



# Midnight Whispers (Forbidden Entanglements #1)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** A warlock who doesn't know he's a warlock. A wolf shifter deputy who has to take another wolf shifter for a mate. Discovering your best friend's college-age son is your fated mate is only one of the things working against them. The other is far more deadly.

All Riley wants is a fresh start. After the unexpected death of his mother, moving to Fortune Falls, finally getting to attend college, and getting to know his estranged father is exactly what he needs. Fortune Falls is more than it seems. It's filled with secrets about sexy sheriff's deputies being wolf shifters and a familial connection to warlocks.

Who knew magic existed? Not Riley. But there it is at his fingertips.

Cass's pack alpha wants him to mate with another wolf shifter. Not his best friend's sweet, funny warlock of a son. He doesn't expect his murder investigation to be tied to his pack or for their lives to be at stake.

It's not just Riley's dad who can't know Cass is his fated mate. Cass's pack can't either.

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

The pack runs were politically charged these days. Since the new alpha took the reins, the pack was on edge. The alpha liked to make speeches. Last month's speech lasted forty-five minutes and part of it was the alpha rambling about tradition.

Cass glanced at his watch.

It looked like the alpha wanted to set a record. Alpha Miller was fifty-two minutes deep.

Julia and Greg Simpson's toddler screamed and then hit his brother. The brother cried to his mom. Julia grabbed the toddler, while Greg grabbed the older boy. The older boy complained about not being able to run.

While this was happening, the alpha droned on endlessly, as if he didn't sense the restlessness of the pack. Or the tension in most of the people.

"We must uphold our traditions. That's why we continue to have the pack runs. Tradition means as much to wolf shifters as instinct. Our numbers...."

Cass's Gran let out a growly sigh beside him and mumbled, "Windbag."

Cass hid a smile.

He had to be at the station in an hour. He no longer had time for the run. It was a good thing he'd brought his deputy uniform with him, or he would have had to leave

already.

“Heard he told Silus to take a mate. Maddie too,” Gran leaned in Cass’s direction. Gran wasn’t the subtlest person. She didn’t have it in her not to say exactly what was on her mind. And she’d claim to be too old for people’s crap. Gran whispering didn’t surprise him. It was practically a shout in a pack full of wolf shifters, especially for those who stood near them in the crowd.

Bethany Walters responding didn’t surprise him either. “Yep. And my daughter too. This isn’t the 1950s when alphas arranged matings.”

Rodney Benson said, “He doesn’t want our numbers to dwindle. The Timeston pack might be smaller, but not by much. Tension is rising between the packs.”

“That’s Miller’s doing. His self-serving attitude will create a war. Just see if it doesn’t,” Bethany whispered.

“How is he self-serving, Beth?”

“Why do you think he wants a bigger pack? Or are you buying into the Timeston pack rivalry?” Bethany huffed and rolled her eyes. “More people means more money in his pocket. He’s already raised the tithe once and never said why.”

“He has no right to tell my grandson who to mate. Wolves find their fated mate all the time. Cass could find his,” Gran patted Cass’s forearm as if consoling him. The alpha hadn’t talked to him yet, although Gran was right. The alpha would have the mate talk with him sooner rather than later.

“Speaking of traditions. It used to be that he would have had to challenge the alpha to a fight to the death to become the Pack alpha.” Vinnie was a firefighter for the Fortune Falls fire department. He was a big wolf shifter with a healthy amount of

muscle. When he spoke, people listened. Partly because the citizens of Fortune Falls respected first responders such as Vinnie. But also, he had a commanding presence. He wasn't a strong enough alpha to lead the pack. For one, he didn't have a third form. Not that you needed one to be the alpha but a pack considered an alpha strong enough to protect them if the alpha had one—Miller said he had a third form, but Cass hadn't seen it yet.

Vinnie would make a good beta. He also was about the same age as Cass. They had gone to high school together, only two grades apart, so he wasn't a young guy. It added to the way people stopped speaking and even shuffling their feet to pay attention, as if they were waiting for some small bit of wisdom to come their way.

“Are you saying we should go back to the old ways?” Gran asked. She advocated for the voting system and Cass had to agree.

They didn't live in a world where fighting to the death was possible anymore. As a deputy for the Fortune Falls sheriff's department, he couldn't stand by and watch one wolf kill another. Murder was punishable by law, even amongst a pack of wolf shifters. Voting someone in was way better, even if he didn't like who the pack voted for or the reason they voted for him.

Cass liked the liberalness of the old alpha and had voted for him. He liked having fewer restrictions, living his life amongst other people in a society with fair and rational laws. But the new alpha wanted to control everyone. He wanted to put restrictions on everyone. He talked about tradition and how higher pack numbers help, but his little speeches amounted to the alpha wanting more control over people. A lot of the pack members fell for his bullshit. That's how he got voted in. Since taking over leadership, they'd since regretted their choice.

“What we need to do is recall him,” Cass whispered. It didn't have to come down to violence. It could be a civil process.

“The pack has never done that before.”

“Because we never had an alpha as bad as Miller.” Cass would have said more, but the alpha finally wound down his speech.

Everyone was tight-lipped, pretending the conversation had never happened. No one wanted to face the repercussions of talking out of turn. The alpha hadn’t punished anyone yet, but he’d only had the job for three months. And no one knew how the alpha would dole out punishments. They only knew he would because he’d threatened it.

Cass sighed and turned toward his car. He might as well head to work early.

Gran stopped him with a hand on his arm. She nodded to the alpha, who made a beeline straight to Cass. And then she put herself in front of him, as if she were a mother bear protecting her cub.

Cass sighed in exasperation. He was a grown wolf. He turned forty-two last September. The days when he needed his Gran to fight his battles were over and besides, they didn’t know what the alpha wanted to speak to him about. It could be anything. It didn’t have to be about taking a mate.

The alpha smiled at Gran as if they were long-lost friends, which was his first mistake. “Miss Huber. How are you this evening?”

“I’d be better if you hadn’t wasted the better part of an hour.”

Cass tried not to laugh but barely contained himself.

Miller smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. If one stared too long into his gaze, they’d see he was lacking something. Cass thought it might just be a soul. “I apologize. I can

be long winded, especially when I'm passionate about something."

"Best get a little less passionate about telling my boy here to take a mate. Our family doesn't arrange matings." Even though Gran intended to challenge the alpha's leadership, the alpha didn't take it as such. "That's why you came over here, isn't it?"

"I intended to make a mere suggestion, ma'am." He met Cass's gaze. "As an unmated male past his prime, I would think you'd want to find a mate."

"Not everyone wants to couple up, Alpha." Cass didn't subscribe to the notion that everyone needed a mate. But he very much wanted one. He just wanted it to be the right person. The perfect person for him was out there somewhere. He'd rather wait for his fated mate. "And besides that, I'm gay. I won't have cubs unless I adopt them."

"It's not just about adding children. Just adding another wolf to the pack is enough." The alpha shook his head and sighed. "Tensions are high with the Timeston Pack—"

"That's not my boy's fault, Miller." Gran stuck her finger in the alpha's face. It gained the attention of several people around them.

His eyes changed from human to wolf and back again. Instead of asserting dominance over a small but feisty old lady, he smiled in his dead-eyed way. "I have the pack's longevity in mind. Nothing more."

Cass put an arm around Gran's shoulder before she could get going again. "I appreciate that, Alpha. I'll do my best to speed up finding my Fated mate."

He didn't wait for the alpha to reply but steered his grandmother toward his car. "I could have handled that on my own, you know."

“By promising to find your Fated mate, Cassius?”

Cass hid a grin. “It let him know I won’t mate just anyone.”

“We’ll see if he listens.” Gran was right. The conversation wasn’t over as far as the alpha was concerned. He wanted to populate Fortune Falls with as many wolf shifters as possible. The more he could boast of being the alpha of the biggest pack in the area, the more his ego grew. Despite how he didn’t react to Gran when she baited him, even though as alpha he could have, Cass was under no delusion about the kind of person the alpha was. They voted in a cold, self-serving asshole. There were consequences none of them wanted to face.

“Don’t underestimate him, Cass. It will be a mistake.” Gran didn’t have to tell Cass to keep an eye on the alpha. He already knew Miller was just getting started in wreaking havoc within the pack.

## Page 2

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### Chapter Two

The funeral was a blur. Riley Palmer remembered sitting on the hard folding chair in the funeral home next to his cousin Leanne and his Aunt Shelly. He couldn't even paraphrase part of the sermon. After the funeral, people told him what a lovely job the pastor had done. But all Riley remembered thinking about was how numb he felt. He'd wondered when it would wear off. He was still waiting to feel something.

Riley lay in bed. He didn't know what time it was. It was late enough in the day to get a phone call. Not super early in the morning. He could hear the music of his ringtone from wherever his phone was. He couldn't remember where he'd left it. All he knew was that it wasn't in his bedroom. It wasn't the first time he'd let a call go to voicemail.

He told himself he should roll out of bed. He needed to be an adult. The rent was due soon and he might be late paying the light bill. He wasn't even sure how much money was in his account. He hadn't checked it since his mother landed in the hospital. He hadn't been to work since then, either.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there. It could have been an hour since his phone rang, or even longer. When someone pounded on the door, it startled him.

He pushed the covers off and sat up on the bed.

When someone knocked again and a deep voice said, "Welfare check", he answered the door.



A police officer stood on his stoop. “Your family called for a welfare check. Do you need help?”

He didn’t, but he understood someone had been worried about Riley enough to ask for a welfare check. Riley thought he knew who it might have been. “I’m fine.”

“Are you unharmed?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need mental health services?”

Probably, but he wouldn’t tell the cops that. All the cop was really asking was if Riley was a danger to himself. He wasn’t. He just couldn’t work through the grief. Not that the electric company, his landlord, or his boss at the appliance store cared. “No, sir.”

The cop nodded. “Call your family. They’re worried.”

“I will, sir. Thank you.” Riley shut the door after the cop left and went to the kitchen. He started a pot of coffee.

The kitchen was a mess. Dishes had been in the sink for days. They had food crusted on them, and they smelled horrible. A half-empty bottle of vodka sat on the table next to a shot glass. He picked up the bottle, walked to the back door, and threw it into the backyard. After he finished, he shut the door and sank to the floor.

He didn’t fight the emotions. It was like a tsunami in his soul, and he knew he had to be okay feeling whatever he felt. He had little choice in the matter. But he had to wonder if maybe the numbness was better.

It had been easier. Not feeling anything. Not moving through life. Lying in bed for so long might not have gained him much, but it hadn't been as difficult as the flood of sadness that took over.

Other people kept living. The phone calls and the welfare check were proof of that.

His phone rang again. It must be somewhere close by, just based on the loudness of the ringtone music. He didn't answer. Not right away. But by the time he calmed down, he was ready to talk to whoever kept blowing up his phone.

He felt drained, as if he'd run a marathon instead of crying. His body felt heavy, but something loosened inside his chest. Whatever pain the numbness held, the tears had been set free. The pain still felt like a prison but less of one. He was out of solitary confinement at least. He hadn't even realized the pain had been there all along until it moved inside his body, taking up so much space there wasn't room for anything else.

He discovered his phone on the coffee table and grabbed it. It was his dad and brother in equal measure.

He called his dad first. His father was most likely the one who sent the cops to his door. Given that he was the sheriff of Fortune Falls, he'd probably been called to check on people too. They didn't have a close relationship, and they weren't close geographically, either. So Riley wasn't sure what sort of life his dad led.

"Riley. Are you okay?"

"Fine." He'd been saying that a lot since his mother's death. It was the biggest lie he'd ever told.

"I'm worried about you, son."

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

He almost apologized again but stopped himself. “Okay.”

“Are you going to make me come there?”

“Is that a threat? Like saying ‘don’t make me come over there’.” Riley smiled, probably for the first time since the day his mother collapsed in the kitchen. He hadn’t been sure he’d ever be able to smile again. But something about seeing the number of times his dad and brother called him and then hearing the worry in his dad’s voice made him feel less alone. His heart felt a little lighter.

His dad chuckled. “Something like that, yeah.” And then he sobered. “I know I haven’t been in your life much. I’m sorry about that. I’d like that to change.”

“Why are you saying this now, Dad? We could have had this conversation when Mom was alive.”

“You had a purpose there. One I might not have liked, but we both know you wouldn’t have left her.”

“She was sick.” Alcoholism was a disease. His mother didn’t love alcohol. She hadn’t wanted to be addicted to it. It was a hole that Riley couldn’t pull her out of.

“I know, son. I’m sorry for a lot of how your life turned out.” At first, Dad’s comment made Riley want to defend his mother. But he’d had to parent himself for most of his life. The only time he’d had a parent was when he visited his father.

His brother had a different mother. She was great, even to Riley whenever he visited.

She was the motherly type. Unlike Riley's mom.

"I couldn't go to college." He wasn't sure why he said it. Maybe because he'd been angry with his mother for taking college away from him. But he felt guilty for blaming her when she couldn't really help herself. She couldn't get past the addiction enough to become well again. Riley hadn't been able to have a life outside of work and being his mother's caregiver.

Was guilt part of the grieving process? He could finally start his life because he hadn't been able to save her. All he had done was watch her deteriorate like damp, worm-eaten wood.

"Fortune Falls has Dinsmore College." That was all his dad said. Of course, he'd mentioned it throughout the years, especially since Riley graduated from high school. It was just another way for his dad to let him know he didn't understand Riley's choices. What was Riley supposed to do? Let her rot? It was bad enough that she did anyway. Without him, she would have died a lot sooner. There wasn't a doubt in his mind about that.

"I'll think about it." And for the first time in his life, he meant it.

### Chapter Three

Cass sat in the passenger seat while his boss and best friend drove to a domestic violence call. Iven had a way of staying silent when he had something on his mind. Cass could guess it had something to do with his youngest son. He'd always had a problem with their relationship, mostly because it was hard fought on Iven's part. Iven blamed himself. Maybe the blame lay with Iven. Cass didn't know. What he did know was it had something to do with the youngest son.

Cass had been Iven's best friend for four years and had yet to meet the youngest son. He'd only listened while Iven had talked about him. So, Cass didn't know whose fault it was or even if placing blame was necessary.

"Are you going to tell me now or wait until after the domestic violence?" Cass would rather not have a deep conversation after the call because they might have a body in the back, listening to the entire conversation. Fortune Falls was a small town, even with Dinsmore College's student body taking over the town. But it was Iven's dirty laundry. He had to decide if he wanted to be the next gossip topic.

Iven sighed. "Guess it wouldn't do for everyone in town to know the sheriff screwed up his son."

"It was his mother who screwed him up, right?" Cass didn't know enough to say whether that was true. All he knew was the kid's mother had been a drunk, and the kid took care of her his entire life, even when he was a child. But she'd died not that long ago.

“I let it happen. I should have fought for custody when he was small.” Iven tapped on the wheel and shook his head. “Instead, I let myself believe Riley was safe with her.”

Cass stiffened. “Did something happen?”

“Other than he’s had to clean up after his mother’s vomit and probably pick up her empty liquor bottles his whole life. And for the last few years that kid has been the sole breadwinner.”

Cass relaxed. “So, he grew up too fast. It could be a lot worse.”

“There’s no evidence that he’s abusing drugs or alcohol. I don’t think he even smokes cigarettes or marijuana recreationally. But that’s the thing. I don’t know for sure.” Iven sighed again. “I don’t know my own son. Hell, the last time he visited, he was seventeen and worried about his mother the entire week.”

Cass couldn’t help but wonder if maybe Iven’s guilt was spot on. Still, it sounded as though his kid was more responsible than most. “He seems like a good kid.”

“He is. No thanks to me and his mother.”

“Does her being gone make it easier for you to get to know him?”

“It should, shouldn’t it? But Riley is grieving. And he’s never needed me to save him.”

“He’s needed you, Iven. He just hasn’t let you in. There’s a difference.”

“I did offer to send him to college.” Iven shrugged. “Griffin didn’t want to go. But I’m hoping Riley does.”

Cass smiled. “Griffin can’t sit still long enough to learn in a classroom setting.”

Iven smiled, too, as if he were proud of his oldest son. “That boy is all about everything mechanical.”

“He’s a fucking genius with all that shit.” Cass had asked Griffin for help on more than one occasion.

“Just like his mother.” Iven and Zinnie’s relationship might have gone south after only a few years, but they had a great friendship. Iven respected the hell out of Griffin’s mom.

“Zinnie’s great.” She owned Fortune Falls Inn which was just off Main Street. Griffin maintained everything for her.

“I got lucky. Not so much with Vivianne.”

“Do you think Riley will take you up on the offer?”

“I hope so. He’s all alone down there. He needs his family.” Sounded more like Iven needed to be a dad to his kid. It was his way of making amends, but was the kid resisting help? Was he just so used to being on his own that he didn’t know how to ask for help? If the latter was the case, then Iven was in for heartbreak. Iven was the sheriff of Fortune Falls. The whole damn town needed him. He excelled at being needed.

They pulled up to the address. The house was out of town, surrounded by fields of what used to be corn, but the farmers had harvested the corn months ago. They’d tilled the ground, preparing for winter. The house was a white farmhouse that sat on top of a hill. It was a pretty setting.

As soon as Cass exited the SUV, he smelled three wolves and a hell of a lot of blood.

Cass put his hand over his gun, ready to pull it free from the holster if necessary. "Someone's injured."

A wolf came around the corner. It limped and then shifted into a man when he saw them. The man was slight and thin to the point of emaciation. He was bleeding from his cheek and clutched his side as if something hurt. He had blonde hair that seemed as if it hadn't been washed in days. Maybe even longer. His feet must be frozen. He'd die of hypothermia within a few minutes if he didn't either shift back into his wolf or put clothes on.

He stopped walking right before his eyes rolled into the back of his head. Cass caught him before he fell.

Iven pulled his gun, holding it as he approached the house.

"There's one more wolf shifter on the property. This one isn't pack, but the other one is." The third wolf was also pack, but his scent was weaker, as if he'd only come and gone once or twice and hadn't returned. All other scents were days older, if not longer. Cass couldn't glean any more information.

Cass called in the scene, requesting an ambulance and backup, after he carried the man to their SUV. The cab was still warm, and they had blankets in the back.

Cass laid him on the seat and grabbed three blankets. Tucking them around him.

Iven came out of the house, shaking his head. Cass had worked for Iven long enough to know his expression meant they had a dead body. "It's a crime scene."

Cass nodded. "This one's alive, but in a bad way."



“The boy in the house is a wolf shifter. He’s younger than this one. There are...rooms in the basement. It looks like jail cells down there.” Iven shook his head.

“Got anything on the third wolf?”

“His scent isn’t as strong. He might have left the area hours ago.”

“He might be our perp.”

“Probably. And he’s pack.”

“Do you recognize who he is?”

Cass shook his head. It was hard to distinguish one person from the next when they weren’t close by. “Scent trail is too old.”

“So much for our domestic violence call.” It sometimes happened when the caller gave them the wrong information. They’d learned to expect anything.

Sirens wailed, growing closer. An ambulance followed two police cars. As soon as the paramedics arrived and took over the victim's care, Cass followed Iven into the house.

As they went through the crime scene, Iven created a spell, wiping away their presence. The dead boy had succumbed to a series of beatings, by the look of him. He lay on his back with one of his legs twisted under him in the middle of the living room floor. A coffee table had been broken, showing there was a struggle. Magazines and a mug were strewn about. The dead guy’s eyes were open and lifeless. “He hasn’t been dead very long.”

Iven made a sound of agreement. “I think our victims escaped.”

Cass made his way to the open door of the basement.

“No one reported a pack member missing.” Cass would have been the first person to know about it. They’d have a report at the station if that was the case.

Cass took the stairs down. There was blood on the handrail and wall. “The blood belongs to our two victims. Not the perp. If he is our perp.”

“Can you tell anything more about him?”

“He smells like grilled meat and greasy food. Like he’s eaten in a restaurant before coming and going.”

“The diner.” It was worth checking out.

“Yeah. Maybe. We’ll check with Darlene and find out if she noticed any pack acting strange lately.”

Cass shook his head. “I can already tell you the answer to that. Every pack member is acting strange, including me.”

“Besides the new alpha taking the reins. I know that leaves a bunch of wolf shifters on edge. It would us warlocks too, if we weren’t such solo creatures.”

“So solo you’ve never told your youngest son what he really is.” Cass had some harsh judgements about that, not that he’d ever voiced them beyond the little he’d just said. Iven beat himself up enough. He didn’t need Cass’s help with making him feel even more guilty.

“Can we focus on the crime scene?”

“It’s more than just the alpha being new. It’s the policies he’s trying to implement.”

“Like what?”

“Like taking us back to the 19 fucking 50s. Like making sure everyone of mating age mates. And paying a higher tithe to the pack. People want to keep their freedom and their money.”

“I had no idea.”

Cass shrugged. “It’s pack business, mostly. Not worth mentioning.”

“Except it might have something to do with our dead body and victim.”

“It might.” Cass liked to keep pack business separate from his job as a deputy for the Fortune Falls sheriff’s department. But it seemed their case was related to pack business. “Let’s hope the third wolf escaped.”

Iven raised his eyebrows. “Do you honestly think that’s the case?”

“No. I think our guy is a Fortune Falls pack member.” But he didn’t have evidence to support it. He hoped he found something to prove him wrong. The pack had enough problems without having a murderer amongst them.

### Chapter Four

Riley folded each item of clothing carefully and packed it into a box. He intended to donate his mother's clothing to the local homeless shelter. She would have wanted someone in need to get some use out of her stuff. Riley hoped a recovering addict would receive it all. Knowing someone who was on their way to recovery, doing the thing his mother hadn't been able to do, made Riley content even amid packing up his mother's life.

He wished he had someone to help him, but he didn't have family in the city. Vivianne's family had died long before Riley was born. Riley had work acquaintances, but he didn't know anyone well enough to ask them for anything, especially not to help him grieve.

He'd been too busy for too long to have friends beyond his brother, who lived a day's drive away in Fortune Falls. Phone calls and video chats had made them closer, but the truth was he hadn't actually seen Griffin in a long time. He didn't remember the last time.

Riley didn't have to be alone, though. With that thought firmly planted in his mind, he dialed his brother's number.

"Hey, little bro. How are you doing today?" Griffin must have been at work because Riley could hear metal clinking against concrete.

"I haven't gone back to work yet." He couldn't seem to get back into his old routine. It didn't feel right. He just knew the second he walked into the store and put on that

smock he would feel empty inside. After a while of doing the same old thing, the emptiness would swallow him whole. He'd get stuck in a life he hated surrounded by his mother's shot glasses.

"Do you even have a job anymore? It's been what...three weeks?" Closer to four, but who was counting besides his boss, who had stopped calling two weeks ago.

"My landlord is going to kick me out if I don't pay the rent." He hadn't paid his light bill, either. He figured he had a couple more weeks before they shut off his electricity.

"Hold on." The line went silent. Griffin was probably dialing their dad. It wasn't the first time they had one of those three-way conference calls.

Griffin's end of the conversation came back to life again.

"What's going on, Griff?" Dad had as deep a voice as Griffin. The sound of it was just a little harsher. He always sounded as if he couldn't shut off the part of himself that made him a good sheriff.

"Riley's on the line with us."

"Hey, son. How are you doing?" Was it Riley or did his dad's voice soften? There was definitely concern in the tone.

"I'm fine. Packing up some of Mom's clothes. The shelter comes to pick up donations for free."

"He needs help paying the bills." One thing about having an older brother-even one he wasn't geographically close to-was he still acted like a brother and told all of Riley's business to the one person Riley didn't want to know.

Riley was just about ready to hang up when his dad said, “I’m here for you, Riley.”

“I am too, little bro.”

Something about the words, spoken with such heartfelt honesty and openness made the floodgates open, and Riley spilled his guts. “I don’t want to be here anymore. Not without mom. I-I don’t want to be alone.”

“Griffin, can you take a few days off?”

“Yep.”

“I can, too.”

“No. I...No, don’t do that.” He didn’t want them to be in the house. He didn’t want his emptiness to suck them in with him. “I’ll finish packing up the house. At least the stuff I want to donate, and I’ll throw out everything else.”

“And then what, Riley? We’re your family. We can help you.”

“I know.” He wanted to be a family with them. Nothing was holding them back now. “I’ll call the shelter and see if they can help pack stuff up. And then I’ll load my car and come to Fortune Falls.”

As soon as he said the words, it was as if his soul felt right about it, too.

“I’ll hire a local moving service for you, Riley.” His dad offered.

“But I don’t have a lot of stuff. Just clothes and maybe some smaller things, like pictures I want to keep. And some of mom’s important stuff.” Like the locket her mother gave her. And the picture album from her childhood.

“I used to know a guy. He owns a moving company. I’ll call him. He owes me for ditching me at prom. The fucking coward.” Griffin had made up his mind. Riley would get help no matter how much he protested, whether from Riley or Dad. The apple didn’t fall too far from the tree.

“Okay.” Riley switched gears. He grabbed a box and put his mother’s jewelry box along with the photo albums from her closet inside before going into his own room and putting clothing on top of it. “And dad?”

“Yeah, son.”

“I’ll take you up on the offer for college.”

“We’ll work out getting you signed up when you come home. Don’t forget to pack your laptop.”

“I don’t have one of those.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a computer, Dad.”

“No worries. I’ll get you one.”

“You also might want to clean out his bedroom, Dad,” Griffin added.

“I already started. I was hopeful after our last conversation.” Dad said that last part to Riley. It warmed his heart.

“Thank you.”

“I’ve always wanted you here, Riley.”

“Mom was—”

“I know. She was sick. But that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve always had room for you. I’ve dreamed of the day when you’d come home.”

Home. Dad had called it Riley’s home twice in the same conversation.

Riley wasn’t sure if Fortune Falls felt like home. All he knew was the house he’d shared with his mother no longer did. Maybe it never had. Maybe it had always felt like Vivianne’s deathbed.

“I can’t wait to see you guys.”

“We can’t wait either.” Dad and Griffin said at the same time.

“Give me a couple of days.” He had to tie up loose ends. Paying his landlord for last month’s rent was in order. He had enough in his bank account to pay off his bills and gas money, but not much else. He didn’t need much to get to Fortune Falls.



### Chapter Five

It turned out Riley didn't have enough money for gas. He knew he'd run out when he'd only been able to put twenty dollars in his tank the last time he refueled. It had gotten him almost all the way to Fortune Falls. According to the GPS on his phone, he was ten minutes from his dad's house, which meant he was just outside town. The road had to be the darkest and spookiest on the planet. It didn't help that it was after midnight.

His car sputtered to a stop as he gently guided it to the side. When the engine shut off, silence took over. The only things surrounding him were the skeletal trees and snow-covered leaves. The forest seemed to take over everything, which would have been a nice change from the city where he'd grown up, if it were during the day.

He didn't know how he was so used to the noises of the city, cars, and buses, and people always moving around, even at night. And the lights made it so it was never really dark. Riley panicked, letting fear grip him. It didn't take long for him to get over it, though. He checked the door locks before calling his brother.

Griffin kept daytime hours, so it didn't surprise him when it went to voicemail.

His hands shook when the cold ate up the heat. Riley couldn't see his breath yet, but it wouldn't take long.

He hesitated to call his dad next. He'd have to explain why he was stranded. It wasn't from neglecting his tank but the lack of funds, which would be way worse of an explanation because Dad offered to send him money more than once and he'd said he

was fine.

Instead of calling Dad's cell, he looked up the number for the station and called it. He decided not to say anything about being the sheriff's kid. He'd just tell them his name and let them figure it out on their own. They might be less likely to alert his dad if he didn't help them connect the dots.

The best-case scenario would be the deputy helping him by putting just enough gas in his car to get him to his dad's house and no one else had to know about it.

He did not want his dad's employees to lie for him, but it would be great if they did.

The call was quick. Riley could tell the man who answered was used to answering calls from people he knew. He answered the phone as if he were prepared to take Riley's order. "What can I do for you, hon?"

"I ran out of gas. I'm on..." He put the man on speaker to check what the road name was on the GPS map. "Hensley Road."

"Are you a local or a college student?"

"I'm about to be both."

"All right. Well, that's pack lands out there. Just so you know. If you ain't pack, I wouldn't get out of the car."

Well, that just made Riley pee himself a little. "Pack?"

"Just wait for Cass to get there before exiting the vehicle."

"No problem." Like he would. Dark, scary forests weren't his thing. Add in all the

pack stuff the dispatcher mentioned and leaving the car wasn't a problem.

They ended the call.

And what the hell were pack lands, anyway? Were there wolves in Fortune Falls? A pack of them must live in the forests around Fortune Falls. But Riley wasn't aware wolves were in Fortune Falls. He always assumed wolves were more of a western United States thing and not a mid-western animal, but maybe the government had reintroduced them to the area or something.

It would be totally neat to see one, as long as it didn't get close to his car. He tried to see past the tree trunks and brush, deep into the forest, but couldn't spot anything besides trees, snow, and dead leaves.

He looked up what wolf species were in Fortune Falls.

Huh. Riley found a site that said there weren't wolves in the area and then a couple of known sightings suggested signs of them. A hunter killed one by accident, thinking it was a coyote, but that was in a county north of Fortune Falls. They could travel for miles, so it was possible.

But he didn't think getting out of the car when the dispatcher told him specifically to stay inside would be a good way to do that. It was stupid to face a fear when the potential for that fear was very real.

So, he stayed put and decided he'd conquer another fear, like public speaking or singing in front of a crowd. Maybe Fortune Falls had a karaoke bar.

But facing down a pack of wolves. No, thank you.

Riley settled in to wait. After five minutes, he was freezing. He grabbed a blanket

from the stack he'd put in the back seat and wrapped it around himself.

The blanket did the trick to ward off the cold, but it didn't stop his imagination from taking over. The more his mind conjured images of snarling wolves with red eyes and bigger-than-normal teeth, the more he felt as if his heart would beat out of his chest.

He kept picturing wolves surrounding his car and him freezing to death before someone could save him.

All he wanted was to start a new life in Fortune Falls. One where he'd be a college student for the first time. He'd get to know his dad and connect with Griffin face-to-face instead of phone calls and video chats. They could finally have dinners as a family. They'd be able to do things together, like go fishing, not that he ever had before in his life. And maybe his brother would take him hiking. There were several trails close by. He'd have a give-and-take with his dad and brother in a way he never had with his mom.

He didn't seem to be starting on a good note. He should have taken the money his dad offered him. It would have changed the vibe of his fresh start. But he let pride get in the way. And maybe he didn't know how to depend on another person, not even his dad. It was something he had to learn. He needed a book. *How to Rely on Your Dad*. He needed to let go of the notion that he only had himself, and it was all on him. Survival mode. That's what he needed to get rid of. He needed to start living.

But that was easier said than done.

### Chapter Six

Cass printed out the information he'd found about who owned the farmhouse. He'd never heard the name before. Alice Newman sounded like an alias. Or at least that's what his instinct was telling him. He'd find out either way soon enough.

He was just about to enter the name into the national database when Danny came around the corner. "Got a call. Some kid ran out of gas. On Hensley."

Cass raised his eyebrows. "Not a local."

Danny winced. "He'd said he was about to be. I thought that meant he knew about shifters, so I mentioned he was on pack land out there where he's at. But now I'm questioning that theory."

Cass swore and stood, grabbing his keys off the desk. "You told him not to get out of the car."

"Yep. The pack alpha would have a field day with some stranger on pack lands." Danny was pack and a good guy. His only issue was he assumed too much. He had a lot to learn if he wanted Iven to put him out in the field.

Cass nodded and then headed out. It took ten minutes to fill a container with gas and another ten to get to the guy, and by then, the night air had taken on a bitterness that promised temperatures in single digits.

He parked on the road and shut off his lights. There wasn't any point in going to the

side. No one would be out here at this time of night. He wasn't even sure why the kid had come this way. The highway would have been a better option.

Cass let his lights shine onto the car so he could see the occupant inside. The kid had dark blonde hair and big brown eyes. He would have had a fresh-faced innocence about him if not for the lifetime of living in his gaze. But he appeared young, as if he were in his twenties.

As soon as Cass saw him, he knew they were mates. They had a twenty-year age gap, or close enough to it for Cass to second guess his reaction.

His eyes shifted into his wolf, and his fangs descended.

The car was an older model with rust on the front fender. Cass saw the tops of boxes in the backseat. He marked the kid as some broke college student on their way to Dinsmore. If Cass remembered correctly from his own college days and if things hadn't changed, then the new semester started in about three weeks. Dinsmore College called the semester spring, even though it started mid-January.

The kid appeared as though he were about ready to shit himself. And Cass knew why, not that he could help his partial shift. His eyes, being canine, were unmistakable. Their headlights did a good job of illuminating Cass and his surroundings. Cass hadn't forgotten what Danny said about the kid not knowing about the existence of shifters.

Cass didn't get any closer than a few feet away. "I have a container of gas in my trunk."

"Holy shit!" That was all the kid said, but he didn't press the lock on the door on repeat. That was a positive sign, right?

“I won’t hurt you.” Cass made sure he kept his voice as calm as he could. It seemed to have no effect on the kid, though.

“What-what the fuck? Holy shit.”

“I’m going to approach.” Cass took a step closer, going slow.

Then the kid started hyperventilating, Cass thought the guy would pass out if he didn’t get himself under control. Cass also noticed how the kid’s breath came out in icy puffs. His cheeks were red from the cold and his lips were purple.

Cass cursed and hurried to the car. He tried the door handle, but the door was locked.

“I just want to get you warm.” The kid smelled like sulfur. He was a warlock.

How did he not know about shifters?

The kid shook his head. “Go away. I’ll call my dad.”

As soon as he said the word dad, Cass’s stomach twisted in knots. What was the likelihood that this kid was Iven’s son? Cass couldn’t mate with his best friend’s son. Iven would shit a brick and then probably kill Cass. “Are you Riley Palmer?”

Riley’s expression turned into one of confusion. He hesitated, but eventually, he nodded.

“I’m a friend of Iven’s.”

“You also work for him.”

Cass smiled. “That’s right. Will you open the door, please? My car is warm. You can

sit inside while I put gas in your car.”

“I can put gas in my own car.” Sassy. Cass liked that.

He could also give as good as he got. “Apparently not.”

Riley flipped him off. But he unlocked the door. He’d covered himself with a blanket but put it on the passenger’s seat before he got out. As soon as he was free from the car, Cass wanted to wrap him in a hug.

“Stay back!” Riley held up his hand. He was shaking from the cold, but he still stood his ground, not allowing Cass closer. “I don’t know what you are but stay the hell away from me.”

Cass cursed his canine eyes and fangs. Not that he could help it, but he still felt bad for scaring Riley.

His poor mate shook. Whether from fear or the cold, Cass wasn’t sure, but something about it wrenched at his soul.

Cass grabbed the gas can from his trunk.

Riley followed him, although he kept his distance.

“I’m a wolf shifter.”

“I’d say that’s bullshit, but I saw your eyes.”

“You’re on pack land.” Cass opened the trunk and grabbed the can. He left the trunk open because he’d have to put the can back inside after emptying it into Riley’s gas tank.



“That’s what the dispatcher said. I thought he meant wolves. Like the animal version. Or are you the animal version too?”

“Sort of. I won’t hurt you.” Cass carried the can to Riley’s car.

“I can do it myself.”

“Your hands look frozen.” Purple and red blotches covered them.

Riley sighed. “Yeah.” He followed Cass and watched him as he poured gas into his tank. “I know you’re not going to hurt me. No way would my dad hire you if you were a danger to people.”

“Why’d you run out of gas?”

“Why are your eyes all scary?”

Cass met his gaze. “That’s complicated. And I asked you first.”

“I ran out of money.” Riley gestured to Cass’s face. “Do you always look like that? Your eyes, I mean.”

“Not always.” Cass liked Riley’s curiosity. He seemed as if Cass had put him at ease, or he was starting to. “So, you’re too proud to ask Iven or Griff for help. Is that it?”

Riley flipped him off again by way of an answer. “How do humans not know about you? If you have a pack, that means there are other people like you, right?”

“Fortune Falls is home to one of the biggest packs in the area.”

“Now tell me the complicated reason why your eyes are like that. Do you have

normal teeth too? Or are your teeth always like that?”

“Okay, Mr. Million Questions. I’ll answer them all another time. When you’re not freezing to death and you’re ready to hear my answers.” Cass took off his gloves and handed them to Riley. “Put those on.”

“Thanks.” They were too big for Riley’s hands, but he moaned a little at the warmth. “I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t ready to hear it.”

That moan went straight to Cass’s cock. It was at that moment he knew he had to figure something out because he was going to mate with Iven’s kid, whether or not Iven liked it. It just wouldn’t happen right away.

Riley might have thought he was ready to hear Cass’s answer, but he wasn’t. Instead of furthering the conversation, Cass changed the subject. “How old are you?”

“Why is that relevant to you helping me with my situation?” They definitely wouldn’t bond right away. Not when Riley had no frame of reference for what it meant.

“It isn’t.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty-two.”

“I heard your back hurts when you get older. Is that true?” Riley smirked.

Cass chuckled. “Little shit.”

“I’m twenty-four.” It was the first time Riley let his guard down. It made him seem more innocent, if that was possible. And more like the kid Iven described. Cass could

practically see the boulder of stress on Riley's back. Or pieces of it. Maybe some of it flaked off after his mother died, but he didn't know how to let go of all of it yet.

It made Cass want to wrap Riley in a hug and not let go until the rest of the rock fell away.

After Cass finished with the gas container, he took it to the trunk. Riley followed him. "Would you like to warm up in my vehicle for a minute before you go back into your cold one?"

Riley nodded. "Thank you."

Cass shut the trunk, and they got into the car.

They sat in silence for a long time.

The radio buzzed, but Danny didn't dispatch him. It was a quiet night.

"I'm not keeping you from anything by sitting here?" Riley pulled off Cass's gloves, laying them on the seat before putting his hands up to the vents. The heater worked overtime. He opened his palm and sucked in a breath. The way he had it turned, Cass couldn't see what had startled him, but he saw the glow coming off it. Cass had been around warlocks long enough to know what happened when they found their mate. Riley might not understand what was happening since Iven neglected to tell Riley about being a warlock. As much as that pissed Cass off, it would be better coming from Iven.

Riley tucked his right hand underneath him and held the left closer to the vent. Since Riley was ignoring it, Cass would too.

"Nothing important." Only a murder case, but even that wasn't as important taking

care of his mate.

“Are you going to tell my dad I ran out of gas?” When Riley met his gaze, his expression was pleading.

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

Riley sighed in relief. “Thanks.”

“Why didn’t you ask Iven for gas money? He would have given it to you.”

Riley shrugged. “I don’t know. Pride, I guess. I’m just used to doing everything myself.”

Cass couldn’t help the scowl. As soon as he realized what he was doing with his face, he smoothed it out. The last thing he wanted was to scare Riley. With his eyes still canine and his fangs still dropped, he had to keep his expressions neutral. Overall, Riley didn’t seem scared or even surprised by the existence of wolf shifters.

“I’m surprised Iven let you. Or Griffin. Hell, I’m surprised Zinnie wasn’t mothering you all this time.”

Riley smiled. Just speaking Zinnie’s name did that to people. Even Iven, who’d married and divorced her, smiled when he talked about her. “She did when I came for a visit. Dad and Griffin tried, before and after my mom died.”

“How did she die?” Nice conversation upon first meeting, but Cass seemed to bring out the deep conversations in people. He wasn’t sure why, other than he didn’t like small talk much. He’d never been good at it.

“Collapsed on the kitchen floor. Her heart just gave out.” Riley shook his head. “I

don't want to talk about it, if that's okay. This is my chance to start fresh. I don't want to taint it. You know what I mean."

Cass smiled. "Starting fresh, huh? You've come to the right place for that."

"Dad's been asking me to live with him my entire life. I figured this is our chance to get to know each other as father and son, since we never really did." For the first time since meeting, Riley seemed genuinely happy. The smile reached his eyes.

Cass knew then that he needed to take a step back and let Riley have his time with his father. He couldn't get in the way. Announcing they were mates would step right in the middle of them.

### Chapter Seven

Even the coffee was better in Fortune Falls. Or maybe it was just at his dad's house where the coffee was the best thing he'd ever put in his mouth. It was way better than the cheap stuff he bought and brewed in his drip coffeemaker.

Dad had one of those machines that made the coffee foamy on top, and he doubled down on it with cold foam coffee creamer. It tasted like one of those fancy coffees he got from the cafe down the road from his work. He'd only ever been able to buy them on his birthday because they were more expensive than he could afford.

Riley shut his eyes as he took a sip.

Dad chuckled. "It's that good, huh?"

"Better. My moans don't express the love I feel adequately enough." Riley had been with his dad for a solid day, and it was the best time they'd ever had together.

He was in his uniform, minus the button-down shirt that hung off a kitchen chair across the room. He didn't want grease to splash onto it, so he kept it off. Bacon could splatter sometimes.

His dad cooked a full breakfast every morning, which was something his mother never did. Riley didn't remember the last time someone cooked for him. Probably the last time he'd come for a visit. He'd been a teenager.

His dad was taller than Riley and broader through the shoulders. Riley was a little

leaner, too. But those were the only differences between them. Riley had his hair and eye color. They had the same facial structure, too. But what really sealed the deal was the way they had the same mannerisms. They also reached for things at the same time.

It was weird watching his dad and seeing himself in the simplest of behaviors, especially considering they hadn't spent much time together. Most of their relationship had happened over the phone.

"I wish you didn't have to work."

"Me too. If I didn't have a case, I would take time off."

"I wouldn't want you to do that. We'll can have lunch or something. Yeah?"

Dad smiled. "Sounds good."

Riley took a sip of his coffee. "Is your case a hard one?"

"Being sheriff is hard all by itself. But the case is a difficult one. Thank the gods for Cass. He's a better cop than me. He's got a nose for it." Did his dad mean that literally? Did Cass have a canine, doggy nose that could pick up scents better than a human? Surely, Dad knew about Cass turning into a wolf.

At the mention of Cass, Riley's hand started glowing. He wrapped it around his mug so his dad wouldn't see. But he glanced in Riley's direction as if he saw how the soft light bounced off the ceramic mug.

Dad didn't say anything or ask questions. That he didn't probably meant he knew a lot more than Riley about why his body did all the weird things it did, like his palm glowing with what appeared to be a tattoo, even though he'd never had a tattoo in his

entire life.

But if Riley asked him questions, what would he say about the hand-glowing thing? Or about how Riley thought he had the hots for his dad's wolf shifter deputy, a man a lot older than him?

He still couldn't wrap his head around it.

"We're investigating a murder case. And kidnapping. First one in years for Fortune Falls. We're usually a quiet town, except for breaking up a few college parties."

"And helping the long-lost son of the sheriff put gas in his car because he might have run out in the middle of nowhere." Riley winced and gave his dad his best innocent smile.

Dad raised his eyebrows. "It happened because you didn't have enough money."

It wasn't a question, but Riley answered it like one. "Yes."

"I'll give you anything you need, Riley. But you have to let me."

Riley could feel the tension rise in his body.

"I'm here, aren't I? Living with you. But I'm not, nor have I ever been, helpless." He stopped before he got on a tangent about having to do everything himself, including caring for his mother. He didn't want to ruin the good thing they had by sharing his feelings. Instead, he said, "I need to get a job soon."

"You've been here a little over a day. Take a breath before you get back to life. And maybe focus on school."



“I’ve been working since I was fourteen. I maintained a perfect grade point average throughout high school. Not that you’d know that.” No one came to his graduation, including his mother. Dad and Griffin didn’t know when it was because Riley couldn’t afford invitations, and he hadn’t had the time to call them.

“You’re right. I wouldn’t know. And why is that?”

“Well, I’m very sorry, but I worked two jobs back then. I didn’t have time for phone calls.” Riley huffed.

Dad sighed and shook his head. Griffin saved him from having to respond when he entered the house through the back door.

“Great, I’m on time for breakfast.” Griffin glanced between Riley and Dad. “What the hell happened?”

Riley said, “Nothing.”

“Riley was just about ready to tell me what a shitty parent I’ve been. As if I didn’t know already.” Dad said it as though they’d been discussing the weather.

Griffin lifted his eyebrows. “Do you have something to get off your chest, little brother?”

“No.” And he probably shouldn’t blame his father for how his mother was, and that’s exactly what he’d been about to do. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. And I do really appreciate you letting me stay.”

“If it’s how you feel...”

“It isn’t. It’s about mom. Mostly. You’re just here, and she’s not.” And something

about admitting it brought tears to his eyes.

He put his mug on the counter and cleared as much emotion from his throat as possible before starting out of the room. "Excuse me."

Dad grabbed his arm and pulled Riley into a hug. He didn't say a word but just let Riley feel his emotions. The tears didn't last long.

He'd been all cried out weeks ago. He wanted to move on, but sometimes, the feelings would pick up again as though the universe needed to remind him of his grief.

"I wasn't a great parent to you. I'll admit that."

"I didn't start my day wanting to bring up the past."

"I know." Dad pulled away but held Riley by the shoulders. "I intend to be the best parent I can be, but you must do one thing for me."

"Which is?"

"Let me."

"That's going to be difficult." He'd had no one for so long. He wasn't sure what relying on his father entailed. Would he have to ask for every little thing, including spending money? Did he need to be in at a certain time of night? "I'm not a child anymore."

"I know you're an adult, Riley. I'm talking more about letting the past go."

"I'll try." But the past hadn't been that far away on the timeline of his life. He wasn't

sure he knew how to let it go.

Griffin patted Riley on the back. “How about you come with me to work today? That way you don’t have to be alone. And I can introduce you to Miss Ruth. Plus, my mom has been asking daily if you’re ready for her.”

“I’m always ready for Zinnie’s love.” Riley couldn’t help but smile.

“She was worried, what with you losing your mom.” Griffin directed that comment to his dad more than Riley. It was as if he were reminding Dad to take it easy on Riley.

Riley rolled his eyes. He didn’t need anyone tiptoeing around him, but he didn’t say so. He didn’t want the argument to continue.

“Zinnie isn’t anything like my mother.” For one thing, she wasn’t an alcoholic who was so far into the bottle that she neglected everything else in her life, including her son. Riley blew out a big sigh. “I think I might be in the anger stage.”

“Anger stage?” His dad asked.

“The stages of grief.” Riley picked up his cup again. “I’m mad at her. And I think I want to take it out on you, Dad. I’m sorry for that.”

“If that’s what you need, I’m here for it.” But it wasn’t what Dad deserved.

Riley shook his head. “I’ll deal with it.”

Griff shook his head as if in exasperation. “Just feel your feelings.”

Dad began plating food. He handed Riley and Griffin each a plate before pulling one of the bar stools around and sitting down to his own plate.

They ate eggs over medium, potatoes, bacon, and toast. It wasn't until Riley was a couple of bites in before he spoke again. "Did you know there are wolves in Fortune Falls? As in werewolf shifters."

Griffin choked on the bite he'd just taken.

Riley patted him on the back.

Dad was the one who answered. "Most everyone who's a permanent resident, minus a lot of the college students, know about the wolf shifter pack. Why do you ask?"

"Just something the dispatcher said last night. Cass filled me in when he came to my rescue." When Griffin opened his mouth to ask, Riley said, "Ran out of gas. Called the sheriff's department for help. Cass came."

Riley kept his right hand under the table for a moment. It seemed he couldn't even speak Cass's name without his hand glowing. What the hell was wrong with him?

Dad frowned. "It's not like Cass to clarify. It's against pack law to tell an outsider about shifters. Not just wolves. Or any paranormal, for that matter."

Riley sucked in a breath. "Other paranormals? What does that mean? Like there's more than just people who turn into wolves?"

Griffin raised his eyebrows at his father. "There are a variety of shifters and vampires."

"Witches...and warlocks." His dad never took his gaze off Riley.

Riley closed his hand. "Warlocks."

He wasn't sure why he latched on to that word. Something clicked into place inside his brain. It felt...familiar. Right.

Dad chanted under his breath, and the dishes on the stove went into the sink.

Riley sucked in a breath.

Griffin snapped his fingers, and a small flame sat on the tip, as though it were a candle.

Riley took two full minutes to lose his mind. A million questions went through his head. The one he wanted to ask about was the glowing tattoo on his hand, but instinct told him to keep it to himself.

He wasn't sure why, other than it had something to do with Cass. He thought it might be some indicator that he had a crush on Cass. He didn't want to have to explain his feelings to his dad. Cass had said Dad was his best friend. And he was a lot older than Riley. It would not be very comfortable to admit.

What if Dad or Griffin told Cass about the crush? He would see Riley as just a kid. How embarrassing would that scenario be? And why was he thinking about Cass when his dad and Griffin just used magic.

"If you guys can do stuff like that, can I, too?" He should be weirded out, but he'd always known he was to the left of normal. He just didn't know what made him that way.

Riley shook his head. "I should be panicking. Why aren't I?"

"On some level, you knew who you were all along. That could be why learning about wolf shifters didn't come as much of a surprise either."

That made sense, but it was still bizarre to think about other people who weren't human. It was like learning aliens existed and lived in the house next door.

“Why are you only telling me now?” It was one more way his dad neglected Riley. Perhaps it was the biggest one of all. If Riley had been told who he really was, maybe it would have made a difference to their relationship. Plus, the simple fact of the matter was that Griffin hadn't told him either.

Instead of waiting for an answer, Riley shook his head and stood. He brought his half-eaten meal to the counter and grabbed plastic wrap, covering his plate before sliding it into the refrigerator.

“Will you sit and let me explain, please?”

Riley had to collect his thoughts. He'd been running on nothing but emotions for the past few weeks. He needed to separate a few things in his mind before he started asking the hard questions.

“No. I won't. What I am going to do is get dressed.” Riley met Griffin's gaze. “I assume we'll be outside. At least for part of the day.”

Griffin nodded.

As Riley was heading down the hall, he heard Griffin say, “We shouldn't have said anything about him being a warlock. He wasn't ready to hear it.”

“Did you notice his palm? He met his fated mate. He needs to know what that means.”

“How? He's been here one day.”

“Maybe he met someone during the road trip.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

Riley sucked in a breath. Fated mate. That had to be like a boyfriend, right? And if that’s what it meant, it had to be Cass. There wasn’t anyone else.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:24 am*

### Chapter Eight

Cass knew something was wrong the second Iven walked into the station. All he wanted to do was talk about the case to avoid whatever was bothering him.

Iven sat behind his desk with Cass across from him. He had the case file in front of him, reading the interview with the victim. "Give me your impressions."

"He's scared enough to hold something back, and I can't blame him. It's not too often that a wolf shifter gets kidnapped, with our reflexes and senses being better than most others. He's a college student. He had our former alpha's permission to be in the area. As long as he remained a student, he didn't have to become a part of the clan. But he's from Timeston."

"Why would that matter?" Iven being a warlock and not part of the pack, made him naive to pack politics some of the time.

"You know about the alpha wanting our numbers to increase to keep up with the Timeston pack."

"Why is that relevant to our case?"

"It isn't all by itself, but the dead kid, Gregory May, and the Timeston wolf were fucking. I'm unsure if they were mates, but they smelled like each other. It's relevant because our vic didn't join the Fortune Falls pack. And the dead wolf was pack."

"What about the third wolf?"



“I don’t have much. The vic isn’t talking, which tells me the third wolf is our perp. It’s a pack member.” Cass couldn’t blame him for not trusting him enough to tell him what happened. If the killer was pack, then the victim had a right to be cautious. The victim didn’t know where Cass’s loyalties lay.

“Do we have a list of pack members?”

“I can get one.” There were hundreds of members. Some Cass only knew in passing. They might live in a small town where everyone knew each other, but sometimes all that meant was that you recognized someone’s face while shopping at the local grocery store.

“We need the vic to talk.” Iven’s wheels were turning. He talked to himself a lot when that happened. “Let’s look into your alpha but do it discreetly. I don’t want to alert him yet.”

“I’m already one step ahead of you.” And so far, Cass had found nothing. It was as if Porter Miller didn’t exist before coming to the Fortune Falls pack. But he wanted to get a full workup on the guy before he gave the information to Iven.

“What else?”

“A dead girl owns the house. And when I say dead, I mean a few decades gone. Alice Newman was nine years old when she died in a drowning accident in 1967.”

“Someone used her identity.” He’d checked in every database they had. She was a ghost.

“Yeah. It sounds like it.” Cass sighed. “So that’s a dead end.”

Iven picked up his phone. “I’ll call the boys and ask if they want lunch at the diner.

We'll get a discrete look at who's eating there. Maybe we'll get lucky and you'll sniff out our guy. At the very least we can question Darlene. She may know something."

Cass's heart rate increased at the thought of seeing Riley again. He tried to focus on work so he wouldn't give himself away. "I'll talk to Gregory's family and friends. Find out why no one reported him missing."

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As soon as Cass walked into the diner, he caught Riley's scent. His eyes shifted and his fangs dropped. He was glad he was behind Iven as they approached the table.

But Griffin noticed. He drew his eyebrows together as if in confusion.

Riley sat in a booth next to Griffin. He bit his lip and glanced at something in his lap. His hand, maybe. But if that was the case, did he know what it meant? Did his body know Cass was his mate?

Griffin glanced at Riley's hand. Of course, Riley noticed and shook his head while he widened his eyes. Griffin met Cass's gaze with that same wide-eyed expression.

Iven sat down first, across from Riley, and then Cass slid into the seat next to Iven.

"Holy shit," Griffin mumbled under his breath.

Cass hoped his expression told Griffin to keep his mouth shut.

Griffin rolled his eyes and put his arm on the back of the seat behind Riley as if in a protective gesture, which made Cass's wolf growl. As far as his wolf was concerned, Riley was his.

The only problem was that Iven noticed Cass's behavior mostly because he was making it obvious. Thankfully, Riley kept his head down and his hands in his lap under the table. Iven was oblivious to what was really happening.

"What's up, man? Do you sense something?"

"Nothing. It's frustrating. But I'll talk to Darlene." Cass walked to the farthest corner of the room. The whole time, he heard Iven dodging Griffin and Riley's questions.

The diner was the old-fashioned type. The soda machine and coffee makers were on a counter against the far wall. They had a bar. Three guys from the road construction crew sat on stools next to each other, drinking coffee and eating burgers.

There was a jukebox in one corner. It played nothing but oldies. The songs spanned several decades. Still, nothing within the past twenty years. The Chordettes sang Lollipop. Between the music and the vinyl seats, the Diner was a blast from the past. The locals liked it more than the college kids because the Diner hadn't changed beyond some minor repairs. The citizens of Fortune Falls didn't like change.

Darlene pressed the button on the soda machine. She was an older lady whose family had owned the Diner for three generations.

Cass tapped the bar, getting her attention. When she turned, he said, "I need to ask you a few questions."

"All right. Give me a second. My servers are in between shifts." She set the glass of full soda on a tray and then filled another empty one with ice. "What's this about?"

"Gregory May. Do you know him?"

"Yeah. He works in the kitchen. Or used to." That explained the grilled meat scent.

Cass thought it had belonged to their murderer. She stared at the glass, watching it fill with her lips pursed as she scowled. “Oh, it’s been about a month since he’s been into the diner. He said he was leaving town and had to quit. Hadn’t heard from him since. Figured he’d just lit on out of here. If you’re asking about him, I’m guessing that isn’t the case.”

Cass shook his head. “He was murdered four days ago.”

Darlene seemed genuinely distraught. She had to stop filling the glass with soda. And she had tears in her eyes. She pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes.

“Do you remember anything that didn’t seem normal? An argument he might have had or someone hanging around him. Anything at all might be helpful. No matter how small.”

She shook her head but then halted. She came closer, leaning over the counter toward him. “He had a new friend. Started coming around about four months ago. Smallish guy. Dark hair. I think his name was Quincy. Carried a backpack, so he might have been from the college. Greg had stars in his eyes for that kid. No doubt about it.”

Cass nodded and patted the counter. “Thanks, Darlene. That’s helpful.” It gave Cass a timeline. “If you think of anything else, let me know.”

Riley met Cass’s gaze as he returned to their booth. Riley smiled. He was a little shy about it, which was cute.

Cass winked.

When he sat, Iven handed him a menu, but Cass already knew what he wanted, so he put it down.

Darlene's afternoon server came over and took their drink orders.

When the server left, Iven filled the silence. "I know you two met already, but I'll make a formal introduction."

Riley's eyes widened. "That's unnecessary. Cass was very nice and let me warm up in his car the other night. We talked for a bit."

Why did it sound dirty when Riley said that?

Iven nodded. "You can count on Cass."

Cass tried to smile, but he couldn't accept the praise. Not when he wanted to do all sorts of naughty things to his best friend's son. All other thoughts went out of his head, including the case he should be working on since that was part of the reason they were in the diner today.

Griff stood. "Gotta piss. Order me a burger and fries, will ya?"

Griff headed toward the back of the room at about the same time the server dropped off their drinks and took their orders.

Iven nudged Cass. "I'll talk to the server and the cook since it's making your wolf aggressive."

Cass let Iven out and then scooted over until he sat across from Riley.

"My dad thinks you're aggressive. What does that mean?"

"My eyes are like this for only two reasons. If I'm upset or if I'm around my mate."

Riley bit his lip. He played with the straw on his soda momentarily and then showed Cass his hand. In the center of his palm appeared to be a tattoo that glowed. The tattoo consisted of tangled vines in the shape of a circle. "I have an overwhelming urge to touch you with this."

Cass took his hand, putting his over it on the table. "Not here."

Riley rolled his eyes. "I know."

Cass smiled. He liked Riley's sassy attitude.

Griffin started back to the table, so Cass took his hand away.

"Can we talk later?" Riley held his glass to cover up his palm.

"Yeah. I'll come over later. Leave your window open."

"Seriously. We're doing that." Riley shook his head and sighed. "Fine. But I've never had to sneak a boyfriend into my room before. I guess there's a first time for everything."

Cass grinned, but it only lasted a moment. "I don't want you running around town at night. It's dangerous."

Riley snorted. "If you think Fortune Falls is dangerous, come to the city."

Cass grabbed Riley's wrist at the same time Griffin sat.

Griffin lifted his eyebrows but didn't comment.

"It is, Riley. You need to be careful." Cass let him go and met Griffin's gaze. "You

both do.”

“What’s going on? And I’m not talking about whatever the fuck the two of you are doing. I won’t tell Dad, by the way. I wouldn’t want him to die of a heart attack. But holy shit.” Griffin let out a deep sigh. “There. That’s the full extent of my freak-out. Now, what’s this about danger in Fortune Falls?”

“We’re investigating a murder—young guys, like you. We haven’t caught the killer yet. So be careful.”

Riley swallowed. “That’s awful. I hope you catch whoever did it.”

“Me too, baby.” The endearment slipped out.

Griffin shook his head. “Yeah, you don’t have to worry about me telling Dad. The two of you will fuck it up in no time at all.”

“Shut up, Griff.” Cass and Riley said it at the same time. Only Riley didn’t shorten Griffin’s name.

Riley chuckled, which made Cass smile.

Griffin was right about one thing. Cass needed to figure out what he wanted. His best friend and his job or Riley. He had to prepare himself for the eventuality of being unable to have both.

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### Chapter Nine

Riley couldn't believe how great Cass was. An hour after lunch, Riley was still thinking about him. His gentleness when he helped Riley hide the mating mark on his hand was the stuff of dreams. Maybe he'd be gentle in other ways, too. He also smiled a lot. And when he smiled, his expression softened, especially his eyes. It didn't seem to matter that they were canine.

When Riley had first seen Cass, he'd had on dark brown pants. They were part of his deputy uniform. But at the diner, he had on worn denim that hugged his ass. The gun holstered on his belt made him look badass. Not that Riley liked guns, but Cass was a hot guy with a badge on his chest. He totally pulled it off.

The main takeaway was the way the jeans made Cass's ass look. Riley's physical reaction to it made him feel like he might be a normal twenty-four-year-old man after all. For the first time in his life, the mental strain didn't restrict his other needs. Maybe he'd finally gotten out of survival mode.

And he very much did need to touch Cass's ass. As well as other parts of him.

Griffin sighed so loud it took Riley out of his thoughts. "Wrench. Riley. Come on."

Riley rolled his eyes and handed over the wrench.

Griffin smirked at him before turning back to the furnace he was fixing. "Why are you so distracted? I can't even venture a guess."



Riley chuckled. "Shut up."

"Not once in my life have I looked at Cass like you do."

Riley pushed Griffin on the shoulder, which made Griffin laugh. "Don't start now."

"He's more like an uncle. He and Dad have been friends for what? Five years now." Griffin waved his hand as if dismissing a part of what he'd said. "Well, when Cass joined the sheriff's department. However long that has been."

"Well, I've never met him before coming to live with Dad." Riley didn't have familial feelings for Cass. His feelings were definitely on the more jumping-his-bones side of things. "He should scare me. I mean, he turns into a wolf. At least his eyes do. That alone is enough. But also, he's way out of my league."

"I don't know much about shifters, but from what I've seen of Cass when he shifts—"

Riley sucked in a breath. "You've seen him shift."

"Yeah. A couple of times."

"What does he look like?"

Griffin chuckled. "If you're going to keep your relationship on the down low, you are definitely going to need to control your face. It says everything you're thinking."

"I don't know why we're keeping it a secret. Cass seems to think we should, so I'm following his lead." Riley took the wrench back from Griffin, putting it back into the toolbox he carried for Griffin. Following Griffin around and handing him tools should bore him, but he'd had a lot of fun. Griffin was easy to talk to and funny, even

when he teased Riley about Cass. “Do you think Dad will freak out?”

Griffin snorted. “Oh yeah. And it will land all over Cass. Cass knows that. That’s why he’s being secretive. There’s also something going on with the local pack. Cass seems stressed, and it isn’t just about the murder east of town. Cass might want to keep you out of all that shit too.”

Riley didn’t want to cause Cass problems. “What’s happening with Cass’s pack?”

“It’s your pack now, too. Or will be when you bond.” Griffin shrugged. “Anyway, all I know is Cass has been stressed since the new alpha took over.”

It sounded as though Cass had a lot going on in his life. Did he even have room for Riley?

“What does bonding mean?”

“All the good stuff. Sex. And then you’ll leave your marks on each other.” Sex with Cass would be next-level hot. Full on three-alarm fire.

“Marks?” But Riley knew it had something to do with his glowing hand.

“You better let Cass explain about mating marks.”

They headed up the stairs from the basement of the inn. When they arrived, Zinnie had been nowhere in sight, but as soon as they made their way upstairs, she stood with her arms open, staring right at him.

Riley smiled upon seeing her. He set the toolbox down and hugged her. She smelled like she’d been sitting in a garden surrounded by flowers, eating cookies and drinking coffee.

Griffin resembled her more than he did their dad. She had soft, dark curls that hung down her back. Her hair had a few gray strands through it, but nothing else suggested time was catching up to her. Griffin had her curls. He'd covered them with a cap advertising the Dinsmore's hockey team, the Lumberjacks.

He had her green eyes. When she held him by his shoulders and studied him, it was as though she were looking directly into his soul. He had an urge to bear his soul as if it were judgment day. Griffin had the same effect on him.

When she smiled and nodded, he took that as a good sign.

"I've been letting you rest, I see. That's good." He'd sat around doing nothing but sleeping, eating, and talking to his dad. It had been great until they had argued. But that was mostly Riley trying to work through his emotions. It turned out that grieving was hard.

"I did nothing but let him feed me. It was great. But lying around like a sloth for that long was too much of a good thing." Riley smirked at Griffin. "So far, my day with Griffin has been less than."

Griffin flipped him off. "Lunch was good."

Riley's face heated thinking about Cass, but he chose not to focus too much on that. He wasn't sure who he could tell about their connection, which neither of them had asked for, but the universe, Fate, or whoever had a hand in making them mates. They couldn't deny it, at least not to each other. "The whole day has been great. Not just lunch."

"But lunch was the best part. Admit it." Griffin chuckled when Riley's face heated even more.

“Stop teasing each other.” Zinnie patted his cheek and smiled. “I missed you.”

Riley missed her mothering instinct. His mother hadn’t been like Zinnie. At least, not that he remembered. Perhaps she had it when he was a baby.

Zinnie had been the only person who had ever felt like his parent. His relationship with his dad had consisted of a back-and-forth argument that never seemed to end. His dad wanted to help, but Riley refused. That was only just starting to change.

Riley hugged her again. “I really missed you, Zinnie. A lot.”

“Well, now you’re here. We don’t have to miss each other anymore.” Zinnie rubbed his back. “I’m here, honey.”

He met Griffin’s gaze over Zinnie’s shoulder. Griffin winked as if to say connecting them was the day's ultimate goal.

“Mom, do you need help around the inn today?” Griffin asked. He really was a good brother. Riley couldn’t have asked for anyone better. Not only that, but Griffin was his best friend since Riley hadn’t spent much time making friends.

They ended the hug, but Zinnie kept an arm around Riley’s shoulders. “I could put Riley to work.”

Riley would take any excuse to spend time with Zinnie. “I’d love that.” He met Griffin’s gaze. “I was only joking about having a bad day. I’m having fun, I promise.”

Griffin waved off the comment. “You need time with Mom. Let her baby you.”

“Dinner with Dad later?” Riley met Zinnie’s gaze. “What about you? Will you

come?”

“I’ll be there. It’s been a while since I’ve given Iven hell.”

“A whole five minutes, mom?”

“More like a week. Far too long.”

Riley chuckled. Griffin shared a similar humor with Zinnie.

Life had been too serious. He hadn’t had time to laugh. He didn’t know how much he needed it until he was with Zinnie and Griffin.

### Chapter Ten

It didn't look right for a Fortune Falls deputy to sneak outside someone's home. And it wasn't just anyone's house, but the sheriff himself. Cass had sunk to a new low.

He also felt like a stalker. He could see Riley through the window, curled up on the couch. He wore blue pajama bottoms and a matching long-sleeved T-shirt. The pants had little cats all over them, and his shirt had a big black cat in the center of his chest. The cat had big green eyes and smiled. The words "cat lady" were above the cat's head like a word cloud.

Iven sat in a recliner. He wore jeans and a sweater, which meant he was ready if a call came in. He'd sleep in those same clothes just so he didn't have to take the time to change. Cass knew because he did the same thing whenever he was on call.

If they didn't solve the murders soon, they'd need an extra deputy. They could probably use one, anyway. Cass made a mental note to talk to Iven about hiring someone.

His immediate problem was getting Riley's attention without alerting Iven.

Cass didn't have to wait long before Riley seemed bored enough with whatever they were watching on television to avert his gaze to the window.

It was dark outside. Cass wondered if Riley saw him through the blackness. But Riley widened his eyes and then bit his lip.

“I’m tired. I think I’ll turn in.”

Cass felt bad for eavesdropping on their conversation.

Iven looked at the clock on the wall and drew his eyebrows together. “So early?”

“I don’t know if you know this, but following Griffin around all day is hard work.”  
Riley stood and hugged Iven.

Iven chuckled. “I thought that was Zinnie.”

“Her too. It must be genetic on her side.” Riley patted Iven’s shoulder.

Iven touched his hand. “I love you, kid. Never doubt it.”

“I don’t. Love was never the problem.”

“Attention was. I know.”

Riley smiled. “We’ll work through it. It’s easier now that I’m here.”

“I’m paying attention now.”

“I love you too, Dad.” Riley glanced at the window and winced, but Iven was still sitting in the chair facing the television, although Cass knew Iven well enough to know he hadn’t been focusing on anything other than Riley for a while.

He was sorry he’d taken their time away from each other. The last thing he wanted to do was make the dynamics between them even more difficult.

Cass had wanted to avoid this exact scenario, but he moved the ball in the direction it

was going. He had to follow through, which meant finding Riley's bedroom window.

He moved around the house, sniffing as he went, searching for where Riley's scent was the strongest.

He found it toward the back of the house in the left corner.

He didn't have to wait long for Riley to appear.

Riley opened the window and stuck his head out. He met Cass's gaze with a smile. "This is ridiculous. You know that, right?"

"I'm aware, yes. Stand back, baby." The endearment kept slipping out. It was as though Riley invoked it.

When Riley moved, Cass lifted himself into the window. By the time he got inside, his arms burned from holding his weight, and he discovered he needed a couple of good workouts every week. He'd been slacking lately.

"I'm definitely not as young as I used to be," Cass panted.

Riley chuckled. "I don't know. You looked kinda sexy, struggling to get into my bedroom."

Cass grinned even as he growled. He kept the growl as playful as he could, mindful of the fact Riley hadn't known about wolf shifters until meeting Cass.

Instead of being scared, Riley laughed harder. He definitely didn't fear much.

Cass stalked toward him. He half expected Riley to back down, but he didn't. Instead, he stood his ground as if anticipating Cass's touch.



Cass was close enough to feel Riley's body heat. He wanted to wrap Riley in a hug, but Cass knew he was cold from being outside for so long. He didn't want to make Riley cold, too.

Riley's laughter died, and he bit his bottom lip as he met Cass's gaze. They were about the same height. Cass was only a couple of inches taller than Riley. He had a lot more muscle mass, though.

"Hi," Cass whispered.

"Hi." Riley didn't lose the humor in his gaze, but his expression had softened a bit. "I feel like I've known you my whole life. Is that weird?"

"Not at all. I feel the same way. I think a part of me knows who you are..." Cass put a hand on Riley's chest. "...right here. That probably sounds like a line, but I'm being sincere."

"It doesn't sound like a line. Well, it kinda does. But I get it." Riley cupped Cass's cheek. His hands warmed his freezing skin. "You were outside for a long time, weren't you?"

"If I admit it, will you please not think of me as a stalker?"

Riley chuckled. "I can't make promises."

Cass wrapped his arms around Riley and pulled him closer. "Then I admit nothing."

"If it makes you feel better, I've been antsy since after dinner waiting for you." Riley rubbed his fingers over Cass's stubble. His gaze was on Cass's mouth. "I have a few questions."

“Ask.”

“Can I kiss you first?”

“That’s a question?”

Riley grinned. “I guess it is. My first one.”

Cass pressed their lips together. As soon as their mouths touched, Cass felt a spark between them. That energy ignited something inside Cass. He should have ended the kiss. He knew they needed to talk. But he deepened it instead.

Riley let Cass have control. If his moan was any indication, he seemed to like giving it to Cass.

Cass held Riley in place by his nape and went in for a taste.

Riley’s hands left Cass’s face to wrap around his waist. His cock was easy to feel through his cotton pajama pants. It was unmistakable and wonderful to feel. As much as Cass wanted more, he didn’t take the kiss that far.

Instead, he got one more taste and then ended it.

Riley whimpered and buried his face in Cass’s neck. His arms tightened around Cass, and his body tensed. The latter thing put Cass on alert, but Riley’s body language suggested something wasn’t quite right.

“I’ve got you, baby.”

“I...Sorry. I don’t know why I’m like this. It’s never happened before.”

As much as Cass didn't want to talk about Riley kissing other people, he needed to ensure Riley was okay. "Let's talk about how you're feeling."

"Clingy." Riley's one-word reply was enough to put Cass at ease.

"That's okay. I'm here for that." Cass tightened his hold as well. He felt right in Cass's arms, in a way no one had before. It was as if he were made to hold Riley whenever he needed comfort.

"I should feel scared, right?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you turn into a wolf. That should be scary, but it's not." Riley sighed and wiggled in his arms, as if getting closer. "I feel safe."

"You'll always be safe with me."

"I forgot what it felt like."

"You haven't felt safe? Not even here with Iven?"

"I wouldn't call it security. It's survival mode. I'm learning how to live. Probably for the first time in my life." Riley lost some of the tension. "I don't know how to be around Dad. He's not like mom, in a good way. But I'm waiting for him to take that first drink. Or do drugs."

"You don't trust him." But Riley did trust Cass, although Cass wasn't sure what he'd done to earn it.

"No, I guess not. I didn't realize that's what was lacking." Riley met his gaze with a

smile. "Thank you."

"For what, baby?"

"For talking me through my issue with Dad. It will help a lot going forward." Riley bit his lip, averting his gaze for a moment before meeting Cass's gaze again. "We have to keep sneaking around, don't we?"

"For now. I don't want to disrupt your relationship with your dad, for one. But my pack is also a problem. My alpha's conservative. He won't accept a mate who isn't a wolf shifter." Cass wanted to shield Riley from all their problems with a nice lie but the truth was better, even if it was less comfortable for Riley.

"Oh." Riley averted his gaze again.

Cass tilted Riley's chin up. "I'll work on the pack issue. You work on building a relationship with your dad. That's how we're going to tackle this. Okay?"

"What about us?"

"You know that little cottage behind Zinnie's Inn?"

Riley nodded. "I think so."

"That's my house." Cass held Riley's hand, palm up, before fishing in his pocket. He placed a key in Riley's hand. "Here's a key if you ever need it. Use it whenever you want."

"Is it okay if I come to see you tomorrow?"

"More than okay." Cass couldn't wait to see Riley for longer than a few stolen

minutes. “I better go before Iven gets wind of me here.”

A door closed somewhere in the house. Probably the bathroom.

It was going to be a long, slow mating.

### Chapter Eleven

Cass let Iven lead. The victim, Quincy Barr, seemed at ease with him in a way he wasn't with Cass. Cass didn't take offense. He probably would have too, if he were in the victim's shoes. And the lack of trust helped confirm Cass's suspicions about their perpetrator. They would start looking for the murderer with the pack.

"I met Gregory in a creative writing class." The victim smiled as he wiped his eyes with a tissue. His other arm was in a sling.

He had a bandage on the right side of his forehead. Clothing covered his other cuts and bruises. His wounds were severe. His healing ability wasn't as fast as it normally would be, probably because he'd had multiple injuries all at once. He'd had surgery to repair the internal damage. That he was sitting up and able to talk was a miracle.

The kid was smart, though. He seemed to have come to some correct conclusion about Cass because he wasn't as strung tight as he had been when they'd first come in.

They sat in the victim's living room. Or rather, the victim's mother's living room. The mother wasn't a pushover. She sat beside her son with her arm around his shoulders, glaring at Cass as if he were a part of the problem.

Cass tried to keep his expression as neutral as possible. He didn't want to set the woman off. He knew a protective mama wolf when he saw one. She might not care that he didn't intend to hurt anyone, especially a man who'd already been through hell and back.

“We’re Fated mates, Gregory and I.” The victim shook his head. “Gregory was...everything to me.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss. We’re doing everything we can to put Gregory’s killer behind bars. But we need your help.”

Quincy met Cass’s gaze. “I’m sorry I didn’t answer your questions the last time you were here.”

Cass smiled, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible. “I understand.”

Quincy nodded. “You’re a Fortune Falls pack member. Just like the wolf who hurt Gregory and me.”

“What can you tell us about him?”

“Gregory called him Leo.”

Cass stiffened. The only Leo he knew was the alpha’s beta. If that was who hurt Quincy and killed Gregory, then he was following the alpha’s orders. But Cass had to be sure. “Did he use a last name?”

“No, but Gregory called him beta.”

“Leo Krieger.” Cass mumbled. His heart sank as his worst fear was realized. Through the rest of the conversation, he thought about what having a murderous alpha meant for his pack.

Iven gave him a subtle nod and continued asking questions. “Can you describe him?”

“He had dark hair. Long-ish. He was tall. Bigger than Gregory even. Wore a leather

coat.”

Iven met Cass’s gaze. Cass nodded, letting Iven know he was sure about who it was.

Iven let Cass lead the question after that. “You’re from the Timeston pack, correct?”

“Yes.” The mother was the one who answered. She shook her head as if thinking something that disgusted her. “Our property borders the county line. We chose Timeston because the alpha, Kinnison Ransome, is strong.”

Ransome was a lot of other things, too. A little crazy, but in a calculated way. He also had a record. Cass had arrested him twice for making hooch on the Fortune Falls side of the county line. It wasn’t the worst law he could have broken, and he might break other ones. If he did, Cass didn’t know about it. Kinnison Ransome had an edge so sharp that people stayed out of his way.

Cass had to wonder if the Fortune Falls pack would get backlash for the murder from the Timeston Pack. Ransome was the type to make an example of them, and he’d do it through violence. Could Alpha Miller handle Ransome? Cass had his doubts.

“Did you plan on joining the Fortune Falls pack after meeting Gregory May?”

Quincy shook his head. “Gregory talked to your alpha about moving to our pack. He wanted his blessing.”

Cass tried not to let his emotion show in his expression but knew he failed. For the first time in his career, he couldn’t hold back.

He could see questions forming in Quincy’s mother’s eyes. Before she could ask, he stood. He didn’t want to talk about pack issues with an outsider. Other than Iven, who had to know the truth about what had happened.



The mom's parting words were, "I hope you catch the bastard who did this to my son and his mate."

Cass hoped they did, too. He also hoped the Fortune Falls pack would survive.

He had one last question for her. "Why didn't you report Quincy missing, ma'am?"

The mother drew her eyebrows together. "I reported it. He and Gregory. They were thick as thieves the last few months, so Gregory was always here."

"Did you report it to Fortune Falls or Timeston, ma'am?"

"Fortune Falls."

"Thank you, ma'am." They headed out.

It wasn't until they were in the car that Iven said, "Tell me what you're thinking."

"Leo Kreiger is pack beta." Iven understood pack dynamics from Cass talking about it from time to time.

"If Krieger is Alpha Miller's right hand man, then the alpha is involved somehow."

"Krieger doesn't do anything without Miller's say so." Cass sighed and shook his head.

"So, Miller put a hit on them and Krieger executed it?"

"Not a hit. I don't think the alpha wanted them dead. I think he thought he was taking Quincy away from the Timeston pack. He wanted to force them to stay with the Fortune Falls Pack."

“When Gregory came to him, saying he was leaving, Miller arranged a kidnapping.” Iven filled in the blanks. They were good at bouncing ideas off each other during a case.

“Yeah. There were rooms in the basement. Maybe the alpha wanted to keep them locked away until they agreed.”

“Do you think he intended to let them go? Quincy didn’t seem like the type of guy who would agree not to say anything.”

“His mother would have gone to the ends of the earth looking for him.” Cass liked how protective Quincy’s mother was. Quincy had a hard road ahead. He’d need his mother’s help to get through it.

“She reminds me of Zinnie. She’s like that with Griff and Riley. She even smacked me upside the head the other day and told me I need to take better care of Riley.” Iven smiled as if it were a good memory. Maybe it was for Iven, but Cass didn’t like getting smacked on the head, not that it had happened in a while. Iven had affection for his ex-wife in a way few did after a divorce. Of course, they’d been kids when she got pregnant with Griffin. Barely out of high school was what Iven had said. Maybe the young age made them more agreeable with each other since the separation. They’d somehow learned how to be friends along the way.

“Riley seems like a good person.” Cass tried to pick his words carefully.

He hadn’t spent that much time with Riley. But it seemed as though he had a lot of things going for him. Riley was young but strong. He was also hurting and needed love.

Cass couldn’t forget that Iven didn’t want to know how sexy his son was. He’d probably punch Cass when he found out about them being mates. And he would find

out. It was only a matter of time. Cass didn't want to lie to him forever. Lying made mating with Riley feel wrong and it wasn't. It was just complicated.

Cass's pack dynamics weren't safe for Riley. Their meeting with Quincy confirmed as much. He wouldn't put Riley at risk, so they would have to keep it secret for a bit longer.

"He's a great kid." Iven sighed and shook his head. "I know it's not all Vivianne's fault. I have an equal share in raising him. The pill's just hard to swallow."

"Because he's here. Finally. That's probably why." Maybe it wasn't too late to do right by Riley. Cass had spent enough time with Riley to know that all he really needed was a lot of love and attention. "You're spending time with him."

"Not enough to make up for his childhood."

"You can't change the past."

"I wish I could."

"Just hug him a lot. That's what he needs most." Cass swallowed down the feeling that maybe he'd said too much. And then he tried to cover up his slip. "That's what my gran would tell you, anyway."

"Like hell, she would. She would smack me upside the head too, and tell me to be a good parent to Riley, like I am to Griffin."

Gran would probably say that. "She'd also tell you to hug him."

"My boys were raised differently. Griffin has had a lot more parenting than Riley." Iven needed to give Riley more credit.

“It’s not like he’s an addict or a criminal. So he’s overly independent and not used to accepting help from people. That’s not the worst thing he could have become.”

“He’s only here for college.”

“Not true. He wants a fresh start. And he wants to get to know you. He wants you to be his dad. And you’re doing that.”

“Deep down, he’s pissed at me. It comes to the surface sometimes, and then he catches himself and puts on that sunny smile. It won’t be long before he lets me have it.” Iven tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

“And you’ll take it because it’s what he needs you to do.” Cass wasn’t a parent, so he didn’t know what parenting was like. A guy in Iven’s position didn’t have anywhere to go but forward. “It’ll bring you closer together in the long run.”

“Did he tell you all about fresh starts and such the night he got into town?”

“Yeah, he did. Although I didn’t realize he was your kid. It didn’t take me long to figure it out, though.” Maybe Cass should steer the conversation away from Riley. It was safer if they didn’t talk about him.

“He’s with Zinnie today. I think she’s going to offer him a job. Maybe you can keep an eye on him when he’s there.” Iven made Riley sound like a young kid.

“He’s an adult.” Cass knew exactly how grownup Riley was. He felt like a man in Cass’s arms.

“I know. I just want him to feel like he has family around him. I want him to know he has us.” Iven was a good father when people got out of his way.

“I’ll look out for him.” Cass would do much more than look out for him. He’d keep him so close that Riley wouldn’t have to guess who he could rely on.

“Thanks.”

Cass pushed the guilt down and changed the subject. “I know where Krieger lives. We should head over there. Take the next right.”

Iven turned. “You don’t want to talk to your alpha yet?”

“He’s got the mayor’s ear. Two of the town commissioners are pack members. He could make it difficult for us since we don’t have enough evidence yet. It’s best to find Leo first. He might turn on the alpha.”

“You don’t think Miller will take responsibility?”

Krieger’s house was a couple of miles down a dirt road, but the drive was bumpy.

“Hell no. He’ll lie his way through. But maybe Leo isn’t as loyal as he wants the alpha to believe.” Cass hoped that was the case because if it weren’t, they’d have a hell of a time proving the alpha was involved with the information they had.

“I’ll work the Alice Newman angle. See if we can connect her to the alpha.” Cass and Iven made a good team.

Cass hoped they would stay that way after Iven learned about him and Riley.

Krieger lived in a camper trailer in the middle of the forest. He didn’t have neighbors for miles. A creek ran behind his house. Even before Cass got out of the car, he knew why Krieger chose the place. It was a perfect location for making moonshine.

They got out of the car.

Cass kept a hand on the hilt of his gun. He noticed Iven doing the same.

There were no cars in the driveway besides their own.

“The place feels empty.” Cass sniffed the air. “Unless he’s upwind, which is possible, he hasn’t been here for a while.”

Iven made his way to the trailer. When he stepped onto the small stairs, they wobbled. He managed to keep his feet under him, but he proceeded with a bit more caution as he knocked on the door. It was a waste of time. Cass would have smelled Krieger if he were inside the house.

Cass looked around the property. Nothing was around except for an abandoned copper still. They still lay on the ground with a dent in it.

As soon as Cass made his way back to Iven, Iven sighed in frustration as they made their way back to the car. Without probable cause they couldn’t enter Krieger’s home, even if it was a camper trailer in the middle of the forest.

“At least we have enough evidence now.” With Quincy Barr’s testimony, they had enough to make an arrest.

The problem wasn’t evidence on Krieger, though. Cass wasn’t sure how they were going to prove the alpha was involved without Krieger’s turning on him.

They needed to find Krieger and fast before the alpha ordered him to kill again.

### Chapter Twelve

Riley didn't mind helping Griffin fix things around the inn, but it wasn't his favorite thing to do. He also didn't comprehend the mechanics of certain things like Griffin did. Griffin seemed to know instinctively how a furnace worked.

He loved spending time with his brother, though.

Griffin sat at Zinnie's kitchen table with a radio in pieces. The radio was older than Riley. According to Zinnie, it had stopped working that morning. Griffin had spent the afternoon fixing it, but so far hadn't been able to figure out the problem.

Riley used Zinnie's kitchen to make blueberry lemon muffins. She had bigger tins and muffin paper liners. She also shared her recipe with Riley and told him to go to town. Since baking was his happy place, it was the best way to spend his day.

Zinnie had five guests, plus she told Riley to make enough for the neighbors, which meant Riley could take a muffin to Cass later. But they'd be ready for breakfast tomorrow morning.

Riley had a batch in the oven already.

"Smells good in here." Griffin smiled as he fiddled with the world's smallest wire. He had a special tool ready. Griffin called it a soldering gun. Riley had never seen one before, but it reminded him of a glue gun.

Griffin used the soldering gun on the tiny wire. Then he blew on a small bit of what

appeared to be liquid metal, but Riley didn't know what the stuff really was. Griffin put the radio back together again, and it came to life.

Giffin fiddled with the dial until he came to a song he liked. Noah Kahan and Post Malone sang Dial Drunk. Griffin seemed to know all the words, so he sang aloud.

Riley would have teased him if he had sucked. Lucky for him, he didn't.

Riley whipped the batter for his next batch of muffins, dancing to the beat at the same time. Riley didn't take long to pick up the chorus, so he sang along, too. He sucked at singing. He knew it. But he didn't care.

Until Cass and his dad came into the kitchen. Well, Riley didn't care about Dad hearing him. It was Cass who made Riley blush.

When their gazes met, Cass's expression held longing.

"I didn't know you could cook," Dad said as he came in for a hug.

Riley met Griffin's gaze over his father's shoulder. He mouthed the words, "What's happening right now?"

Griffin shrugged and shook his head.

His dad wasn't a tactile person. He'd hugged Riley upon first seeing him and told him it was good to see his face, but that was it—beyond a pat on the back or a touch on his shoulder.

When Riley tried to pull away, Dad held on and whispered, "Not yet."

"There's going to be flour transfer from my apron." Riley smiled.



“I don’t care.”

It didn’t take long for Riley to relax. He even shut his eyes and rested his head on Dad’s shoulder.

“I love you, son.”

Riley kept his eyes closed when tears threatened. “I love you too, Dad.”

“What the hell happened?” Griffin asked. Riley wasn’t sure who Griffin asked, but he didn’t know what had gotten into his dad, so he didn’t answer.

Riley opened his eyes and lifted his head off his dad’s shoulder, meeting Cass’s gaze. Cass winked at him and smiled.

Dad finally ended the hug. “Nothing happened. I was told Riley needed a lot of hugs. Especially from me.”

“What about me? I need hugs.” Griffin smirked and opened his arms wide, beckoning Dad closer with his fingers. “Come on, Dad. Let it happen.”

Dad chuckled, but he let Riley go to hug Griffin. It wasn’t as long as the one Dad gave Riley, but it still seemed heartfelt. Dad was smiling when it ended.

And then, of course, Griffin turned his attention onto Riley.

Riley rolled his eyes but stepped into the hug.

“Cass set Dad straight,” Griffin spoke so quietly that Riley barely heard it. There was no way Dad or Cass heard it. But when they stepped away from each other, and Riley met Cass’s gaze, Cass nodded.

Riley cleared his throat and grabbed two paper sacks he'd packed for Cass and Dad. "I intended to bring it to you later, but since you're here."

"Wait a minute. You got one more hug to receive. Don't worry about the partial shift. He gets that way when we're on a case sometimes." Dad took both bags with a smile.

Oh, Riley knew why Cass's eyes had turned canine and his fangs had dropped. It wasn't because of a case. But he couldn't correct his dad's assumption.

"Oh, I don't think Cass wants to hug me." The last thing Riley needed was to chub out in front of his brother and dad. And that was what would happen the second Cass touched him.

It didn't help that Riley had been remembering their kiss all day. He couldn't look at Cass without focusing on his mouth.

Cass pulled Riley into him. His arms were thicker than most. The strength in them was unmistakable, but he held Riley as if he were precious. "Thanks for whatever's in the bag."

"You don't know what it is yet." Riley could live in Cass's arms for the rest of his life. He laid his head on Cass's shoulder and shut his eyes. "Also, thank god for this apron."

Cass chuckled. "I have the same problem. And it doesn't matter what it is. I still appreciate it."

Riley sighed. He didn't want to end the hug but knew he should, so he pulled away. But he met Cass's gaze. "It's a muffin."

"What flavor?"

“Blueberry lemon.”

Cass grinned. “I’ll love it.”

Riley cleared his throat and tried not to focus on how his face heated.

Cass kept a hand on his back as if he needed to touch Riley. The way his dad watched them, with speculation in his gaze, made Riley's instinct to step away from Cass kick in, as if his dad caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. But what he wanted was to lean against Cass.

Dad’s gaze went from Riley to Cass and back again.

Griffin shook his head and rolled his eyes at the same time. When he met Riley’s gaze, he held his hands out as if to say ‘what the hell are you doing’. But Riley didn’t understand Griffin’s reaction unless...they weren’t that obvious, were they?

Shit. What if they were?

Before they could do anything, Zinnie came in, carrying a rifle. “There’s a wolf in the forest. I’m not sure if they’re a shifter or an animal. Either way, they shouldn’t be in town.”

“You’re right. If it’s a shifter, they risk exposure. Especially this close to the inn.” Exposure must mean a shifter shouldn’t be in their wolf form, so close to unsuspecting people. Fortune Falls Inn had a steady number of visitors.

Even though she wasn’t talking to him, Riley started out of the room, untying his apron as he went.

“Oh no. You’re not leaving this room,” Cass said right before an arm wrapped around

his waist and pulled him back.

Riley stiffened. He didn't want to be angry at Cass, but he didn't like being restricted. Riley hadn't ever had someone protect him before. He'd always been the one who had to respond to everything, threat or not. It felt good to have someone else take charge of a situation.

Iven set the paper sacks on the counter. He raised his eyebrows at the way Cass held Riley but said nothing as he headed out. He waved a hand to Zinnie, asking her to follow him. "Tell me where you saw it."

Cass kissed Riley's temple before letting go.

"Lock the door," he said as he left the room.

Griffin did as Cass said, flipping the lock on the door leading outside. And then he sat down again, turning off the radio. "Something is going on. It's all connected to that murder, I bet."

"What is? The wolf Zinnie saw? How could that be connected?"

Griffin shrugged. "No one sees an animal around here. They are always shifters. That wolf is watching Dad and Cass. It probably followed them here."

"How do you know?"

"I don't for sure, but that murder has something to do with the pack." Griffin washed his hands before sitting at the table, tucking into a muffin. "I feel it in my gut."

If the pack was involved, what did that mean for Cass?

### Chapter Thirteen

Cass knew Iven was suspicious because he kept glancing at Cass. He just wasn't sure what he'd done to make him that way and what exactly he suspected. Iven usually waited until he collected his thoughts before he said anything, so Cass had to bide his time.

Zinnie seemed to be a buffer between them. And the moment called for their undivided attention on the wolf sighting.

Cass couldn't help being in protective mode. His mate was far too close to a potential threat. As much as Cass probably should have pushed his wolf back, he let the wolf lead.

Cass growled when he caught the scent of a pack member. He couldn't pinpoint exactly who it was. "It's a pack member."

"He might have followed us here from Krieger's property," Iven whispered.

"Or even from when we talked to the victim." Cass scanned the ground, searching for clues. He didn't see anyone, but he knew Krieger's scent by that point. It was fresh. He followed it to the road where it disappeared.

"I'll call the sheriff in Timeston to elicit their help." As much as Cass didn't want the Timeston pack to know about the shitshow Fortune Falls pack had become, there was no helping it. Quincy had to stay safe.

“He got into a vehicle.” Cass knew Krieger would go to the alpha. He would tell the alpha that the sheriff’s department was onto them.

Cass had to be careful. Their investigation didn’t paint a good picture for the alpha. A scared wolf was a dangerous one. The alpha had been charming, which he used as a manipulative tool, up to that point. It told Cass the alpha was narcissistic, which didn’t mean it made him a murderer. Cass didn’t have proof the alpha was involved.

It didn’t matter what he knew. It mattered what he could prove.

Cass sighed. “Well, we can expect a visit from the alpha.”

“No need for us to go to him, then.” That was one way to look at it.

Zinnie glanced from Cass to Iven. “So, this has something to do with that murder?”

Iven shook his head and sighed. “It doesn’t take long before information travels in this town.”

They hadn’t told anyone about the murders beyond Griffin and Riley. And maybe Griffin said something to his mother, but Cass doubted it. Griffin wasn’t the type to gossip. Maybe Riley had mentioned it, but Cass doubted that, too. He’d grown up in the city where crimes like murder happened a lot. Riley wouldn’t have thought about mentioning it because, to him, it was the norm. Another nameless, faceless person dying was tragic, but not worth whispering about. She likely heard it from someone else.

Most residents had lived their whole lives in Fortune Falls, minus the college kids. Word traveled fast because they didn’t consider each other strangers, so they gossiped about everything. Some of it was true and some not so much. But the truth wasn’t a necessary part of any gossip session. Still, with the murders happening, Cass

figured most of it was correct.

“Are the boys safe out here?” Zinnie turned to Cass because it was a pack member.

Kreiger wasn't targeting people randomly, so as long as he didn't find out about Cass's connection to Riley, there wasn't a reason for Krieger to hurt him. “They aren't random attacks. Griffin and Riley are fine.”

Iven met Cass's gaze. His suspicions were clear, but it appeared he wanted to ask questions. Maybe he wanted a private conversation.

As they were walking back, he saw Riley at the back door, standing on the stoop with his apron still on. Alpha Miller stood next to him.

Cass could see the tension in Riley's shoulders even from a distance. At first, Cass wasn't sure why, but then he saw the alpha lean over and sniff around Riley.

Riley scowled and stepped away from him.

Cass didn't think about his next move. His reaction was instinctive, charging forward. He only thought about getting the alpha as far away from Riley as possible.

Iven had the same thought, which saved Cass from exposing Riley as his mate. “Get away from my boy.”

The alpha smiled.

Iven stepped in front of Riley, standing nose-to-nose with the alpha. He held a small flame in his hand, which he would use as a weapon if needed.

Riley saw it and gasped, his eyes going wide, but he didn't move. He searched for

Cass, his gaze landing on Zinnie next, as if asking them for help. Cass moved at the same time Zinnie did. But Cass let her put an arm around Riley's shoulder and lead him away. As much as he wanted to comfort Riley, he needed to provide backup for Iven if things turned nasty.

"Why the fuck were you sniffing around my kid? He's a warlock. Not part of your pack."

"Considering he smells like my pack member, I have an invested interest, sheriff." The alpha turned to Cass with his eyebrows raised.

It was then Cass knew the alpha expected him to admit to something as if he were a teenager caught partying on a Saturday night. Cass wouldn't explain himself. "Who I choose to spend time with is none of your business. Alpha."

But Iven wasn't backing down. It seemed he would make an enemy of the alpha, which was a bad idea, but it was bound to happen with the evidence they had against Krieger.

"You don't have an interest in my kid. Am I making myself clear?" Iven had a lot of clout, too. As sheriff, he could make Miller's life difficult.

Alpha Miller's expression hardened. It was the first time Cass had ever seen him lose his charming exterior. But it was back in seconds. "I only came to ask about the investigation, sheriff."

Iven took a step back. The flame in his hand disappeared. "When we're ready to question you, we'll let you know."

"Are you close to catching the person who killed my pack member?" Miller wasn't very subtle. He couldn't keep the concern out of his expression. Cass had his doubts



it was concern for the victims and their families. He strongly suspected Miller feared they were close to proving he ordered the killing.

Instead of answering, Iven said, "Go home, Miller."

Cass followed Iven inside.

As soon as they entered the kitchen, Riley hugged Iven. "I went outside to see how it was going, and he was just standing there. And then he kept trying to get closer to me."

Cass tried to keep the growl at bay but failed. "I told you to stay inside."

It wasn't the growl that pissed Riley off but the words themselves. Cass could tell by his icy expression. "I don't have to answer to you."

"He's right, Riley. You should have stayed inside." Iven had kept Riley tucked against his side, but Riley moved away, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I'm not a child anymore. And I don't appreciate you treating me like one."

Iven sighed and shook his head. He clearly didn't know how to respond.

It left Cass to defend his position. "Alpha Miller is at the top of our suspect list, Riley. We think he ordered his beta to kidnap our victims. We think he did it to control the victims' mating. That makes him the most dangerous person in Forbidden Falls right now." What Cass didn't say but what he hoped Riley would pick up on was that the alpha was dangerous to Riley.

"I can handle myself." Riley huffed.

“I’m glad. And I know your dad is happy about that, too. As a warlock, you have a lot of power.”

“But you don’t know how to use it yet,” Iven added.

“You could teach me.” The way Riley said it was as if he thought Iven wouldn’t.

“I intend to. I wanted to let you get settled in first. But it seems like you’re ready to learn now.”

“I am.” He seemed sure of himself.

“Every morning. Seven o’clock. Unless you have a class. And some evenings after dinner. You can work with Griffin then.” Iven would put him through his paces.

If it helped Riley protect himself, Cass was all for it. He might need all the magic he could get if Miller continued to sniff around Riley.

Cass just needed to keep Riley off the alpha’s radar.

### Chapter Fourteen

Riley thought about how he snapped at Cass and his dad the whole way to Cass's house. He felt bad because they didn't earn it. For his dad, it was more about him dropping a bit of a bombshell onto Riley about being a warlock and not doing anything to help him. That was the real reason he'd been angry.

Dad wasn't breaking his promises. In fact, the exact opposite was happening. It turned out Iven Palmer was a good dad. And Riley needed to stop treating him as though he wasn't.

A fresh start meant the past was behind him. It seemed like a simple concept, except the past kept creeping up in small ways. He tried to forget about it. Survival mode had made him push down his emotions. It was how he'd coped. But he didn't have to be in survival mode anymore. He could live, which meant he could feel again. And maybe that meant he had some lingering anger. And maybe it also meant it was okay to think his dad was a good person. And it was okay to want something substantial with Cass.

Riley knocked on Cass's door. He had another paper sack with a muffin inside—this one was banana nut flavored. As apology gifts went, Riley wasn't sure how the muffin measured up, but he had other ideas too.

His whole body was on board. He practically vibrated with anticipation.

He knocked again and then tensed when he heard an unnatural rustling of leaves, as if something was in the forest behind Cass's house.

The wolf sighting from earlier had him spooked. And Riley wasn't fond of the dark. The streetlights cast too many shadows for Riley's comfort. The tree line hid dark secrets.

Cass's front door didn't face the road. Instead, it faced the inn. The expanse of the yard and Cass's driveway separated the properties. On Riley's left was the forest, and on his right was the road.

Riley's gaze never left the tree line. So he saw the wolf when it came out of the dark as if it were a phantom being. It was bigger than Riley's imagination had conjured. He'd never seen a wolf in real life, so he wasn't sure what he expected, but the beast who seemed to walk straight to him wasn't it.

It had black fur and gold eyes. He was pretty in a dark sort of way.

Riley stopped breathing when his eyes locked with the wolf's. His heart felt as though it would pound out of his chest.

He took a step back.

It stopped a few feet away and sat.

Running was a bad idea, right? The wolf had a lot more speed than Riley. It would catch up with him in no time. But what if the wolf wasn't an animal, but the murderer?

Riley held up his hand and began talking to it. Nonsensical words, but everything fled his mind when the wolf's body distorted and bulged in places. Its skin seemed to suck in its fur until it was bare. Bones cracked. It had to be painful.

Riley turned to run.

“You’re safe. I won’t hurt you.” Cass’s voice was nothing more than a whisper, but it went a long way to easing Riley’s fear.

Riley stopped. His knees were weak when his body lost all tension.

Before Riley could turn around, he felt Cass against him, and then an arm came around his waist, anchoring him to a reality that seemed far fetched. Riley had a difficult time believing it.

“Holy shit.” A part of Riley didn’t believe Cass could shift into a wolf. His canine eyes didn’t matter to the delusional thought. “You looked just like the animal.”

“I have three forms,” Cass whispered in Riley’s ears. “Your heart’s racing.”

Yeah, Riley knew it was. He could feel it. “Three forms?”

“Mm-hmm. Human, wolf, and a form that is somewhere between the two. Like they depict us in the movies.” Was Cass sniffing Riley’s hair? Cass moved to Riley’s neck. He felt Cass’s breath against his skin.

Riley’s heart pounded for a different reason, and it definitely wasn’t fear. He had a sudden urge to touch Cass. He tried to turn in Cass’s arms so he could face him and wrap his arms around him. Cass held him in place.

“Not yet, mate. Let’s go inside first.” Cass’s whispered words confused Riley.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t have clothes on. We should go inside so I can get dressed.” But did Cass really have to?

Cass would be naked. Where would his clothing go when he changed forms? Of course, it made sense for him to take them off before shifting. And then something else occurred to him. “You must be freezing.” Riley tried to pull away, but Cass held on as he duck-walked them to the door.

“It’s cold. Especially on my feet.”

Cass opened the door, which was unlocked. Because, of course, it was. It wasn’t like a murderer ran around in the forest thirty feet from the door. Riley rolled his eyes at Cass’s lack of security measures.

“Shouldn’t you keep it locked? I mean, anyone can come in and surprise you.” Maybe Riley needed to apply for the job of Cass’s keeper. Cass needed one.

Cass chuckled. “I can smell everything and everyone who gets close, including you and your muffin. Smells like bananas and walnuts.”

“The muffin is my way of apologizing.” Warmth washed over him the second they entered.

The cabin had an open concept with a living room and kitchen separated by a small table.

The door clicked shut, and Cass released him. “I’ll be right back, baby. Make yourself comfortable.”

Actually, Riley felt the loss of all those hard muscles in his soul the second Cass released him.

Riley set the bag on the table and wandered over to the bookshelf. All the while, he tried to keep Cass’s privacy by not getting a peek at his naked body.

Riley pulled a book from the shelf. It seemed Cass liked the fantasy genre of the epic variety. The books were big enough to be door stops. Someone could use it as a weapon. The cause of death would be blunt force trauma.

Riley chuckled to himself. Not that murder was funny. But Cass's giant books were the stuff of nightmares for Riley. He was more of a romance person. And he liked cozy mysteries a lot. None of the blood and gore or magic so epic it wiped someone off the face of the earth. Or whatever happened in the books Cass liked.

"What's so funny?"

Riley whipped around with his hand on his chest, holding his heart in his chest. "You light-footed bastard."

Cass snorted. "Sneaking up on people is how I can tell I have good wolf genes."

"What's the alternative to good wolf genes?"

"Bad ones." The words probably encompassed a lot of sorry stories. "Wolves can be aggressive sometimes. Violence is still the way some packs handle things."

"Not Fortune Falls?"

"No, usually. The murder case notwithstanding."

"So, sneaking up behind people makes you better than other wolves."

Cass chuckled. "Absolutely. But I can tell you have a different opinion."

Instead of answering, Riley smirked.

Cass stepped closer, cupping Riley's cheek. "You don't owe me an apology."

"Yeah, I do." Riley offered Cass the truth behind the angry comment. "I just don't want you to see me as a kid."

Cass's eyebrows raised. "I definitely don't. Do not. See you as a kid."

"But I'm Iven's kid. You and my dad are tight. I can tell." They were far tighter than Riley had realized. Cass had called Iven his best friend. It was one thing to hear him contextualize their relationship in that way, but seeing how they interacted really brought home how close they were. "You finish each other's sentences."

"We do not." Cass didn't realize it, but they absolutely did. "My friendship with your dad doesn't change how I feel about you."

"And how is that, exactly?"

"Protective. That's where I was coming from earlier." Cass narrowed his eyes. "And you walked across the yard alone to get here, didn't you?"

"Yeah." Riley wanted to have strong feelings about Cass chastising him, but Cass ran his thumb across Riley's cheek and down to the corner of his mouth. It was the most intimate experience Riley had ever had.

He'd had sexual experiences, but he wouldn't call them intimate. He would call them scratching an itch. He met some random guy. They had sex. The end. He had a regular thing with a co-worker a couple of years ago, but it had never been more than fucking. Riley had never had time for love and romance. He hadn't had the emotional capacity for it either.

But Cass was different. Riley felt a connection with him. And he wanted things with



Cass. He wanted sex. But he craved how Cass touched him and how he seemed to see Riley. He especially saw through Riley's crap.

"Call me next time, or have Zinnie or Griffin watch for threats as you walk over." Cass framed it gently.

Was Riley bothered because Cass's tone worked? Maybe a little. He'd get over it a lot quicker if Cass kissed him.

"So, you only feel protective, then? Nothing else?" Riley bit his lip to keep from smiling.

Cass's amusement reached his eyes. "I feel other things."

"What other things?" Riley thought he knew the answer.

"You're fishing, but that's okay. I'm going to tell you anyway." And then Cass kissed him. It didn't start out as a press of the lips. Riley wasn't sure what passion tasted like, but he was pretty sure Cass intended for him to find out. At first, the kisses came with a hint of tongue. Each one melted Riley more than the last. Riley was a pile of desperation and need, and it hadn't taken very long.

When Cass stopped pretending to go slow, Riley found himself pressed against the epic fantasy genre. The heavy books and the shelf they sat on pressed into his back, but not for long. Cass ran his hand up Riley's back and moved them without ending the kiss. Riley found himself on his back, on the couch, with Cass lying over him. Their bodies pressed together.

That was when Cass stopped the assault on Riley's mouth. He trailed kisses along his jaw to his neck. In between the kisses were little licks that set Riley on fire, especially when Cass got to Riley's neck.

“Mmm. You smell so good.” Teeth grazed his neck. Cass didn’t bite him, but there was a promise of it. Maybe wolves got all bitey during sex.

Riley had an urge to press his palm against Cass’s skin. His hand itched with the need for it.

Cass seemed to know because he grabbed Riley’s wrist and stared at his palm. “You want to mark me as yours.”

Instead of answering, Riley tried to lift Cass’s shirt away with his free hand, but Cass stopped with a shake of his head. “No bonding. Not yet. We need to talk before we make it permanent.”

Riley couldn’t help but feel a little deflated. “Permanent?”

“If you put your mark on me and I put mine on you...” Cass ran a finger along Riley’s neck in a gentle caress. “We’ll have a permanent bond. Lifelong. Only death can break it.”

“Oh.” Riley wrapped his arms around Cass’s shoulders and held on. He didn’t want to stop kissing, but he felt like maybe they would.

Cass returned the hug, kissing Riley’s temple and into his hair. “Shh, I’m not saying no, baby.”

Riley didn’t realize he’d whimpered until Cass had spoken. He forced himself to stop. Showing weakness wasn’t an option, especially to a guy who wasn’t ready to make a commitment.

Not that Riley was ready, either. They barely knew each other. Or that was what he told himself.

But he wanted to leave a mark on Cass. Was that possessive? It felt a little like it was, and that made no sense, considering Cass was a person, not something that belonged to Riley.

If he stripped away the weird possessive feeling, what did Riley's reaction really mean? It meant he wanted a commitment. He was ready for one, but only with Cass. And knowing that made his stomach twist into knots.

Cass's reaction felt more like a rejection upon Riley examining his own feelings. While Riley knew Cass hadn't meant it that way, the illogical part of Riley that always waited for the next big disaster twisted Cass's meaning until it fit that mold.

Riley let go of Cass. "Can I get up, please?"

Cass moved off him.

Riley stood so fast he probably appeared as if he thought his ass was on fire.

He headed for the door.

It took him a second to put on his shoes and, in that time, Cass had closed the distance. "Riley."

Riley shook his head. "It's okay."

"What's okay, baby? What's going through that pretty head of yours?"

"Nothing. I just need to get home."

"I can drive you."

Riley shook his head. “No thanks. Griffin’s still at the inn. I’ll catch a ride from him.”

That was a lie. Griffin had left Riley at the inn, stipulating that he would get a ride from Zinnie or Cass. Riley didn’t intend to do either. He needed fresh air and to clear his head. Or, more precisely, he needed to get rid of the voice that told him he wasn’t good enough for someone like Cass.

As soon as Riley had his shoes on, he was out the door.

“Riley. Please.”

Riley just raised his hand in a goodbye gesture. “Catch ya later, Cass.”

God, Riley was failing at starting over. Who failed at that? But Riley seemed to be the master. At least where romance was concerned.

Riley pulled his coat around himself when the chill set in and made his way to the sidewalk in front of the inn. He had a three-mile walk ahead of him where he had to trudge through snow. He probably should have let Cass drive him home, especially considering he was no closer to shutting off his inner critic.

A garage light on a passing house illuminated the area enough for him to glimpse black fur and that smooth gait. Cass was on the back side of the houses.

“I’m fine. Go back home, Cass.”

Of course, Cass couldn’t say anything while in wolf form.

He came to the front of the house and eventually began walking beside Riley.

The entire way home, the silence was comfortable. Riley felt better about not being

alone. What quieted Riley's negativity the most was Cass's presence. He even waited for Riley to enter the house before he left. Riley waved and watched Cass head back the way they had come.

It felt more like a beginning than an end as he shut the door.

### Chapter Fifteen

Riley couldn't believe he had a small flame at the end of his fingertips, and it wasn't burning him. It wasn't even hot.

Riley grinned. "Holy shit. I'm doing it."

Dad smiled. "I see that."

Griffin sat on the floor with his legs cross-legged. He looked like a preschooler on his way to fix a refrigerator. His shirt even had his name on it and the name of the little business he created for himself. Palmer's Handyjobs was stitched onto a patch on his shirt.

Riley pointed to the patch. The only problem was that he forgot about the flame on his finger. A small ball of fire went sailing at Griffin.

The good news was Griffin moved out of the way at the last minute. The bad news was Riley set the recliner on fire.

Dad seemed to pull a fire extinguisher from nowhere and had the blaze gone within seconds.

"Well, the chair is toast," Griffin stated the obvious with a grin. "Good job."

Riley's face heated when he met his dad's gaze. "I'm sorry."

He felt like he'd been saying that a lot lately.

"Griffin burned down the shed when he was learning. I had to call the fire department for that one." Dad chuckled, as if scorching the chair wasn't a big deal. He patted Riley's shoulder. "I was expecting it."

"Great. So I met your very low expectations." Riley's shoulders sagged.

"Actually, you exceeded my high expectations."

Griffin nodded. "Yeah, man. You learned how to do that faster than most warlocks."

"If memory serves, it took me two days to learn how to conjure a flame," Dad said.

Griffin nodded. "Why did you point at me?"

"To tell you the name of your business sounds dirty." Riley still felt bad about burning the chair, but at least he didn't set his brother on fire.

Griffin chuckled.

Dad rolled his eyes. "That's why he picked it."

Riley laughed. "Really?"

"Hell yeah. Do you know how funny it is when people call me, and I say, 'Palmer's Handyjob? How can I serve you?' Everyone in town knows I'm Sheriff Palmer's kid."

Dad shook his head, but he laughed too. "I always get asked about Griffin's reasoning for the name."

“What do you say?” And more importantly, how did Riley get rid of the flame on his finger?

“I change the subject. Or I don’t answer.”

Griffin snorted and nodded to Riley's finger. “You just have to imagine it leaving you.”

“So, the opposite of wanting it to appear.” In his mind, he told it to go away. It took him a couple of tries, but eventually it disappeared.

Dad’s eyes widened, and he smiled as if proud of him. “That was fast.”

Riley shrugged, but inside, he was happy he pleased his dad. “Thanks for teaching me.”

“Tomorrow we’ll practice. The more you do it, the faster you’ll get. I want you to get good enough that it becomes second nature.”

“My guess is he’ll have it down by the end of the week.” Griffin winked.

“The way he’s going, it’ll be sooner.” Dad headed out of the room toward the kitchen. “Conjuring is hungry work, so let’s make breakfast.”

It was more like Dad made breakfast while Griffin and Riley teased each other. Being in the kitchen with his dad was the best family time Riley had ever had.

They followed Dad to the kitchen. Riley and Griffin sat on the island stools.

Riley laid his head on Griffin’s shoulder.



Griffin didn't seem to mind. He drank coffee and watched Dad make eggs. "You're coming with me again today, right? Mom has something to talk to you about."

"Yeah. I just need to go to the bookstore on campus and get my books. Class starts on Monday."

Dad waved a spatula at an envelope on the counter. "That's for the books. If it's not enough, call the station. I'll bring you more."

Riley hesitated but took the envelope. Dad hadn't sealed it, so he peeked inside. As soon as he saw the amount, he shook his head. "I can't take this. It's too much."

"I've saved money for you for school. It comes from that fund, Riley."

"I didn't go to college, so I spent my college money on my house." Griffin put an arm around his shoulders and pulled Riley in for a side hug. Then, he whispered, "Just accept it, brother."

Riley walked around the kitchen island. When his dad turned, Riley hugged him. "Thank you."

"I'll pay your tuition too."

"All right." Riley didn't stop hugging his father. "I didn't know how I was going to pay for everything. I have a credit card with a low limit and a high rate. That would have only paid for the books, though."

"I've been saving for your school, or in Griffin's case, for his house, since the day you were born." Dad kissed Riley's forehead and released him. "I'm here for you now, Riley."

“I think I’m finally getting that.”

“If you need to talk about anything, I’m here for that too.” Dad raised his eyebrows as if that would get Riley to tell him his secrets. Riley only had one, and it seemed like his dad might suspect something.

“Like what?”

Griffin sipped his coffee extra loud, which was annoying. It was also his way of saying he told Riley so. And maybe Griffin was right. Maybe Riley and Cass had been obvious. Dad was a cop whose job it was to ferret out the truth. But Griffin’s point was also annoying, so Riley wouldn’t acknowledge it.

“I don’t know, Riley. You tell me.”

Riley felt a sudden urgency to get to the bookstore, even though it didn’t open until nine o’clock, which was a whole hour away. But he’d wait in the cold car if it meant Riley could escape Iven Palmer’s suspicious gaze. “I have nothing to tell you other than can you please tell Griffin to stop sipping so loudly?”

Griffin sipped even louder and then promptly choked.

Riley pounded him on the back. “It serves you right.”

Dad shook his head and went back to the eggs.

Riley sat on the stool again when Griffin started breathing normally.

“You’re an idiot,” Griffin whispered to him.

Riley knew he was. His dad practically handed him an opening to say something

about Cass and he didn't take it. Keeping the secret was ridiculous, considering it seemed as though Dad already knew.

"Funny, I was going to say the same about you."

Griffin smirked. "Of the two of us, you take the prize, and you know it."

Riley wouldn't give Griffin the satisfaction of agreeing. "I know no such thing."

Griffin snorted. "Liar."

Riley rolled his eyes, but he let Griffin have the last word. He didn't mind the teasing or how Griffin put Riley in his place when he needed it. He'd take a bit of truth thrown at him occasionally if it meant he had more days like that one.

### Chapter Sixteen

Cass replayed his night with Riley. It ran like a movie reel in his mind. He wished he could tell Iven about Riley. Iven was always a sounding board when Cass needed one. He weighed the merits of keeping it a secret. They should decide together if they told Iven. And then there was the threat of the alpha. The last thing Cass wanted was to make Riley a target. All they had to do was bond for that to happen.

Riley seemed so dejected on the walk home.

As soon as Cass finished running down the lead, he'd head over to Zinnie's place and see if Riley was there. They needed to have a chat about where Cass stood. And he'd like to know what Riley wanted where their mating was concerned.

Cass glanced in Danny's direction. The second their gazes met, Cass knew they had let the lack of a missing person's report go unaddressed long enough.

Danny averted his gaze—beads of sweat collected on his forehead.

Cass walked into Iven's office and closed the door.

Iven raised his eyebrows.

Cass put a transcript of an emergency call in front of Iven and waited. It was the call from Quincy Barr's mother, reporting him and Gregory May missing two weeks before they were found.

Iven's face hardened as he read to the end of the transcript. It was Danny saying all the right things, telling Mrs. Barr they would find her son and his mate.

"Did you find the report?" Iven would lose his cool if Cass didn't step in. Cass had half a mind to let Danny take the brunt of Iven's anger. Unless Danny had a damn good reason for not making a report, he was fucking screwed. And he probably knew it.

"There's nothing in the system."

Iven cursed under his breath. He stood and ripped open the door.

The second Danny saw Iven, his face turned white. He stood and backed away, as if he intended to run for the front door.

"You won't get far, Danny. Not if I shift. My wolf will chase yours down. I'm better at tracking than you are." Cass wasn't sure why Danny didn't file the report, but he didn't have a nefarious reason. Cass would go to his grave believing that.

Danny's face crumbled, and he fell against the front counter. He slid to the ground.

Iven swore again, but he let Cass take the lead.

Cass sat next to Danny on the floor. "Spill it, man. We'll deal with the consequences together, but we need to know what happened first."

Danny wiped his eyes with the back of his hand but didn't have to again because Iven handed him a box of tissue.

Iven squatted in front of Danny. "Did someone ask you not to file a report?"

“The pack beta...he threatened me. Threatened my sister and brother.” The tears came again. “I can’t let them get hurt. I can’t, sheriff.”

“Leo Krieger threatened to harm you?” Cass had to make sure Danny had the right person.

Danny nodded. “He said the alpha would make life hard for my family.”

Danny already had it hard enough. He was parenting his young siblings and doing a damn fine job of it.

“You should have come to me or Cass. We could have helped you.” Iven met Cass’s gaze. They had an entire conversation without speaking a word. They were going to help Danny get out of trouble instead of arresting him as an accessory to murder and kidnapping.

“Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to go into the break room and calm yourself. Then you’re going to write the fucking report. Mark it for the date Mrs. Barr called,” Iven whispered, as if someone could hear them. There were only the three of them, and there weren’t cameras inside the station, except for the holding cells.

Danny sucked in a breath. His eyes widened as he met Iven’s gaze. “Seriously?”

“Yes. But let me make one thing clear. In this station, we aren’t partial to a group of people. We don’t give favors, and we don’t let anyone threaten us without arresting them afterward. And above all, we stick together. Got it?”

“Yes, sir. And I’m sorry I didn’t come to you. If it ever happens again, I’ll know what to do.”

Iven nodded. “Your brother and sister are in school, right?”

Danny nodded.

“They’re safe enough there for now, but you can’t stay alone out where you live. It’s too far from town.” Iven met Cass’s gaze as if searching for a solution to the problem. “Stay at the inn. Zinnie will watch over you and the kids in the evening. During the day, my boys are there for extra protection.”

“Move the kids?” He seemed as if the thought was painful.

“You’re too vulnerable out in the country. Zinnie is right in town. Cass is next door, and I’m just a few miles down the road. And the inn has plenty of room. Plus, Riley makes a pretty good muffin. He’ll fatten you and the kids up. And he already has excellent control of his magic, so he can protect you almost as well as Griffin.” Iven’s pitch was pretty good.

“I did something terrible and you’re offering me muffins?”

Cass chuckled. “When you put it like that, it sounds as though we’re irresponsible.”

“At the very least. We’re definitely obstructing justice.” Iven stood, cursing his knees as he did so. “The alpha had Krieger threaten you. I believe that. So basically, we’re saving you from having to fight a charge you don’t really deserve.”

“So, we’re just cutting out having to go to court.” For the first time, Danny smiled.

“Sure, let’s say that’s true.” Iven pointed to the computer. “I want the report on my desk by the end of the day, Danny.”

Cass stood and then offered Danny a hand. “You’ll be okay, kid.”

Cass followed Iven. “So, the magic lesson went okay, then?”

“Better than okay. Riley’s a fast learner.” Iven turned and smirked. “Why do you ask?”

Cass shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant about the whole thing. Inside, he was dying to know even the smallest nugget of information about Riley. “Just wondered, is all.”

Cass got to work on the next lead.



### Chapter Seventeen

Riley started baking as soon as he got to Zinnie's inn. He, Griffin, and Zinnie had developed a bit of a routine. Riley's role was that of baker, and he was happy to do it. He loved it, so it wasn't a hardship.

He had a few more days until college started, after which he'd have to develop a new daily schedule. But for now, this one worked well.

He made cinnamon rolls. He loved kneading the dough by hand. He could forget about everything except the motion his body made. Even the room disappeared as he used his upper body to increase the gluten in the dough.

He was so far in the zone that he didn't hear anyone enter the room until something touched his shoulder. He jumped a mile high and turned to face the threat.

Zinnie stood there with an envelope in her hand and an apologetic expression. "Sorry, honey. I didn't mean to startle you. I called your name, but you didn't answer."

"I'm into cinnamon rolls." Riley smiled and wiped his hands on his apron.

He blushed when Cass walked in.

Cass winked. "Hi."

"Hi."

Zinnie's gaze went from Riley to Cass. Her eyebrows raised.

Cass met Zinnie's gaze. "Iven and I need a favor."

"In the form of..."

"Housing two kids and their guardian brother."

Zinnie frowned. "Danny?"

Cass nodded. "Iven will tell you about it."

Zinnie turned to Riley again and held out the envelope.

Riley took it. Zinnie wrote his name on it and a dollar amount. "That's your cut from the muffins. They were a huge hit. So much so the diner wants to sell them."

Riley sucked in a breath. "Are you serious?"

"I don't know where you found time to learn how to bake, but you're good at it."

"When mom wasn't drunk, she was a good baker. It was few and far between, but I was a fast learner." In his mother's drunk stupor, she sometimes had managed to give him pointers. Riley peeked inside the envelope. He widened his eyes. "This is a lot, Zinnie."

"You earned it." Zinnie waved her hand as she left the room. "I'm not arguing about it, Riley Palmer."

Riley wondered if he should double his recipe. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome,” she yelled from the hall.

Riley stuffed the envelope in his apron. “I can buy a backpack and a college sweater.”

“Or you can ask Iven for the money and save that.” Cass came further into the room.

Riley shook his head. He didn’t see the need to ask his dad for money when he’d just earned some on his own. Besides that, his dad paid for everything else. Riley had no bills beyond putting gas in his car to get to school. And he was an adult. He’d taken care of himself and his mother until the day she died.

It was nice to make money again. Doing it by baking was beyond surreal. It was the one thing his mom had done well. And the one positive thing she’d passed down to Riley. It was also something he did for fun. It helped with stress.

And he was grateful for Zinnie’s awesome kitchen.

Cass cupped his cheek. “How are you doing?”

“You mean since I freaked out and ditched you.” Riley winced. Thinking about it made him a little ashamed, but also wanting to know if Cass had rejected him, because maybe his reaction wasn’t unfounded.

Cass nodded. “I want you. More than anything. It’s just not safe. Not with the pack alpha acting weird.”

Riley averted his gaze.

Cass kissed him. It was just a peck, but it made Riley’s heart sing. Riley stepped closer. “When will you finish here?”

“Around six o’clock. Why?” Riley liked the way Cass smelled. Maybe it was his laundry detergent or the soap he’d showered with that morning. Cass smelled like pine.

“So we can start over.”

“Start over, as in...”

“Spend the night.”

Riley didn’t even think about how bad of an idea it was, especially considering he would have to explain to his dad where he’d slept. It would set a ball rolling they probably weren’t ready for, but Riley didn’t care. Not when Cass held him and promised to do a lot more than that later. “No bonding?”

Cass flashed his fangs and buried his face in Riley’s neck. He kissed Riley’s neck. “When I’m inside you, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop myself. If the alpha finds out about you, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Cass sounded as conflicted as Riley felt.

“Whoa.” Griffin’s voice penetrated through their bubble. “You guys should just fuck and get it over with.”

Riley didn’t even hear the back door open. He jumped and tried to pull away, but Cass held onto him, so he relaxed again.

Cass growled. “We’re Fated mates, Griffin. It’s not just fucking. And besides that, it’s complicated.”

“It looks pretty simple from here.” Griffin sat at the table, grabbing a muffin. “Did

you talk to mom yet?”

“A few minutes ago.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“Do what?”

“Bake. For the inn and diner.” Griffin took a bite and talked when his mouth was full, which was gross. Riley got a glimpse of chewed dough and blueberries. “Hey, you know where Capote’s Pizza used to be?”

“I’ve been a resident of Fortune Falls for ten days. How would I know what you’re talking about? And can you please eat with your mouth closed?” If Riley weren’t wrapped around Cass so thoroughly, he’d call for his dad to make Griffin stop.

Instead of answering with words, Griffin flipped him off, and at the same time, he took another bite. But he finished chewing before speaking again. “It’s on Main Street. Dad took us for pizza there every time you came home for the summer.”

Riley remembered the live bands that would play sometimes and drinking strawberry smoothies.

“I don’t think it would be hard to grab up. It needs lots of work. It’s been abandoned for a while.”

Cass pulled Riley against his side. “You’re talking about Riley opening a bakery.”

Griffin shrugged. “It might make a good space for one and Fortune Falls has a need. We don’t really have one. That place is in the heart of town where the college students hang out.”

The idea bloomed in his chest. He hadn't thought about anything beyond having the cool job of making muffins and cinnamon rolls in small batches for the inn and the Diner. It was a job he could love, and it worked for his upcoming college schedule. "Two problems. I don't have the money or the time for that type of project. But it's an amazing idea."

"Well, it would take a while to renovate. It would give you time to figure out how to make it work. Or just take a few business classes to help you run the bakery." Griffin shrugged. "It's just an idea."

"I'll help you with the cost," Cass whispered to him.

"Plus, if you're only taking a few classes, then you'd have all that money Dad saved for you. I bet he would let you spend it on that as well as school. And Mom will want to invest." Griffin took another bite.

Holy shit. Was he really thinking about it? "It's a huge step."

"Seems like you're taking a lot of those lately, anyway. What's one more?" Griffin shrugged again. "That place isn't going anywhere. And besides, there's another place downtown. That one will be more expensive, though."

Riley met Cass's gaze. "What do you think?"

"Are you ready for it?" That was a good question. One Riley really needed to contemplate.

Riley met Griffin's gaze. "I'm seriously thinking about it."

Griffin smiled. "Good. It would make a good business, especially in this town."

Riley pulled out of Cass's arms and made his way to Griffin. He hugged him. "Thank you for being so brilliant."

"It's about time you recognized how great I am." Griffin hugged him back.

Riley chuckled. "You're funny, too. The full package."

"Spread it around to all the cute college boys, will ya? Maybe I'll get laid in this damn century." Of course, Griffin had to make the moment weird.

"I'm not your pimp, Griffin."

"You could set me up, though."

"With someone I haven't met yet." No pressure or anything. Riley rolled his eyes and went to Cass again. Cass put an arm around him.

Riley turned to Griffin. "I want to talk to Dad about it first."

"About setting me up with a college boy?"

Riley sighed. "About your bakery idea."

"What do you want to talk to me about?" His dad said as he entered the room.

Riley jumped and pulled away. Cass tried to pull him back, but Riley slipped out of his grip. Riley gave him a look. They needed to talk about Cass holding onto him against his will. Well, not against it. He loved it when Cass reeled him back in, but doing it in front of his father was inappropriate. Especially considering they were supposed to keep their relationship secret.

Riley went back to his cinnamon roll dough. “Griffin had an idea about me starting a bakery.”

Griffin launched into a sales pitch that was better than the one he’d given Riley.

Riley snuck a peek at Cass and smiled when their gazes met.

Cass winked.

When Griffin came up for air, Cass asked, “Is Danny settled?”

“Zinnie’s mothering him, so he’s fine,” Dad said and stepped closer to Riley. “What are you making?”

“Cinnamon rolls. I’ll bring some home in the morning.”

“Why not tonight?”

“I...I’m staying over at my...um...”

“My house. I’m taking him to a jock party with some of my old hockey buddies.” Griffin grabbed another muffin and then handed it to Riley. He smirked. “Can I get this one to go?”

Extortion. Great. Riley returned the smirk. “Sure.”

He wrapped the muffin in plastic. “I’ll see you later.”

Dad almost bought it. Clearly, he didn’t know if it was a lie or not. “Do you talk to any of them anymore?”



“How else would I know about the party?” Griffin headed to the back door. “See you later.”

Griffin hightailed it out of there.

Dad sighed and shook his head. “I can never tell when he’s lying.”

Cass patted Iven on the back and snorted. “Go with your gut.”

Riley didn’t contribute to the conversation. Griffin might be good at lying, but Riley wasn’t. He was also stuck in the kitchen with his dad and Cass. He couldn’t leave his dough unattended.

His dad glanced from Cass to him and back again. “My gut, huh? I don’t think the two of you want to know what that’s telling me.”

They probably didn’t.

### Chapter Eighteen

Cass smelled Riley before he knocked. Cass's stomach flipped with anticipation as he opened the door. Riley wore a cute stocking cap with a ridiculous puffball on top. His coat had seen better days.

Cass grabbed the coat and pulled Riley inside. It was a good thing Riley had a hold on the box he was carrying because Cass suddenly pulling him inside would have upended everything inside the box. Riley put the box on the nearest flat surface, which was a table at the end of the couch.

They were kissing before he kicked the door shut. Riley's lips were cold at first, but it didn't take long for them to warm up. The kiss set Cass on fire. How long had he been waiting to touch Riley? It felt like forever since the last time he'd held him. It had only been that afternoon, but it hadn't been long enough. He needed all night and into the next morning. Even then, he doubted he'd get enough.

Riley felt right against him. Even wearing a heavy coat and thick scarf, he was still perfect in Cass's arms.

Cass ended the kiss in favor of taking off Riley's heavy winter clothes. His hands shook as he undid Riley's coat buttons. When Riley tried to help, Cass noticed how he had the same problem.

When Cass chuckled, Riley's gaze was confused, but he smiled. "What's so funny?"

"We're both so excited, we're shaking." Cass kissed Riley again. "I'm glad I'm not

the only one.”

“Excited. That’s one way to put it.” Riley let his coat fall to the floor. “The last few hours were the longest of my life.”

“For me, too.” Cass probably should have just gone over to Zinnie’s kitchen. The only reason he didn’t was because he would end up holding Riley the whole time, which would have made it impossible for Riley to finish his baking tasks.

“Zinnie watched me walk over.” Riley bit his lip. “She thought I was just bringing you some baked goods.”

“I’m glad you were safe.” Cass took off Riley’s hat. His hair was mussed and standing on end. A few fine strands stuck up as if reaching for the ceiling.

Cass smiled and ran a hand down Riley’s hair, trying to tame it.

Riley’s cheeks turned pink, and he reached for his head. He stopped when his hand touched Cass’s. “It probably looks crazy.”

“You’re cute.” Cass kissed Riley’s lips. He intended to keep it brief in favor of disrobing Riley, but the peck lingered. “Sexy.”

Riley backed away just enough to kick off his boots and then he went right back into Cass’s arms.

Cass wasn’t sure who started it, but they kissed again. When he made demands, Riley met them, opening for him.

Riley tasted like cinnamon and coffee. He must have had a roll with a caffeine boost before coming over. He smelled like sugar. He was good enough to eat. Cass would

start by licking every inch of his body.

Cass tried to move them toward the bedroom without ending the kiss, but they made it as far as the wall next to the bedroom door. He pressed Riley against it at first, ravaging him to the best of his ability. He had Riley's shirt off and had started on his own when Riley flipped them, pressing Cass against the wall.

Riley grinned right before he went in for a kiss. He wasn't submissive this time but made demands of his own.

So, it was going to be like that, huh?

Cass let Riley dominate the kiss. He opened for Riley, letting him get a taste. It was when Riley moaned and the kiss turned desperate, that Cass took over again.

He lifted Riley off his feet and made his way into the bedroom. Riley might have been smaller, but not by much. His thinness hid pure muscle. He was heavy, even for a wolf shifter who had superior strength. But Cass only had to go a few steps and they were at the bed.

Cass let him go and went to his knees, undoing Riley's pants.

When their gazes met, Riley's eyes were wide. "Are you gonna..."

"Taste your cock?" Cass pushed down Riley's pants. "Yeah, baby."

Riley stepped out of them when Cass asked him to. He only wore black underwear that hugged his ass and outlined his hard cock. When Cass ran his hand along the length of Riley's cock, Riley sucked in a breath and let it out on a moan.

Cass kissed Riley's cock through the fabric before pressing his nose against his hard

length. His scent concentrated there. Even with the cotton barrier between them, it was strong.

Cass growled. “Smells so good.”

“Cass.” Riley gripped Cass’s hair.

Cass didn’t make Riley wait any longer. He pushed Riley’s underwear out of the way. His cock sprang free.

The weight of Riley’s hard length felt perfect in Cass’s hand.

Cass licked from root to tip and swirled his tongue around the tip, gathering the precum. “You taste good, too.”

When Cass stopped, Riley met his gaze. He panted as if he’d run a marathon and he pleaded with his eyes. Cass licked the tip again, but this time, he took Riley’s length into his mouth. It was just the head at first. He held still until Riley whimpered, after which he took a little more inside.

Riley’s grip on Cass’s hair grew almost painful the more Cass took into his mouth. Something about it made Cass’s blood heat.

Cass growled around Riley’s cock.

When Cass pulled off, Riley moaned. And then he sucked in a breath and held it when Cass took him in again.

He took all of Riley until the tip hit the back of his throat, and then he swallowed around it.

“Oh god.” Riley moved his hips, thrusting in and out as if he couldn’t stop himself from moving.

Cass held still, letting Riley set the rhythm. Riley didn’t take long to whisper, “I’m gonna.”

Cass increased the suction. That was all it took for Riley to come to completion.

When Riley came down from his orgasm high, Cass stood. Riley wrapped his arms around Cass and held on. His body shook against Cass’s.

“Are you okay, baby?”

“That was...so... great.” Riley sighed. “My legs are shaky.”

Cass rubbed his back. “Let’s lay on the bed then.”

Riley nodded and pulled away. He removed his underwear before getting on the bed and lying on his back.

Cass had too many clothes on, so he tackled that problem.

It was when his pants were all the way off, that Riley sucked in a breath. “You’re hot.”

Cass smiled. “So are you.”

“Not like you.” Riley ran his hand along his flat stomach. “You have a six-pack that I want to lick.”

Cass chuckled. “Yeah, well, your cock was delicious.”

It lay against Riley's abdomen, semi-soft and satisfied.

Riley smiled. "Yours is big."

"The better to fuck you with, my dear."

"Oh, so now you're the big bad wolf."

Cass growled and stalked to the bed, crawling across it.

Riley opened his legs for Cass, making room. When Cass hovered over him, Riley wrapped his arms around him, pulling him close.

"I've gotten a peek, or twenty, of your ass." Cass kissed Riley's neck. "It's perfect. I want to taste it."

"Oh god." Riley moaned. "Seriously?"

Cass nipped Riley's neck and then licked the spot. He worked his way down Riley's body to his nipples. He teased the right one with his teeth, licking across it. "Unless you want to lick my abs."

Riley arched his back as if asking for more. Cass assumed Riley didn't want him to stop.

Cass moved on to his other nipple, licking it and then blowing on it. "You can lick them later."

Cass wanted to make their first time all about Riley.

And gods, did he want inside him? He'd open Riley up first and do it as slowly as

possible with his tongue. He needed Riley to be hard when he entered him.

He worked his way down Riley's body, licking and kissing him everywhere. When he got to Riley's cock, Cass kissed it but didn't give it much attention.

Cass's goal was to make Riley beg for his cock.

Everything good in the world had a delicious smell. Cookies. Christmas in Fortune Falls. Riley's balls and taint. There was nothing better.

Cass licked across Riley's opening.

Riley pulled his legs back even farther, giving Cass room. He kept saying, "Oh my god. Keep going. Oh, my god."

Cass smiled and used his tongue to open Riley. It wasn't the best tool, but he got Riley nice and wet. It didn't take long for him to add a finger.

As soon as he pushed his way inside, Riley moaned. It seemed Riley loved having something inside him. His responsiveness heated Cass's blood, making him forget about going slow.

Cass's cock was so hard, it hurt a little. He sat up to reach for the nightstand drawer and pulled out the tube inside.

He growled when Riley moved against his finger.

"More." Riley panted. When Cass pulled out, Riley whimpered and shook his head. "Please."

Cass put the lube on his fingers and then reentered Riley. He met Riley's gaze. "I



wanted to draw it out more, but I...I can't wait any longer."

Riley nodded. "I need you."

Cass kissed him as he thrust his fingers inside. He added another one when Riley's muscles loosened. He rubbed over Riley's prostate, making him crazy.

Riley's cock grew hard, so Cass jacked him off with his free hand.

Riley sucked in a breath and seemed to not know if he should push or pull. His hips did both for a while.

It didn't take long for Riley to open further, so Cass pulled his fingers out.

He held onto his cock until his head touched Riley's opening and then slid inside Riley. The way Riley opened around his cock was like magic. He lifted Riley by his hips and pushed in. The angle made it possible for Cass to rub against Riley's prostate.

Riley's cock seemed to get even harder, and it jumped in Cass's hand as Riley cried out his pleasure. He held onto Cass at the waist, pulling him closer. "Deeper."

When Cass bottomed out, he pulled Riley closer. Cass set a slow rhythm after that, wanting to make it last as long as possible. But it didn't take long before Riley set him on fire.

He was desperate to come. Maybe that was why he whispered what he did. He wasn't sure what made him do it. All he knew was that he wanted the connection. He needed the bond. "Mark me."

He took Riley's hand and placed it on his chest.

At first, he felt nothing. And then his blood heated, setting him on fire.

Everything that came after was instinct. He growled right before biting Riley where his neck and shoulder met.

Riley's muscles tightened around Cass's cock, and he cried out.

As much as Cass wanted to hold back and prolong the pleasure, he couldn't. Riley's orgasm prompted his own.

Cass stopped biting Riley. When the white-hot pleasure consumed him, he pressed into Riley one last time as he shuddered, and then relaxed.

Cass didn't expect his knot to grow so quickly. He could feel it stretch Riley.

Riley sucked in a breath. "What is that?"

"My knot." Cass licked across the wound he left on Riley's neck. "Sorry. I should have told you about it."

"What does it do?" Riley tried to move against it. Even though he couldn't move very far, because Cass lay on him.

Riley moaned. His cock jumped as if wanting to get hard again. He'd come twice already.

Cass smiled. "Your bounce back is remarkable."

"I'm a lot younger than you." Riley chuckled when Cass growled.

Cass moved inside Riley.

Riley moaned. “Oh yeah. That’s so good.”

“We’ll be stuck together for a few more minutes.”

“I love that.” Riley’s arms tightened around him.

“Me too.” Cass kissed Riley.

“We’re official now, right?” Riley whispered.

“Yeah.” Cass wouldn’t think about the consequences. Not yet. They were safe from the alpha and the pack for a while longer. They didn’t need to worry about the fallout with Iven yet. Not until the morning. “I feel the connection.”

Riley touched Cass’s chest. “It’s a forever thing, right? Because it seems like if I can feel you in my heart, that you will always be there.”

Shit. Was that hesitation? Gods, Cass hoped not. “It’s permanent.”

“You want forever with me?” Riley’s uncertainty broke Cass’s heart a little.

Cass met Riley’s gaze. “I want you with everything in me.”

Riley took a deep breath and let it out. Cass hadn’t been aware of the tension until Riley relaxed, and he smiled. “Okay.”

“So, same question.” It was a little late to ask, but Cass hadn’t intended to bond. It just happened. And he needed to know how Riley felt.

“I want a relationship with you. I know it’s complicated, and I know we’ll have to sneak around for a while longer, but I want this.” Riley smiled and kissed Cass. “Big

bad wolf.”

“Did I blow your house down, AKA your mind?” Cass wiggled his eyebrows.

“You blew everything, including my mind.” Riley moved against Cass’s knot, but by then, it was going down.

### Chapter Nineteen

I ven had clearly been at the station a while by the time Cass got there. Not that Cass was late. It looked as though Iven had been stewing in his juices. His expression was like stone as he flipped pages in their murder case file.

Cass went into his office and sat across the desk from him. He said nothing but put the cinnamon rolls Riley had given him on Iven's desk. Giving him the roll wasn't a confession, but it might as well have been.

Iven looked at it and then met Cass's gaze. His eyes narrowed right before his expression turned to stone again. "I think I found Alice Newman's family. He's a nephew in Rochester, New York. I've already called him. He says he's unaware of his family having ever owned property in Fortune Falls."

"So, the deed was doctored? Or the family forgot they owned the property. I mean, Alice Newman died a long time ago. Maybe they moved and the property just fell out of memory."

Cass expected the conversation to continue. What he didn't expect was Iven to bring his fist down on his desk.

Iven grabbed the bag of baked goods and shook it at Cass. And then took a deep breath and sat in his chair again. He took another breath before he spoke. "His mother just died. He took care of her his whole life, practically from birth. He doesn't need any complications."

“I don’t intend to be one.”

“Yet, here you are wearing his mark.” How the hell did Iven know that? It wasn’t like Iven could see Cass’s chest through his clothes. Before Cass could ask, Iven rolled his eyes. “You smell like sulfur. It’s too strong for it to be anything beyond bonding.”

“I know you’re protective of him.” Cass appreciated Iven's wanting to protect Riley. It meant Riley had more people in his corner.

Iven slapped his desk again. “He’s my son!”

Cass stood and took a step back. Iven wasn’t known for violence, but it wasn’t every day his best friend mated with his son. “I’m protective of him, too.”

“Then tell me why you bonded.” Iven closed the file before picking it up and shaking it at Cass. “You put him at risk.”

Cass didn’t know what to say. How could he explain himself in such a way that didn’t make it sound like sex was the priority? “We needed to be together. It went further than I intended.”

Iven shut his eyes and took a deep breath. “That’s exactly what I want to hear, Cass. How you and my son got carried away.”

“Sorry. But that’s the truth.”

“Oh, so now you feel like telling me the truth?”

Cass growled. “We were always going to tell you. We needed to figure out what we wanted first.”

“So, you asked him, and he said he wanted to bond?” Iven met Cass’s gaze as if he expected an answer.

The question pissed Cass off on several fronts. “Who the fuck do you think I am? You should know me better than that.”

“I thought I did.” Iven sighed and ran his hand down his face.

“Fuck you, Iven.” Cass’s wolf came to the surface. “I’ve been protecting him from the moment I met him.”

“Well, you dropped the fucking ball, Cass. And you know you did.” Iven meant Cass had compromised Riley’s safety. And Iven wasn’t wrong.

Cass’s instinct was to lash out, but Iven didn’t deserve it. All Iven did was express his concern for his son. They had the same agenda, and that was to keep Riley safe.

Cass turned and headed out of Iven’s office. He grabbed his keys off his desk and headed out the door.

He had to pass Danny, whose eyes were wide. He looked like a scared deer. Clearly, he had heard their argument. Cass didn’t stick around to find out what his thoughts were.

He headed to his car. Even when he heard Iven call his name, he didn’t turn.

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He drove to pack lands. He wasn’t sure why. But he parked along the side of the road instead of where the pack would park during runs.

The air was chilly, but he needed it to clear his head. Ice and snow covered the road, but he still remembered where Riley's car had run out of gas.

His chest ached thinking about the night he had first caught Riley's scent. Cass's partial shift had scared Riley. He'd still hung out in Cass's car. He'd sat beside him while he warmed his hands. Cass had taken care of Riley. He'd followed Riley home, making sure he got there safely.

Every instinct had told him to stay as close to Riley as possible, but he'd gone home, trusting Iven to protect Riley. Because he knew Iven, he'd known him for years, since the day Cass started as a deputy. There wasn't a person he knew better. He thought Iven knew Cass, too. Cass had been an open book. They told each other everything. Iven should know Cass wouldn't hurt Riley.

Except he might have. There wasn't a reason for Riley to be on the alpha's radar. Yet. But Cass couldn't keep him at bay forever.

If the alpha was guilty, Cass needed to prove it, but what did he have as evidence?

Maybe Krieger would turn on Miller. There was Quincy Barr's testimony.

Cass didn't see the wolf come out of the forest until it crossed the road. Cass stiffened, sniffing the air, but the wolf stayed downwind. Every instinct in Cass screamed to get out of there, but he had to find out why the wolf was there.

His gut clenched.

He pulled his gun from the holster. "Stay where you are!"

The wolf startled, glancing in Cass's direction. He growled and then appeared as if he were going to run, so Cass shot at the ground a few feet before him. It was a warning,



and the wolf must have known it because he met Cass's gaze.

Cass had the advantage because he had the gun, but he wouldn't shoot the wolf. He didn't know for sure who it was or why they were on pack lands. They could have an innocent reason for being there. After all, Cass was there too. He had no way of knowing until the wolf either grew closer so he could catch their scent or if they shifted and made themselves known.

The wolf hesitated as he took a step toward the forest. They must have sensed Cass's hesitation because they sprinted for the tree line and disappeared into the brush.

Cass cursed and undressed as quickly as possible. Before he shifted, he called in the sighting using the radio attached to his coat to let Iven and Danny know what was happening.

"Possible suspect sighted on Hensley Road. In pursuit through the north facing forest. Backup requested." He didn't wait for an answer, but took off after the wolf, following his scent.

Iven would come. It didn't matter how angry he was. Cass knew he could count on him.

Rotting flesh flooded his senses, drowning out everything else. It was a full two minutes before he saw the bodies.

### Chapter Twenty

Riley had texted Cass three times and called him twice with no answer. Going through the morning without a word from Cass left Riley with nothing else to think about besides the reasons for not answering. Was something wrong? Did he not want to talk to Riley? Did his dad say something? So many unanswered questions.

The worst part was his muffins probably tasted like worry. He pictured his negative feelings falling into the dough, making them bitter or, at the very least, tasteless.

Riley had worked under worse situations. Every time Riley had left his mother to her own devices, he worried. What if she got drunk and tried to cook? What if, in a drunken stupor, she drowned in the bathtub? What if she fell and hit her head? The list of what-ifs was long. His imagination muscle had grown until he had conjured all sorts of scenarios. Some were realistic. Others weren't.

It seemed his job was to worry and stress. Maybe it was what he was born for as though the universe had plans even before he was conceived. Or maybe it was a superpower, although it felt more like a curse. It could be a warlock thing.

He'd have to ask his dad or Griffin if they stressed over things beyond their control.

When the back door opened, he expected it to be Griffin. He didn't even glance away from measuring out the next muffin ingredients.

When his dad spoke, Riley turned in his direction. He held his breath as he hoped Cass was with him, but Dad stood alone. He stiffened.

“I need your help.”

Dad walked up to him and pulled his sweater away from his neck, but it was on the opposite side from where Cass had bitten him.

Riley stepped away from him with a frown. “What the hell, Dad?”

“Did he bite you?” If it bothered him, he didn’t show it. His tone was hopeful.

Riley sighed and pulled his sweater away from the wound Cass had left.

Dad nodded. “Come with me.”

Dad headed toward the back door.

“Where are we going?” Riley followed him out the back door.

“Grab your coat, Riley. It’s cold out.” Dad scowled at him. He didn’t remember if Dad had given him the parental stare before that moment. But it was there when he met Riley’s gaze.

“Yes, sir.” Riley went back inside and got his coat, which hung on the rack inside the door. He put it on before joining Dad again.

Iven met his gaze and shook his head but turned, heading for his car. He’d parked on the side of the road.

“What?” Riley was pretty sure he knew what his dad would say, and none of it would be pleasant.

“Now isn’t the time to get into it.” Dad was probably right, but it would eat Riley

alive if he didn't know what the problem was. Too many other uncertainties were rolling through his mind for him to be comfortable with his father's disappointment.

"Then when is the time?"

"Not now."

Riley sighed and made sure he was loud enough for his dad to hear him.

They got in the car and pulled onto the road when his dad finally spoke again. "Do you even know what the mating marks mean?"

"He explained it."

"You made a lifelong commitment to a man you barely know." Dad's jaw muscles ticked.

"He's your best friend, Dad. Are you saying I shouldn't trust him? I trusted your judgment." Riley could tell he won that part of their argument.

"You're not ready for it, Riley. You just lost your mom. You're starting college."

"And seriously considering starting a business." It had been rolling around in his mind since Griffin put it there. He first had to decide if he wanted to bake as a profession. He loved doing it but wasn't sure if he wanted to do it for a living. He feared it would become a chore after a while. He wasn't sure if that would be the case. He fell into the task, allowing it to empty his mind. His thoughts could flow freely.

"That's a conversation for another time."

“Agreed. But you brought it up.”

Riley wasn't sure what he said, but something made Iven chuckle and shake his head.

“I need to change my argument points, don't I?”

“I don't see why you even want to argue with me.” Riley stared out the window as the town disappeared behind them. “It's not your decision. It's not the rest of your life. It's the rest of mine. And honestly, I'm lucky.”

“How so?”

“First tell me where we're going.” Riley dreaded the answer. Panic formed in his chest.

“To find Cass.”

“He's missing?” Riley's stomach twisted in knots, and he sent silent prayers that nothing was wrong but deep down he knew what his gut was telling him.

“No. Not really. He went after a suspect alone. Which was a stupid thing to do. You'll be able to help me locate him.” His dad was worried too. Riley could tell in the way he white-knuckled the steering wheel.

“Is he in danger?”

“Hopefully not, but I won't lie to you. He could be.”

“How will I be able to help you find him?”

“Through your mating bond. I'll show you when we get there.” Dad took a deep breath and let it out as if attempting to not panic. “Now tell me how lucky you are?”

Riley appreciated the distraction, although it didn't help that much.

"Cass is...he's protective. And that has kept us from bonding up to last night." Riley wasn't sure how much he should say, but he wanted to be honest. "Neither of us planned it. We just wanted to be together. We were caught up in the moment."

"He put you at risk by bonding with you."

"Yet here we are with the potential to face danger." Riley would have gone, regardless of who needed him, but it was Cass. His mate. His life partner. He had a whole new level of fear he had never experienced before.

"How else are you lucky? Besides Cass's protectiveness."

"He's not impulsive. I like that he's a little wiser than me. He's thoughtful. He asks my opinion. He asks me to do stuff with him. He doesn't take me for granted."

Iven sighed, but he smiled. "None of that surprises me."

"Because you know him."

"Yes, I do." Iven sighed. "I want to find the mistake."

Riley smiled. Finally, Dad was being honest with himself. "I know."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"You're my kid. And he might be my best friend, but there's a big age difference. I don't know what you have in common with someone so much older than you." And

there it was. The last argument he had and the one that would have mattered if they hadn't bonded. But they had, so Riley knew exactly what they had in common.

"You don't really want me to answer. Trust me."

Iven shook his head. "Beyond sex."

"We're compatible, Dad."

"Well, I don't think you need to move in with him immediately. Go slow on that."

"We haven't discussed it." And it wasn't like Cass had brought it up. In fact, Cass hadn't even answered his text or calls.

At least Riley knew why.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Cass had to hold his breath or he'd lose the contents of his stomach. Three bodies lay naked and lifeless. It was clear they'd been dead for a while. Their blood soaked the ground days ago, becoming a part of the earth. Cass wasn't a forensics expert or a coroner, but rigor mortis had set in. Bugs had started making a home in them.

He had to shift. The smell was too much in wolf form. It wasn't much better as a human but it helped a little. He'd experienced nothing as bad in his life and he'd seen a lot as a deputy.

The forest was dense. Trees clustered together, vying for sunlight. And they were larger than in other parts of the forest. Oaks stood strong and mighty. They were kings of the forest compared to the sugar maples and various species of conifers. A tree had met its end sometime ago. It appeared to be maple, but Cass couldn't really tell. It was big enough to hide the bodies from Cass. When he peered over the log, he had to hold his nose. The smell still clawed at him.

The bodies lay on their stomachs, so Cass couldn't see their faces. He couldn't catch their scent because of the decay. Two of them lay together, with one laying over the other. The one on top was female. The bottom person's gender was unknown, but given the smaller size, he'd assume for the moment that she was female, too.

The other one was male. A couple of feet separated him from the other two. The male might have been older. It appeared as though he had gray hair, but with the decay and outside elements taking a toll on the body, it was difficult to know for sure.



The woman had a hole in the back of her skull. It was a small hole, which most likely meant someone had shot them from behind. The blast would have done the most damage to her face. He would bet money the woman underneath her died in a similar fashion.

The women could have been a couple. Maybe even mates. Given what he knew about the alpha's agenda, it made sense in a sick sort of way. The older man was an outlier. He just didn't fit in. "Why are you here?"

And why were they naked? Even the old man was. Unless it was some sick sort of game the killer played with his victims. The old man and the woman on top of the other might be wolves. The rotting smell kept him from knowing for sure. The woman on the bottom might not have been. Cass had no way of knowing. He had a gut feeling.

The old man might have been out for a run and was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"What about you two?" The body posture seemed to suggest one was protecting the other. He didn't think it was the way they fell, just based on hand placements and knowing how protective wolf shifters were of the people they loved. Especially their mates.

But why were they out here on pack lands where anyone in the pack could find them? Unless Kreiger had wanted Cass to follow him. If that was the case, then the whole thing might be one big setup. It didn't matter if it was. He was there now. He might as well assess the crime scene and see if he could find anything. If Krieger intended to come after him, he would know it soon enough.

Cass searched for anything out of place. He found nothing, but the scene was days old. The entire time he searched, he thought about the coroner's report. What would it

tell him? Obviously, a bullet to the head killed them, but there was bound to be more evidence. Most of the time, the victims spoke their truth. Gregory May might have only told them he was beaten to death, but the victims in the woods would be a different story.

Cass just had to chase down the evidence before anyone else died. He could practically hear the clock ticking down to the next murder.

The further away he got from the bodies, the less the smell got to him. Being upwind helped.

He shifted into his third form. Hair went a long way toward keeping warm.

He'd never show Riley his third form. If Riley saw him as half man and half beast, resembling a wolf and man hybrid, he'd scar his little warlock for life.

Why the thought jumped in his mind he didn't know other than Riley was never very far from it. Even when he should focus on the murder investigation, he was thinking about Riley.

Cass smelled fresh blood before he saw the body. The killer hadn't hidden him like the others, but he was naked and ripped to shreds. The killer was clearly a wolf shifter. Huge gashes covered his chest, exposing flesh and rib bones. Unlike the other victims, he had just died minutes before and not by a bullet. Not even an hour had gone by since Cass had followed Krieger into the forest and there he was, another victim.

What did Krieger's death mean?

A wolf shifter did this, and not that long ago.

Cass hadn't heard screams or any sounds beside those of the forest. He would have if Krieger had expected the attack, but he'd been caught off guard.

Cass didn't have very long to contemplate why Krieger was a victim instead of the perpetrator. Whoever killed Krieger was nearby.

Cass shifted to his wolf and crouched down. If someone had been watching him, he had already exposed himself. If the killer had a gun, Cass had less of a chance of getting shot by staying low. Cass might hear someone coming if he stayed still.

He didn't have to wait long. He heard movement in the forest. The crunching of snow and the wolves moving through the brush came first. And it wasn't just one wolf. If Cass were to guess, he'd say there were at least eight, maybe more, and they surrounded him.

The alpha was in human form but he wasn't clothed, so he wouldn't stay that way for long. "You've become a liability, Cass. Between Leo's sloppiness and you discovering the truth, you're trying my patience."

So, Miller lost his patience with Leo and blamed him for Cass and Iven's investigation going in the right direction.

Cass shifted to his third form. He'd have a better chance of surviving the attack. When the alpha was done talking, he'd call for his henchmen to carry out the punishment. And that's exactly how Miller would see it, not as an attack on an innocent person but as a pack member needing to be punished.

"You needed to be loyal to the pack first. Not the sheriff. He's a warlock. Not a part of your wolf family. I should have counted on you to fudge the evidence, at the very least, but you won't do that." The alpha sniffed the air. His expression turned to disgust. "I can smell sulfur on you."

Cass growled, his hackles raising.

“You mated one of them. The sheriff’s son?” The alpha shook his head. “You should have picked a wolf.”

The alpha raised his hand and brought it down as if it were a guillotine. It signaled the start of the attack.

Cass braced himself for it.

All he had to do was stay alive long enough for Iven to come.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Riley recognized the area. It was where he'd run out of gas and where he'd met Cass for the first time.

Cass's car sat on the side of the road. They parked behind it. His dad didn't shut off the engine.

"It's important that you listen to me." Fear underlined every word Dad spoke. It put Riley on alert more than what he said.

Riley nodded.

"Wolves protect these lands from outsiders. Like us."

"Like you, you mean." Riley tapped on his neck. "If Cass's bite didn't get me in the club, nothing will."

"Cass's bite should have made you a pack member, but the alpha is old school. He wants to approve every mating. He wouldn't have approved of you simply because you're a warlock."

How fucked up were these people? "So much for living in the land of the free, huh?"

The corner of his dad's mouth lifted in a half smile that made most people look as though they had a stroke. But Dad could pull it off. Since Riley looked so much like him, he wondered if he looked as good doing it also.

“The point is, the second we step onto pack land, the pack might take it as a challenge.”

“Even though we’re here to help Cass? Cass could be in danger.” Riley hadn’t thought about what might have happened or why his dad would ask for his help, even though it put Riley in danger. Obviously, the threat to Cass was far greater, or he wouldn’t have said a word.

“The alpha isn’t a reasonable person.” Dad’s tone suggested Riley should have picked up on that.

“Right. Okay.” Riley reached for the door handle, but his dad stopped him before he could exit the vehicle.

“Promise me something.”

Riley wouldn’t promise anything unless he knew what it was first, and Dad must have known it because he tightened his hold on Riley’s arm.

“This is serious, Riley.” Why did his dad think he wasn’t being serious?

“I’m taking it seriously. My mate is out there, Dad. He needs me.”

“I know. But you have to promise to do everything I say.”

“I will, as long as you don’t tell me to leave him. I won’t do it. Not under any circumstances.”

Was that respect in his dad’s gaze? It sure appeared as though it was. “I won’t tell you to do that.”

Riley nodded.

When his dad let go of his arm, he exited the vehicle. Dad wasn't far behind him.

They stood in the middle of the empty road. Forests lined either side with thick underbrush. Even in the daylight, the vegetation made it impossible to see anything.

Dad chanted under his breath, and before Riley knew it, something shimmered around them.

"It's a ward that will follow us. Protection." Dad moved behind him. "Close your eyes."

Riley did.

"Reach out to Cass in your mind."

Riley had zero idea on how to do that. How did you 'reach out' with your thoughts? They were contained in his brain.

For a couple of very long minutes, they stood within the ward and listened to the crickets in Riley's head because nothing else was happening in there.

Riley let out a frustrated sigh and opened his eyes. "I don't know how."

Dad ran his hand down Riley's arm. "It's alright."

"It's not. He's out there alone. God knows what he's going through." By the time he finished his little rant, he was calmer, as if saying the words made them less relevant.

"You'll get it." Dad kept his tone even and calm.

A wash of comfort came over Riley. Knowing his dad was there made a huge difference. Riley took a deep breath and shook off the rest of his frustration. “Let’s do this.”

“Shut your eyes again.”

Riley did.

“Picture Cass in your mind.” That was easy. The last time he saw Cass, he kissed Riley goodbye, holding him close. He’d said he didn’t want their night to end. How he wanted to pretend it wasn’t morning yet. And then he’d joked about wanting to kidnap Riley and hold him hostage on the bed. Riley had been all for that.

“Do you have his image? It needs to be a strong one.”

“I got it.” Riley had his smiling face at the forefront of his mind. But the smile turned wolfish, literally. Cass’s mouth grew and distorted. He grew fur everywhere, and his wolf emerged somewhere in the twisted breaking of Cass’s body. And then it changed again. He stood on two legs, instead of four. He still had hair. His head was still a wolf’s. His fingers had long claws. But his legs were more human than wolf. He was so tall, it stole Riley’s ability to breathe.

Riley wanted to back away from the creature, but its gaze met Riley’s. Those amber eyes belonged to his mate. They showed affection and worry. There was also confusion as if Cass wasn’t sure why Riley was there.

And then Cass growled, shoving Riley away.

“Go home. Stay safe.” The voice was still Cass’s voice, even though it was distorted and gravelly.



While Riley knew on a fundamental level the exchange happened in his mind, the experience felt as real as if Cass had been standing in front of him.

Cass was fighting for his life. He was in the middle of several wolves. Riley couldn't tell how many there were, but they had injured Cass. Riley couldn't tell how bad it was.

He opened his eyes. "I know where he is."

"Now imagine yourself putting a tether on him, linking you. Like a rope."

Riley put the imaginary rope around Cass's waist, ignoring his growl. "I got it."

"Now repeat what I'm about to say. You don't have to say it aloud, just in your mind."

Riley nodded and repeated words he didn't understand in a language that sounded as ancient as when time began—the connection formed in the center of Riley's chest. The pull was overwhelming in its intensity, giving Riley no choice but to follow where it led.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Cass was in deep shit. There wasn't any other way around the trouble he was in, but to experience it. He'd walked right into a damn trap. Hindsight, being what it was, he should have waited until Iven arrived. Since he hadn't been able to save Krieger, doing so would have saved his life.

He stared the alpha down, watching him. He would give the sign for the next attack. Cass was the only one in his third form. It gave him an advantage.

He'd injured two wolves severely enough for them to stay down. The rest geared up for the next fight.

Cass had several bite wounds already. They would have killed him if he were in his human or wolf form. His strength saved him from a worse injury.

The fighting had stopped. They were in a moment of reprieve on both sides. It was how the alpha wanted it. Prolonging the attack meant Cass would suffer for longer. Attacking someone in such a way wasn't considered ethical. It was a law amongst wolves not to do exactly what the alpha was doing to Cass. Wolves considered it torture. From where Cass bled out, it felt like it.

Some alphas had a third form, like Cass did. For an alpha who led a pack, they almost always needed one because it set them apart. Wolves considered a third form as stronger and deadlier than others. The better to protect the clan with. Alpha Miller should have shifted into it. If for no other reason than to show strength. But maybe he thought he didn't have to show it since he had eight wolves to do the killing for him.

Riley entering his mind stole his focus. Cass tried not to think about Riley. Fear for his precious mate would rule him, clouding his choices, not that he had many of those left. Cass tried to shake Riley loose, but Riley clung to the recesses of his mind like a monkey. He told Riley to leave, but all he got in return was a scowl on Riley's handsome face.

He needed to focus. The reprieve wouldn't last long. He needed to get Riley out of his head so he could concentrate on the next attack.

Cass's stomach twisted in knots. Knowing what was coming again, over and over, until he succumbed to his injuries, each attack bringing him closer to death. But at least Riley wasn't there to see it.

He needed to think of a way out. Talking wouldn't do it. No one who killed as easily as the alpha would listen to reason. And anyone who followed an insane alpha was a little insane, too.

Could he shift and outrun them?

After the next attack, if he survived it, he might try to make a run for it. He couldn't fight his way out. There were too many of them.

Cass's internal dialogue took a backseat when the alpha pawed the ground.

Two wolves came forward, working together. They snarled as if he were the enemy. Last month, they'd all been at the pack run. The betrayal was the worst part of it all. Maybe this was how Gregory May felt right before he died. And the three victims a few yards away. Miller had even betrayed Krieger.

What would they tell Gran about his death? Would they make him a martyr somehow? They would have to. He had a good reputation in town and amongst the

pack. He knew people considered him a fair deputy.

The attack, when it came, was like the rest. Cass had practice by that point. He'd gotten better at dodging, which was what he did. One went high, the other low. Their momentum made one of them fall to the ground. But the other stayed on his feet, stumbling but righting himself.

When he lunged, Cass deflected. The wolf yipped in pain and landed feet away.

By then, the other wolf recovered.

Cass expected him to attack from below, but he didn't. He went for Cass's neck. Cass reacted too late.

Cass growled when the wolf's teeth sank into his shoulder.

Cass tried to reach for the wolf. He positioned himself well enough that Cass couldn't get a hold of him. He tried to shake the wolf off, but it hung on by teeth and misplaced loyalty.

Blood tickled his skin and matted his hair. He could see it on his chest. He'd bleed out from that one wound alone. It was a matter of time.

How long could he keep going? That was the real question.

His heart ached with the way his pack treated him. The emotional damage was life-changing. The injury surpassed the physical ones on his body.

He transferred the pain into anger and roared. Searching for the nearest tree wasn't difficult. Despite the small clearing they were in, the forest was dense. He turned away from the tree and slammed the wolf into it. The wolf yipped but didn't release

Cass. Cass rammed him into the tree even harder. As soon as Cass moved away, the wolf slid to the ground.

He wasn't sure if the wolf was dead, but he was at least unconscious. His lifeless body lay at the base of the tree on his side.

The dizziness came in waves. Was it blood loss? Or maybe slamming his already injured body against a tree twice knocked a few screws loose. Cass needed to assess his body but he didn't know if he had the time.

The alpha would send another two more wolves to fight him. He had to run before then. But Miller didn't wait. He sent two more wolves after him as soon as Cass defeated the last two. Maybe Miller knew he was close to defeating Cass and wanted it over with.

That made two of them.

It hit him all at once that Riley was in his mind for a reason. Cass could smell him before he saw him, and so could Alpha Miller.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Bile rose in Riley's throat. It wasn't the dead body a few yards away, half covered by brush, that got to him, although that didn't help anything. It was Cass, covered in blood. He was mostly a wolf, but not entirely. Standing bipedally like a human, the rest of him was a wolf. Fur covered his body, but blood matted it down. So much blood. His shoulder and neck were gnarled. Seeing all that pink flesh exposed and torn up as if a shark had bitten him instead of wolves, was what brought on the urge.

He thought for sure he'd lose his stomach contents, but tears flowed and instead, emotion clogged his throat.

The instinct to go to him was overwhelming. He started to, but Dad grabbed him, holding him back. "He needs you to fight for him. Can you do that?"

The desperation in Dad's voice broke through Riley's panic, making it possible for him to think about how he could save Cass's life. He stopped fighting against his dad's hold and listened. "What do I do?"

Riley never fought a day in his life, although he knew how to protect himself. He came from the not-so-great part of the city where carrying mace was a necessity. Muggings and assaults happened fairly regularly in his old neighborhood. But he'd never been a victim.

"You know how to create fire. Use it."

Riley didn't know what to do with a small flame. He didn't have time to think about

it because the wolf in the back shifted into a human. Alpha Miller was naked, which made him seem out of place.

“Attack them,” the man yelled. He was definitely the alpha. Riley remembered him from before.

Cass swayed as if he’d fall over at any moment, but he seemed to brace himself for the attack. Four wolves surrounded him, growling and snarling. Four more lay on the ground. One tried to get up but couldn’t.

Dad chanted, and the next thing Riley knew, something shimmered around Cass. It happened at just the right moment because Cass swayed a little too hard to the left and fell.

Two wolves went after him, and at the same time, two more ran for Dad and Riley.

Instinct kicked in. He ignored everything but saving himself and the two people he loved. He stepped in front of his dad for reasons he couldn’t explain, protecting him from the wolves.

“Riley!” The frustration was real in his dad. But he chanted and threw something over Riley’s shoulder. One wolf froze mid-attack.

The flame was a natural extension of himself. It appeared as if Riley held a lighter. And when the flame grew into a ball of fire, it came from instinct. Riley threw it at the closest wolf.

The fire seemed to suck up the wolf. There was no other way to describe it. One minute, the wolf was there, and the next, he was gone in a giant whoosh. It was as if the wolf had never existed.

The wolves ran at Cass but bounced off the protective field Dad had created, yelping as they landed on the ground.

Cass got to his feet, but Riley could tell he wouldn't stay that way for long.

Dad took action. He pushed Riley behind him, throwing magic around as though he were playing basketball. It was freaking amazing. He had two wolves in some sort of shiny magical bindings. Two were too injured to be a threat. He made the rest freeze.

They all shifted simultaneously, making Riley think maybe Dad had forced them to shift into a human somehow.

As soon as Riley stepped toward Cass, something slammed into him, knocking the breath out of him when he landed on his back.

He stiffened when he felt teeth on his neck. The wolf was heavy as it stood on his body.

It had to be the alpha. He must have shifted to a wolf again.

Cass roared, which made the wolf tighten its jaws.

Riley shut his eyes and waited for his teeth to sink in. But then Cass said, "Fight me. Leave him alone."

"No. No, please. Please." Riley didn't know he was going to say it until the words were out of his mouth. All he knew was Cass wouldn't survive a fight. He could barely stand up. Riley couldn't let him do it.

A gun clicked, as if someone cocked it back, taking aim. It had to be his dad.



The wolf on top of him shifted. When its teeth left his throat, Riley sighed in relief. But then the alpha pulled Riley to his feet. The alpha used him as a shield, threatening to kill him with the claws on one hand.

“If you shoot me, I’ll kill him. You don’t want your son’s blood on your hands, do you?”

“You’re done, Miller. Give up.” Dad never wavered. He seemed as if his energy waned. Riley couldn’t figure out why until one wolf, who had been bound by magic, moved.

The wolf shook off the effects of the magic as if he were shaking water from his fur.

Dad shook his head. “I can’t hold it.”

Riley had heard his dad chant the words enough times. He thought he could conjure the spell. As soon as he said the words, a shield shimmered around him and the Alpha.

“Shit.”

The alpha chuckled. “Well, aren’t you helpful?”

Riley pictured the shield coming down, and then it did. He didn’t have to use his words.

Dad sucked in a breath, but his surprise took a backseat to having his gun trained on the alpha.

The wolf bared its teeth.

“Take down the deputy first. I’ve got the sheriff and his son.” The alpha said it as if he were smiling. Since Riley’s back was to his front, he couldn’t say for sure.

The wolf snarled at Cass, stalking him. When it lunged, it went for Cass’s throat where his neck already resembled hamburger.

Riley tried to get away, but the alpha’s hold tightened. He didn’t know he cried out or that he screamed until it rang through the forest. The sound became tangible, touching everything in thick waves, like metal sailing through the air.

When Riley pictured it in his mind, everything froze except for him. Even the sound wave stopped moving. The wind froze on his command.

Riley tore himself away from the Alpha, falling to his hands and knees because of the momentum.

“Cass.” He couldn’t see through his watery tears. He still managed to get to his feet and made his way to Cass. He pushed the sound waves away like water. The wolf came next. He hadn’t bitten Cass yet, so Riley didn’t have to worry about hurting Cass as he pushed on the wolf.

The wolf hung in the air a few feet from him.

Riley’s hands shook as he touched Cass. He hesitated to touch his wound. His hands shook. “Oh god, Cass.”

He was bad off, and Riley didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know how to help Cass or how to fix him.

He didn’t know how to make things move again. He wasn’t even sure how he did what he did.

Riley waded through the waves to his dad. He pictured his dad moving again. That seemed to work before.

Except nothing happened. He touched his dad's arm.

"I don't know what to do. Dad." He tightened his hold, leaning on him for support. "I need you."

Dad's body softened. Dad put an arm around Riley but kept his gun trained on the alpha. He scanned the area. Twice. And then turned to Riley, meeting his gaze. "You did this?"

Riley shrugged. "I don't know. I think so. That wolf was going to kill Cass and I...I panicked."

His dad blinked at Riley as if he were seeing him for the first time, but he recovered quickly. "We can use this."

"Cass is all torn up. He needs me."

"Can you wake him up?"

"Wake him up? I didn't put him to sleep."

"That's what it feels like."

Riley pulled his dad over to Cass, pushing the sharp sound waves away so his dad wouldn't get cut. Not that he was sure they would cut Dad. They didn't cut Riley, but something told him they would cut everyone else, including his warlock dad.

"I need you to tell me what to do. How to help him. He can't..." Emotion lumped in

his throat, stealing his words for a moment. He swallowed them down as best as he could, but it came through when he spoke, anyway. “He can’t die like Mom.”

Iven sheathed his gun and then pulled Riley into a hug. “He won’t.”

Riley would have smiled if he wasn’t so panicked. “Do you promise?”

“I’ll do everything in my power, Riley.” Iven met his gaze again. “Now, can you unfreeze him?”

Riley didn’t know how he did it. The fundamentals were beyond him. But he put his arms around Cass, holding him up. He feared Cass might fall over.

Dad went to Cass’s other side.

Riley pictured Cass in his mind. With Cass, it was different. When he pictured him, he was there, yelling at Riley for being in the forest, for putting himself at risk.

“Wake up, Cass.”

I’m awake, Riley. And I’m pissed. Cass said through their link.

Riley couldn’t keep the tears at bay. “Don’t die. Okay?”

Cass sighed. “You don’t either.”

“I won’t, but you have to wake him.”

“I don’t know how.”

Oh, right. Because Riley was the one who needed to wake him.

Riley got out of Cass's head and pictured Cass moving so Riley could help him.

It didn't take long before Cass fell into Riley. His fur disappeared, and he shrunk to human height. His skin was as covered in blood as his fur had been. "The discussion isn't over, Riley."

"Live, and I'll let you yell at me for as long as you want."

"Yell at him for what?" Dad asked.

"For coming here. For putting himself at risk." Cass growled. His eyes turned canine.

"Concentrate on staying alive." Riley didn't want Cass to stress. It wouldn't help his injuries.

"Ditto, baby." Cass scowled when he finally glanced around. "What the hell happened?"

"Riley happened," Dad said.

Cass met his gaze. He was clearly in pain, but admiration came through despite it.

Riley shrugged. "I don't know how I did it."

"We'll practice." Dad pressed the button on his radio and spoke into it.

Riley didn't know what the numbers and letters meant, but they seemed to calm Cass.

"I just need to shift a few times. That should heal some of my wounds. At least enough to get me to the hospital." Cass met Riley's gaze. "Stay next to me. No matter what. Got it?"

Riley bit his lip to keep from smiling. “Yeah.”

“Even when I’m in my third form.”

“The werewolf beast thing?”

Cass sighed as if something Riley said annoyed him. Riley chalked it up to being injured. Since Cass could argue and stay grumpy, Riley figured his injuries looked worse than they were.

Come to think of it, the massive hamburger one on his neck appeared to have stopped bleeding. “Can you heal faster than a human?”

Cass cupped Riley’s cheek. “Faster than a warlock, too.”

That’s why Cass was so worried about him.

“Are you trying to say I’m fragile? Because I’ll have you know, I saved your life.” Riley pointed to the wolf, still stuck in a mid-air attack.

“I didn’t call you fragile.” Cass kissed Riley.

It felt weird in front of his dad, not that Dad paid attention. He’d moved on to securing the crime scene. He felt for pulses on some wolves and left the others alone.

“You did, but I’ll forgive you.” He was just glad Cass would live. Nothing else mattered as much as that.

Cass held Riley close and spoke to Dad. “There are three bodies a hundred yards west from here. They’ve been there a while. I think Krieger led me to them. He wanted me to find them.”

“Is that Krieger?” Dad pointed to a dead guy a few feet away.

“Yeah. I found him a few minutes after the other three.” Cass shook his head.

Dad pulled zip ties out of his pocket. “Do what you got to do. I need you well enough to help me secure the scene.”

Cass kissed Riley one more time. “I’m going to shift now, baby.”

Riley gave Cass room to shift. Each time he did, the wound on his neck appeared to scab over.

“I’ll grab your clothes.” Riley turned toward where he knew Cass’s clothes lay on the side of the road, ready to trek through the forest to go get them.

Cass grabbed him around the waist. “No, you don’t. Next to me at all times, remember?”

“It’s ten minutes, and none of them are a threat right now.” Riley waved a hand at all the frozen people. Some were literally freezing by that point if the purple tint to their skin was any indication. “I’ll grab blankets for them too.”

“Glued to my side, Riley.”

Riley sighed. “Fine. But I have a class on Monday. You can’t come with me.”

Cass smirked. “Can I have the day off on Monday, Sheriff?”

Iven chuckled. “I’m not getting into the middle of it.”

“That’s a change,” Cass mumbled.

Riley held Cass around the waist as they made their way toward the road.

Was Iven Palmer coming around? It sure sounded like it, but Riley wouldn't know for sure until his dad said so. Riley knew him well enough to know they'd have the conversation on his own time.



### Chapter Twenty-Five

Cass still had some healing to do. Physically, he'd be all right. He showered and changed in the station. It went a long way toward making him feel like a person again. But he still limped, and the wound on his neck hadn't healed completely. By tomorrow, his body would appear as though nothing had happened. He'd have no scars to show what he'd gone through. But what the alpha and his crew did to Cass would leave scars on his soul for a long time.

Riley sat in Iven's office. He'd pulled a chair to the corner of the room and leaned his head against the wall. His eyes were closed, but Cass could tell he wasn't sleeping.

Cass wondered what was going through Riley's head. Maybe he was just tired, but it might go deeper than that.

Iven sat behind his desk. Probably typing up the report. It was always tricky to doctor a report, so the shifter and warlock elements were left out. Almost all residents in Fortune Falls were something other than humans who were a part of the packs and covens. It was all the outsiders and a few of the college students who were unsuspecting. Iven had his work cut out for him.

So did Cass, for that matter. He'd have his own report to doctor.

When Iven saw him come out of the bathroom, he stood and closed the distance between them.

"I called Maggie." Great. That meant Gran would be there within fifteen minutes.

That would go one of two ways. Either Gran would fuss over Cass, or she'd threaten the alpha who was in the station's holding cells at the back of the room.

Cass nodded to Riley. "How is he?"

"Shook up. Understandably so." Iven had a no-nonsense way of approaching the world. But it all disappeared when it came to Griffin and Riley. Emotions took over. "I'd be sorry for taking him along, except he saved your life."

Cass knew his expression softened. He couldn't help but be proud of Riley. And grateful. "He's tough."

"With a mother like Vivianne, he's had to be his whole life." Iven sighed.

"You can't change his past, Iven." History was set in stone. Nothing about it would change. It was nothing but rock solid after the fact. All they could do in the present was read the hieroglyphics.

Iven nodded. "I know."

"What he did back there..." Cass wasn't sure what had happened. He never thought he'd be able to see sound waves. Not to mention them freezing solid, as if ice had formed around them.

Even Iven didn't know what happened or how Riley had done it. Cass could tell by his expression. "He's special."

"In more ways than one." How did Cass get so lucky, having a mate as talented and beautiful as Riley?

"I know why you were out there, in that spot."

What Iven said had hurt. But Cass needed to consider the possibility that Iven was right. Did Cass put Riley at risk? He'd gotten his answer, although it almost cost him his life. "He and I need to stay together as much as possible. We can protect each other better that way."

Iven smiled. "I agree. That's why you have my blessing."

Cass didn't know how tense he'd been until it left his body. He'd craved Iven's approval. "I'll take care of him, Iven. You have my word."

Iven patted Cass's shoulder. "I know you will. But don't rush living together. Please. Riley needs me to take care of him for a bit longer."

"It'll be at his speed. I promise."

Riley watched them through the glass in the window. When their gazes met, Cass winked. Riley smiled and winked back. He pointed to his own shoulder and then pointed to Cass, asking how Cass felt.

Cass nodded. Even though he wasn't at one hundred percent yet, he still felt okay.

Riley sighed as if in relief.

"We should talk to the alpha." Cass wanted to get it over with.

"I tried. He lawyered up already."

"Yeah, well, I have a few questions, anyway. It doesn't have to go in the report." Cass met Riley's gaze again and held up a finger before pointing to the back of the station.

Riley nodded and shut his eyes again, resting in the corner. His face softened as if the worry left his body.

Iven chuckled. “First, you two have silent conversations and then you’ll be finishing each other’s sentences.”

“Those’re couple goals for you when you find your mate. You’re welcome.” Cass smirked.

“I guess it is.” Iven followed him to the back of the station.

The alpha sat on the cot. When they walked in, he stood up. His expression hardened. All the charm he usually had was gone. “You betray the pack by mating with that...that thing.”

At first, Cass took the bait at least in his own mind. Anger washed over him. Cass wanted to react, but he stopped himself. A reaction was what the alpha wanted.

Iven had a similar response. When he stepped toward the cell, as if to go inside and punch Miller’s filthy mouth, Cass held him back.

Cass shook his head, which was all it took for Iven to back off, although he seethed as he leaned against the back wall.

Cass focused on Miller again. “Gregory May and Quincy Barr were the first, right? Not the women and the old man in the woods.”

Miller clammed up. He averted his gaze.

“That’s okay. You don’t have to answer. I’ll wait for the coroner’s report.” Cass knew why Miller had Krieger kill them. Miller said he wanted to increase pack

numbers, but he also wanted only wolves in the pack. “Those women. One of them was human, weren’t they? And the old man was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Cass and Riley were just like those women. They would have been next on Miller’s victim list. Except something happened with Krieger, and that changed everything.

Miller smirked and stepped closer. He’d never seemed more sinister than in that moment. “Warlocks should mate with warlocks—wolves with wolves. You’re tainting the pack. I hope they finish making you pay.”

Riley came around the corner. “You were going to torture my mate to death.”

Every word created a wave. They stilled as they bounced off the walls as if waiting for Riley’s orders. It bent to his anger, ready to strike at Miller if he said the next wrong thing. It was visible. Tangible. Cass could touch them, but he couldn’t manipulate them the way Riley could. He couldn’t even push them away. They held him in place, but he had his wits about him. He didn’t feel as if he were sleeping.

Miller sucked in a breath. “What the hell is this?”

“You’re a monster.” The sound waves cut through the air at a faster speed. The tension increased in Riley’s body, and it was as if he were a bomb ready to explode.

“Riley.” Iven’s tone held a warning. He expected Riley to kill Miller.

Cass was a little worried about it, too.

“Baby, look at me.” When Riley didn’t avert his gaze from Miller, Cass tried again. “Look at me. Not him.”

Riley glanced at Cass. Their gazes met and held.

Riley could kill just by speaking, if he wanted to. Yet he still looked to Cass for protection. “Do you see how I’m okay?”

Riley nodded, but the sound waves from Cass’s words bent to his will, stilling in the air. Riley raised his hand, and all the waves stood at attention as though they were soldiers ready for the next command. When he flicked his wrist and pointed at Miller, the waves turned into thousands of deadly needles.

“Riley Cameron Palmer. Stop it, right now.” Iven’s voice was sharp.

“The world is better off without him.” Riley wasn’t backing down.

“You don’t want to save the world, Riley.” Cass expected him to deny it.

“Fine. You’re right.” Riley met Cass’s gaze. His chin wobbled. “I don’t want him to hurt you again.”

“You see me. I’m right here.” Cass reached out his hand, wanting to touch Riley, but he was too far away. The waves were razor thin. Sharp and deadly. Cass couldn’t move for fear of getting cut.

Riley pushed the waves out of his way, flicking his wrist so some of them let Cass and Iven move, too. As soon as Cass had him in his arms, he turned them away from Miller. “You saved me already.”

“If you hurt him, it would be for revenge. Is that a good enough reason to kill him?” Iven’s tone seemed to work. Cass could feel Riley’s resolve slipping through their bonding link.

“Maybe.” Riley’s hold tightened. When he sighed, Cass heard the resignation in Riley’s tone. “No.”

The waves crashed to the floor, shattering like icicles.

Iven put a hand to his chest and shut his eyes, sagging against the wall.

Miller opened his mouth as if to speak, but Cass held up a hand, stopping him before he could. “I’d exercise your right to remain silent if I were you. He’ll use every word against you. Literally.”

“And I’ll make your death look like an accident,” Iven added. As sheriff, they could spin it so Riley wasn’t even involved.

Cass just didn’t want Miller’s death to weigh on Riley. But Riley was right about Miller. The world was better off without him. He was considered a serial killer. And there was enough evidence to put him away for life. Wolf shifters didn’t fare well in prison. With cameras everywhere making it impossible to shift regularly, there wasn’t balance in the life of a prisoner. Cass had heard the horror stories about how incarceration left wolf shifters unhinged.

Iven turned to Cass. “Did you get the answers you wanted?”

“I’m done here.” Cass led Riley out of the hall.

Their feet crunched on the waves.

“Hold up.” Cass crouched and picked up one of the broken pieces. It cut his finger, though it was only a prick. “It really is glass.”

Riley shrugged as if he knew he’d made sound tangible and had turned it into

something else entirely but that wasn't a big deal to him.

"You don't get cut." Cass stood and put his arm around Riley again.

"I don't know why." He leaned against Cass and yawned.

"Well, I'm glad it doesn't hurt you." The reason was something to contemplate later. He had a tired mate to take care of. "Do you want to come home with me?"

Riley tightened his arms around Cass's waist.

Cass smiled and met Iven's gaze. "If you don't need us for anything, I will take him home with me for the night and bring him home in the morning."

Iven nodded. "Breakfast at home in the morning, Riley. There will be enough for both of you."

Riley pulled out of Cass's arms and went to Iven, hugging him.

Iven held him. "You did good today, son."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Warlock training before class on Monday. You can take the weekend off since you got a lot of practice today." They were calling what Riley did practice? Seemed a little off the mark.

"Dinner as a family on Sunday?" Riley's tone was hopeful.

"I'll call Griffin. You bring Cass."



“Deal.” Riley fist bumped Iven.

“Am I invited?” Maggie Huber entered the station like a whirlwind. She bypassed the front counter and stood in front of Cass with her hands on her hips. “The next time I have to hear about you getting injured from the sheriff, it will buy you a heap of trouble. I doubt you’ll find it worth it. So, what are you going to do in the future, boy?”

Cass smiled. “Be the first to call.”

“Smart answer.” Maggie turned her gaze onto Riley and then to Iven. “He’s your youngest? Looks just like you.”

Iven grinned. “Handsome, isn’t he?”

“My grandson seems to think so.” Gran turned to Cass and shook her finger at him. “Yet another thing I had to hear from someone else.”

“Zinnie.” Cass and Iven spoke at the same time. Then they both chuckled.

“Yes. Thank the gods for her, or I’d know nothing about you.” Maggie turned back to Riley and opened her arms. When he just blinked at her, she wiggled her fingers. “Well, come on. Don’t keep an old woman waiting.”

Riley raised his eyebrows as he met Cass’s gaze.

Cass smiled and nodded.

That was all it took for Riley to go to her. She enveloped him in a hug, which he seemed to fall into as if she were his long-lost grandmother.

Gran had that effect on people. She was a little firecracker when she needed to be, but she also had a mothering instinct that made everyone want to be close to her.

“Oh, you need a lot of love, don’t you?” Gran held Riley a little closer. “You’ve come to the right place for that.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m not even close to being done with you.” Gran held him by the shoulders. “Now, I heard you’re a baker. How about we set up a time to bake together?”

Cass chuckled. “You’ll never get out of the kitchen.”

Gran waved his comment away. “Like you don’t benefit.”

“I’m thinking of starting my own bakery business.” Riley offered, and then his eyes widened as if he wasn’t sure why he said that aloud and to a stranger. But Gran had that effect on people. They shared things they typically wouldn’t.

“Is that right?”

Riley nodded.

“How about we talk all about it when you come to my house? And bring my grandson with you. The gods know he doesn’t visit enough.”

Cass shook his head and sighed. “Next week?”

“Try again.” She didn’t let go of Riley’s arm as she spoke.

“Tomorrow?”

“Better.”

Riley chuckled.

She let go of Riley and cupped Cass’s cheeks. “Are you okay?”

“Physically. Yes. But the pack...it’s a mess.” Cass sighed. “We can talk about it tomorrow. I don’t want to think about it right now.”

“You’ve had a hard enough day.” Gran nodded as if that was the end of it.

And just like the whirlwind she was, she left a wake of changes when she exited the building.

Riley blinked after her. “I think I just found my new best friend.”

Cass chuckled. “She’ll love that.”

Riley gave Iven another hug. “One more for dinner.”

“And come over to Gran’s tomorrow,” Cass added.

“That didn’t take long,” Iven mumbled.

“What didn’t?”

“The two of you finishing each other’s sentences.” Iven headed to his office.

Iven was right. It didn’t take long at all.

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They didn't make it past the door. As soon as Cass closed it, he had Riley pressed against it, holding him by his ass.

Riley wrapped his legs around Cass's waist. His fingers laced through Cass's hair as they kissed.

Cass would never get enough of Riley. He'd known it from the first moment he scented him as he sat on the side of the road in the dark in the middle of pack lands. That seemed like ages ago. The stress of their secret was no longer there, and Cass worried less about the pack hurting Riley, although his protective instinct was still intact.

Not that he wanted to think about the pack. That would just stress him out. The pack was in limbo, and many members just didn't know it yet. They would all have something to say when they found out about the alpha. Things would change. And even though they had needed to, the pack's future was too uncertain to feel settled.

His relationship with Riley was the one bright spot. Their contentment went deep, finding a home. It wouldn't be long before they were ready for other things besides spending the night on occasion. Their baby steps would head in the right direction, knowing it made up for the insecurity within the pack.

Riley trailed his hands to Cass's shirt and pulled it up as if he wanted it off.

Yeah, he certainly felt lucky. And really grateful.

Riley stopped kissing him for a moment. "Get naked."

Cass set Riley on his feet. He felt the loss of his body heat. He wanted a feel of his ass again. Even through the denim of his jeans, Riley was a perfect handful.

Cass pulled his shirt over his head and threw it near the couch. He didn't look to see where it went.

"You too, baby." Cass worked on getting his pants off. He had them undone when Riley stepped into his space again.

"I will in a minute. I want to feel you first." Riley made a sound as if he could taste Cass through his touch when he ran his hands all over Cass's chest. "You're warm."

"Finally." Cass didn't think he'd ever get warm, even after putting on his clothes at the car or taking a hot shower at the station. Staying in his human form while naked and standing in the snow as he bled all over everything was for the fucking birds.

But being with Riley was like sipping on a cup of hot chocolate by a warm fire wrapped in a soft blanket. It didn't take long to get warm when Riley's body helped heat him up. The promise of more went a long way toward keeping him heated. If Riley's expression was any indication, Cass would catch on fire soon.

Riley kissed the center of Cass's chest.

The mood shifted. Riley's hands shook and then he put them around Cass, holding on so tightly, it was almost painful. "I was so scared for you."

Cass had been, too. If Riley and Iven hadn't come, Miller and his crew would have killed him. "I'm sorry, baby."

"It'll take a while to get the image out of mind, of you all bloody and torn to shreds."

"Wolf shifters heal fast." It might have been true, but it was a poor consolation prize.

Riley sighed. “Is that a normal occurrence in your pack?”

It didn’t occur to Cass that Riley would think such a thing. “It’s the first time I’ve had to fight anyone in a long time. Not since I was a kid, and Adrian Trentino called my Gran weird. I punched him in the nose and broke it. Talk about blood getting everywhere.”

Riley chuckled. “Was she weird?”

“She still is. You met her. Now her weirdness is endearing because she’s a cute old lady.”

“I’ve never fought anyone before today.” If that’s what Riley called fighting, Cass would hate to see what Riley would do to someone if he were angry enough.

“If the residents of Fortune Falls saw you do what you did, no one would fuck with you.”

Riley kissed Cass’s chest again. “The most I’ll do is throw my muffins at them.”

Picturing Riley hurling muffins at strangers like a little lunatic made him laugh. “You can toss your muffins at me, baby. I’ll know exactly what to do with them.”

“Well, my muffins want you to touch them.” Riley kissed Cass’s nipple and then licked it.

Cass moaned and gripped Riley’s ass cheeks with both hands.

“Food references turn me on.” Of course, that wasn’t really true. What did it for him was Riley’s attention in all the right places, but Riley was witty when he wanted to be. Cass wanted to know how he’d respond.

“Is that so?” Riley kissed Cass’s other nipple. “How about we reintroduce your sausage to my muffins?”

Cass’s chuckle turned into another moan when Riley fell to his knees. He pushed Cass’s pants and underwear down and then helped him take them off.

When his cock was free, Riley held it. He kissed the shaft before moving onto the head. And then he took it between his lips.

The wet heat was amazing, but so was watching Riley take it in his mouth. Riley didn’t stop until Cass felt some resistance. Riley couldn’t take it all, but he definitely didn’t seem to have a gag reflex because Cass could feel him swallow.

Cass held the back of Riley’s head but didn’t make demands. He just needed to touch him. Nothing more.

When Riley pulled part way off, he watched Cass, as if he wanted to see Cass react. And Riley wouldn’t be disappointed because all thoughts fled his mind when the pleasure ramped up.

Cass fought the urge to thrust. He wanted to be inside Riley when he came, but it wouldn’t take much for Riley to make it happen if he kept it up. When Riley moved on Cass’s cock, Cass hissed and bit his lip.

Cass was on the verge of losing control. “That’s enough.”

Riley pulled off. His lips were rosy and parted. When he stood, he pressed himself into Cass. His cock was hard.

Cass wrapped an arm around Riley’s waist and pulled him to the bedroom. Once inside, he helped Riley take off his clothes. The whole time, his hands shook. He was desperate to come, but he needed the time to calm down, or he’d come as soon as he

was inside Riley.

“Get on the bed.” Cass pulled open the bedside table and waited.

Riley lay on his back in the center of the bed and pulled his legs back. “Hurry, Cass.”

Cass climbed on the bed between Riley’s legs. He put the lube on his fingers.

He rubbed a finger over Riley’s opening.

Riley moaned and lifted his hips into Cass’s touch. “In me.”

Cass pressed inside. “Are you topping from the bottom, sweetheart?”

Riley nodded. The gesture was almost frantic.

Cass took Riley’s place and handed him the lube.

Riley took it with no small amount of enthusiasm. He put some on his fingers before straddling Cass’s hips.

“You like riding.” Cass wished he could see it when Riley stretched himself. Next time, Riley could be on all fours. That way, Cass could watch him from behind.

Riley nodded. “I want to control the penetration.”

“You want to tease?” Cass held Riley around the waist.

Riley chuckled. “I wish I could. I’m too far gone for that.”

It didn’t take long for Riley to hold Cass’s cock at the base and position himself over it.



Cass watched Riley's expression when he sank onto his cock. He closed his eyes as he moaned, and then he smiled, although it was strained.

Cass wanted a snapshot of the moment. He wished his phone was closer. He'd take a picture of Riley.

As soon as Riley took all of him, he sighed as if that was where he'd needed to be for days. There wasn't anything better than being inside Riley.

Cass reached around Riley to his ass, feeling where they connected. And then Cass gripped Riley's waist again. "Fucking sexy."

Riley smiled again, but it turned into a moan when he lifted off Cass's cock and then sank down again. "So good."

Riley moved again. And then again. His rhythm was erratic, but it was as if he were testing the pleasure, riding the high.

Cass wanted to take over the thrusts, and he would, just not yet. "You're addicted to my cock."

Riley nodded and let out a breathy chuckle, "Yeah. Wolfy cock."

Cass grinned and moved his hips.

Riley increased his pace.

Cass held him still and fucked into him even faster. Their skin slapped together and every time, Riley got louder. "Cass...God, Cass."

"Wolfy cock."

“Fuck yeah.”

“Want my knot.”

“Yeah.”

“How bad?” Cass wouldn’t last much longer. The pace was too hot for it to be a slow ride.

“Real...bad.” Riley slammed down as Cass was coming up.

Cass gripped Riley’s cock. Touching it was all it took to set Riley off. Riley tightened around him. It seemed impossible for it to feel even better, but it did.

Cass couldn’t hold back. He pressed into Riley and held still, wanting to prolong it, but it was too late. Cass lost control. He growled and fucked into Riley until the white hot need peaked.

“Mine.” Cass bit Riley on his mating mark, holding him still as his knot formed.

Riley cried out. His channel tightened again. “Cass.”

Cass wrapped his arms around Riley. He licked across the bite. “Mine.”

Riley laced his fingers in Cass’s hair. He moved his hips just enough to feel Cass’s knot, and then he stilled. Riley’s body relaxed on top of Cass’s. “Love you, Cass.”

Cass sucked in a breath. He held Riley tighter.

Riley stiffened. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

Cass rubbed Riley’s back. “But do you mean it?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

Cass chuckled. “You think, huh?”

“It’s too soon, right?” Riley sighed.

“I don’t know. What’s the proper amount of time?”

“How should I know? I’ve never been in love before. Besides, you’re way older than me. Shouldn’t you know?”

“I’ll show you older.” Cass tickled Riley’s sides. When Riley laughed and wiggled around, the movement made his knot move inside Riley.

Cass hissed at the pleasure and Riley moaned. But it soon became apparent that Riley didn’t want to stop moving.

Cass got between them and took hold of Riley’s cock. He jacked Riley off to the rhythm he set.

“Come on, love. Come on my knot.” Cass’s words must have spurred Riley on because Riley picked up the pace.

It didn’t take long for Riley to come again. The orgasm seemed to hit him like a train. He cried out. His movements slowed down and then stopped. He panted and went limp on Cass again.

“Your bounce back is amazing.”

“Told you I was young.”

Cass acted as though he would tickle him again, but he didn’t when Riley chuckled

and said, “Not again.”

Cass wrapped his arms around Riley and kissed his forehead. “For the record, it’s not too soon.”

“Yeah?” Riley met his gaze.

Cass smiled. “Yeah. Because I love you too.”

Riley grinned and laid his head on Cass’s chest again. “We’re it for each other. The real deal, huh?”

“The real deal.”

It didn’t get much more real. Forever wasn’t that long. He wanted more time, but he’d cherish every moment he got with Riley and be grateful for them.

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