug deals... this was someone's life in danger. Or at least that was the way it had sounded.

I approached the house, my steps slow and silent as I climbed up the porch steps to the door. My eyes darted to the window, but I couldn't see anything except for part of

the living room and a dining room table further back.

My knuckles hesitated just inches from the wood. If everything was fine, I could just say I was stopping by to introduce myself... in the middle of the night. Sigh. Not very believable. Before I could talk myself out of it, I knocked firmly.

Moments passed, and I knocked again. "Hello? Everything okay in there?"

I was about to knock again when I heard footsteps approaching. The door swung open, revealing a young woman, maybe early twenties, with auburn hair flowing down both shoulders. She wore black jeans and a black sweater, looking perfectly stunning and put-together for midnight.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her voice pleasant even though there was a stranger at her door in the middle of the night.

"Oh," I said before clearing my throat and pasting on a smile. "I'm Everly from across the street. I was told a man lived here, and I know this is totally weird, but I thought I heard something and just wanted to make sure everything was okay."

Her expression didn't change. "Oh gosh, I am so sorry about that. My dad and I were watching a movie. I can't believe it was loud enough for you to hear it across the street." She rolled her eyes and glanced over her shoulder. "My father is a bit hard of hearing. I'm really sorry we disturbed you at this hour."

I hesitated, looking past her into the house. The entryway opened into a short hallway, so I couldn't see into the living room. What I could see was filled with boxes and stacks of books — an organized mess.

"I'm Francis," she said, extending her hand and flashing me a cool smile. "My father is... have you lived across the street long?"

“No,” I said, taking her hand.

She shook slowly, her skin cool against mine. “I don’t come around much, but I thought an old man lived in that house?”

“Yeah, I’m the new owner,” I said, taking a step back. “I’m really sorry I bothered you.”

As she pulled her hand back, I noticed a splatter of blood on the back of her hand. I swallowed hard as my pulse quickened. Something was definitely wrong.

My eyes darted to her face, and I knew immediately she knew I’d seen something. Her smile was frozen on her face.

“Well, goodnight,” I said, taking another step back.

I didn’t make it more than half a step before she grabbed me with shocking speed. Francis yanked me inside the house, shoving me forward as she slammed the door shut behind me. I tripped over my feet and fell hard onto the wooden floor.

“No one ever minds their own fucking business anymore,” she said, licking the blood off her hand.

I scrambled backward, stopping when I spotted the old man sprawled on the floor in front of the TV. His throat was torn open, blood pooled around him, and his eyes stared lifelessly at the ceiling.

“Oh my God!” I screamed, trying to get to my feet. I slipped on a splotch of blood, but managed to regain my footing.

She bobbed and weaved with each of my movements, and when I darted toward the

back of the house, she moved with inhuman speed, blocking my path. Francis clicked her tongue as she rubbed her hands together.

“Help!” I shouted, hoping someone — anyone — might hear. “Help me!”

“Who would come for you?” Francis said with a chilling laugh. “No more neighbors left to get in the way.”

She stalked toward me as I backed away, looking frantically for anything I could use as a weapon. My back hit a wall, and panic surged through me.

“Please,” I gasped. “Whatever you want?—”

“What I want,” she said, looking at her fingernails, “is to finish my dinner in peace.” She grinned as she looked me up and down. “I’m actually stuffed full, but maybe I have room for dessert. It’s not often I treat myself to something as delicious as you.”

She lunged at me. I ducked and rolled, but she caught my ankle and dragged me across the floor. I kicked and screamed, my nails breaking as I clawed at the hardwood. She flipped me onto my back and straddled me, pinning my arms with her knees.

“You’re not a wolf, but you smell like a wolf,” she whispered, leaning close to my face. “Have you been playing with the puppies? They don’t like it when their toys get broken. I’m going to be in even more trouble than I already am!”

She threw her head back and laughed.

“Get off me!” I thrashed beneath her, but she was impossibly strong. I glanced over at the man on the floor, but there was no doubt in my mind here wasn’t going to be saving me. “Why? What on earth did he do to you?”

“My father?” she asked, her face wrinkling. “I wouldn’t be like this if it hadn’t been for him.”

“Was he?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. That old fart was afraid of his shadow. He sold me, and I’m just getting my revenge.”

A crash of breaking glass cut through the room. A massive black shape hurtled through the window with an explosion of glass and splintered wood. Another followed immediately after — two enormous wolves landing with efficient precision.

Francis’s head whipped toward them, her grip on me loosening as her teeth grew into wild fangs. I twisted hard, freeing one arm and swinging wildly, connecting with her jaw. She snarled, but didn’t budge.

As she lowered her mouth toward my throat, the wolves charged in a chorus of growls. Francis sprang off me, flying up toward the ceiling... almost hovering there before slowly landing on her feet in a crouched position.

I sat up and crawled away, gasping for breath as I hid behind a recliner. Two of the wolves lunged toward Francis at the same time, but both missed as she quickly darted away.

The wolves launched a coordinated assault, with one soaring through the air while the other charged at ground level. The one with black fur crept behind her, sinking its sharp claw into Francis’ spine.

Francis howled as teeth sank into her flesh — first the black wolf, then the gray wolf. As she dropped to her knees, she grabbed the smallest wolf with both hands, hurling it against a wall with a sickening thud.

The black one moved to her throat and tore at the flesh, ripping her apart piece by piece. I crawled backward toward the door, unable to tear my eyes away from the horrific scene. Blood sprayed across the walls as the wolves tore into Francis. Her inhuman screams gradually weakened until they stopped altogether.

I burst through the front door, stumbling down the porch steps in my desperation to escape the carnage behind me. The cool night air hit my face as I ran, my lungs burning and my legs threatening to buckle beneath me. Blood — or whatever the hell it was that came out of her — was spattered across my shirt, cold and sticky like syrup on my skin.

“Oh God, oh God,” I gasped, sprinting across the street toward my house. I just needed to get there, lock the door, and figure out what the hell had just happened.

I hadn’t made it halfway across the street when a massive black shape darted in front of me, cutting off my path. The black wolf from inside the house stood before me, its amber eyes glowing in the darkness, muscles rippling beneath its midnight fur. It was even bigger up close, the size of a small bear, with paws that could crush my skull in one swipe.

I skidded to a halt, nearly falling backward as I tried to change direction. My heart hammered against my ribcage as the wolf circled around me, blocking my escape route.

“Please,” I begged, backing away slowly with my hands held up. “Please, just leave me alone. I’m not like her. I don’t know who she was. I won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

The wolf continued to stare at me, its amber eyes never blinking. A cracking noise popped from the creature’s spine, as a wave of convulsions moved through the wolf. Its massive body twisted and contorted in ways that didn’t seem possible.

Bones cracked and shifted beneath the skin... the sound making my stomach churn. The fur began to recede, muscle and sinew reshaping themselves within seconds.

I couldn't look away, couldn't run, couldn't scream — just stood there paralyzed as the wolf's muzzle shortened, its limbs elongated, and its body transformed before my eyes. The sickening sounds of reconstruction were all I could hear until it stopped.

Silence.

A naked Kellan cocked his head. "Looks like I saved your life."

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Where is Ryder?” I asked, taking a brave step forward.

“What?” Kellan asked, his eyes narrowed. “How about a thank you?”

I shoved Kellan with all my strength, my hands connecting with his bare chest. “What did you do to Ryder?”

Kellan didn’t budge an inch from my push. He might as well have been a brick wall. His lips curled into an amused smile that made my blood boil.

“Not even a thank you first?” he asked, gesturing toward the house behind us. “I saved your life.”

“Answer me,” I demanded, my hands balling into fists.

Kellan laughed, a low rumble that held no humor. “I didn’t do anything to Ryder. He went off to speak with someone about me. Apparently, when I don’t listen to his orders, which I’m under no obligations to do, he feels the need to try to deal with things using the alternate methods.” He made air quotes with his fingers around “alternate methods,” his amber eyes gleaming with mockery.

“You’re lying.”

“Why would I lie? Ryder thinks he’s so righteous, but what he doesn’t realize is that if I get in trouble, he will, too.” Kellan took a step closer, towering over me. “He

allowed a human to know about us. That's a punishable offense too."

"You're not staying in your territory," I said, crossing my arms.

Kellan's eyelids fluttered. "I'm challenging our territorial boundaries. I get that you think I'm the bad guy here, but it's not like that. Ryder has been handed everything to him on a silver platter. I have to fight tooth and nail for every little inch." He shook his head. "Why am I talking to you about this?"

"I wish you weren't," I muttered, my eyes flashing over my shoulder. "What was that woman? Her teeth were... she was so?—"

"Don't ask," Kellan said, cutting me off sharply. "It's done, and you don't need to worry about her anymore."

"I didn't know I had to worry about her before either," I said, swallowing hard. "Are there others like her?"

Kellan sighed. "You should seriously consider leaving this place and never coming back. You know far too much for your own good."

"I'm going to," I said, looking down at my blood-splattered arms. "I just need to shower and forget all of this ever happened."

"You should," Kellan said, his eyes fixed on mine. "I'm still waiting for the thank you."

I stared back at him, reluctant to express any gratitude to this man who had threatened me just nights before. But he and his wolves had saved my life.

"Thank you," I finally muttered.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “You’re welcome.”

“How did you know I was there?” I asked, chewing my lip.

Kellan’s expression shifted, becoming more serious. “I didn’t. That was the woman we’d been looking for. She has been killing wolves in the area. We finally tracked her down, and apparently just in the nick of time. We initially thought it was you that we were looking for.”

My blood ran cold at the thought. If they hadn’t been hunting Francis already, I would likely be dead. The reality of how close I’d come to death hit me like a physical blow.

“I look nothing like her,” I said, my voice fading.

Kellan shrugged. “We didn’t know what she looked like. Until tonight.”

“Oh,” I said, my head feeling like a helium balloon. “I should go.”

“Yes, yes, you should.”

I stumbled back to the house, my legs shaking beneath me. The adrenaline was starting to crash, leaving me exhausted and jittery all at once. I locked the door behind me, though I doubted a simple lock would stop whatever that woman had been — or Kellan or his wolves, for that matter. I’d seen how they’d launched themselves through the window and knew it was something they could do again.

I grabbed my phone from the couch cushions, and my heart dropped into my stomach. Six missed calls and a string of increasingly panicked text messages lit up my screen.

Where are you?

Everly, pick up your phone.

I'm getting worried.

Please tell me you're okay.

I'm about to come looking for you.

I quickly hit the call button, and he answered on the first ring.

"Everly! Where have you been? Are you alright?" His voice was tight with concern.

"Um, I'm okay," I said, glancing down at my blood-splattered clothing. "Service went out on my phone again. Where were you? I was trying to?"

"Tried a different idea to get things to end with Kellan," Ryder said, shaking his head. "I meant to call sooner. I know it's late, but can I stop by? I need to talk to you."

I glanced down at myself again — blood on my clothes and skin, dirt on my hands, and a leaf in my hair. "Um, sure, but I have to jump in the shower."

"A shower?" he asked. "I figured you'd be sleeping."

"Well, I wasn't. I'll explain later," I said, not wanting to think about my encounter with Francis over the phone. Not to mention if he heard about Kellan, he'd probably lose it. "How far are you?"

"Twenty minutes maybe," he said, pausing. "I heard Trevor dropped off your car, and for a minute I thought you bolted."

I drew in a slow breath. “I haven’t yet. See you soon, okay?”

“Bye,” Ryder said, ending the call.

I rushed to the bathroom, stripping off my stained clothes and piling them in the corner of the floor. I’d deal with them later... by burning them.

The hot water hit my skin, and I watched as Francis’s blood swirled down the drain in pale pink spirals. I scrubbed frantically, needing to erase every trace of the night’s horror from my body.

As I rubbed shampoo into my hair, I thought about what I would tell Ryder. I couldn’t keep what happened with Francis a secret because Kellan or another wolf would tell him about it.

I’d also have to tell him I tried to leave, but that, for some reason, I just couldn’t. The worst part would be telling him that Kellan had saved my life... then again, maybe that meant Kellan would actually finally leave me alone. None of his wolves had been outside my house trying to scare and threaten me. It was possible that he’d given up on trying to kill me. Maybe everything Ryder was doing had worked.

I finished my shower and wrapped myself in a towel just as there was a knock at the door. My heart jumped into my throat, and I quickly slipped on my robe.

I rushed to the window. Relief washed through me when I saw Ryder standing on the porch, his shoulders tense under his flannel shirt.

I unlocked the door and opened it. “Sorry, I just finished. You weren’t out there waiting long, were you?”

“No,” he said, his eyes scanning my face. “Just got here.”

“Let me get dressed,” I said, and he caught my arm.

He gestured to the couch. “Let’s talk first.”

As I sank down on the couch, I tightened my robe, trying to appear more composed than I felt. My hands settled in my lap, fingers fidgeting with the tie of my robe.

Ryder remained standing for a few minutes, pacing the small space in front of the coffee table. He sucked in a deep breath before lowering himself to the cushions.

“So,” I said, swallowing hard, “what did you want to talk about?”

Ryder looked at his hands and then at me. “I managed to talk to Kellan earlier today.”

“And?” I prompted when he didn’t continue.

“After a short discussion, I managed to get him to agree to leave you alone,” Ryder said, his voice measured.

My shoulders relaxed. “That’s wonderful!”

“No more threats. No more wolves harassing you, nothing,” he said, looking back down at his hands.

“Why aren’t you relieved?” I asked, my eyes narrowed.

Ryder took my hand in his. “I have to agree to his terms.”

I shook my head. “What are his terms?”

“I have to step down as pack leader.”

The words hit me like a slap across the face. “What? No, that’s?—”

“It’s his price,” Ryder said. “He wants the territory and the pack. Has for years. This is his leverage.”

“You can’t do that,” I said, my voice rising. “The price is too high, Ryder. That’s your family, your life, your?—”

“It’s you or the pack,” he said simply. “I can’t just let an innocent person die because she accidentally saw something she shouldn’t have.”

I shook my head, struggling to process what he was telling me. “That’s not fair. That’s not right. He can’t make you do that.”

“I have three days to agree, but I’ve already made my decision,” Ryder said, running his hands through his hair. “It doesn’t even feel like I have a choice. I can’t let anything happen to you, Everly. It was so weird.”

“What was weird?”

He looked toward the window. “Tonight... I felt so strongly that you were in danger. I’d never felt anything like that before. It was like... something inside me just grabbing my insides. Then when you didn’t answer?—”

“I was in danger,” I said, hugging myself. “But Kellan?—”

“Kellan did what?” Ryder said, getting to his feet. His hands were balled up into fists so tight his fingers were white. “That fucking bastard! I knew it was another lie!”

I shook my head. “No, Kellan saved me.”

Ryder froze in place. He didn't blink. "What happened, Everly?"

Before I could explain what happened, a bright orange glow suddenly illuminated the windows at the front of my house. The flickering light cast eerie shadows across the living room.

I sucked in a breath. "What is that?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ryder made it to the window in two steps, and I followed close behind, holding my robe tight to my chest. I pulled the curtain to the side and gasped.

The neighbor's house was engulfed in flames. Orange and yellow fingers reaching toward the night sky, devouring the structure like a hungry beast. Smoke billowed upward, thick and black against the darkness, making a large cloud overhead.

"What the hell happened?" Ryder asked, turning to face me, his face half-illuminated by the fire's glow.

I took a step back from the window. "A woman... she attacked me. I heard someone calling for help and I went?—"

"You what?"

"I'm not going to stand around and let someone die!"

"Has anyone ever told you that you're actually terrible at pretending you don't see things?"

I waved a hand in the air, brushing away his words. "A woman killed my neighbor. She said it was her father... and that he made her the way she was or something. I thought she was going to let me go, but then she didn't."

"Son of a bitch," Ryder said, pacing at the window, running his hands so aggressively

through his hair I thought he was pulling it out. “You could have been killed!”

“There was blood everywhere once Kellan and his pack got inside,” I said, wincing as I swallowed. “Kellan showed up just in time. He saved my life. He and the other wolves killed the woman. He said they tracked her.”

“She was the one killing wolves in our territories,” Ryder said, as if he were making sense of everything.

I nodded. “That’s what he said, but she wasn’t... normal. There was something wrong with her. She threw one of the wolves across the room as if it weighed nothing. Her teeth?—”

The distant wail of sirens broke my train of thought.

Ryder looked me up and down. “Did she hurt you?”

“Not even a scratch,” I said, shaking my head. “Maybe a few bumps and bruises, but nothing that won’t heal. I have no idea what she was. She was so incredibly strong and beautiful.”

“She was a vampire,” Ryder said, his jaw tense.

I stared at him. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“You believe werewolves, but vampires are a step too far?” he asked, raising a brow.

I scoffed. “Sadly, I believe both... but I’m far more afraid of her than I am of Kellan or his pack. She was unbelievably strong.”

“Dammit,” Ryder said, turning back to the window. “I knew I should have trusted my

instincts and come back. I felt something was wrong. I've never experienced it before... that pull, it was just so... different. I don't know... if... maybe?—"

"What?" I asked, shaking my head.

"I don't know," he said, his eyes focused on the flashing lights outside my window. "The fire will make sure she can't come back."

I cocked my head. "You burn vampires?"

"Or stake them."

"What about garlic and holy water?"

Ryder flashed a quick half-smile. "They don't like them, but it won't kill them."

"Do they have reflections?"

"Do you believe everything you read?"

"She was just so powerful?—"

Ryder snorted. "Nothing a wolf can't handle. Or sunlight."

I turned away from him, twisting my fingers. "There's something else I should tell you."

"How is there more?" he said, placing a hand on my shoulder and turning me toward him.

"It's nothing bad, just weird." I pressed my lips together and closed my eyes, trying

to remember how it had felt. “Earlier today, when Trevor dropped off my car, I tried to leave. I was going to go back to Chicago, but I couldn’t even turn the key in the ignition. It was like there was a magnet holding me in place. It sounds crazy, but it felt like I physically could not leave this place.”

Ryder swallowed hard. “You couldn’t leave?”

“No, but now I know you’re safe and that everything’s well... everything will be okay once I’m gone,” I said, gesturing toward my bag. “It’s for the best.”

“I understand,” Ryder said, his voice low. “I’d like to beg you to stay, but I know that this isn’t the life you want. I never wanted you to get caught up in any of this.”

I touched his arm. “This is exactly why you can’t give in to Kellan’s demands. I’m leaving anyway. You don’t need to give up your pack for me. You need to protect them and lead them. They’re with you, and not Kellan, for a reason.”

He turned to me, his blue eyes reflecting the fire’s glow. “You’re right.”

“Promise me you won’t step down,” I insisted.

He nodded slowly. “As long as you’re safe, I promise. But I’m going to keep an eye on you until the minute you leave.”

“I’d like that,” I said, leaning my head against his arm.

“When do you plan to go?” he asked, stroking my hair.

I shrugged. “A day or two, I think. I can pack up some of my stuff and send someone for the rest of it. I guess I’ll sell the house or something. Could you visit me in the city?”

“Yeah, maybe. I’d love that,” he said, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. He cleared his throat and turned to look into my eyes. “Before you go, would you let me take you out on a proper date?”

The request caught me off guard. A smile grew on my face, and I nodded a bit too aggressively. “I’d like that.”

“Excellent,” Ryder said, his lips curling at the ends. “I don’t think I’ll ever meet someone I feel as strongly about ever again.”

“Oh, please,” I said, pressing my lips together. “That’s obviously not true. You’ll find someone. I’ve heard that all the women in the area drool over you.”

Ryder drew in a slow breath that puffed out his chest. “I don’t drool over them.”

“I would love to go out with you,” I said, squeezing his hand. “I’m sure I’ll never meet anyone like you again in the city.”

“You’re right, you won’t,” he said, flashing me a confident smile.

We stood at the window, watching the firefighters battle the blaze that consumed my neighbor’s house. Their silhouettes moved urgently against the orange glow, hoses arcing water onto the flames while they shouted back and forth.

There was nothing left but a smoldering, blackened skeleton when the sun kissed the horizon. Smoke continued to rise from the remains, but the flames had been thoroughly extinguished.

“It’s just gone,” I whispered with a heavy sigh. “I can’t believe it really even happened.”

Ryder turned to face me, his blue eyes searching mine, before he bent down and placed a soft kiss against my lips. “I’ll pick you up around eight tonight.”

“I’ll be waiting,” I said, biting my lip as visions of our last encounter flashed through my mind.

After Ryder left, I crawled into bed, pulling the covers over my shoulders. My mind kept replaying the night’s events — the vampire, the wolves, the fire — but eventually, exhaustion won out and I drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Insistent knocking jolted me awake. I squinted from the sunlight beaming into my room and reached for my phone. It was early afternoon, and I felt sickeningly groggy, but at least I’d managed to get a few hours of sleep.

Whoever was out there knocked again.

I shuffled to the window first, peeking through the curtain. My stomach dropped when I saw a police officer standing on my porch, notepad in hand. Another officer was scanning my property, looking carefully at my windows, the surrounding trees, and the lawn.

Great.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I quickly ran my fingers through my tangled hair. I knew I probably looked like I'd been hit by a truck — so much for avoiding those dark circles under my eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door, trying my best to appear like a normal person.

“Good afternoon, officers,” I said, hoping my voice sounded steadier than I felt. “Can I help you with something?”

The female officer at the door looked down at her notepad and then back up at me. “Are you Everly Montana?”

“Yes,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “That’s me.”

“I’m Officer Rankin, and this is Officer Moore. We’d like to ask you a few questions,” she said, her expression unreadable.

My stomach tightened. “Regarding what, exactly?”

The officer’s gaze shifted over her shoulder, looking at her partner, before she gestured toward the house next door. “Didn’t you notice a raging fire last night?”

“Oh, well, sure,” I said, gripping the door. “But the firefighters came and handled it.”

“You didn’t see anything?” she asked, squinting at me.

I shook my head. “No, I was sleeping. Of course, eventually the fire woke me up, and I smelled the smoke, but that’s about it.”

“I see,” Officer Rankin said, scribbling something down on the notepad.

I frowned. “I wish I could be of more help. I guess I figured it was just a regular old house fire.”

“Could be,” Officer Rankin said with a sharp nod. “Unfortunately, the man who lived there was still inside.”

“That’s awful,” I said, my brows squishing together.

“Indeed,” she said. “Did you know the man?”

I hugged myself. “No, I only just moved in.”

Officer Rankin’s pen hovered over her notepad. “And you’re certain you didn’t hear or see anything unusual before the fire started? No arguments, strange vehicles, anything like that?”

“No, do I need to be worried?” I asked, swallowing hard. Lying so much was making me feel generally ill, which seemed to be working in my favor. “Am I safe here?”

The officers exchanged another glance that made the back of my neck prickle.

“Oh, no, miss,” Officer Moore said, looking toward the trees. “I’m sure you’re plenty safe here. This is all standard procedure.”

I nodded slowly, trying to keep my expression appropriately concerned without looking guilty. Their standard procedure felt anything but standard to me.

“Well, that’s... that’s a relief,” I managed, still hugging myself. The morning air felt suddenly colder than it had moments ago.

Officer Rankin flipped her notepad closed and handed me a card. “If you do happen to remember anything, no matter how insignificant it might seem, please give us a call.”

I took it with fingers I hoped weren’t visibly trembling. “Of course. I will.”

“Well,” Officer Rankin said, finally offering me a smile, “we won’t take up any more of your time, Miss Montana. We’ll be speaking with other neighbors down the road as well, but yeah, probably just a regular old house fire that the poor, old guy couldn’t escape.”

“Okay,” I said, the words feeling heavy on my tongue. “Good luck.”

The second they turned away, I closed the door, immediately leaning back against it. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. It wasn’t like I could have told them a vampire killed the owner and that werewolves killed her before setting the house on fire. They’d have locked me up and lost the key.

I made my way to the kitchen on wobbly legs and poured myself a glass of water, gulping it down before going back to the front window. The police cars were gone, and yellow tape fluttered in the breeze around what was left of the neighbor’s house.

It wasn’t like I’d done anything wrong. All I’d done was go over there when I heard someone calling for help.

I needed to clear my head. The police visit had left me rattled, and sitting around my house overthinking everything would only make it worse. Not to mention, it would be nice to have something new to wear for my date with Ryder tonight. Something other

than my robe or pajamas.

Grabbing my phone, I dialed Courtney's number. She answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Courtney, it's Everly," I said, trying to sound more cheerful than I felt. "I was thinking about heading into town to do some shopping. Any chance you'd want to join me? Maybe point me toward the best spots?"

There was a short pause. "Um, yeah. I could do that."

"Great," I said, noticing Courtney didn't seem to be her usual bubbly, overtalkative self. "I'll swing by to pick you up in, say, fifteen minutes?"

"I'll be ready," she said and ended the call.

I threw on some jeans and a t-shirt, grabbed my keys, and headed out to my SUV. It didn't take long before I was pulling into Courtney's driveway.

She walked out of the house as if she'd been waiting for me. Courtney looked beyond radiant in her flowing yellow sundress and round shades. The wind blew a few tendrils of her hair along with the fabric as she walked toward me, wearing a smile.

I smiled back, but it quickly faded when Kellan stepped out of the house, holding Mason's hand. They both waved from the door.

My fingers tightened around the steering wheel. I hadn't expected to see Kellan — hadn't prepared myself for it. Even though he'd saved my life, a chill of something creepy and crawling moved through my body just at the sight of him.

I forced a smile and waved back... for Mason's sake. Courtney opened the door and sat down on the leather passenger seat.

"Wow, fancy," she said, her eyes wide.

"It's not real leather," I said, shifting the car into reverse as she put on her seatbelt.

"Still, it's like a new car," she said, looking around. "And so clean."

I followed her gaze. "I think Trevor detailed it when they fixed it. I don't remember it looking this nice."

We rode down the country road for several minutes in complete silence. She didn't even look as we drove past the shell of my neighbor's house. It seemed as though Courtney was distracted.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel for several seconds before I just couldn't hold my question in any longer. "So, um, Kellan was at your house?"

"Yes, all night," she said flatly. She didn't know I knew she was lying. "He stops by to see Mason from time to time."

"Oh," I said, keeping my eyes fixed on the road. I didn't want to pry, but curiosity was eating at me. Why would Kellan want to see Mason? Given what I knew about Kellan, the idea of him being anywhere close to a kid made me uncomfortable.

But I bit my tongue. I'd pissed Courtney off once before, and I didn't intend to do it again. For all I knew, Kellan was just a family friend. Everyone in the area knew everyone. Maybe they'd gone to high school together or something.

"Are there a lot of shops in Birchwood Hollow?" I asked, glancing at her.

“Not a lot,” Courtney said, chewing a nail. “What are you looking for? Something casual or comfortable? Or maybe something?—”

“Ryder asked me out on a date,” I said, feeling the heat in my cheeks. “I accepted but told him I’m moving back to Chicago.”

Courtney’s mouth dropped open. “What? You’re leaving? Why? Oh, no! It’s been so nice having you down the road. Don’t you like it here?”

“I do, but I guess?—”

“You’re just homesick. This place will eventually feel like home.”

I shook my head. “It’s just not what I was looking for.”

“Well, that’s a real bummer,” she said, turning to the window. “I’m going to miss having you around, but why even bother going out with Ryder if you’re not going to stick around? Is he going to leave with you?”

I shook my head. “Oh, no. We don’t really know each other well enough for that kind of thing. We just sort of get along. I feel comfortable around him. We’re just going to enjoy the little time we have left together.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Courtney said, rubbing her palms together. “That means you’re looking for something sexy, right?”

“Courtney!”

“Well? Am I right?”

I winced. “Maybe.”

She held up her hands. “I get it. I really do. Those big, tall, muscular men just really have something that draws you to them, don’t they?”

“Is that what it is? I hadn’t noticed,” I said, pressing my lips together.

Courtney laughed. “Yeah, right!”

I steered us into the town, passing May’s diner and heading down the main street. There were tons of little shops — old brick buildings with matching awnings and hand-painted signs.

“You can park anywhere along here,” Courtney instructed, pointing to a row of angled parking spots in front of the shops. “Mona’s Boutique is right there on the corner, and if we can’t find something there, we could try the Dress Store or one of the others. I think Mona’s is the best place to start.”

I pulled into an empty spot and turned off the engine. The boutique had a pale blue storefront with a display window featuring mannequins in sleek dresses and what looked to be prom gowns.

As we walked down the sidewalk, Courtney’s phone dinged with a text notification. “One sec.” She pulled out her phone and smiled, her face immediately lighting up. “Awe!”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s from Kellan,” she said, smiling as she tapped her screen. “Look. He sent a video of Mason.”

She turned the phone so I could see too. On the screen, Mason was standing in the yard with a tiny plastic bat in his small hands. He swung wildly at a ball on a tee,

connecting with a solid thwack on his first swing.

The ball flew through the air, and Mason dropped the bat. He took off, running, his little legs moving furiously past what looked like paper plates set out for bases.

In the background, I could hear Kellan's voice cheering enthusiastically. "Go, go, go! That's it, buddy! Round third base!"

Mason circled back toward what must have been home plate, giggling the whole way. As he jumped on the final base, Kellan laughed and clapped his hands.

"That's my boy! Way to go, son!" he said, zooming the camera on Mason's big smile.

"I did it, Mommy!" Mason said, looking up at Kellan. "Should I do it again?"

"Go for it," Kellan said, and the video ended.

My stomach swirled violently at the realization that Kellan was Mason's father. I didn't know what to say.

"Adorable, right?" Courtney said, hugging her phone to her chest before typing a quick message back to Kellan.

Did Courtney know what Kellan was? Did she know he was working against Ryder, trying to take over his pack and territory?

Everything started to spin. "I need to sit down."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I sat down on a wooden bench just outside the store. After a few seconds, Courtney sat next to me, leaning forward to meet my eyes.

“Everly?” she said, her voice soft.

“Yes,” I said with a sharp breath.

“Are you okay?”

I swallowed hard. “I’m fine. I just didn’t know he was Mason’s dad.”

“I didn’t mention that?”

I shook my head.

“Oh, well, yeah, he is,” she said, taking my hand and pulling me toward the boutique.

“He’s a good dad, but he doesn’t visit Mason nearly enough, but I’m not sure why that made you have to sit down.”

“It wasn’t that,” I said, getting to my feet. “I just stood up out of the car too fast.”

“Yeah, that happens to me sometimes, too,” she said, leading me into the store. “All good now?”

I managed a small smile, my legs still feeling a bit unsteady as we walked into the

boutique. "I'm fine now, really. I haven't been sleeping the best."

"Mason wakes up at least once a night with bad dreams," she said, shaking her head as she held up a dress. "How about this one?"

I wrinkled my nose.

"I wish things had worked out for Kellan and me. I really do, but he's always so busy. That man always has something going on," she said, holding up something pink with ruffles. She put it back without waiting for my response. "Last night, he stopped by in the middle of the night. Scared the hell out of me, too. He asked if he could crash on the couch so he could be there when Mason woke up in the morning. It's not like I could say no. I want him to see his son and be part of his life. A boy needs his dad, right? Anyway, nothing happened between us. He fell asleep almost instantly."

I nodded sympathetically, trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling spreading through my chest. "I guess this is why you got so upset with me the other day."

"I mean, yeah, I guess. I wasn't that upset with you. It's just more like... um... it just kind of stings. I've always thought that I would find a nice man, marry him, and have kids. A nice, happy family living the easy life in the country, and that isn't at all how things turned out," Courtney said with a heavy sigh. "Anyway, we shouldn't talk about this. We're here to find you a dress!"

"Can I help you ladies find anything?" a sweet woman with thick pink-framed glasses said as she cautiously approached.

"We're just looking," I said, quickly, before she had me in the back trying on frilly gowns. Once the woman was gone, I turned to Courtney. "I'm sorry if I said anything that offended you about Kellan. I didn't know you had history."

Courtney waved a hand in the air. “It’s fine. We’re good. I know you didn’t.”

“Either way, I didn’t mean to?—”

“Seriously, Everly, we’re good.”

I nodded, letting the subject drop as we continued our search through the racks. The boutique was small but filled with an eclectic mix of dresses — some elegant, some casual, and everything in between. Nothing was really speaking to me, though, and after twenty minutes of browsing, I was about ready to suggest we try somewhere else.

“I think maybe this isn’t the right place,” I said, pushing aside yet another pastel floral print that wasn’t my style.

Then I saw it, tucked between two matronly dresses that someone had probably misplaced — a strappy red silk dress that caught my eye immediately. I pulled it out, holding it up by the hanger. The material cascaded down, stopping at what would definitely be an inch above mid-thigh.

“Hmm, it’s a bit short,” I said, cocking my head.

Courtney’s eyes widened. “Oh my God, you have to try it on. I couldn’t pull off something like that, but with a body like yours? You totally can. It’s perfect. Please, Everly, try it on!”

“I don’t know...” I said, turning it back and forth, eyeing the plunging neckline and thin straps. “It might be a bit much, don’t you think?”

“No, no, no! I think it’s exactly what you’re looking for. He won’t be able to take his eyes off you,” Courtney said, already steering me toward the dressing rooms.

“Sometimes the best dress is the one that makes you feel a little nervous.”

The attendant unlocked a room for me, and before I knew it, I was alone with the red dress. I slipped off my jeans and t-shirt, carefully stepping into the silky fabric. It slid over my skin like water, the material cool and light. I adjusted the straps, pulled up the zipper, and turned to face the mirror.

“Oh,” I whispered to my reflection.

It was definitely too short, but it made my tits look amazing and a bit bigger. The dress hugged my curves, and the red was striking against my skin.

“Are you coming out or what?” Courtney called from outside.

“I’m not sure,” I said, biting my lip.

“Come on, it’s just me,” Courtney said.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and stepped out. Courtney’s mouth dropped wide open.

“Holy crap, Everly!” she said, bringing her hand to her mouth.

“Yeah?” I asked, looking at myself in the mirror, and in the slightly brighter lightning. “I don’t know.”

“That dress was made for you!” Courtney said, holding out a pair of matching stilettos. “Try these.”

I slid my feet into the shoes and buckled the little straps at the sides. “Well, at least I won’t look as comically short next to him as I do now.”

“Gosh,” Courtney said, shaking her head. “Absolutely stunning. You could be in a fashion magazine.”

I felt my cheeks flush as I smoothed my hands down the sides of the dress. “You don’t think it’s too much?” I leaned closer, so the saleslady didn’t hear me. “It might be a little too slutty.”

“Nonsense,” Courtney said, waving a hand. “It’s perfect. You look smoking hot. He’ll absolutely fall head over heels in love with you. Honestly, if you don’t buy this, I will literally never speak to you again.”

I turned to check my reflection in the larger mirror outside the dressing room. The dress caught the light as I moved, giving it an almost liquid appearance. Despite my initial hesitation, I couldn’t deny how good it felt to wear something so boldly feminine, so unapologetically sexy.

“I don’t even know where he’s taking me,” I said, a smile spreading across my face.

“I have a guess.”

“Where?” I asked, raising a brow.

A smile curled the corners of Courtney’s mouth. “The bedroom.”

“Courtney!” I said, secretly hoping she was right.

I gave in and bought the dress, along with the heels Courtney had insisted on. The saleslady packaged everything carefully in tissue paper, sliding it into a fancy shopping bag with rope handles. Even though it cost more than I’d planned to spend, the expression on Courtney’s face convinced me it was worth every penny.

At least I still had the money from working at The Timber Tavern that I could put toward the purchase, since Trevor had refused to take anything from me for fixing my car. There wouldn't be much left, and I'd have to dig into my savings to pay the moving company a second time, but I'd most likely be able to get my job back in the city once I returned.

"Can we stop at the gas station for a snack?" Courtney asked as we climbed into the SUV. "I think I forgot to eat lunch."

"Sounds good," I said, my stomach rumbling.

We pulled into the gas station near the highway. Courtney was still talking about the dress as we went inside. While Courtney loaded up on chips and candy, I grabbed a bottle of diet soda and a pre-packaged sandwich on seeded bread.

"I'm going to get this for Mason," she said, stepping up beside me, holding a little toy truck.

"I thought the candy was for him."

Courtney rolled her eyes. "Please, he doesn't need any more sugar. I don't either, for that matter, but I need to recover from the shopping."

"It wasn't that long," I said, paying for both of our items.

"You don't have to do that!" Courtney said, pressing her hands together.

"I insist," I said, handing her a bag filled with her snacks and the toy truck. "It's my way of thanking you for your help and time."

She got back into the passenger seat and opened her drink. "You're really too sweet.

Like this candy, I shouldn't eat."

I laughed and turned back onto the road. We munched our food and chatted about nothing as we headed back to our part of the countryside. I kept the conversation deliberately light, steering clear of any mention of Kellan. If I were only going to be here a few more days, I didn't want to waste any more time talking or thinking about Kellan.

When I pulled up to Courtney's house, I stopped at the end of the driveway instead of going all the way up. "Thanks again for coming with me."

"Do you want to come in? Say hi to Mason?" she asked, sliding her purse off her shoulder and gripping the plastic bag in her other hand.

"I would, but I need to get back home and start getting ready," I said, giving her a quick smile.

"Oh, right? Duh," Courtney said, shaking her head. "Have a really good time, but not too good. Let me know how it goes, okay?"

"I will," I said, waving.

She closed the door, and I reversed out onto the country road, speeding toward home without another look at her house. I didn't even watch her walk to the door, afraid I might catch a glimpse of Kellan through a window or coming out on the porch to greet her. The thought of seeing him again made my stomach twist uncomfortably.

Back home, I hung the dress carefully in my closet and headed to the bathroom to shower. The hot water helped wash away some of the tension I was still holding onto, and I took my time shampooing and conditioning my hair until it was silky-soft.

I blow-dried it until it fell in gentle waves to my shoulders and then applied my makeup with more care than usual. A subtle smokey eye, with pink blush and red lipstick that matched the dress almost perfectly. My hands shook as I applied the final touches.

The butterflies in my stomach grew more intense as I slipped into the red dress and stepped into the heels. Looking at myself in the full-length mirror, I barely recognized the woman staring back at me. The dress transformed me, making me look sophisticated and sexy in a way my usual jeans and t-shirts or business attire never could.

It was 7:55 pm when I finished. I paced around my living room, my heels clicking against the hardwood floor as I alternated between checking my phone and adjusting my hair every few seconds. At 7:59 exactly, I heard the low rumble of Ryder's truck pulling up outside. My heart hammered against my ribs as I took one last look in the mirror, smoothed the dress down over my hips, and took a deep breath.

At precisely 8:00, he knocked at the door — three confident raps.

I walked to the door slowly, trying not to wobble in the heels, and pulled it open.

Ryder stood on my porch looking devastatingly handsome in dark jeans and a crisp button-down shirt, his sleeves rolled up to reveal his muscular forearms. When his eyes landed on me, they widened, and his mouth actually fell open.

He swallowed hard as his eyes traveled slowly from my face down the length of my body and back up again. "Holy shit."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face as heat filled my cheeks. It seemed Courtney was right about the dress.

"Hi," I said, suddenly feeling very shy.

He took my hand and spun me in a slow circle. "You look absolutely incredible."

"Thank you," I said, grabbing my purse and stepping out onto the patio beside him. "You don't look so bad yourself."

"This old thing?" Ryder said, playfully tugging at his shirt.

The night air felt cool against my bare skin, but the heat in Ryder's eyes as he continued to stare at me was enough to keep me warm. Whatever happened tonight, I knew one thing for certain — spending my money from the tavern was the right decision.

Ryder placed his hand on the small of my back, guiding me toward his truck. The warmth of his palm radiated through the thin fabric of my dress. He walked me to the passenger side and opened the door for me.

He offered his hand, and I took it, being careful to keep myself covered as best as I could as I climbed up into the cab. Once I was settled, he closed the door gently and walked around the front. I watched him move, appreciating the way his dark jeans hugged his thighs and the button-down shirt stretched across his shoulders.

He hopped up into the driver's seat and started the engine. He looked in the mirror, then at me, and then over his shoulder as he backed out of my driveway.

"So, where are we going?" I asked, smoothing my dress over my thighs.

"I thought we'd drive to Bresco for dinner. Then maybe dancing, or a movie after, whatever you prefer." He glanced over at me, his eyes moving downward slightly before he forced them forward. "Or if you're feeling adventurous, we could take a walk near the lake. It's beautiful at night."

"Let's play it by ear," I said, setting my purse down on the seat beside me.

As we bounced down the country road, the conversation flowed easily between us. The initial nervousness melted away with each mile.

"So what made you want to work construction?" I asked, genuinely curious about the man behind those piercing blue eyes.

"Inherited my dad's business after he passed. I grew up swinging hammers and learning how to read blueprints. It was something I knew I would do from an early age," he said, his hands gripping the wheel tighter as he turned onto the interstate. "What did you want to be when you were a kid? Something tells me it wasn't what you did in the city."

I laughed. "Well, my mom always said making a lot of money was important, so I guess that's how that all happened, but I wanted to be an artist."

"Oh, do you paint?"

"Not since high school," I said, frowning. "Maybe one day, but honestly, I don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

Ryder laughed.

We continued talking about trivial things — favorite foods, music, and favorite TV shows. Each revelation made him more real to me, less the mysterious alpha werewolf and more just... Ryder.

I caught him stealing glances at me while he drove, his eyes dropping occasionally to where my dress rode up on my thighs. But I was just as guilty because I couldn't stop thinking about how I wanted to reach over and glide my hands up and down his arms. I'd practically drool watching how his forearms flexed when he turned the wheel.

It was annoying. I'd become one of those women who drooled over Ryder. But also, how could you not?

How the hell was I going to walk away from this man? The thought of returning to my sterile apartment in Chicago, the crowded streets, and the dull faces, suddenly felt suffocating. It wasn't like I had a choice. I wasn't going to make him give up his pack in order to keep a woman he barely knew safe.

Even though it sucked — really sucked — it was for the best. This was a vacation romance, nothing more, and we both knew it.

Ryder exited and turned on his blinker in the direction of Bresco. It was only a few minutes before he turned into the restaurant with a stone exterior and twinkling lights strung around the entrance.

"This looks fancy," I said, the nerves returning.

"Only the best for tonight," he said, parking in a spot toward the back of the lot.

He hopped out of the truck, raced to my door, and helped me down. His large,

muscular body shielded me from sight while I managed to tug my dress into place.

Ryder took my hand in his and led me to the front of the building. He grabbed the handle and held the door for me, a small gesture I was not used to.

“Thanks,” I said, walking to the hostess table with him at my side.

Ryder stepped up to the hostess table. “Reservations for Black.”

“Ah, yes,” the young woman said, grabbing two menus. “This way, Mr. Black.”

As we walked to our table, both men and women shot looks our way, some doing double-takes. The hostess led us to a secluded table near a stone fireplace. Soft jazz played in the background, and candlelight flickered across the golden tablecloths.

“This might be the nicest place I’ve ever been,” I said, looking around.

“Red or white?” Ryder asked, studying the wine list.

“Whatever you prefer,” I said, still taking in our surroundings.

He ordered the most expensive bottle of white, and the waiter seemed impressed. When it arrived, we clinked glasses, his eyes never leaving mine as we sipped.

“Wow, this is delicious,” I said, licking my lips.

“Better be,” he said, smirking.

The food was exquisite. The scallops I’d ordered were light and buttery, cooked to perfection. Ryder ordered the filet mignon. We both ate slowly, savoring each bite between easy conversation and laughter.

“I can’t eat another bite,” I said, pushing my plate away.

“We’ll take the rest to go,” Ryder said, signaling for the waiter. “It’ll make the best midnight snack.”

After settling the bill, Ryder took my hand as we walked out into the cool, dark night. He stopped beside my door, setting the bagged food on the edge of the truck bed. The moonlight caught in his gorgeous blue eyes, making them sparkle.

“I know I’m supposed to wait until I drop you off,” he said, his voice low and rough. “But I don’t think I can wait that long. May I kiss you?”

My heart hammered against my ribs. “Yes.”

He stepped closer, one hand sliding around my waist while the other cupped my cheek. Slowly, he lowered his mouth to mine — his lips soft and gentle.

My back met the cool metal of his truck as he leaned into me, his body warm and solid against mine. A deep rumble erupted from somewhere deep inside, and he pushed himself back to look into my eyes.

“Movie, dancing, or a walk?” he asked, his chest rising and falling.

“Is my place an option?” I asked, biting my lip.

Ryder reached around me and pulled the passenger door open. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The ride back to Birchwood Hollow felt endless. Twenty-four miles of tortuous anticipation stretched between us and my little house. Ryder kept both hands firmly on the wheel, his knuckles white from gripping it so tightly. The silence between us crackled with electricity.

I stared out the window, watching the dark shapes of trees blur past. My heart hadn't stopped racing since we left the restaurant parking lot after Ryder's kiss. Every time he turned the wheel, even the smallest amount, the muscles in his arms tensed.

"If I haven't said it already, you look so incredible," Ryder said, his voice rough. "That dress... shit, it's killing me."

I turned to look at him, catching the heat in his gaze when he glanced my way. "Thank you for dinner and the wine. It was absolutely amazing."

"I'd rather be tasting you right now," he growled.

My breath caught in my throat. The intensity of his words made heat pool low in my belly. I shifted in my seat, my thighs pressing together as desire built between them. I tried to think of anything else, but everything led back to Ryder.

After about five minutes of this delicious torture, Ryder's deep voice broke the silence. "Hey, why don't you slide over?"

I hesitated only a second before unbuckling my seatbelt. I moved across the bench

seat, sliding until my hip pressed against his. The truck suddenly felt much smaller, filled with his masculine scent — fresh pine, earthy musk, and something distinctly Ryder.

He lifted his right arm and wrapped it around my shoulders, pulling me even closer. I nestled against his side, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breathing and the solid warmth of his body. Without thinking, I placed my hand on his thigh, feeling the powerful muscle tense beneath my touch.

His hand began tracing lazy patterns on my bare shoulder, sending shivers down my spine. His fingers slipped beneath the thin strap of my dress, testing the boundary between fabric and skin.

I watched the dark road ahead, streetlights and passing headlights occasionally illuminating the cab, bathing us in golden light before plunging us back into shadow. Each time the darkness embraced us, Ryder's fingers grew bolder, venturing lower along my collarbone.

My hand twitched on his thigh, wanting to explore higher. I tried to resist since he was driving, but the solid heat of him beneath my palm was just too tempting. I slowly inched my hand upward, feeling his muscles flex beneath my touch.

“Mm, Everly,” he warned, dragging my name out like taffy.

I bit my lip, battling my better judgment and losing spectacularly. My hand slid between his legs, cupping the hard ridge straining against his pants. A growl rumbled deep inside his chest, and the truck swerved slightly before he regained control.

“Christ,” he breathed, his arm tightening around me.

I could feel how ready he was, how much he wanted me. The power of it was

intoxicating. I stroked him through the fabric, feeling him throb against my palm.

“I need to pull over,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Right fucking now.”

“Where?” I said, looking around.

“Anywhere,” he whispered.

The truck slowed as Ryder steered onto a dirt turnout surrounded by tall pines. The moment the engine cut off, he twisted in his seat, his hands cupping my face as his mouth crashed down on mine.

His kiss was hungry, demanding, his tongue sweeping into my mouth as he devoured me. One large hand tangled in my hair while the other slid down my neck, tracing the edge of my dress where it dipped low between my breasts.

I moaned against his lips, pressing closer to him. My fingers fumbled with his belt, desperate to feel his skin against mine.

Our eyes locked as he reached over, sliding the straps down my shoulders until my dress fell, my breasts glowing in the dashboard lights. His hand slid up my thigh as I stroked his length, my dress bunching around my middle. When his fingers brushed against the damp silk between my legs, I gasped.

“Fuck,” he said, gripping the front of my underwear. “Are these special to you?”

I shook my head, and in one quick motion, he ripped them away from my body. His finger dipped inside, finding me slick and very, very ready.

“I’ll buy you new ones,” he whispered.

I arched against his hand, crying out when he slipped another finger inside. “Oh, god.”

“You’re so beautiful, especially like this,” he murmured, his breath hot against my skin.

I shifted position, my eyes never leaving Ryder’s as I leaned down toward his lap. His eyes darkened, pupils blown wide with desire as he realized my intention.

“Shit, Everly,” he groaned, his voice strained as my lips brushed against the tip of his cock.

I took him into my mouth slowly, savoring the way his breath hitched. His hand tangled in my hair, not pushing, just holding on like I was his anchor in a storm. I loved the hardness of him against my tongue, the taste uniquely his.

“Holy fuck,” he whispered hoarsely.

As I worked him deeper, I felt his other hand sliding up the back of my thigh, tracing the curve of my ass. His fingers found me from behind, dipping gently into my wetness.

I moaned around him as his talented fingers stroked me, matching the rhythm I’d set. The dual sensation of pleasuring him while he touched me was overwhelmingly erotic. Each time I took him deeper, he rewarded me with firmer touches, his fingers circling my clit before plunging inside me again, making my whole body shudder.

The truck’s windows had fogged completely, creating our own private world. The only sounds were our labored breathing and the occasional wet sounds of our bodies connecting.

“God, Everly, you’re killing me,” he said with a deep moan. “So fucking perfect.”

His praise spurred me on, and I took him deeper than I thought possible. Ryder’s fingers never stopped their relentless rhythm, pushing me closer to the edge.

“Look at me,” Ryder commanded.

I lifted my head, meeting Ryder’s gaze — his eyes dark and hungry in a way that made my insides melt. In that moment, I couldn’t bear another second without feeling all of him.

“Shouldn’t we wait?” he asked, breathing heavily. “Until we get back to your place.”

“No, I need you,” I whispered, my voice barely recognizable to my own ears. “Now. I can’t wait.”

Ryder didn’t respond with words. His hands gripped my waist, effortlessly lifting me across his body until I was straddling him. The steering wheel pressed against my back, but I didn’t care even a little. My dress was bunched up around my waist, my body completely exposed to him while his hard length pressed insistently against me.

His hands tightened on my hips as he guided me down, sliding himself into me with ease. I sank down slowly as he filled me, exquisitely perfect and overwhelming at the same time.

“Fuck, Everly,” he groaned, his forehead dropping to my shoulder. “You feel so goddamn good.”

I braced my hands on his broad shoulders, using them as leverage as I began to move. The confined space of the truck cab made each movement slow and careful, intensifying every sensation.

Ryder's hand slid up my sides, shifting the silky fabric against my skin before cupping my breasts. His thumbs brushed over my nipples, sending sparks through my entire being.

He growled as I glided up and down him, my thighs shaking. I couldn't form words, I could only feel him inside me, his rough hands on my skin, his hot breath against my neck. Each time I dropped down onto him, he thrust up to meet me, hitting a spot so deep inside that the top of my head tingled.

The truck rocked slightly with our movements, the suspension creaking as our pace increased. I didn't care if the whole world knew what we were doing — nothing existed outside of this moment, outside of Ryder.

"Oh, god, Ryder," I said, gasping for air as tension coiled tighter within me.

"Let me see you," he growled, one hand sliding between our bodies where we were joined, his thumb finding my clit with unerring precision. "Come for me, Everly. Now."

His command, combined with the perfect pressure of his thumb, sent me hurtling over the edge. My entire body clenched as my orgasm crashed through me in overwhelming waves. I cried out, my nails digging into his shoulders through his shirt.

Ryder's eyes glowed brightly as he grabbed my hips, holding me firmly as he thrust up into me twice before he came with a deep, throaty groan. He buried his face against my neck, a string of curses and my name falling from his lips.

For several moments, we remained locked together, our breathing gradually slowing. I rested my head on his shoulder, my body feeling too heavy to move. His hands stroked soothingly up and down my back.

“You okay?” he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to the side of my head.

I nodded, a small laugh escaping me. “Better than okay. Although I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk tomorrow.”

His deep chuckle rumbled through his chest and into mine. “Worth it.”

As our heartbeats returned to normal, I became aware of the slightly awkward position, half-naked, cramped against the steering wheel of his truck on the side of a deserted road. I carefully extracted myself from his lap and attempted to put my dress back in place.

Ryder glided the strap over my shoulder, his expression growing serious. “I don’t want you to think this is all I wanted from tonight.”

“I know,” I whispered. “It’s just hard to... not want to... with you.”

“It’s an irresistible pull,” he said, zipping his pants.

I settled into the seat beside him as he started the truck again. “It’s kind of weird. I’ve never felt anything this strongly before.”

“Neither have I,” Ryder admitted. “I really like it, though. It’s going to be hard when you leave.”

“Let’s not talk about that right now,” I said, resting my head against his shoulder. “Let’s just enjoy our time together while we get it, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, kissing the top of my head again.

The rest of the drive passed quicker than I expected, snuggling against Ryder’s warm

side. His arm stayed draped around my shoulders, occasionally squeezing me closer as if reassuring himself I was really there.

“Sorry about your underwear,” Ryder said as we turned onto my road.

“It’s fine,” I said, looking down at my legs. “Although I’m not sure how I’ll get out of the truck without flashing everyone.”

“Lucky for you, no one lives around you.”

I frowned. “Not so lucky for my now deceased neighbor.”

“Oh, shit,” Ryder said, wincing. “I didn’t mean that, I just meant you live out in the country.”

As we approached my driveway, Ryder’s body suddenly tensed beside me. His arm tightened around my shoulders, then slowly withdrew as he sat up straighter, eyes narrowing at something ahead.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, following his gaze.

Ryder’s jaw tensed. “Someone’s here.”

Chapter Thirty

“Wait here,” he said, putting the truck in park. “Don’t get out.”

Before I could ask more, he was already sliding out of the driver’s seat. The door hung open as he paused, turning back to me with worry etched across his face.

“I don’t like this,” he muttered. “It’s Paul.”

I squinted through the windshield, confused. “Paul? I don’t see?—”

That’s when I spotted him. A man, completely naked, emerging from between the trees. My mouth fell open as I instinctively shrank back against the seat.

Ryder’s voice grew firmer. “Stay in the truck, Everly. I mean it.”

He slammed the door shut. Paul approached cautiously with his head bowed, a posture that seemed rather submissive.

“You’re different,” Paul said, his voice making its way inside the cab. He sniffed the air. “Something changed.”

“Why are you here?” Ryder asked, keeping his voice calm.

Paul shook his head. “I made a terrible mistake. Ryder, I don’t know if... will you ever be able to forgive me? Can you take me back? I should never have left the pack to join Kellan. I was weak... so easily tempted by empty promises.”

Ryder stood with his feet planted firmly and his hands balled into fists at his sides. “You weren’t tempted, Paul. You were fooled.”

Paul nodded emphatically at Ryder’s words. “You’re right. I was completely fooled.” His voice cracked with desperation. “Please, Ryder. I’m begging for your forgiveness. Let me come back. I’ll do anything.”

Ryder’s broad shoulders tensed beneath his shirt as he stood in the moonlight, facing the naked man. The confidence he’d shown during our date was still there, but harder and more — he was a leader. It was more than enough to show me that there was no way I could stay and allow him to give it up to Kellan.

His pack needed him.

“You understand that if I let you back in, you’ll be at the bottom of the pack,” Ryder said, his voice sharp. “It would take a long time to regain my trust. Maybe years. Maybe never.”

Paul dropped to his knees in the dirt. “I’ll do anything. Anything at all. Just let me come back.”

I shifted in my seat, feeling like I wasn’t supposed to be there watching this moment between the two men. Part of me wanted to look away, but curiosity kept my eyes fixed on them.

Ryder crossed his arms. “Did something happen between you and Kellan? Why the sudden change of heart?”

“He treats me like trash,” Paul said, his head dropping as if it were too heavy to hold up any longer. His face contorted with an array of emotions before he looked up again. “The things he’s done to me. I know he hates me because I was loyal to you.

He'll ask questions about your pack, and when I don't know the answer, he hits me. Says I'm keeping things from him... that I'm not being loyal. I'm afraid of what he might do, Ryder. You have to help me."

"Jesus," I whispered, my fingers gripping the edge of the seat.

"It's not right," Paul said, shaking his head. "It's not like you. He told us all that you're going to step down. That soon, all the wolves in the area will be bowing to him. Is it true? Are you stepping down to him?"

Ryder's face remained impassive, revealing nothing. The silence stretched between them for several long seconds.

"It's under control," Ryder said, his voice flat.

"Do I even have a pack to come back to?" Paul asked, his eyes glassy.

Ryder let out a slow breath. "Yes, you do. Now, get up and don't come back here without my permission. I will be in touch soon."

"Thank you, Ryder. Thank you," Paul said, nodding. Without another word, he turned, and his body began to contort before he disappeared back into the darkness of the trees.

Ryder stood motionless for a moment, staring after him. When he turned back toward the truck, his expression was unreadable. I felt a chill run through me that had nothing to do with the temperature.

Ryder pulled open the driver's side door and held out his hand to me. I grabbed my purse and took his hand.

“This is why you can’t step down,” I said when we got to the door. “They need you.”

“Everly,” Ryder said, shaking his head.

“I’ll miss the hell out of you, too,” I said, forcing a smile. “It’s for the best. Besides, shouldn’t you be with a woman who is like you?”

A noise moved through Ryder’s chest. “I should be with who I want to be with.”

“Sorry,” I said, digging in my purse for my keys.

“It’s fine,” Ryder said, glancing toward the trees. “Just frustrated with all of this.”

I opened the house door, my keys jingling in my hand. The night had taken a weird turn, but still I wasn’t ready for it to end — not like this.

“Would you like to come in?” I asked, turning to face him. “I don’t have any wine as good as what we had at the restaurant, but I have some juice or maybe some diet soda.”

His eyes scanned the trees behind him before meeting my eyes. “I would like that.”

Once inside, we didn’t talk much about what had happened with Paul. Instead, we found comfort in each other’s company, in the simple normalcy of being together.

That night, I fell asleep curled against Ryder’s chest, his strong arms wrapped protectively around me. For someone who carried so much responsibility, he slept deeply beside me, letting out a few rumbling noises from his throat every so often as he dreamed about something.

We stayed that way until late morning, the sun high in the sky, when we finally

stirred. He smiled at me as my eyelids fluttered open.

“Still beautiful,” he said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

“What do you like for breakfast?” I asked, my nose scrunching as I tried to think what I could offer. “I have eggs, sausage... toast or bagels.”

He tucked his hands behind his head. “A guy could get used to this.”

“Well? What do you like?”

“All of it,” he said, grinning.

He sat on the sofa, checking his phone while I cooked. It was so calm and peaceful, and everything I wanted when I moved out to the country. I’d never felt more... I wasn’t sure what it was... happiness?

“All right,” I said, setting his plate down on the table. “Scrambled eggs with cheese, overcooked sausage, and heavily buttered toast.”

“Perfect,” he said, sitting down.

Ryder put his clothes on after we’d crawled out of bed, but hadn’t bothered to button up his shirt. He looked more delicious than my food.

“I need to get to work,” he said reluctantly as he finished the last bite of food. “Have some projects I need to get set up with the crew today.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, waving a hand. “I should probably start boxing everything up.”

He stood and started buttoning his shirt. “Thought we weren’t going to talk about that?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” I said, lowering my head.

“Hey,” he said, hooking his thumb under my chin. “You don’t need to turn your beautiful face away from me or be sorry about anything.”

“I just don’t want you to feel like I’m just using you or something,” I said, frowning. “I love every minute I get with you, but we know this is the right thing to do. I don’t belong here.”

Ryder didn’t respond. He pulled me in for a soft kiss, his lips lingering as if he were trying to think of any excuse he could to stay.

“Ryder,” I said as he pulled away.

“Yes?”

“What happens after I leave and you refuse to give Kellan the pack?” I asked, wrapping my arms around my middle.

Ryder let out a heavy breath. “Things will just go back to how they were before you got here, I suppose. He’ll keep antagonizing me. Anyway, I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, ignoring the twinge in my heart as he opened the door and slipped out of the house.

I moved to the window, watching as he walked toward his truck. He opened the door and paused, his head tilted upward, and his shoulders tensed as he seemed to sniff the air.

Instead of getting into his truck, he walked around to the bed and, without warning, he slammed his fists against the side panel. The metal caved inward with the force, leaving two deep dents in the steel.

I rushed outside, pain jolting through my bare feet when I stepped onto the gravel. “What’s going...”

My voice fell away as I looked into the bed and stumbled backward, barely managing to stay on my feet. Tufts of dark fur, and a limp paw hanging over the edge.

A wolf.

A dead wolf.

“Oh, my god!” I breathed, looking at Ryder. The world around me started to spin.

Ryder turned to me, his chest heaving with barely controlled rage, his knuckles bloody from hitting the truck. “It’s Paul.”

Chapter Thirty-One

My hand flew to my mouth, stifling a gasp as I looked again at the lifeless animal. Paul, who had been begging for Ryder's forgiveness, was now dead in the back of Ryder's truck.

The morning sunlight caught on Paul's fur, cruelly highlighting the deep red gash across his throat. His lifeless eyes stared at nothing. My stomach lurched.

"Son of a bitch," Ryder said, his voice dropping to a dangerous growl. His eyes flashed an eerie blue for a split second. "This isn't good. He's gone too far this time."

I stepped back, my breath coming in shallow gasps. "I don't understand. Why would he?—"

"Everly." Ryder grabbed my shoulders, his grip firm but gentle. "You need to go inside and get your things. You need to leave. It's not safe for you here."

"What?" I shook my head. "But we have more time."

"We don't. Something's wrong." He glanced back at the truck, his expression dark. "Something's changed. I don't know what, but I'm worried sick that something could happen to you."

"But—"

"Now, Everly. Please."

The urgency in his voice sent me racing inside. I grabbed the bag I'd never unpacked, stuffing in a few items I'd taken out. My hands trembled as I collected my laptop, chargers, and toiletries from the bathroom.

I quickly got dressed, not even caring that my socks didn't match. I hauled everything out to my SUV, tossing my things into the back. Ryder stood on the lawn, his phone pressed to his ear as he spoke in a low, intense voice. When he saw me, he ended the call and walked over.

"Learn anything?" I asked, nodding toward his phone.

"Not yet," he said, running his hand through his hair.

I swallowed hard and looked into his eyes. "I guess this is goodbye, then."

"I never wanted it to be like this," Ryder said, his blue eyes searching mine. "I will visit you."

"Sure you will," I said, flashing him a warm smile. "I'll never forget you."

He reached out, brushing his thumb across my cheek. "Do you have enough money? A place to stay once you get back to Chicago?"

"I'm fine. I'll just get a hotel until I figure things out."

Ryder pulled me into his arms, and I breathed in his scent, hoping to commit it to memory. Despite everything, I didn't want to let go.

"Be safe," he whispered against my hair.

"Are you kidding? You are the one who needs to be safe," I said, closing my eyes to

stop the tears that were threatening to roll down my cheeks. “Don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“I never do,” Ryder said, leaning back.

He tilted my chin up and kissed me, deep and desperate. My whole body melted into him. I couldn’t believe this was how we had to say our goodbye.

“Go,” he said, his voice hard as he took a step back. “Before I actually do something stupid and keep you here.”

I gave him one more look before climbing into the driver’s seat of my SUV. I put the key into the ignition, but when I tried to turn it... it wouldn’t move, not even a little, just like the other time.

I tried again, twisting harder. The key wouldn’t budge.

It didn’t make sense. I’d just driven it the other day when Courtney and I went into town.

I cracked the door open. “It won’t turn.”

“What do you mean?” He approached the car, brows furrowed.

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling panicky. “It’s like the key is stuck.”

“Let me see.” He opened the door wider and reached across the steering wheel. The key turned effortlessly in his hand, and the engine roared to life.

“Huh, that’s weird, right?” I asked, meeting his eyes. “What if I get out there and that happens again? What if I get stranded somewhere?”

Ryder rubbed the back of his neck. “You have my number. I’ll get someone to help you. For now, you just need to get far away from this place. Far away from me.”

I frowned, pressing my lips together hard as my head bobbed in understanding. My fingers wrapped around the gearshift, and I tried to put it in reverse, but it wouldn’t move.

“What the fucking hell?” I said, hitting the steering with my palms. “Now the shifter is stuck!”

Ryder ducked back in, placing his hand over mine on the gearshift, and it easily slid into reverse. When I stepped on the gas, the SUV sputtered and the engine died.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“Oh, shit.” He backed away from the SUV, running his hands through his hair. His expression shifted from confusion to realization to what looked like panic. “Everly, get out of the car.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but complied. “What?”

“Get back in,” he said.

“What are you doing?”

“Just try again.”

I slid back behind the wheel and tried turning the key. Stuck.

“What’s going on?” I asked, throwing a hand in the air. “It’s just like the other time. I couldn’t leave!”

Ryder paced a few steps, then stopped, looking at me with an expression I couldn't read. "I think something happened."

"Would you please tell me what you're talking about?" I asked, getting out of the car and crossing my arms.

He took a deep breath, his hands clenching and unclenching as he paced. "I think I may have done something."

"What?" I asked, shaking my head.

"I think I may have accidentally imprinted on you," he said, swallowing hard.

"You what?" The morning sun suddenly felt too bright, too hot on my skin.

"Imprinted," he repeated, like the word pained him. "It's a wolf thing. A rare wolf thing. I thought it could only happen with other wolves."

"What does that mean?" My voice rose, panic fluttering in my chest. "What did you do to me?"

"I didn't do anything intentionally." Ryder's voice was defensive, but his eyes held a mixture of confusion and concern. "Sometimes when wolves..." He cleared his throat. "When we're intimate with someone, there's a small chance of forming a bond. An unbreakable bond."

I frowned as I crossed my arms. "I don't know what you're talking about. Are you saying I'm stuck here? I don't believe that. Give me your keys."

Ryder handed me the keys to his truck, and I hopped into the cab. I slid the keys into the ignition, and, just like my SUV, it wouldn't turn.

“It’s like I’m not strong enough to turn it,” I said, looking at him.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Everly,” Ryder said, climbing up in the doorway and reaching over to start the truck. It rumbled and purred to a start. “I can drive you somewhere.”

“Okay,” I said, letting out a breath. “How do we undo this imprint?”

Ryder cut the engine and lowered himself back down to the ground. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, okay. You don’t know. I guess that’s fine then,” I said, rolling my eyes. Anger filled me, and heat raced to my cheeks. “You can’t do this to me, Ryder!”

“I didn’t do anything on purpose!” he said, turning away from me. “The bonds form when there’s something deeper. A connection that...”

“That what?” I asked, my voice sharp.

Ryder turned, meeting my eyes. “A connection that is unbreakable. A connection so strong. It happens when a wolf finds their soul mate.”

“Mate?” The word hung in the air between us. “Like, forever mate? We only just met. Wait.” I swallowed hard. “This didn’t happen last night. I tried to leave before now... you imprinted on me after the first time we fucked?”

“Apparently,” Ryder said, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “The car works fine. It’s the bond that won’t let you leave. You don’t want to leave me. We’re connected.”

I felt my knees weaken as I leaned back against Ryder’s truck. “You’re going to blame this on me?”

“It’s not blame, it’s just how it works.”

“Shouldn’t you have to get my permission to do something like that?” I asked, my brows squishing together like an angry caterpillar.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Ryder said, pushing his shoulders back. “I’m a pack leader. I’m an alpha.”

I covered my face with both hands, feeling the weight of defeat on my shoulders. “So I’m trapped. Oh my god, am I going to die here?”

Ryder winced. “I won’t let that happen. I need to call Trevor... have him take care of Paul. I need to figure this out.”

“Figure what out? How to un-imprint me?” I pushed away from the car, anger rising to replace my shock. “Is that even possible?”

His silence was answer enough.

“Great. Just great.” I pushed past him toward the house. “So much for my escape plan.”

“Everly, stop.”

My feet stopped moving.

He reached out, taking my hand in his. “I didn’t know this would happen. I didn’t even think it was possible with a human.”

“So, what happens to me now?” I asked, searching his eyes.

He glanced at his truck, then back at me. “Now I protect what’s mine.”

The possessive words should have angered me further, but instead, they sent a shiver of something else entirely down my spine. It should have annoyed me, but it didn't. Instead, I felt something... new. Something I definitely didn't understand.

“Can't you just order me to leave?” I asked, looking into his eyes.

He shook his head. “I think it would weaken me. I can't risk that either.”

“I can't believe this,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I... I don't understand. What am I to you now?”

Ryder's gaze intensified. “Everything.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

I stared at Ryder, a chill creeping up my spine as I tried to process what was happening between us. For the most part, other than the absolute infatuation with Ryder, I felt the same as I always had.

More scared and afraid for my life, but I didn't think that had anything to do with the imprinting.

"So, um, do I have to obey your every command now?" I asked, hating the quiver in my voice. I couldn't deny that the connection between us felt both exhilarating and terrifying.

Ryder's expression softened. "No, Everly. That's not something I'd ever enforce. I'm not looking to control you." He ran a hand through his hair, seeming just as overwhelmed as I was. "If you wanted to leave badly enough, I think the SUV would start. The bond's strong, but it's not a prison."

"So, it's breakable?" I asked, raising a brow.

"Do you want to break it?" he asked.

I opened my mouth but snapped it shut.

"I mean, to be totally honest, I don't know enough about it, having never experienced it before," Ryder said, running his hand through his hair. "I'm sure there are ways... I'll need to talk to?"

“Right now, when you told me to stop walking, I did,” I said, chewing my lip. “If you’re not my master or whatever, then why did I stop? I didn’t even think about it... my body just responded.”

“It’s a deep connection,” he said quietly. “I think on some level we just don’t want to be apart.”

I looked out at the trees. “I am very worried about all of this.”

“I promise I won’t order you around like some kind of submissive,” Ryder said, looking into my eyes. “That’s not what I want. I just want to protect you. Be with you. I would do anything to keep you safe.”

“This is a lot,” I said, chewing a nail.

“I’ll learn more about it,” Ryder said, glancing over his shoulder. “I will, but this Kellan bullshit has to come first. He’s far too big of a threat to you and to my pack.”

I looked down at my feet. “And to you.”

“Please,” Ryder said, pulling me into his arms. “I’m not afraid of Kellan.”

“What if I am?”

“I’m older, I’ve been a pack leader longer?—”

“Why does it feel like there’s something you’re not telling me?” I asked, burying my face against his chest.

Ryder sighed. “There is probably a lot that I’m not telling you, but it’s for your protection.” He cleared his throat and gestured toward the house. “You should go

inside. Do you think you'll be okay here alone, or should I send Gage or Trevor?"

"I'll be fine," I said.

"Good," Ryder said, placing his hand on the doorframe. "Do I need to tell you to lock it?"

I cocked my head. "Are you ordering me already?"

"Whoa," Ryder said, taking a step back. "That night when you were in danger... I'd felt it. That's part of the?—"

"Imprint," I said, finishing his sentence.

His head bobbed. "Good. If it happens again, at least I'll know what it means."

"Let's hope it doesn't," I said, my shoulders dropping. "I never want to be near a vampire ever again."

"Lock the door," Ryder said, taking a step back. "Call if you need anything."

"Please be careful," I said as I closed the door.

I watched through the front window as Ryder's truck kicked up dirt as he sped down the driveway. When he disappeared down the road, I let out a breath and pressed my forehead against the cool glass.

Imprinting. I'd just been imprinted on by a werewolf. Was this real life?

The pull I felt toward Ryder was undeniable — a strange magnetic connection that had happened days ago. And there wasn't anything we could do about it? It was hard

to make sense of it all.

I wandered through the empty house, the silence suddenly overwhelming. My footsteps echoed against the hardwood floors as I made my way to the kitchen. Without anything better to do, I poured a cup of coffee and curled up on the couch, wrapping myself in one of the throw blankets.

There wasn't much I could do, other than wait for Ryder to take care of things. What did that even mean? Weren't people going to wonder what happened to Paul when they didn't see him or when he didn't show up for work?

Oh shit. The Timber Tavern.

Paul wasn't the only one who wasn't going to be showing up. I grabbed my phone, staring at the screen for several minutes before typing out a message.

Hey Steven, I don't think I'll be able to make it in next weekend. Something's come up. Sorry for the late notice.

I hit send and set my phone down. That money would have been nice, but something told me that Ryder would not allow it, at least not anytime soon. For all I knew, I wouldn't ever be able to leave this house again.

Steven didn't respond, but that was fine. Normal, even. He was probably busy with one of his many businesses.

The sun began to set, casting long shadows across the living room. I pulled the blanket tighter around my shoulders, suddenly aware of how vulnerable I felt. Every creak of the house settling made me jump. Every shadow seemed to hide a threat.

I used to enjoy being alone, but now it turned my stomach. I didn't want to watch TV,

and I didn't want to read my book... all I could do was sit there and wonder and worry.

Around dinner time, my phone buzzed. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Ryder's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey," I said, trying to sound casual.

"How are you doing?" Ryder's deep voice filled my ear, somehow making the empty house feel less vast.

I glanced around at the darkening rooms. Without thinking, I got to my feet and moved around the house, turning on the lights one by one.

"I'm fine. Just... feeling really alone here," I said, wishing I didn't sound so freaking pathetic.

"I know," he said softly. "That's why I called. I could feel it."

I pressed my lips together. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"Sorry," Ryder said, his voice low. "I wasn't trying to. It's just inside me."

I returned to the couch, sinking back into the cushions. "Having someone in my head, knowing what I'm feeling... it's kind of... intrusive."

"I can't help it," Ryder said. "If I could shut it off, I would. Maybe I'll be able to control it better, eventually. This is all new for me."

"When are you coming back?" I asked, picking at a loose thread on the blanket.

“Soon. We’ve dealt with the situation, but that’s about it so far.” He didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t ask. “Just need to tidy up a few things, then I’ll be right there. Will you be okay until then?”

I let out a breath. “Don’t you already know the answer to that question?”

“I’m not psychic, Everly,” Ryder said.

“Yeah,” I said, resting my head back. “I’ll be okay.”

After hanging up, I bustled around the fully lit house, straightening pillows, rinsing my coffee mug — anything to keep busy until Ryder arrived. I washed my face and then ran a brush through my hair and considered painting my nails, but decided against it when I noticed how shaky my hands were.

As full darkness settled in, I heard the familiar rumble of Ryder’s truck coming up the driveway. The headlights swept across the front windows, and I hurried to the door, eager not to be alone anymore.

I opened the door and stepped out on the patio to greet him. He held up a hand, a growl rumbling deep inside him.

“Go back inside,” he said, his voice tense.

I froze. “What’s wrong?”

He growled as he turned toward the trees. “We’re not alone.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

My heart was pounding so hard it felt like my brain was vibrating. The leaves and foliage rustled as the wolves emerged from the shadows, their eyes gleaming in the moonlight. They formed a semi-circle around us, blocking any path to escape, unless I was able to slip back inside and lock the door. But I wasn't about to leave Ryder outside alone, completely surrounded by them.

From behind the wolves, Kellan stepped out, fully dressed in jeans and a dark jacket. Unlike the rest of his growling pack, he hadn't shifted. His face was set in a cold determination as he strode forward, stopping several yards from where Ryder stood near my front porch.

"I challenge you, Ryder Black," he shouted, raising his hands to the sky. "I challenge you for your pack and for your territory."

Ryder stood in front of me, his body tense. "What's this about Kellan? I thought you were giving me three days? You gave me your word."

"Plans changed," Kellan replied with a dismissive wave. "Paul informed me that not only have you imprinted, but that you weren't actually going to step down."

"What would Paul know?" Ryder asked, his jaw tensing.

Kellan laughed, the sound lacking any real humor. "From what I heard, he found you. He said he could tell things had changed and, of course, he told me all about it. Said he could smell the change in Ryder. Something about an imprint?"

My blood ran cold. “If he told you what you wanted to know, then why did you kill him?”

Kellan turned to me as if he had only just realized I was there. His amber eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me.

“Well, he didn’t tell me because he wanted to. Apparently, his loyalties had shifted, and I had to get it out of him, but it was far easier than it should have been,” Kellan said, brushing something from his jacket. “You can’t trust someone who will hand over information that easily, can you?”

“You’re a monster,” I spat.

“Careful,” Kellan warned, his brows raising. “Think about it. What’s to say that he wouldn’t do the same thing to Ryder? For all I know, Paul came here to beg for a place back in Ryder’s pack. That Ryder wasn’t actually going to step down. Oh, wait, that’s exactly what happened.” Kellan paused, looking from Ryder to me and then back to Ryder. “He didn’t want to tell me about the imprint. In fact, he only mentioned it after I pulled out one of his teeth.”

My stomach lurched at the casual way he mentioned torturing poor Paul. I hadn’t known him well, but the thought of him suffering that way before being killed made me feel sick.

“To be totally honest, he begged for his death,” Kellan said, drawing in a breath through his nostrils. “It was what he wanted.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered, grabbing Ryder’s arm.

Kellan’s eyes flashed. “I did what was necessary to protect both of our packs. Ryder wouldn’t want someone he couldn’t trust in his pack. He would do the same to

someone who was disloyal in his own pack, too.”

“I would not!” Ryder roared. “I was going to let him prove himself. Everyone makes mistakes.”

“Mistakes?” Kellan asked, smirking.

Ryder growled. “Being tricked by you.”

Kellan’s eyes narrowed. “You consider betraying one’s pack to be a small mistake?”

“It depends on the circumstances,” Ryder hissed, his hands clenched even tighter.

Kellan clicked his tongue. “Oh well, then it’s no wonder why I had to be the one to step up. Besides, information has a price, and now that I know about this imprint business and the lying about stepping down.” Kellan shook his head slowly from side to side. “Sheesh, Ryder! I’m not sure what you’re doing, but it’s going to end in your demise, which, to be honest, makes me very, very happy. Honestly, I should thank Everly.”

“For what?” I snapped.

“You’ve completely distracted Ryder and made him pathetically weak,” Kellan said, wearing a smile that was half a sneer.

“You’re an idiot,” Ryder said, sucking in a short, angry breath.

“Now it’s time to get down to business,” Kellan said, cocking his head. “Leadership has a price, too, Ryder. Are you prepared to pay for it?”

“This is not how you go about a challenge,” Ryder growled, his hands clenched.

“You know the rules. Challenges are announced?—”

“Is that not what I just did?” Kellan asked, smirking.

“And witnessed by both packs and done on neutral territory,” Ryder said, gesturing toward the house. “Not near humans.”

Kellan scoffed. “Rules? Please. You only obey them when they suit you. Others you ignore... like letting humans know about us.”

The wolves in the yard growled in agreement as they inched closer. I counted at least ten of them, but there were probably more hidden in the trees.

“This is between you and me,” Ryder said firmly. “Let Everly go inside, and we’ll go deal with this the proper way.”

Kellan tilted his head, considering. “I don’t think so. She’s part of this now.” His gaze slid to me. “Besides, she should see what happens to wolves who don’t follow the rules. It’ll be... educational.”

One of the wolves flanking Kellan—a massive gray beast—snarled and took another step forward. I recognized the aggression in its stance, the way it lowered its head, ready to charge.

“Stop this!” Ryder roared, his voice sharp.

“I’m not giving you a choice,” Kellan replied. “Either fight me now, or my pack and I will take it by sheer force. This land should rightfully be mine, and we are all ready to fight. Is your pack ready?”

The threat in his voice was unmistakable. A deep rumble started in Ryder’s chest, and

I could feel waves of fury radiating off him. Through our new bond, his rage crashed into me like a physical force.

“We are not doing it like this! My pack isn’t even here,” Ryder said, taking an aggressive step forward.

“Call to them,” Kellan said, shrugging. “They’ll all come running for their leader, will they not?”

I felt my breath catch. The reality of my situation hit me like a ton of bricks. To these wolves — to Kellan’s pack — I was nothing more than a liability, a weak human who knew too much. It was almost like I could feel their hatred toward me.

“Ryder,” I whispered, my voice shaking. “What’s happening? What exactly is a challenge?”

But Ryder didn’t answer. His entire focus was on Kellan, his body coiled tight like a spring ready to snap. I could feel something changing in him — a shift in energy that made the hair on my arms stand up.

“Last chance, Kellan,” Ryder warned. “Take your wolves and leave. We can settle this properly because you’re right about one thing...”

“And that is?” Kellan asked, his brow raised.

“That it’s time to end this,” Ryder said, his shoulders rising and falling with quick but controlled breaths.

“No,” Kellan said simply. “I’m done waiting. I’m done playing by your rules.”

Ryder growled as his hands jerked. “They are not my rules! They are THE rules.”

Kellan rolled his eyes. “What’s it going to be, Ryder? Will you fight for your pack? For your territory? Or will you submit to me like you should have years ago?”

The wolves around us began to pace, their movements agitated and eager. One of them — a smaller brown wolf — snapped its jaws in my direction.

“Get inside,” Ryder ordered, turning briefly to meet my eyes.

“I don’t want to leave you,” I said, my words spilling from my lips as I took a step back.

“Now, Everly!” he barked, his voice carrying an authority that sent a shiver down my spine.

I took another step back. I was technically inside the house, but the door was still hanging open wide enough to see my front yard.

Kellan wagged his finger. “Uh, uh, uh. She stays. She wants to be part of this world, then she can be your witness.”

Ryder ripped off his shirt, letting it fall to the porch. His muscles were already shifting under his skin.

Kellan laughed and started to remove his clothing. “Wasn’t sure you’d have it in you. Thought you’d back away from a real challenge.”

“This isn’t a challenge,” Ryder said through gritted teeth. “This is an ambush.”

Kellan shrugged, standing in just his jeans. He laughed as he reached for his belt, whipping it off in one quick, fluid motion.

“Call it what you want. The outcome will be the same,” Kellan said confidently.

“What is going to happen?” I asked.

“It’s a fight,” Kellan said, his lips curling as he let his pants drop to the grass. “To the death.”

I gasped. “Ryder, no!”

Chapter Thirty-Four

My breath caught in my throat as Ryder's body began to contort. Bones cracked and shifted, his skin rippling as fur burst through every pore. I couldn't look away, mesmerized by the horrifying yet beautiful transformation happening right before my eyes.

Within seconds, where my Ryder had stood was now a massive wolf, his thick, brown fur gleaming under the moonlight. His eyes were the same, glowing and wild.

He padded toward me, his passive paws tapping softly on the wooden porch. Ryder nudged my legs with his snout, trying to get me further inside the house.

When I looked up again, Kellan had changed into his giant black wolf form and was sneering in our direction. Ryder turned away from me, raising his magnificent head toward the moon. A primal howl tore from his throat, echoing through the trees and vibrating through my bones.

A powerful compulsion pulled me toward him. I stepped into the doorway, my fingers clutching the frame with desperate intensity, as if to stop myself from going closer.

"Ryder! You don't have to do this!" I said, tears burning in my eyes.

Ryder cast one last glance at me before bounding down the porch steps into the yard to face Kellan. The black wolf's lips curled back, revealing gleaming fangs as he stalked forward. My heart hammered against my ribs as they began to circle each

other, muscles tensed beneath their fur.

The shadows at the edge of the yard shifted and moved. I heard rustling from all directions, the snap of twigs and soft padding of paws as more wolves emerged from the darkness. They formed a living circle around Ryder and Kellan, silent witnesses to this challenge... to this fight, to the death.

A wolf with russet-red fur slipped onto the porch, positioning itself between me and the unfolding scene. The wolf's head turned slightly, blue-green eyes meeting mine for just a moment.

"Trevor?" I whispered.

A breath escaped the wolf's nostrils before it turned back to face the yard. Trevor moved silently back and forth, protectively between me and the impending violence.

My hands trembled as I clung to the doorframe, my knuckles white with tension. Trevor's russet wolf form paced in front of me, blocking my path to the yard where Ryder and Kellan circled each other. I wasn't sure if he was there to protect me or to stop me from running out should something happen to Ryder.

The wolves surrounding them had gone eerily silent, their eyes reflecting the moonlight like dozens of floating lanterns. There were so many wolves that I couldn't even start to count them.

"Please," I whispered, though I knew my human pleas meant nothing in this primal confrontation.

Kellan lunged first, a blur of midnight fur and gleaming teeth. Ryder dodged sideways, powerful muscles rippling under his brown coat as he snapped at Kellan's flank. They crashed together in a fury of snarls and growls that made my blood run

cold.

“Oh, god,” I said, covering my mouth.

I’d never seen such raw violence up close. The wolves collided again, teeth flashing as they tore at each other.

Ryder caught Kellan’s shoulder between his jaws, and I heard the sickening sound of flesh tearing. Kellan yelped but twisted free, leaving a spray of blood across the grass.

My stomach lurched. They really were trying to kill one another, and one of them was not going to walk away from the fight.

“Please,” I said, looking at Trevor, who was too focused on the fight to notice. “Can’t you do anything?”

Ryder’s massive form darted forward with surprising speed for his size, but Kellan anticipated the move. The black wolf ducked under Ryder’s attack and came up beneath him, jaws clamping onto Ryder’s foreleg. The sound that tore from Ryder’s throat wasn’t just pain — it was fury.

With a powerful twist of his body, Ryder broke free and backed away several limping steps. Blood matted his brown fur where Kellan had bitten him. They began circling again, both breathing heavily. The watching wolves shifted restlessly, some letting out low whines of anticipation, or perhaps they were cheers for their leader.

“Ryder,” I choked out, tears streaming down my face. I could feel what he was feeling deep inside my body — determination, rage, pain, and, underneath it all, fear, not for himself, but for his pack and for me.

They crashed together again, a whirlwind of teeth and claws. I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. Blood splattered across the grass like macabre raindrops. A particularly vicious snarl from Ryder sent chills down my spine as he caught Kellan's ear between his teeth and ripped.

The black wolf howled in agony, stumbling backward. For a moment, I thought it might be over — Ryder seemed to have the upper hand. But Kellan recovered quickly, shaking his head and sending droplets of blood flying through the air.

Trevor whined softly, shifting his weight from one paw to the other. His ear twitched, and he shot a quick look in my direction.

With a growl, Kellan faked left, then attacked from the right, his movements so quick I could barely keep track of them. Ryder had strength, there was no doubt about that, but Kellan had a quickness that was undeniable.

Kellan's teeth dug into Ryder's hindquarters, and Ryder let out a howl that pierced the night. My chest ached with a phantom pain — I could feel his agony so strongly that I dropped to my knees.

Trevor stepped back to me, whimpering, as he pushed his face against my arm. "I'm okay."

With renewed fury, Ryder twisted and locked his jaws around Kellan's throat. For one breathless moment, I thought it was done... that he'd won. But Kellan thrashed wildly, breaking free and backing away, as blood oozed from multiple wounds.

Both of them were growing tired. Their movement became more deliberate... more desperate. Ryder limped slightly, and Kellan's black coat was matted with blood, his breathing labored.

“Ah! Just stop this!” I shouted, a wave of exhaustion rippling through me.

They clashed again, rolling across the yard in a tangle of limbs and fur. When they separated, Ryder staggered, clearly weakening. I pressed my hand against my mouth to stifle a scream. Our bond pulsed with pain and exhaustion and something else... something I didn't even want to think about.

Kellan saw his opportunity. He charged forward with renewed strength, slamming into Ryder's side. The impact sent Ryder tumbling to the ground. Before he could recover, Kellan was on him, passive paws pinning Ryder's chest to the ground, jaws hovering inches from his exposed throat.

“No!” I screamed, pushing past Trevor. The russet wolf blocked me more forcefully, nearly knocking me down.

Kellan's teeth gleamed in the moonlight, poised for the killing blow. The watching wolves tensed, some shifting forward expectantly, others crying out to the moon as if begging for help.

Ryder's head turned toward the side, his glowing blue eyes finding me. The sound that escaped his throat was soft, but I heard it... or maybe I just felt it.

“Ryder, please,” I said, my fingers gripping the porch railing to hold me up. “Get up!”

In that split second, something changed. Ryder's body coiled beneath Kellan, and with his last bit of strength, he twisted violently. His back legs shifted, thrusting hard into Kellan's underbelly.

Kellan flew through the air, a startled yelp escaping him as he crashed several feet away. Ryder leaped to his feet, his head thrown back in a thunderous howl that shook

the trees.

Before Kellan could recover, Ryder was on him, fangs bared for the final strike. Kellan lay beneath him, bleeding and beaten, no longer fighting back.

The wolves were silent. The moment stretched endlessly as Ryder stood over his enemy, his jaws ready to end Kellan's life. They stared as if they were communicating with one another.

That brief hesitation was all Kellan's pack needed to change the outcome. Three wolves lunged forward in perfect unison, slamming into Ryder from different directions. The impact knocked him off Kellan, and in seconds, he was surrounded by his pack.

Ryder regained his footing, blood dripping from multiple wounds, a growl rumbling from deep in his chest. His own pack members growling as they stepped forward, ready to engage if necessary.

Two of the wolves helped Kellan up with their snouts, and they began to retreat. They moved as one organism, backing away with Kellan protected in their center. At the edge of the woods, Kellan cast one last hateful glance at Ryder before they all disappeared into the darkness.

When I turned back to the yard, Ryder was already shifting back. The transformation to human seemed extremely painful, and his wounds were more apparent on his skin.

Ryder walked toward me, glancing back over his shoulder as he dragged his feet through the blood-soaked grass. His body was covered in gashes, bites, and a deep claw mark across his back. Blood oozed from a particularly nasty wound on his thigh. His breathing was ragged... his face contorted with pain as he tried to move toward the house.

“Ryder!” I said, my eyes wide.

Trevor shifted too, returning to human form in a quicker, more fluid motion than Ryder had managed. He ran quickly inside my house, returning moments later with a blanket draped over his shoulder.

“Help me get him inside,” Trevor said urgently.

I rushed forward, the grass wet with dew and blood beneath my bare feet. When I reached Ryder, he dropped to his knees in front of me, unable to take another step.

Trevor slipped an arm under him, helping him back to his feet. “Come on, man. You weigh a ton.”

“Is he okay?” I asked, my eyes locked on Ryder. “Are you okay?”

Ryder’s eyes found mine, glassy with pain but still alert. “Everly.”

“I’m right here,” I said, going to his other side to help Trevor.

We took five steps before Ryder stopped moving his feet. He swayed dangerously, and I didn’t miss the look of concern that flashed across Trevor’s face.

“Only a little further,” Trevor said, grunting as he carried most of Ryder’s weight.

“I think I need a doctor,” Ryder said when we finally lowered him to the couch.

Trevor nodded. “I’ll call.”

“Um,” I said, looking at the marks on Ryder’s body. “Won’t they know something weird happened?”

“It’s a special doctor,” Trevor said, looking around. “Got a phone?”

I handed him my cell phone.

“Thanks,” Trevor said with a nod before placing a hand on Ryder’s shoulder. “You’re going to be okay, but you’re a real idiot.”

My eyes narrowed with fury.

“You should have killed him when you had the chance,” Trevor said, bowing his head.

Ryder’s jaw tightened. “I should have.”

“Why did you hesitate?” I asked as Trevor went into the kitchen, tapping the numbers on my phone.

“I didn’t want it to go that far. I never did,” Ryder said, wincing.

“Will he come back?” I asked.

Ryder met my eyes. “Let’s hope not. Next time, I won’t hesitate.”

Trevor came back into the room, handing me my phone. “Actually, if he comes back, we have every right to?—”

“Let’s not worry about it right now,” Ryder said, closing his eyes.

“Doctor will be here in a few minutes,” Trevor said, placing a light hand on Ryder’s shoulder. “Want me to get out of here?”

“Wait until your doctor arrives, okay?” I asked, grabbing Trevor’s arm.

I was just so terrified that something would happen and I wouldn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to be alone when Ryder was in such a vulnerable state.

They exchanged a quick look, and Trevor nodded. It wasn’t long before there was a knock at the door.

Trevor opened it, letting the doctor in. When I looked up, my mouth dropped open.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I stood there gawking at Dean Quinn, my mind completely blank. I'd met him once in May's diner, and the only thing I knew about him was that he was the town's one and only dentist.

"The dentist?" I managed to get out in a high-pitched squeaky voice.

He nodded, his eyes on Ryder. "Hey."

"How is a dentist going to help?" I asked, the words tumbling out before I could stop them.

Dean offered a sheepish smile, running a hand through his hair. "I know a thing or two. Still not entirely sure how I got caught up in being a doctor to these guys." He gestured with a flick of his hand toward Trevor and Ryder.

Trevor, his face etched with concern, stepped forward. "And we appreciate it, Doc, but Ryder really needs you right now. We can talk about all that another time, perhaps."

The urgency in Trevor's voice made my stomach tighten. Whatever was happening here was serious. Dean's expression shifted immediately to one of professional focus.

"Of course, sorry," Dean said, sitting on the coffee table in front of Ryder.

I awkwardly stood there as Dean turned his full attention to Ryder, who was looking

worse by the minute. The dentist — a dentist, for heaven's sake — set a small medical bag next to him on the coffee table.

"I'm going to need some privacy while I work," Dean said, glancing between Trevor and me. "Could you give us the room?"

Trevor nodded, checking his watch. "I need to get going, anyway. Check on the others." He turned to Ryder. "You gonna be okay here, or do you want me to wait outside?"

Ryder winced as he shifted position. "Go. I'll be fine."

"I'll check in later," Trevor said, giving Ryder a quick nod. With one last concerned look, he headed for the door.

"Should I..."

"She can stay," Ryder said, before Dr. Dean could say anything.

Dean's head bobbed as he dug for something in his bag. "As you wish."

I sat down on the recliner, twisting my fingers together as the doctor worked. Dean remained calm and professional as he cleaned wounds and asked Ryder only the necessary questions.

When I dared a look at him, Ryder was grimacing as the doctor wrapped a bandage around his middle, covering the claw mark on his back. There were smaller bandages on his arms, and one wrapped tightly around his leg. Dean was packing up various tubes of creams and gels, gauze, and medical tape.

"He's in pretty rough shape," Dean told me as I approached, "but I don't think anything's broken. He's lost some blood, that's for certain. Had to stitch up a few that

were pretty deep, but I think he'll be okay with just some rest and fluids."

I hugged myself. "Thank you."

Dean closed his medical bag with a decisive snap. "You'll want to help him change those bandages tomorrow morning," he told me, his expression serious. "And keep an eye on the wounds. Call me immediately if you notice any unusual redness, swelling, or if he develops a fever. Infection is our biggest concern right now."

I nodded, trying to absorb all the instructions while still processing the surreal situation. There was no doubt in my mind that Doctor Dean knew exactly what Trevor and Ryder were... but wasn't he also human?

Ryder shifted on the couch, wincing slightly as he extended his hand to Dean. "Thanks, Doc. Send a bill."

"You know I will," Dean said, gently clasping Ryder's hand. He reached into his pocket and handed me a card. "My number, in case you need anything or have any questions. It's my personal number, so it'll go directly to me."

"I appreciate it," I said, walking him to the door.

With one final nod toward Ryder, Dean stepped outside. "Take care of yourself, Mr. Black."

"You bet," Ryder said, settling back onto the couch.

I walked back to Ryder, my mind racing with questions. The couch was stained with blood, and there was a trail of blood on the floor where he'd walked. I stood there, wringing my hands, unsure where to even begin.

Ryder broke the silence first. "I'll replace the couch and anything else that got... uh,

messed up.”

“Whatever,” I said, waving a dismissive hand. “I don’t care about any of that. It’s just stuff. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

He patted the couch. “Sit with me.”

Silence fell between us as he slid his hand over mine, giving it a weak squeeze. I cleared my throat awkwardly.

“Um, so, that was the town dentist,” I said, looking down at our entwined fingers.

Ryder nodded, wincing slightly as he adjusted his position on the couch. It seemed as though he couldn’t get comfortable.

“He knows about you guys? Knows what you are?” I pressed further. “But he’s human, isn’t he?”

“He is,” Ryder confirmed, his voice rough with pain and exhaustion. “In the rules set many, many years ago, a pack can form a relationship with a doctor. We need medical help sometimes that we can’t provide ourselves.”

“So many rules,” I said, shaking my head. “And he just... helps you? Doesn’t that put him in danger?”

Ryder’s eyes met mine, and something dark flickered behind them. “Of course, if the doc talks... it won’t end up so well for him.”

“What about rival packs? Couldn’t they?—”

“He’s protected,” Ryder said, with a long blink. “Dean’s a good guy. Keeps his mouth shut and my pack healthy.”

“You’re tired,” I said, frowning. “I’ll get you a pillow. More blankets?”

Ryder held my hand tighter. “I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m glad he was here to patch you up,” I said, pressing my lips together. “I’m not sure I could have managed that. There was so much?—”

“Everly,” Ryder said, exhaling slowly. “Try not to worry so much. It’s done.”

“It’s not done,” I said, shaking my head. “He’ll come back.”

Ryder shook his head. “He’s in worse shape than I am.”

“This shouldn’t have happened to you... here at my house,” I said, my head falling back against the cushion.

“Kellan is the only one to blame,” Ryder said, his voice low.

I swallowed hard, a lump forming in my throat as I stared at Ryder’s wounded body. “It’s my fault,” I whispered, barely able to get the words out. “If I would have never found out... never seen you that night in the woods... none of this would have happened.”

Ryder’s eyes found mine. “This has nothing to do with you or what you saw. Kellan has been doing this for years. Long before you were in the picture.”

I shook my head, unconvinced. “I don’t want to be a distraction for you. I could tell just how much you care for your pack.” I swallowed again, forcing myself to say what I thought was right. “You should let me go... release me... find a way so that I can get out of your hair.”

“I don’t want that,” he said, his hand tightening around mine, with more strength than

I would have thought he had left. “I want you to stay. It’s going to be okay now. He got the message.”

“But the pack?—”

“My pack will understand,” he interrupted, his gaze never leaving mine. “They want me to be happy. I have a pack that will want you to be a part of it, even if you are human.”

I drew in a slow breath. “How do you know he got the message?”

“He knew I was going to end him. Not only did he see it in my eyes, he could feel it,” Ryder said, his voice low. “There is one thing I know about Kellan. He doesn’t want to die. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s afraid of it.”

I looked over at him, covered in bandages. The fierce protectiveness I’d witnessed when he faced Kellan had changed something between us. It wasn’t just that he’d fought for me... it was that he’d chosen me, even knowing the complications it would bring.

“You should get some rest,” I said softly, starting to rise. “I’ll get you some water.”

Ryder’s grip tightened slightly. “I heal faster than humans. By tomorrow, I’ll be much better.”

“You’ll get rest. Doctor’s orders,” I said, crossing my arms as I looked down at him.

I went to the kitchen, filling a glass with cold water. My hands trembled slightly as I returned to the living room, the reality of everything washing over me in waves.

“I’ll leave this here,” I said, setting it on the coffee table. “Can I help you lie down?”

“I can manage,” Ryder grunted as he worked to reposition himself.

“So what happens now?” I asked, crouching beside the couch.

Ryder’s eyes found mine, steady and certain despite his pain. “Kellan will lick his wounds and retreat. He knows he came close to death today. As for my pack... there will be adjustments, but they follow me for a reason. They trust my judgment.”

“And us?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“That depends on you, Everly Montana,” he said, reaching for my hand again. “I know what I want. What do you want?”

The intensity in his gaze made my heart flutter. This man — this werewolf — had put himself between me and danger without hesitation. He’d been willing to kill to protect me and his pack.

“I want to try,” I admitted, the words feeling both terrifying and right. “But not if your pack is against it. This shouldn’t be hard for us, right?”

“They will accept you,” Ryder said, his voice hard. “They will protect you as if you were one of us.”

“You really want this?” I asked, shaking my head. “I’m nothing special. I’m just... I’m just me.”

A smile curled Ryder’s lips. “You’re everything. You’re special to me.”

“Did the doctor give you something?” I asked, raising a brow. “I think you might be delirious.”

Ryder laughed, but winced. “Ow, ouch.”

“Sorry,” I said, pushing myself to my feet. “Get some rest.”

I watched him for a moment, his eyes growing heavy as everything caught up with him. His breathing was slow, becoming deeper and more regular despite the occasional wince with the slightest movement.

Sighing, I sank into the recliner, drawing my knees to my chest. Was I really considering this? A real and serious relationship with a werewolf? I said I was done with men, but I guess we were all breaking rules. If Ryder broke his for me, then I could break mine for him. Maybe he really was different. Only time would tell.

All I knew for sure was that my heart was aching at the sight of him wounded. I’d been so afraid of losing him that I hadn’t been able to stand.

Something about him was different.

And when he looked at me... when he touched me... when our eyes met, it was all just right. It was like we were two pieces of the same puzzle, fitting perfectly together.

I shook my head, a small smile forming on my lips despite everything. I owed it to myself to find out what these feelings meant. What if this was it? What if this was the real thing?

A human and a werewolf — who would have ever thought? No one would believe it if I told them. But then again, no one would ever know. This would be our secret, mine and Ryder’s and his pack’s.

The rational part of my brain was screaming that this was insane, that I should run as far and as fast as I could. But then I looked at Ryder’s sleeping form, his face peaceful despite the cuts, stitches, and bruises, and I knew I wasn’t going anywhere. Not that the imprint would let me leave, anyway. Whatever came next, whatever

challenges we'd face, I wanted to face them with him.

I just hoped everything was really over. That things wouldn't be so hard, and no one would have to risk their life for me, or for their pack. But something told me that Kellan wouldn't give up so easily. I was afraid he'd be back.

Hopefully, I was wrong.