



Primal (The Prey Drive #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Fated Mates: Two characters who are destined to be together.

But what happens when you're rejected by your fated mate?

I, Rennick Fallamhain, Pack Alpha, reject you, Noa Alderwood, as my mate

I never planned on returning to the pack that exiled me, but life has a way of forcing you to face your ghosts. I'm a shifter without access to her wolf. Latent. A weakness in their mighty ranks.

For eight years, I stayed away. I built a life, found a new purpose.

But Fate—that conniving b!tch—has me crawling back to the people who cast me out.

I'm not sure what I expected to find upon my return, but I can tell you with certainty I never expected him.

Rennick Fallamhain.

The pack's new Alpha.

One innocent touch has my trapped wolf raging against her chains. Without thought, I've opened my big mouth and claimed him as my mate.

Right in front of the woman he's already promised to.

Oops.

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Rennick

I 've been here before, and like every other time I've found myself in this damn dream, there's this unrelenting, nagging sensation sitting heavy in my chest screaming at me that I've forgotten something important.

No, not just important.

Vital.

The demanding feeling has my heart pounding, flooding anxiety into my veins, and my wolf clawing to be let out—to be allowed control of our shared existence. He knows just as I do that something has been taken, but we can't figure out what that something is or what this recurring dream is trying to tell us.

At least fifty times now I've stood in this mist-filled forest created by my unconscious mind, and each time, it's exactly the same. The dense, white fog obscures my vision and chills my heated skin, causing goosebumps to prickle down my arms and spine. Nothing changes here. Down to the pine needles in the snow-covered ground to the silence that sits thickly in the cloudy air, it's always the same.

That's why I know when I turn around, she'll be standing there waiting for me.

The silhouette made of the same ghostly fog stands between two snow-dusted trees, the long, draping length of translucent hair blowing in nonexistent wind. As always, none of her facial features are definable no matter how hard I squint. Any attempt to move closer to the ethereal figure is futile. If I take one step toward her beckoning

frame, she retreats a matching step. In the past, I've done everything I can think of to get closer, even charging forward in an all-out sprint—in both man and wolf form—but nothing allows me to get closer to her than I am right now.

I gave up trying twenty dreams ago, just as I have given up trying to speak to her knowing she will never answer my calls. All I can do is stand here and try to settle the unease racking my bones until I wake up in my own bed gasping for air as I've done countless times before.

This time, though, I find it hard to control my breathing or keep my wolf at bay. Never before in one of these illusions has he been as restless as he is now. Keeping my grip on him is quickly becoming a losing battle as he fights against me. In my twenty-eight years of life, unconscious or not, never have I lost control of my animal side. While my beast is as dominant as they come, I've always shown unparalleled restraint with not giving in to my baser instincts. It was a skill I was applauded for when I first shifted over a decade ago. But now, like a length of disintegrating rope in my palms, my restraint is fraying apart.

My teeth ache, my canines turning into fangs, and my eyes shift into their gleaming wolf form, making my vision sharpen. My wolf is fighting me harder than he ever has. The desperation radiating from him and seeping in his howls has sweat breaking out across my forehead. Is it possible to sweat during a dream?

I'm about to try and find a way to force my body awake and out of this fantasy I'm trapped in when I hear it. A sound that bleeds into the white mist and envelops me in a calm warmth I've never experienced before.

One simple word spoken is enough to have my wolf stilling, peace settling within.

“Ren,” the detached but sweet, honey-like voice calls to me, tugging at the organ pounding against my ribs.

Ren.

Nobody calls me that. Friends and pack members I'm close to have called me Nick for as long as I can remember, but the new moniker has my knees buckling. On unsteady feet, I stumble forward, barely catching myself before my kneecaps hit the frozen ground.

With my shaking legs once more beneath me, I raise my chin, directing all my focus back to the hazy figure who has been haunting my subconscious mind.

My breath catches in my chest.

She's moved closer. Close enough for me to meet her gaze for the very first time.

The unique orbs staring back at me are shining with a mournful longing that I can't help but feel my own soul mirroring back at her. I'm so enamored with the appearance of her eyes I barely note the way the rest of her facial features are still distorted. Each time I try to focus on what the shape of her nose or lips is, they smooth into the white vapor she's comprised of.

Her left eye shimmers with a rich amber, and something deeply innate tells me if I were closer, I'd see the brown shift to liquid gold under the right light. This color alone is mesmerizing, but it's the uniqueness of her right eye that truly holds me captive. Perfectly divided, the iris is half golden and half icy blue. The blue, the same shade as the frozen northern lakes, pulls me so deeply in I'm moving before I notice I've lifted my foot off the ground.

Like a beacon, I'm unable to fight against the desire to be closer. My fingers tremor at my sides, itching to know what she feels like. The voice in my head I'm certain belongs to my wolf begs me to breathe her in so we can memorize the wraithlike woman's scent. To our disappointment, we can only pick up on the frozen pines and

earth surrounding us.

“Ren,” she repeats, my body having the same reaction to her voice as it did the first time she called to me.

“Who are you?” I ask, the desperation in my tone obvious to my own ears. “Why do you keep bringing me here?” That’s the question I’ve been dying to know since I first started dreaming of her eight months ago.

Despite the ten feet of space still between us, being in her presence is doing something to my soul. It’s mending pieces I didn’t know were broken. Each shard knitted back together allows me to stand a little taller and breathe a little easier. Two things I never thought I struggled with until now.

“You have to remember,” her disembodied whisper pleads with me, her anguish matching mine. “It’s time. You have to remember.”

“I don’t understand. What do I need to remember?” I can’t find any comfort in the fact that she’s all but confirmed what I’ve already known deep inside. Not when every one of my nerves have come alive with a frantic kind of energy. “Please,” I beg. “I need to know.”

“Soon—”

Gasping for air, as though I’ve been submerged underwater for far too long, I jolt awake in my bed.

As I do every time I come out of this reoccurring, prophetic dream, I wait for the frenzied and agitated energy racking my body to pass, and, more importantly, I wait for the debilitating weight of feeling like I’ve lost something imperative to dissipate.

But just like the dream, this time it's different.

My wolf, who's just as restless and volatile as he was when we stood in the mist, hasn't calmed either. Pacing and clawing, he begs me for something I don't know how to give him. Something I can't give him until I remember whatever the hell it is that's been taken from us.

"It's time to remember." Her honeyed plea repeats in my head as I rake my fingers through my hair. The slight pain that comes from tugging on the strands helps marginally bring me back to reality.

The longer I sit here, heart pounding and chest still heaving with every breath, the more I come to the realization I'm not missing a what.

I'm missing a who .

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Chapter 1

Noa

I never wanted to go back, and I thought my mother had agreed with me on this, but as it turns out, the notorious and powerful Thalassa Alderwood had every intention of one day coming home.

In one shape or another, she was always going to return to Fallamhain Pack territory. I just wish she had been the one to tell me this and not some estate attorney with a unibrow and a weird curly hair growing out of the tip of his nose. Grooming habits aside, Mr. Miller must be good at his job because my mother was the least trusting person I've ever met, and she bestowed him with some fairly important tasks. It was this lawyer, whose name I'd never once heard before, that not only oversaw the deed transfers of our beloved Victorian house and the apothecary to my name but was also the one who conveyed her final wishes.

Wishes I never saw coming.

Thalassa's last earthly request was to be reunited with her long-passed mate. His remains have resided in the Fallamhain Pack cemetery since his death over two decades ago. The instructions left for me in her perfect cursive writing were that I spread her ashes over his grave. A sentiment I may have considered to be romantic—if not in a slightly morbid kind of way—under different circumstances.

“Are you sure you want to do this today?” Seren's lyrical voice comes through my SUV's speakers. It's barely been an hour and a half since she watched me pull away

from the house. “You’ve been putting this off for, what? Eight months now? No one would blame you if you needed more time. Hey! Halloween is in a couple weeks. Here’s an idea, come home and we can pop some googly eyes on her urn. Maybe a tiny hat. It was Thalassa’s favorite holiday. You know she’d get a kick out of us dressing her up one last time.”

At the mention of my mother’s urn, I risk taking my eyes off the winding Northern Idaho mountain pass to glance at the pewter vessel buckled into my passenger seat. Yes, I buckled my mother in. Safety first, folks. Don’t want her going through a windshield for the second time in a year, you know?

“We could have gotten her a matching costume with Ivey. Now that’s something Mom would have really enjoyed,” I allow myself to muse along with my best friend, a mere hint of a smile curving on the lip I’ve been relentlessly chewing on since I left the safe haven of my small Washington town. It still makes me sad that mom never got to meet Ivey. The baby was born almost three months after mom’s accident. Having to navigate a world without my mom and learning how to help take care of a newborn was a wild time for both Seren and me.

If there is something I’ve learned in these difficult months it’s that humor, no matter how dark or macabre, is the only way forward when dealing with deep, debilitating grief. If I hadn’t had Seren there to hold my hand and find the humor in the small moments with, I don’t think I could have made it through this horrific transition in life. The reality of losing the childlike naivety that your mom will always be a constant presence in your life is a pain I wouldn’t wish on anyone.

I never saw myself being a packless orphan at the age of twenty-five. Without Seren and her daughter, and the small community my mother has built for us in Ashvale, I would be facing the weight of the responsibilities left to me by Mom completely alone, and the thought of that is unfathomable. Handling the official day-to-day duties of our little shop, Potion & Petal Apothecary, is a lot to juggle all on its own, but to

also take on the mantle of the less “legitimate” dealings we also secretly run through the business is enough to make me want to flee for the hills. I won’t, of course. Those dealings are vital for so many people, and while dangerous, it’s been my greatest honor to assist those in need of our help.

While the learning curve hasn’t been necessarily smooth and has more resembled being dropped into the deep end of the pool with my hands tied behind my back, I’m proud of the way both Seren and I have stepped into our new roles. I like to also believe Mom is pleased with the way we have been able to keep what she built flourishing.

At the mention of Seren’s five-month-old daughter, Ivey’s babbles echo through the vehicle’s speakers. “Yes! See? That’s the spirit. Even the baby’s into it. Thalassa loved a new outfit. Now, turn your cute little ass around and we can go shopping.” She’s trying hard to mask it with manufactured lightheartedness, but the distinct and sharp sound of Seren’s worry is hard to miss. “I think this is a much better plan. We can postpone your little quest for another day when we’ve had time to fully think this through.”

“Seren—”

“You should have at least waited for a day I could go with you instead of lone-wolfing-it. If you’d given me some notice, I would have asked Edie to babysit,” she interrupts before I can attempt to explain the rash decision-making. “I just really don’t like the idea of you going there alone, Noa.”

The drawn-out breath I exhale is to buy myself a little time and to calm the nerves that have been on fire since I first opened my eyes this morning. “If I waited any longer, I don’t think I ever could have done it. When I woke up, I just knew in my gut it needed to be today. It’s literally the last thing I want to do, but it’s also the last thing my mom asked of me, and I can’t let her down. For her I can do this. I can face

this.”

I can face them , the pack who rejected and exiled me and my mother almost eight years ago.

And I guess when it comes down to it, that’s the real mystery at hand with this shitshow I’ve found myself in. Why in the ever-loving fuck would Mom insist on me going back to the Fallamhain Pack and asking their Alpha this favor knowing how we parted ways all those years ago? And why would she want to be officially laid to rest in soil owned by the very people who rejected her daughter for something out of her control.

Being a latent wolf shifter is obviously something I’d never choose for myself, but that didn’t matter to the pack Alpha. Alpha Fallamhain refused to allow a “weakness” like a latent wolf to be part of his pack. That’s what my mother explained to me the night she told me we had to leave the only home I’d known. That chaotic and fateful night is merely a blur in my head these days. Just vague memories from another life. Memories I try hard not to linger on due to the sharp pain they cause my suppressed wolf.

Seren knows this story and the history I share with my birth pack, and that’s why she’s upset I’ve decided to travel alone to the Fallamhain territory that’s nearly two hours away.

Is it the smartest thing I’ve ever done? Perhaps not, but it’s something I know I needed to do by myself. Which is what I told her this morning when she caught me walking out the front door with my homemade latte in one hand and the urn in the other. You know, just my everyday essentials.

My wolf had also fully agreed with my impulsive plan.

Being latent doesn't mean I don't have a wolf. It just means I can't shift. For years, I tried to find a way to access the animal I share the very fibers of my soul with, but nothing I tried brought her forward. On the best of days, she's a trapped beast pacing the impenetrable glass cage she's confined to. On the worst days, she's nothing more than a ghostly presence within my being. When I try to grasp her, she slips through my fingers as if made of smoke.

When I'd fully accepted today would be the day that I was brave, she had perked up more than she had in years. The closer I get to Silverthorne, Idaho—the town closest to where the pack resides—the more antsy my wolf within becomes. The more she bangs against those indestructible walls she's trapped behind. I can't think of another time she's been this...present.

If I admitted to Seren how my wolf is feeling, I have no doubt it would only make her fight me harder. She knows how vast and devastating the disconnect between my animal and me is. Her knowing my wolf's presence is amping up the closer I get to my old pack's land would only aid her campaign for my immediate return home. Shit, if she were here and picked up on my heightened emotions with her charmer gifts, I just know that she-wolf would be scheming up a way to hogtie me and toss me in the back seat until I was home safe.

"I know you can face this. All I'm saying is you shouldn't have to face it alone." Seren's tone takes on a somber cadence. "This is heavy, babe, and it's a lot to take on. I just want to be there to support you. Or bite that bigoted Alpha on the dick tip—hard—if he doesn't agree to let you spread Thalassa's ashes."

An image I haven't conjured in years fills my mind and it instantly has my inner beast baring her teeth. Merritt Fallamhain. The long-standing Alpha of the largest pack in Idaho. It's not the way he was a walking, talking wall of sinewy muscle or that he had a permanent scowl on his face that I remember best. It's the coldness that lived in the pitch-black depths of his eyes. There wasn't a hint of warmth in those obsidian orbs.

Knowing I will have to look into that chilling gaze today and beg for a favor I, by all accounts, am not entitled to as an exiled member of his pack has me wanting to pull over and purge my vanilla latte onto the side of this mountain road. But that would be a waste of precious espresso, and we don't fuck around with caffeine in my house. That sweet nectar of the Goddess is sacred.

“While I continue to endlessly appreciate your colorful brand of unwavering support, Ser, I will be okay.” If I'm being honest, I don't know if I'm trying to assure her or myself with those words. “I found the phone number for the Alpha's assistant this morning. The woman who answered was shockingly kind and she assured me she'd squeeze me into the Alpha's schedule. Which is more help than I was expecting. The way I see it, there's two ways this can go. Option one, I have an awkward conversation with him. He tells me no and to get the hell out of his territory. Option two, some kind of blessing by the Goddess occurs and he agrees to my request. I spread Mom's ashes and I'm back on the road home in a matter of hours.”

I don't admit there's a third option. One where I'm met with open hostility and somehow end up in a precarious situation. The harried way Mom rushed us out of the territory back then is the reason this last option is on the table. Most of my memories of that night may be hazy, but the way fear darkened her features is something I've never forgotten. In all my years at Mom's side, I've never seen her react like that to anything else. And we've gotten into some sketchy-as-hell situations with our secret little operation.

The growl of frustration that comes from the woman who's all but become my adopted sister since she showed up in our lives is downright animalistic. “Fine. I don't like it, and I will be holding a grudge about it for the next five to seven business days, but fine,” she relents. “But just know, if you don't text me the second you get through those gates and don't provide me with adequate updates, I will drive there and drag you home.”

I can't help but snort at this. "As if you'd interrupt Ivey's naptime to drive to Idaho and get me." The infant's sleep schedule is inflexible and any disturbance to it is not tolerated in my dear friend's book.

Seren scoffs so loudly I can visualize her powder blue eyes rolling in her head. "For you, I would. I'll leave her with the coven if I have to. Those crones love fussing over her, and Ivey likes when Amara makes random shit float in the air. It's a win-win for everyone."

"Ah, yes, I'm sure the very powerful coven High Priestess and elementalist would love to hear you've relegated her gifts to 'making shit float'."

The High Priestess of the Ashvale Coven has long earned her position and our respect. The only person I've ever met more gifted than Amara was my very own mother. A feat not easily accomplished seeing as Mom wasn't a full-blooded witch like the Priestess is. Wolf shifters born with magic in their blood are often called charmers. They are rare shifters who descend from a powerful coven of witches who mated with a pack of shifters about ten generations ago. The power from those unions still runs in their descendants' blood. Often, it presents in miniscule ways, like basic scrying or surface-level healing, but in scarcer occasions, it presents as pure boundless power. The kind of power that can only be gifted by the Goddess herself. My mom was blessed ten times over with that kind of power.

In the end, it didn't matter how much witch's blood ran through her veins. It wasn't enough to keep her here with me.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me," I counter, smiling my first full smile of the day. "You and I both know you needed to stay and watch over Potion & Petal, anyway." The second the apothecary's deed was transferred into my name, I promoted Seren to an official leadership

position. In my absence, there is no one else on earth I trust to leave in charge of our precious establishment. “We still don’t know if Nightingale is going to show up. Her call to the emergency line was cut off, but she sounded terrified. Someone needs to be there in case she finds her way to us.”

Nightingale. A code word Mom came up with for the little birds we take in and help. With all the things my mother could have used her vast power for, she chose to selflessly dedicate it to fighting the abuse and neglect that so many innocents face in the shadowy corners of our world.

Seren exhales a breath. “I know you’re right. One of us needs to be here to man the fort and keep everyone in line. I’ve been worried sick since I heard that call, too. Fingers crossed she makes it to the town borders on her own. Amara will know when someone passes her shields, and she or Lowri will alert us like they always do.”

I’m not sure how she did it, but Thalassa Alderwood managed to accomplish the impossible—convincing the famously reclusive and insular Ashvale Coven to join her secret endeavor. I watched her not only befriend the High Priestess but also persuade her to stand with us. In that moment, I swore there was nothing my mother couldn’t do. In my eyes, she became Goddess-like.

Amara believed in our cause, and once she committed, the rest of the coven followed. And with them came the all-female wolf pack led by Amara’s alpha wolf lover, Lowri Craddock. An alpha with a similar cause to ours who brings in females who have been exiled from their old pack or are running from something in their pasts but still long for the stability and sense of community that a pack can offer. A lot of our Nightingales end up joining the Craddock Pack when they leave us. being part of pack.

Their support is the backbone of everything we do. Without the assistance and safety the Ashvale witches and the Craddock Pack offer us, we wouldn’t be able to save half

the people we do. Our sanctuary—our underground refuge—wouldn't exist at all.

“Keep me updated. You know what to do if she makes it to our doors, and if she does, text me immediately. I'll drop everything and head back.” Nothing is more important than a Nightingale. My mother instilled this in me and that's why I know she'd understand if I had to further postpone finally laying her to rest. “I'm thankful for your fussing and your willingness to act as my savior on the off chance I need one, but I've got this. I promise I'll be home soon. Love you! Kiss the baby for me!”

I end the call before she has a chance to try and talk me out of this. Again.

The rest of the drive, I can't bring myself to turn on the radio or listen to my current audiobook. It's just my restless wolf pacing her cage and a singular thought I keep repeating in my head that keep me company...

What the hell have you gotten me into, Mom?

“Someone will meet you in front of the house,” the young beta male on shift at the pack's security shack instructs after handing me an obscenely bright yellow visitor's tag to place on my dash. Nothing says you don't belong like being branded with blinding neon. “I'll call up there once you're through the gates and tell Rhosyn you're headed that way.”

Behind my dark sunglasses, I glance toward the familiar massive iron and pine gates. The last time I drove through them I was barely eighteen years old and was more confused and heartbroken than I've ever been in my life. Confronting the gates that literally and figuratively closed that chapter of my life brings forward the sorrow I thought I'd long since buried. My wolf, whose anguished howls join the thundering drumming of my heart, echoes my emotions.

“Okay, thank you for your help...” I trail off, realizing I've already forgotten what he

introduced himself as when I'd pulled up.

"Danny," he tells me with a kind, albeit noticeably wary smile.

Anticipating the worst, I braced as if I was going to get smacked in the nose when I had first rolled down my window to greet him. To my relief, Danny has shown no outward signs of disdain, only mild curiosity and caution. Both of which only appeared once I'd given him my name. Up until that point, I had been secretly clinging to the hopeful delusion that after spending nearly a decade away from this pack, my surname and the history associated with it would have dwindled into nonrecognition, but it appears the notoriety has lingered.

His lack of hostility does little to soothe my pent-up beast. My inner wolf doesn't appreciate or take kindly to the attention of men. It's been a mystery for as long as I can remember as to why she reacts like she does when in the presence of a male. Alpha or beta, she doesn't discriminate. The only male I've been around who didn't set her teeth on edge was a rare omega male I interacted with years ago. Her severe reaction to the male population has made dating a no-go and trust me, I've tried to push her on this. Latent or not, it's not in a wolf's nature to be alone. We are meant to find a mate. In the end, it just winds up causing us both immeasurable stress. After my last attempt, where I pushed her issue further than I ever had before and it ended in disaster, I gave up on the issue entirely. That was nearly four years ago.

"Danny," I repeat, offering him a smile of my own. This pack may have rejected me, but I can't find it in me to be rude in retaliation. Besides, it's not like this young guard played a hand in my exile. He would have been a kid himself when it happened.

"Do you know where you're going?" he asks. "If not, there are signs that'll direct you back to the Alpha's place. Just know, if you reach the gathering hall, you've gone the wrong way."

My head bobs once as the nerves in my gut further twist into a knot. “Yes, I believe I remember enough to find my way there.”

Danny’s dark brows pinch, the curiosity in his gaze amplifying.

Yes, I’m who you think I am, buddy.

“Well, I hope you have a good rest of your shift. Maybe I’ll see you when I leave.”

His throat clears. “Yeah, maybe. Shift change is only three hours away, though, so probably not.”

I wave this off with a sarcastic laugh. “Oh, Danny, if I’m here longer than two hours that means something has gone terribly wrong. I’ll see you on my way out.” My promise is more to myself than to the guard. I will not stay in this territory longer than I absolutely must. With that, I dip my chin in goodbye as I roll up my window.

The imposing gates swing open when the front of my army green Jeep is about ten feet away. With one last steadying breath and a silent prayer to Mom, I drive into the place that was once my sanctuary.

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Chapter 2

Noa

It hits me like a blow straight to the diaphragm to drive the familiar winding roads that lead through the ten-thousand acres that make up the Fallamhain Pack territory. In many ways, it looks like nothing has changed, but in others, it couldn't be more unrecognizable.

The old schoolhouse looks to have had an expansion added to it and there is a fresh coat of rich red paint on the sturdy wood siding. There's also a new playground behind the building and...is that a chicken coop? The first day of school I ever attended was in that building, but when I was a student there, it hardly had enough room to house four classrooms. If I hadn't already clocked how many new cabins sit where there used to be nothing but thick forest, the addition to the school alone would tell me how the pack's numbers have grown.

The entrance to the trail I used to take down to the creek doesn't exist anymore. Instead, what looks to be a general store of sorts resides there. The white paint and black trim give it a quaint farmhouse vibe that I would consider to be welcoming if it were located anywhere else. Next to the general store is an equally charming café. The glowing LED sign shaped like a cup of coffee makes my lips twitch.

Growing up here, one of the biggest nuisances we faced was that we had to drive thirty-five minutes to the shops in Silverthorne to purchase any kind of necessities. Even if deliveries were permitted, the community is tucked so deep into the Selkirk Mountain Range few companies were willing to make the drive to transport our

goods. Those who were willing charged a small fortune. Forgetting something as simple as eggs turned into a whole ordeal come mealtime. Going to get coffee with my friends as a preteen was merely a wistful thought when I lived here, but now, it looks like the pack has lattes within walking distance.

In an odd way, it makes me happy to see the pack has found a way to become more self-sufficient. The growth and development of the community tells me in our absence, the pack has not only grown but also thrived.

For the first couple years when we were rebuilding our lives in Ashvale, my sulking teenage brain fixated on the possibilities of what could be happening back here. What had changed? Who had finally come into their wolves after they turned eighteen, and what designation did they present as once they shifted? Alpha, beta or omega? Did the classmates and friends I'd had since we were pups ever think about me the way I was still thinking about them? Were any of them lucky enough to find their fated mate?

I was around twenty when I finally swallowed the bitter pill of my new reality and forced myself to stop marinating in the grief of losing my pack and to stop getting lost in my thoughts of "home". That "home" no longer existed for me.

So, I refused to allow my brain to wonder about the changes here or what was happening with the people I'd grown up with. None of it was any of my business anymore.

Taking the right turn where the paved road ends and transitions into a long gravel driveway, I learn those aren't the only updates that have happened in my time away.

The Alpha's house was always a grand structure. Even if Alpha Fallamhain lived here alone with just his son after his mate had died, council meetings and pack gatherings were often held here. Having plenty of space was not only a luxury, but a necessity

for this home. In the years since I last saw it, the river rock and log cabin style McMansion has been modernized into a thing of architectural beauty. The sides of the home that aren't made of light stacked stone and vertically placed black slats of rustic wood are made of large steel-framed floor-to-ceiling windows. The rooflines are sharp and elegant, and due to the chill in the mid-October air, smoke swirls out of the various stone chimneys. The updated, very contemporary design somehow still manages to have the rustic warmth and charm a traditional log cabin would have.

It couldn't be more different from the historic Victorian manor I've called home these past years, but both homes are beautiful in their own rights.

Turning my attention away from the magazine-ready-style house, I carefully maneuver between other vehicles parked on the circle-shaped driveway to park behind a well-loved vintage baby-blue Land Rover.

My hands are shaking around the steering wheel I can't seem to release. The energy coming from my contained animal is wreaking havoc on my nervous system. She bangs and thrashes against the glass walls that feel like they're five feet thick. Her desperation is squeezing my insides, making it hard to so much as take in a lungful of air. Never in all my years of cohabitating with her has she behaved like this.

I'm considering sending up a silent apology to Mom and blowing this Popsicle stand haunted by memories and bad vibes when the large frame of a man appears in my rearview mirror.

"Shit!" I breathlessly yelp as I jump about a foot in my seat.

Not dramatic at all, Noa.

The way he's positioned, I can only make out the wide expanse of his broad, dark T-shirt-covered chest, and his suntanned arms folded across it. For a second, I silently

wonder if the man is the Alpha's son. I try to conjure up a memory of what he looked like, but for the life of me, my mind's eye remains frustratingly blank.

The man standing behind my Jeep shifts on his feet, alerting me to his impatience. With a painfully slow exhale, I remove my keys from the ignition and briefly look myself over in the mirror. Placing my sunglasses on my head, I straighten out the Bardot-style bangs framing my face and wipe away a bit of smudged mascara.

When I'm as presentable as I'm going to get, I glance at the still buckled-in urn in my passenger seat. There's no point in taking it out of the car until I know the verdict of this meeting.

"I hope you knew what you were doing when you left me these fan-fucking-tastic instructions, Mom, because right now I'm thinking you were batshit crazy and it took me until this very second to realize it," I grumble under my breath, hoping the shifter waiting for me doesn't overhear me. My senses may be slightly enhanced but they're about as useful as a human's compared to a true shifter's. I would wager that he can pick up on my erratic heartbeat from outside the vehicle.

Palming my keys in a grip so hard the metal digs into my palm, I find the courage to exit the safety of my car and face the sentry.

Despite not being able to recall what the Alpha's son looked like, I know immediately this alpha male isn't him. And my wolf knows it too. In her usual fashion, she bristles at the male's tea tree and lime scent. It's not that he smells bad. If anything, I'm usually fond of those scent notes. Hell, I handle tea tree on an almost daily basis back at the apothecary, but when the scent comes attached to a man, it's like sandpaper to my sinuses.

"I didn't think you were ever going to get out of the car," the rumble timbre of his voice washes over me, making my eyes dip to his slightly scuffed white sneakers.

While the alpha aura coming off him isn't suffocating, it's just enough to make my inner wolf want to show deference. Those ingrained instincts are hard to fight. "I thought about knocking on your window, but I didn't want to startle you more than I clearly already did."

Crap...so he did hear me.

The sarcastic side of my brain wants to scoff at this and ask why he's worried about the well-being of an exiled latent wolf, but I'm smarter than that. Instead, I clear my throat and flick my gaze to where messy, light brown hair hangs over the middle of his forehead. Some alphas see direct eye contact as a challenge and if there is one thing I know I want to avoid, it's that. No point in picking fights you know you're not going to win.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting. I was just trying to get my shit together." Oops . My chronic potty mouth strikes again. Way to make a good impression. "Sorry, I just mean I was trying to talk myself into getting out of the car. If I'm being honest, I don't really want to be here."

As I fleetingly allow myself to look into his hazel eyes, I see something that looks shockingly like empathy in the chestnut-and-green-flecked orbs. Empathy is something I was not expecting to receive today.

"Rhosyn told me why you requested a meeting with our Alpha. You have my condolences. Losing a parent is..." He trails off with a solemn shake of his head. "I know how heavy the weight of that loss is. I'm just thankful I had my pack and my mate to get me through it when my dad passed a few years back."

His words, while well-intended, are like a hot poker to the still exposed wound my mom's untimely death has left. "Yeah," I mutter after swallowing down the prickly ball of emotions that has lodged itself in my throat. "You're one of the lucky wolves

to have that kind of support around you.”

The sympathy that is reflected in his features is too much for me to handle and I drop my attention to his shoes again.

“Yes, that I am,” he agrees in a tone that is alarmingly gentle. I walked into this conversation braced for all kinds of outcomes, but being met with...genuine warmth? That wasn't on my bingo card. “I'm sorry. I haven't introduced myself yet.” My eyes widen when he holds his hand out. “I'm Canaan Roarke, Rhosyn's mate and the Alpha's second-in-command. Rosie got caught up dealing with a pack matter and asked me to meet you here since she knew I was headed this way already for a meeting. She's ordered me to tell you she's sorry she's running behind and that she promises she'll try her best to get here before you leave.”

There's something about the way he introduces himself as his female's mate before announcing his substantial pack rank that makes my heart tighten with a kind of jealousy I've never felt prior to this. To have a mate who is so proud of being yours he goes out of his way to let people know of your bond? That's something I can only dream of one day having myself, and if my wolf's behavior toward the male species is any indication, it will only ever be just that. A dream.

And it's because of this I flick my eyes at his offered hand before tucking my own hands behind my back. I'm not a rude person. My mom ensured I knew all my manners, but with my wolf already on edge, I can't fathom allowing myself to come into physical contact with an alpha male right now. As it is, I'm barely holding it together with the inner turmoil she's creating.

“I'm Noa Alderwood,” I introduce myself, my voice sounding strained to even me. “But I'm pretty sure you already knew that.”

To my relief, Canaan doesn't comment on the way I've rejected his offered hand and

instead lets it drop casually to his side. “Rosie may have mentioned it when she called and explained the mystery meeting that showed up on our Alpha’s schedule today.”

Feeling a touch more relaxed, I tilt my head up to finally look at the man before me. He’s older than me, probably early thirties, but the boyish charm of his handsome features makes him appear younger than he most likely is. It’s the laugh lines around his eyes that give his true age away.

There’s about four days’ worth of growth over his strong jaw and chin. His hair is streaked with lighter strands that are more than likely caused by the sun. Wolf shifters are most content outdoors. The golden tan and sun-bleached strands confirm this to be true for the alpha male before me. He doesn’t have any tattoos I can see. The only thing to “blemish” his skin is the mating mark on the side of his corded neck, but I wouldn’t consider that to be a true blemish. It’s a scar to be worn with abundant pride and from the very way he simply says his mate’s name, I know to my very core this alpha is a goner for his mate.

One thing I don’t quite understand is how Canaan came to be the pack Alpha’s second. From what I can remember, the Alpha’s brother had acted as his second for the entire duration of his governance. If something had happened to Merritt’s brother, the logical move would have been to pass the job off to his own son. As the Alpha’s heir, it would make sense for him to start off in a less demanding position where he can learn the ropes before donning the metaphorical crown after his father’s retirement or death. Has something happened to the Alpha’s brother and son, and that’s why Canaan has found himself in this high-ranking position?

These questions run rampant around in my brain for a moment before I seize them and lock them away. The hierarchy and politics of the Fallamhain Pack are none of my concern.

“I’m really thankful to your mate that she was able to fit me in.” I nudge the gravel

below my feet with the tip of my thick-soled Chelsea boot. “I’ve been putting this off for a while now and it’s hard to explain, but today, for some odd reason, just felt...right. Like it was finally time.”

“I understand.” Canaan turns and gestures toward the iron and glass front door of the impressive house. “We have a meeting with our pack council and another pack’s leader right after yours, so let’s get you inside and settled so you’re ready to go once Alpha Fallamhain is back. He’s still finishing up his run and he’s assured me he wouldn’t disappear for too long today. I don’t believe him for shit, but we’re still going to make sure you’re on time even if his ass isn’t. We’ve got a bit of a tight schedule with Rhosyn throwing in this curve ball.”

While the wolf side of me is still reeling from the proximity to Canaan, the human side of me can’t help but feel oddly at ease around the burly man.

With hands balled into fists and my poor battered bottom lip trapped between my teeth, I follow the pack’s second-in-command into the equally remarkable house interior. High ceilings, white-oak floors, and impeccably selected furnishings made of natural materials greet us, but it’s not the tasteful décor that nearly brings me to my knees. It’s the scent that is permeating every damn square inch of the space and invading my lungs.

Vetiver. Leather. Mint.

Earthy. Warm. Refreshing.

Addicting.

My entire being trembles down to the pieces that make up my very essence and my wolf rages war against her confinement as I greedily inhale. What is this? What is happening?

Shaking, lightheaded, and alarmingly clammy, I'm unable to force myself to move. I'm frozen in place in the foyer of this vast, delicious - smelling house, and that's where Canaan finds me still standing when he realizes I'm no longer following him.

"Noa?" he asks, sounding cautious.

He probably thinks you're losing it. Get your shit together and stop embarrassing yourself.

Head snapping up in his direction, I gasp out, "Air. I think I need some air."

Before he can stop me, I'm rushing through the grand sitting room that's connected to the foyer and toward the wall of modern glass doors that lead to a deck. Why I didn't simply turn around and head back through the front door is beyond me. I think the alpha male calls my name again and his footsteps thunder after me, but I don't slow down until I'm through the door and welcomed by the scent of the snowy mountains and pine trees.

Instantly, I miss that alluring scent inside the house and the way it had enveloped me entirely, but I'm also relieved to have my faculties restored. The haze lifts from my brain and I can think clearly once more.

"I'm sorry," I gasp to Canaan, who's watching me with unmasked concern. "It's just been a long day."

It's been a long eight months and today is just the cherry on fucking top of the shit ice cream sundae.

"It's all right, but are you okay? You're really pale..." He trails off, hazel eyes searching me for any other signs of distress. "Do you want to go inside and sit down? I'll take you to the conference room and then grab you a bottle of water or something."

Rhosyn has a stash of chocolate around here somewhere I can sniff out if you need some sugar...”

“No!” I answer far too quickly. “No, thank you,” I repeat, this time with less haste and a politeness my mother would be proud of. “Is there any possible way I can meet with your Alpha out here instead of inside?”

Please say yes, because if you make me go back inside that house, I might end up embarrassing myself further by doing something stupid. Like shoving my face into every soft fabric I can find and inhaling that scent like I’m a cocaine addict in a club bathroom.

“Uh...” The second-in-command looks unsure before hesitantly offering me a shrug. “I mean, sure why not? He might appreciate not having to be cooped up inside for longer than he has to be today.”

I offer him a thankful smile before turning and grabbing hold of the metal deck railing. The view from here is breathtaking and a heavy type of homesickness I haven’t felt until right this second washes over me like a cold wet blanket.

Familiar snow-capped granite mountains peek over the tops of tall trees and despite the cold, the early afternoon sunshine reflects off the lake below. Memories of spending scorching summer days down at that lake fill my head. A specific memory of me kicking water at someone and them retaliating by grabbing hold of my bathing-suit-clad body and tossing me into the cold depths while we both laughed plays like a movie inside my head. For the life of me, I can’t seem to conjure up the face of my playful assailant. It had to be one of my friends from school, I just can’t recall which one.

“It’s a pretty good view, huh?” Canaan asks conversationally, pulling me out of the memory I’m not entirely sure is mine at this point. Why can’t I remember who threw

me into the water? “It’s one of the things that made me fall in love with this place when I moved here. A single glance at that mountain range and I knew I was home.”

Home. After all the time away from this land and the way we were ousted from it, Canaan’s words shouldn’t cause my soul to ache or my eyes to burn with unwanted emotion.

Swallowing hard, I drop my sunglasses back down onto my face to hide the unexpected tears and force words out of my tight throat. “This used to be my home. For eighteen years, I looked at this view every day. I haven’t seen it in a long time, but trust me, I never once forgot it.”

If I hadn’t seen it myself, I wouldn’t believe the way the big male winces at my words. “Right. I heard a little bit about your...exit from the pack. Something like that never should have?—”

Before Canaan can finish his odd sentence or I can make a sarcastic quip about his placating use of the word “ exit ”, a haughty and trill voice resonates from behind us.

“What are you doing here?”

Whipping around, I nearly trip over my own damn feet to face the person now standing in the open doorway watching us with unchecked suspicion in her narrowed eyes.

Recognition for the woman hits me instantly as memories of our time shared as pups crawl out of the depths of my subconscious.

Hair, still a distinct shade of copper and styled to perfection, falls in curls around her shoulders, and a pointy chin paired with strong cheekbones define her sharp diamond-shaped face. She was always taller than me, but her frame has now taken on

a willowy form that is common in beta females like her.

“Talis...” Her name comes to me as easily as the memories of her did.

Talis McNamara. Only daughter to the Alpha of the McNamara Pack, a pack based out of southern British Columbia who has long been allies with the Fallamhains. Talis’s father, Cathal, would bring his daughter with him when he’d have alliance meetings with Merritt. Since I was a girl and around the same age as Talis, I was forced to become her de facto tour guide and friend for the duration of their stay. Which was once two torturously long weeks during a summer break. She was never an easy or pleasant individual to be around, something I’d blamed on her father for endlessly spoiling and coddling her.

It's good for personal growth to be humbled occasionally by your parents, something that you don't understand in your youth, but as an adult, you can look back on and see the benefits of.

My own mother had a way of absolutely handing me my ass when she needed to. She was a generous and truly selfless person, but shit, Thalassa took no prisoners. I witnessed many men get put in their place by her and it was glorious . Now, more than ever, I’m thankful for her correction and guidance, no matter how hard some of it was to swallow at the time. Nobody quite says, “You’re a fucking idiot, kid,” like a parent. They humble and then they correct you so you don’t make the same mistakes twice. I’m not an authority on the matter, but I’m pretty sure that’s what you call good parenting.

“What are you doing here?” she repeats, voice rising an octave.

It’s only when I take a half step forward that I finally notice the way her dark eyes are wide, and her desert sun-kissed skin is ashen.

The look of utter horror. That's the only way I can describe the expression contorting the beta female's features.

Or it's as if she's seen a ghost when she glares back at me.

We hadn't been best friends by any means, but we hadn't ended on some kind of teenage drama-fueled bad note either. The last time I saw her was the summer of her eighteenth birthday when she presented as a beta. I was two years younger than her and eager to hear firsthand what it was like to come into your wolf. My excitement for her was met with irritation and open hostility over the whole thing. For the rest of her visit that summer, she'd sulked and bit the head off anyone who dared to ask her about her first shift. I remember leaving my post as her cruise director and taking off to the creek to hang out with another friend instead of dealing with that temperamental bullshit. That night when I'd returned home, Mom had let me know the McNamaras had left the territory. For the next two years while we still lived here, Talis never visited again.

Completely thrown by what could have been a very nostalgic interaction, I shake my head and move back to lean against the railing.

"I have an appointment with Alpha Fallamhain." I don't see any reason why I should need to explain further. Casual childhood acquaintance or not, she isn't owed more than that.

But I guess she doesn't see it this way because she instantly demands more information.

"About what?"

It's not in my nature to be confrontational. It's ingrained in my very bones to crave peace, but if there's one thing I've learned through my clandestine work, it's how to

hold my ground on the rare occasions I need to.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” I say with a casual shrug of my shoulders, my gaze simultaneously raking over the inhospitable woman behind my sunglasses.

The warning snarl that rips through her strawberry-red-painted lips has my spine stiffening and my wolf bristling behind her glass cage walls.

“Talis...” Canaan warns, standing straighter at my right. His voice holds an edge of authority I’ve yet to feel radiate from him. Then again, he’s the second-in-command of one of the most notable packs in the States. He didn’t earn that title by being a passive alpha. No, I think I’ve just discovered Canaan Roarke is just exceptionally good at hiding the true degree of his dominance.

The holier-than-thou expression that brightens Talis’s face grates on my raw nerves.

“I’m betrothed to the Alpha—have been for months.”

It takes everything in me to not reach up and check the status of my jaw because I could have sworn I just felt it hit the decking below my feet. What. The. Fuck?
“You’re going to bond with Merritt?”

“Merritt ?” both Talis and Canaan repeat, each sounding equally appalled.

Suddenly feeling unsure of how up-to-date my information is, I shift restlessly on my feet and ask, “He’s the Alpha, isn’t he?”

If I thought my wolf was throwing a fit before, it’s like a bomb goes off inside of my soul. I’ve barely had a moment to question what set her off when a rich, smoky voice not only cuts through but also completely silences the panicked howls echoing in my

eardrums.

“Merritt is dead. I’m the Alpha of this pack now.”

For all of two seconds, I don’t recognize the man who has silently sneaked up the deck stairs to our left, but just as his intoxicating scent whips through the air, filling my insides and wrapping around my animal half, it finally clicks.

The scent that had made my very world tilt belongs to him .

Rennick Fallamhain.

Merritt’s heir and, apparently, the new pack Alpha.

The very Alpha my meeting is with.

Shit.

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Chapter 3

Rennick

To put it simply, I'm in a shit mood and picking a fight is starting to sound like a good time.

A solid week of running on little to no sleep, and the constant restlessness radiating from my wolf half has me more on edge than I have been to date. Since the first night seven days ago when my dream shifted and I finally heard my haunting angel speak, every time I close my eyes, I find myself back in that fog reliving the cryptic exchange with her.

And it's starting to make me feel insane.

The nagging sensation hasn't let up once and the hollowness that started as a small pit in my chest has grown daily until it now resembles something akin to a crater.

Any kind of distraction I've tried has done little to lessen the lingering effects left by the dream. The closest I've come to finding any kind of reprieve is running myself to death through the thousands of acres that make up my pack's land. In my massive wolf form, I run between the trees and over creeks. The only time I stop is to take brief, cooling sips of water from the fresh springs before I'm dashing across the terrain I know like the back of my hand.

That's exactly what I've found myself doing again today when I saw there was a break between meetings in my schedule.

I already know my second and friend, Canaan, is going to be annoyed I'm late for the meeting his mate slyly added to the shared calendar app. Rhosyn, who's helped me in more ways than I can count during this draining transition phase, rarely makes changes to my schedule without speaking to me first. For this particular meeting, I guess she didn't think it pertinent to fill me in on the details. Which is something I'll have to speak to her about sooner rather than later.

The plan wasn't for my friend's mate to become my assistant, but after a month of filling in and helping me keep my head above water as I found my footing as this pack's Alpha, I officially offered her the job. The crafty beta female simply smiled and pulled the employment contract she'd had drawn up weeks prior out of her desk drawer. I about fell to my knees and kissed the backs of her hands in gratitude. I didn't, of course. Canaan, while typically a laid-back dude, doesn't fuck around when it comes to his chosen mate.

Something I can respect, not that I know myself what it's like to be bonded to another.

Yet. I don't know yet .

The thought of the arrangement I've committed myself to has my paws digging deeper into the earth and my muscles straining as I run harder toward my house. The delicious ache of overexertion doesn't completely quiet the demons I've been silently fighting in my head, but it's just enough that I'm momentarily able to think clearer.

These days, I hardly feel like I have time to catch my breath. It's all been one thing after another since I found myself donning the title of pack Alpha.

It was never a question of if I would take over the mantle from my father, it was a question of when . The day I was forced to take on this role was years sooner than anyone anticipated, but there wasn't any other option. Walking away from my pack

and allowing it to fall into ruin wasn't something I could live with.

Just two years shy of thirty, I'm younger than pack Alphas customarily are. While no one was brave enough to question it to my face, I saw the looks of distrust and heard the whispers from my pack and our allies during the first few months of my reign. They didn't have faith I could keep our pack going strong or that I could keep everyone in it safe. My council, the same men and women who advised my father during his time, were the most open with their uncertainty.

I was eventually able to earn the pack's tentative trust by just being myself and actively proving to them I am a leader they could count on. The pack council took more convincing, and their support came at an immeasurable cost.

The very notion of completing my end of that bargain has never sat right with me, but the closer we get to the scheduled winter solstice date, the more my wolf balks at the idea. The edgy energy he's developed since our shared dream changed into something more only makes his refusal fiercer.

He is going off the simple, black-and-white baser instincts that are ingrained in him; he doesn't understand the human side of things—the political side. As an Alpha, we sometimes have to make sacrifices for the greater good of our pack, even at the detriment of ourselves. This is what I've been telling myself ever since the proposed alliance—one that promises greater security for my people—was first presented to me.

I won't let my pack down and I'll do what I must to make sure my people are safe. Especially those who are most vulnerable and precious to us. As of last month, another omega from my pack has officially been declared a missing person. Abducted. Taken right from our land. That's seven in total since I came into power.

I cannot allow this number to climb and with what I've been promised from this

arrangement, our people will be more fortified than ever. Not only can I not bear to have another innocent disappear beneath my nose, but the pack's fragile trust in me can't take it either. And this is why I'll make this sacrifice for them. Not matter the personal cost.

Claws digging into the damp dirt, I skid to a stop beside the pile of clothes I'd left sitting on a flat boulder. The familiar burn and twist of my muscles and bones snapping and reforming is a sensation I savor until I'm once again standing on two feet. My wolf, who is usually more relaxed after intense exercise, is more present and alert than ever. He paces, pushing at the seams of my control. Since the beginning, my relationship with my animal has always been solid. He is always willing to give up control and allow the human side to be in the driver's seat, but right now, he's fighting me. He's picked up on something I'm not sensing and he's clawing at me to let him to search it out.

Redressing in the charcoal wool trousers and the black button-up—clothes I'd only donned this morning because of the council meeting I have to attend shortly after Rhosyn's stealthy addition—I focus on my surroundings. I'm met with the scent of snow still resting on the pines, damp earth, and the familiarity of my pack. From my house looming far above me on the hill, comes the hum of people speaking, and around me, the light breeze makes the dry leaves rustle and the tree branches creak. Aside from the young pups who are clearly playing hooky from school and are goofing off in the trees a few hundred meters away, nothing seems amiss.

The entire walk up the long, weaving gravel and dirt path, my animal half battles against me, insisting there's something here I need to pay attention to. We've always seen eye to eye on most matters and are historically in sync with each other's emotions and needs, but right now, I can't for the life of me figure out what's set him off.

With a powerful show of dominance, I shove my wolf down and strengthen my

resolve as I reach the base of the wooden stairs that lead up to my deck.

I'd already picked up on both Canaan's and Talis's distinct voices and scents about sixty yards back, but as I climb, it becomes obvious they're not alone.

I'm already questioning why Talis is here and who she's speaking to when a new scent, subtle yet intoxicating, slams into me. It's faint, criminally so, but that doesn't stop me from filling my lungs with it like it's the last breath I'll ever take.

My beast chuffs, a sound that can only be described as his haughty version of "I told you so".

Like a predator locking onto its prey, I surge up the stairs with newfound urgency, my instincts driving me forward. I reach the top just in time to hear a female voice ask, "You're going to bond with Merritt?"

Hearing my father's name spoken aloud summons the familiar inkiness of guilt slithering between my ribs. It doesn't matter if I know in my heart I did the right thing. At this rate, I'm not sure if my reaction to his name will ever ease. Part of me believes I deserve to feel this way after what I did.

"Merritt?" both Canaan and Talis repeat, sounding equal parts repulsed and dismayed by the stranger's question.

That sweet voice hesitates for a second, giving me time to step fully onto the deck and take in the scene before me. Talis, with her penny-like hair, has waves of contempt radiating from her as she stares down the newcomer standing in my second's sizable shadow. It almost appears as if Canaan is safeguarding the pocket-sized woman with the way he positions himself at her side and glares back at the fiery beta female.

“He’s the Alpha, isn’t he?”

I subtly suck in another lungful of the sugary air and there’s no denying it. The scent belongs to her, the stranger with the cascading layers of long espresso-colored hair that is styled in a way that seems both wild and intentional. Wispy bangs fall on her forehead and frame a delicate heart-shaped face, a face that is snapping in my direction when I intrude on their tense conversation.

“Merritt is dead. I’m the Alpha of this pack now.”

Her pink, pouty lips part in a silent gasp, the faint indent on her lower lip making it clear she’s been biting at it, something I silently wonder if she’s aware she’s doing it.

With her attention now locked on me, I’m unable to stop myself from further taking the little stranger in.

Despite the oversized dark sunglasses concealing her fine-boned features, an accessory choice that frustrates both me and my wolf, I can still make out the refined elegance of her face. If I didn’t know any better, I would assume she’s an omega with her petite build, but nothing in her sweet scent conveys she’s a shifter herself. That doesn’t mean she hasn’t been spending time around one, though. Beneath the allure of her own fragrance lingers the distinct aroma of a female shifter. It’s blended with something else. Something familiar, but I can’t quite seem to place it.

It’s the brown sugar and spiced fig that both my wolf and I are fixated on. He’s urging me forward, to stick my nose right to her throat so I can breathe it in straight from the source. I force myself to remain rooted in place because with the way my wolf’s been behaving as of late, I wouldn’t put it past him to choose this moment to finally eviscerate my dwindling control.

“Rennick...” She says my name with a hint of familiarity that makes my chest tighten

in places I didn't know it could. What the fuck is going on? "I didn't know..." Pausing to clear her throat, she looks nervously over her shoulder at Canaan, an innocent action that has my wolf baring his teeth. No! Keep your eyes on me. "I didn't know you were the pack Alpha now."

"Why would you?" Talis snaps, sharp features pulling as she deepens her scowl. "You're not a member of this pack anymore."

The petite woman's jaw tics and her hands ball into fists at her sides. "Yes, I'm very aware of this, Talis, but thank you so very much for the reminder."

Member of this pack... This has my spine snapping straight and my intense interest in this situation taking on a suspicious edge.

Advancing another step toward the trio with a series of questions on the tip of my tongue, the beta female who's become my unwanted shadow these past months cuts my train of thought off.

"I find it's good to be reminded of one's place," Talis snips, chin tilting up. "Just so there isn't any room for confusion."

"Talis!" The bark comes from somewhere deep in my chest, my wolf's dominance flaring. "That's enough."

She is at least smart enough to fold into herself and tilt her head to the side, baring her throat to me in a show of submission. Canaan, a strong alpha male himself, also takes a step back, his gaze dropping to my feet. The mystery girl flinches and her chin dips to her chest, making the layered pieces of dark hair conceal more of her face from me. It's not a customary show of deference, but it's enough to appease my beastly side.

Behind her, Canaan shifts restlessly and his lips press into a tight line. Between the two of them, it's his mate who's been most vocal about her dislike for Talis McNamara, but I know my second's filter on the matter is about to break. He's forced himself to hold his tongue far too long.

"Forgive me, Alpha," the redhead whispers, her placating tone grating on my nerves.

Even if she didn't have her Alpha father's authority to back her, she would continue to carry this unwarranted air of superiority. Whether Cathal is present or not to back her, Talis will always believe she is owed more leniency and respect than she's earned. A character trait I find incredibly fucking aggravating.

I keep my eyes narrowed at her, my alpha aura pulsing, until she shrinks further into herself. Once my wolf is satisfied enough with her display of surrender, I turn my focus back to the person still beckoning me to her with nothing more than her scent and presence.

I don't understand this.

"Not a member of this pack anymore," I repeat Talis's cold words. "Explain."

Unlike me, my second shows no signs of confusion, making it clear I'm the only one left in the dark about this woman, and I really don't fucking like that they know more about her than I do.

Her head apprehensively lifts. That puffy lip is back between her straight white teeth as she stares me. From my place across the deck, I can pick up on the bitter scent of anxiety. Why is she so nervous?

"I can't decide if I'm happy or upset that I'm so easily forgotten." Her quiet musing seems to be mainly for herself. Rocking back on her heels, she exhales softly before

saying, “I’m Noa Alderwood. I was— My mother and I were members of the Fallamhain Pack many years ago.”

Noa Alderwood.

The name brings forward memories I had no idea were locked away somewhere deep in my mind. I can’t recall the last time I thought about the Alderwoods. Thalassa—this is her mother’s name, I remember that now, too—was the pack’s healer for over two decades until... Oh, shit.

The way Thalassa left this pack battles to the forefront of my resurfacing memories, making my wolf’s aggravation multiply tenfold. In his defense, my human side also isn’t thrilled.

Molars grinding and muscles taut with newfound fury, I manage to grit out, “Alderwood?”

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Chapter 4

Rennick

I realize my mistake before the final syllable of her surname passes my lips. The female—no, not female, Noa . Sweet Noa—stumbles back a step and accidentally collides with Canaan’s chest in the process. My wolf snaps at me, demanding I separate her from the other male, but I’m too fixated on the way I’ve startled the poor girl to act on his wishes. The nervous scent in the air transforms into something acrid, almost metallic. Fear. Noa is scared. Of me .

Fix this! my wolf demands with a swipe of his claws.

In a move that is incredibly atypical of a pack Alpha, I lift my hands in a show of placation and take another tentative step toward the skittish female. My animal half isn’t thrilled when I make no move to bring myself closer. I don’t know if it’s because we now know Noa is in fact a fellow wolf and as an Alpha, he wants to sooth her, or if it’s something else entirely, but he relentlessly urges me to bring her closer. To take her into my arms where she’ll be safer.

Protect, he insists.

“I’m not angry at you,” I reassure her, but the skeptical flat line of her mouth tells me she doesn’t believe me as far as she can throw me. Which wouldn’t be very far. I have about a foot and half on her and I’m well over double her body weight. “I promise, I’m angry on your behalf.”

An unhappy grumble comes from Talis's direction, something I purposely ignore, at the same time Noa murmurs, "I don't understand."

Canaan, clearly over the redhead's shitty attitude, whips his attention in her direction and matches her objection with a warning snarl that is all wolf. "Your beta and I are going to give you some space, Nick," he continues when Talis attempts to speak over him. "Stay out here and talk with Noa. I'll come tap on the window when the council starts to arrive for their meeting with you."

My second gives Noa's upper arm a brief squeeze of what I assume is reassurance, something she shrinks away from, before he turns. Talis, who stands in the open doorway, has no choice but to back up and go inside as Canaan pushes through. She starts to whine at him, but it's quickly muffled by the sliding glass door closing behind them.

Fingers pressing into my right temple, I close my eyes as my head shakes. I have a headache brewing and I don't know which female to blame for its arrival. My guess is it's the same culprit as it has been for months. "Now, I understand why I couldn't sense that you were one of us, that you are a wolf."

Noa's arms twist and tighten over her chest as the scent of burning rubber hits my nostrils. What? Now I've made her mad? I can't keep up with this girl's emotions.

"Yep, mystery solved, I guess." Her shoulders lift half-heartedly.

"I didn't mean to offend you, I only meant I remember what happened back then. How your wolf..." I trail off, unable to speak aloud the horrifying crime that was committed against this sweet female, and the fact that it was done by someone she trusted most. What really boggles my mind is that I'd forgotten about the whole dramatic ordeal until now—hadn't given it a single thought in years, I'm realizing.

“I imagine everyone in this pack knows what happened to me. It was probably the hot gossip around family dinner tables for months.” Despite the way she shifts uneasily on her feet, her tone holds a hint of bite in it, and my wolf hums his approval at her brief show of fire. But the flame in her vanishes just as fast as it appeared. “I’m sorry, Alpha Fallamhain. That wasn’t polite. Can we...” She shoves a frustrated hand through her cascading locks. With the way the ends just about touch the waistband of her dark-gray plaid pants, I have to wonder if she ever accidentally sits on her hair. “Can we just move on to the reason I’m here? I have people waiting for me at home. I need to get this show on the road so I can get back to them.”

The incredibly displeased sound that emanates from my wolf confuses me. Why does he care who she associates with, and more importantly, why are the words, “Do you have a new pack?” flying out of my mouth before I can stop them?

The way Noa jerks, it’s as if I’ve physically slapped her. To her credit, she recovers quickly, but every one of her muscles remains stiff. “No.” Her response is simple but holds a weight to it that I can’t quite figure out. Can I figure anything out right now?

“All right.” I clear my throat before gesturing to the patio furniture situated on the other side of the deck. “We can sit over there and discuss why you’ve requested this meeting.”

Noa, not needing to be told twice, turns gracefully on the balls of her booted feet and walks to where the outdoor loveseat and two matching chairs sit. The predator inside of me perks up at the fact she’s just willingly turned her back to us, making herself vulnerable to an attack. She really must not have an inner wolf to guide her, because if she did, she never would have shown her back to a highly dominant alpha male. The thrill my wolf feels about this greatly diminishes when he realizes that with the way she so easily did this in my presence, she’s more than likely done it to another male before. Or she will make this mistake in the future.

Not safe. Protect.

Consumed by his thoughts, I stalk over to the furniture in a haze and am moving toward the chair closest to the deck's railing out of pure habit when I stop abruptly. Seems the little female has already claimed my usual seat as her own.

That is where I sit nearly every morning to drink my coffee and answer the shit ton of emails I receive. Rhosyn handles a mass majority of the pack's correspondence but forwards the ones needing my personal attention over to my inbox. My second's chosen mate doesn't take care of my company's emails, though. No, those inquiries are left to me or my business partner, Rook Draven, to handle. The more our private equity firm, Apex Equity Group, grows, the more emails I receive. And all our company's been doing the past four years is grow, which means I'm drowning in goddamn emails. Rook has it easier since he's the man on the ground back in Seattle, the face of our endeavor. He gets to attend these weekly meetings—who am I kidding, daily meetings—with our people and clients in person. I have to read about every single one of them in painful detail after the fact.

When I was forced to return to pack territory full-time earlier this year after splitting my days between Seattle and here since college, my role in our company changed but Rook knows my dedication to our business hasn't wavered. He, more than anyone, understands the position I'm in because one day when his dad is retired or dead like mine, Rook will also become a pack Alpha. My close friend and old college roommate's days of independence and lack of soul-consuming responsibilities are numbered.

Lowering myself into the low slung black-and-cream loveseat across from Noa, I take in the view from this angle. Usually when I sit out here, I stare out at the lake below and the distant mountain peaks, but from this seat, my view is her and my wolf is pleased as fucking punch about it.

“So, I take it Rhosyn didn’t mention why I requested a meeting with you?” Noa swipes her palms down her thighs and her nails, coated in chipped dark plum polish, scrape against the fabric on the way back up. “She didn’t give you any details?”

“Did she need to?” I question, head slightly cocking.

Noa bites her lip after a short bark of humorless laughter escapes her. If she doesn’t leave that goddamn lip alone... “I suppose it wasn’t a requirement and I’m just lucky she squeezed me in today, but it sure as hell would have made my life easier if she had given you a heads-up.”

That familiar bitter tinge of anxiety floats through the air again. Trying to make myself as approachable as possible— since fucking when do I do that? —I relax farther into my seat and casually cross my ankle over my knee.

“Well, I’m sorry to report I’m completely in the dark here and don’t have the slightest clue what’s going on, but I trust Rhosyn, so I know there’s a good reason for your last-minute and surprise return to your pack.”

Just like before, she starts at something I’ve said and, also like before, my wolf chastises me from within for it.

I study Noa, silently cursing those damn dark sunglasses and wishing she’d take them off as I try to figure out what I said to upset her—again. My pondering comes to an abrupt end when she finally starts explaining herself.

“My mom died.”

My brows pull together. “Today?”

Noa’s head shakes. “What? No. It was months ago, but she left instructions in her

will for me to follow in the event of her death. Full disclosure, I still don't fully understand why she'd ask me to come back here of all places to do anything . Not after everything that happened..." Her voice fades, getting painfully soft. "None of it makes any sense to me, but how could I refuse when this was her final wish, you know?"

This has me equal parts confused and agitated. She didn't want to come back here—to her pack—but she was willing to stay with her mother? Not only that, but she's here today on behalf of that bitch—I mean witch.

"You don't want to be here?"

I might not be able to make out her eyes, but the dumbstruck expression on her delicate face is clear as day. "Why, in the name of the Goddess, would I have wanted to return to this territory, Alpha Fallamhain?" That's twice now she's called me by my title. Forget proper procedure and pack etiquette, I think I much prefer it when she called me Rennick. "We didn't exactly part ways on a good note."

That's putting it mildly, but I have this heavy sneaking suspicion we are not upset about the same thing here, that our versions of the past are vastly different. Which wouldn't surprise me considering what an absolute snake her mother was.

Swallowing my questions and resisting the urge to unleash them on her is almost as difficult to do as battling for dominance over my pestering beast today has been. I force myself to continue with my facade of ignorance so I can learn what version of our history she believes to be true. Or more accurately, so I can discover what lies she's been told over these past seven years, because if Noa Alderwood knew the truth, she would have returned home a lot sooner than today.

"I suppose we didn't," I concede with a somber smile. "If returning was this difficult for you, then whatever Thalassa asked of you must be incredibly important if you're

here anyway.”

“It got marginally easier when I found out you’re the Alpha these days. Facing your father...” She shakes her head like she’s trying to dispel a bad memory. “Frankly, he scared the shit out of me. The idea of coming here and asking him for a favor while knowing how he felt about me...Well, if I didn’t know any better, I would think my mother was punishing me for something.”

I don’t think you know better, Noa, and it’s going to break your heart when I tell you the truth.

Stowing her remark about my father feeling a certain way about her for later, I press for more information. “What is it that she asked of you, Noa?”

This is the first time I’ve spoken her name aloud. As it rumbles out of my throat, my wolf all but purrs—mind you, I haven’t purred a day in my fucking life—and Noa’s body seems to sway forward. Just as I clamp down on my wolf’s behavior, she gets a grip on herself and returns to sitting rigidly in her chair.

She sighs, conveying how emotionally exhausted she is by this whole ordeal. “My father is buried here in your pack’s cemetery.” The way she says “your pack” isn’t lost on me. “Mom’s wishes were to be cremated, and, in her will, she requested I bring her remains here and spread them over her mate’s grave so they can finally be reunited on this earthly plane.”

Earthly plane... words that would only be used by a witch or a powerful charmer like Thalassa Alderwood. Seems Noa’s picked up on the jargon. Not entirely surprising if she truly hasn’t been living amongst another wolf pack and has just been with her mother. Then again, she has the scent of a female wolf on her, so she’s been spending time around at least one other shifter.

I went into this unexpected meeting without a single hint about its purpose, but never in a million years did I think it would pertain to Thalassa.

Part of me wishes Noa came here asking for something else, anything else, because it would have been easier. She could have showed up and asked to rejoin the Fallamhain Pack, and I would have said yes in a heartbeat. She might not technically have access to her wolf, but at her core, Noa is a shifter, and shifters need a community to thrive. But this ? Imploring me to allow her to return Thalassa to our land? Well, that isn't as easy. A pack's territory is sacred, and permitting a traitor like Thalassa entry—in one form or another—would be considered a disgrace. A desecration to our very soil.

“I know it's a lot to ask, especially since it's coming from me, but I beg of you to let me finally put my mother to rest.” The way Noa's voice cracks has my wolf rushing forward once more, testing my resolve. His complete devotion to supporting her turbulent emotions is baffling. “I'll do it as fast as possible. You can have a guard, or guards, if you insist on more than one, escort me to the grave site—I really don't care. After, they can follow me to the front gates, and I'll willingly leave. I promise I won't come back, so your pack will never have to be insulted by the presence of a latent wolf again.”

A latent wolf? That's what she thinks...

That does it.

The cracking of my control is earsplitting, I'm almost certain anyone within a hundred feet can hear it. The raw fury and dominance of my animal half rushes through my veins, driving me to my feet as he fights against me, shoving against the now fragile veil barely holding him back.

A surge of panic crashes over me, entwining with the wrath already burning within.

The panic is for two reasons. The first, and some could argue the most important, is that the council is due to arrive any minute and if they see me losing control of my beast, the fragile faith they have in me will shatter. I'll be back to square one with those self-important bastards. The second reason, the reason I find more imperative than the former, is the fear that losing this battle for dominance will result in somehow hurting her in the process. Sweet Noa.

That can't happen.

What is she doing to me? She has the bloodline of powerful witches in her veins, maybe she's weaved some kind of magic over me? Don't be fucking ridiculous, Rennick, if she had magic you'd be able to smell it on her.

My skin ripples, black fur sprouting with a wave of goosebumps, and my claws replace my blunt fingernails, the eight sharp points slicing into my palms as I turn my hands into fists. The howls of fury and the wrathful growling coming from my barely contained beast are deafening, effectively rendering everything else around me silent.

Everything inside me is chaos, a storm on the verge of consuming the parts of me that remain human. Then there's the gentle brush of her palms against my chest and in an instant, the world stills, shrinking to a single point where nothing exists but her—her touch, her presence, her quiet command over my storm.

Eyes flying open, my hands snap up and wrap around her wrists—to push her away or bring her closer, I can't say. She recoils from the sudden contact, her lips parting in a breathless gasp that lingers between us, but she doesn't pull away. Though unsure and rightfully wary, Noa stays rooted where she stands, her dainty face lifting as she examines the predator still lurking within my irises.

"Hi," she whispers. The sound is so soft, so sweet, it has my wolf howling with a desperation I've never felt within myself. It's his eager, echoing response that clues

me in on what's happening. Noa's gentle greeting isn't for me, it's for him, and he is delighted to be acknowledged by her.

By the skin of my teeth, I'm still wearing my human form, but it's my wolf who leads this exchange and that is why I'm powerless to stop him when he commands my head lower. Noa goes utterly still, her breath trapping in her chest as my nose brushes along her temple before sliding down to skim across the warm flesh of her throat. Her sugary and warm scent invades my senses. I thought I had already memorized all the varying notes that make up her enchanting perfume, but my wolf was right earlier. Taking her scent in this close, right from the very source, is unparalleled.

What happens next is completely out of my control.

I'm nothing but an observer as my life changes before me.

Her scent deepens, the intensity of it borderline overwhelming, and it consumes me until it's all I can focus on. Taking in those greedy gulps has the sweet nectar all but engraving itself into my bones and the pleasure my beast takes from that is what sets off the rumble in my chest. Never in my life have I made this sound before because never have I met a person my wolf deemed worthy of it. The purr climbs from behind my ribs into the base of my throat. Noa's body, which is still locked frozen in my grasp, forces her lungs to expand once more. The shuddering, uneasy air she expels has my wolf amping up his placating rumbling.

And the final nail in my preverbal coffin is the way my name slips from her mouth on her next exhale. I already knew I adored the sound of it on her lips, but this is my undoing.

“Rennick...”

Like a dusty door being unlocked within my brain, a single thought—a single

word—is released and pushed to the surface, silencing everything else. It’s a thought that nearly brings me to my knees in both denial and bewilderment before this female.

“Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate!”

It comes from my wolf and his unrelenting howling demands that I hear him, that I acknowledge what he’s been trying to tell me since he first caught her scent.

The lone word is all that exists, echoing through me, until Noa’s pink lips part, her voice laced with the same disbelief that grips me , “Mate.”

The gravity of her mirrored, very audible, declaration is like a punch to my sternum, causing me to physically flinch from the blow.

Still reeling, I’ve barely had a second to comprehend what’s just conspired when the little female—the one my wolf believes to be his destiny—collapses, her legs giving out completely. A rush of protective instinct rattles my bones, and I have her scooped up and in my arms before she can hit the wood decking. By the time she’s firmly tucked against my chest, she’s fully unconscious. The way her boneless neck snaps back, causing her dark sunglasses to tumble from her face, has my heart skipping a beat and wolf snarling. It’s as I’m shifting her weight to better support her when an all-too-familiar shrill voice slices through the haze I’m in. A deeply displeased low growl follows it.

“What did she just say?”

Reluctantly turning my attention away from the woman who’s all but thrown a bomb at my feet, altering my life in ways I haven’t fully grasped, I find Talis and her father standing across the deck wearing matching expressions of fury.

And behind them stands Canaan, who has been joined by Rhosyn, and the entirety of my pack council. Varying levels of concern twist their features, confirming my fear that they've heard too much.

Noa Alderwood doesn't know it, but she just verbally claimed me as her mate—right in front of my betrothed.

Fuck. Me.

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Chapter 5

Noa

When Seren first found her way to us, she was newly pregnant with Ivey, which meant for many months our idea of a wild girls' night was mocktails and pints of ice cream. Don't think for a second I'm complaining because I'm an unapologetic slut for the mint cookies and cream flavor. A month after Seren popped Ivey out—which, by the way, made her a certifiable badass in my book because, holy shit, childbirth is not for the faint of heart—Edie volunteered to watch the baby for a night. We didn't end up going far. Locked away in the haven that is my renovated attic bedroom, Seren and I sat on the floor, yapping our little hearts out while we passed a bottle of huckleberry moonshine back and forth. Eldrith, the unofficial leader of the coven's elders, warned us that her home brew packed a punch, but never in my entire life have I felt more violently ill than I did the next morning when Seren and I woke up. Still on the floor, we fought for our lives for hours, unable to function until we managed to force carbs and electrolytes down our throats.

I don't care what new concoctions Eldrith has brewed, because since that night, I've turned down every one of that crazy old bat's offers for another bottle. If I ever drink another sip of her backyard hootch, I'm pretty sure I will keel over and die. My poor liver would give up on the spot, still traumatized from our last battle with the berry-flavored poison.

Now, staring up at this unfamiliar ceiling with the headache from hell and my body aching like it got hit by a big yellow school bus, I feel a lot like I did after the moonshine incident. And much like that memorable experience, if someone doesn't

get me to a toilet or provide me with a bucket, I'm going to throw up somewhere no one is going to appreciate.

Heaving into a sitting position so fast I'm pretty sure my throbbing brain does a fucking summersault in my skull, I slam a hand over my mouth to desperately hold back the unpleasantness trying to make its untimely escape. I don't have the ability to breathe, let alone plead for a bucket—I'd even take a used coffee cup as I'm not feeling particularly picky at this point in time—but it turns out I don't have to beg for anything because, miraculously, as if summoned out of thin air, a large plastic bowl is shoved under my chin.

Just in time too.

“Ha! I told you the bowl was a good idea,” the lighthearted, teasing voice barely registers to my buzzing ears. “Did you see how pale she was? There was no way in hell she wasn't tossing her cookies.”

There's an unimpressed scoff. “Would you like a cookie for being correct, Rhosyn?” an older, more raspy-sounding voice deadpans.

In a thoroughly undignified display, I continue to dry heave into the offered vessel long after my stomach's contents have been rudely evacuated.

“Oh, I think I'm going to pass on having a sweet treat for a bit,” she— Rhosyn—responds, the grimace clear in her tone. “I'm suddenly not feeling very snacky.”

“I can't begin to imagine why.”

Forcing my hazy vision to focus on more than the bowl in front of my face, I quickly glance at the two women I've woken up to.

It's nice to put a face to the name. Rhosyn is around my age if not a couple years older. Her oval-shaped face is pale and sprinkled with freckles. The sympathetic and understanding glint in her kind olive eyes helps put me at ease in this incredibly uncomfortable situation I've found myself in. Her aura, though I can't actually see it since no wolf means no access to any gifts I might have inherited from my charmer bloodline, feels warm. The air around her is nothing but inviting. The beta female is also drop-dead gorgeous with her perfect curls and willowy frame. It's no wonder Canaan is completely gone for her.

The other woman, the blasé-sounding one, is around sixty I'm guessing. I'm not sure if it's the current state of my brain or just my blurry vision, but for about five whole seconds, I swear I'm looking at my mother. A couple rapid blinks clear up that delusion real fast, but it's still a kick to my heart nonetheless. Upon further inspection, I decide the dark hair with strands of silver growing in around her face and the familiar air of medicinal herbs clinging to her clothes are where their similarities end. My mourning—and frazzled—mind simply conjured up a comforting image for me in my moment of distress. Which was rude of it, if you ask me.

“I'm so sorry,” I manage to get out. My throat is tight, making me sound hoarser than hell.

Rhosyn waves me off with a nonchalant shrug of her shoulders. “Please, I went to a party school. This is not my first rodeo. Speaking of...” She dips her head toward the basin she's still holding for me, her mess of fawn-colored curls bouncing with the slight movement. “You got anything left in there, or do you think you're done?”

With a quick check-in with my gag reflex and my turning stomach, I come to the decision I'm done whether my body is or not. You will not throw up again in front of these people. Mind or matter, or whatever, Noa.

“I’m good.”

“Thank the Goddess,” Rhosyn praises, standing from the coffee table she’s perched on across from the couch I’ve been placed upon. A couch I have no recollection of being moved to.

Like piecing together a jumbled puzzle, I frantically try to get the fragmented memories swirling about my mind in order while Rhosyn steps out of the room.

The last thing I remember is standing on the deck with Canaan and Talis. No, wait, that’s not right. They left and I was alone with...him.

Rennick.

I’d told him about Mom’s wishes and then the shit had hit the literal fan.

But, if I’m being honest, things were already falling apart way before our grand and somewhat dramatic finale. You know, the part where I lost consciousness. Turns out, doing your best impression of a fainting goat is a surefire way to get out of any awkward or intense situation. Use this knowledge responsibly, friends.

I thought my uncharacteristic reaction to Rennick’s scent was intense when I first stepped foot in his house, but the way every atom of my makeup seemed to respond to his towering, dominant presence put my earlier fit to shame. It was by sheer will alone and a couple desperate prayers to the Goddess that I was able to ignore the absolutely unhinged desires of my caged wolf. If that bitch had it her way, I would have marched right over to the too-handsome-for-his-own-good Alpha and rubbed my body all over him until he was thoroughly marked with my scent.

Scent marking? Yeah, that’s a new one for me.

Never, in my nearly twenty-six years of life, have I had that kind of visceral and needy reaction to another person. Especially not to one who owns a penis. Historically, my wolf doesn't want me within sniffing distance of a male, and yet, she was acting as if her life was going to end if I didn't do what she was insisting of me. His addictive scent had both of us in a vice-like grip and, of course, I'd accidentally selected the patio chair that was soaked in mint and leather. Stopping myself from burrowing deeper into those cushions was a true testament of my willpower.

I deserve one hell of an award for being able to keep my shit together and my inner turmoil under wraps through almost the entirety of my reintroduction with Rennick Fallamhain. There was a moment there that I truly believed I was going to be able to get through this without giving myself away or making a scene, and then I did something astoundingly stupid.

I touched him.

My palms were pressed to his heaving chest before I comprehended that I'd moved to stand before the unraveling alpha male. His pectoral muscles were hot and strong beneath my fingertips, and my wolf half swaggered about her glass cage, pleased as shit she got her way and my hands were finally on him. If I had been capable of focusing on anything else but him at that moment, I may have scolded her, but as if I were under a spell, I succumbed fully to the allure of Rennick.

In that short moment, my hands on his chest, his baseball-mitt-sized hands wrapped tightly, yet somehow still tenderly, around my wrists, I felt a hundred emotions all at once as my psyche begin to crack. At first, it was nothing but a small trickle dripping through the narrow fissures forming, but the longer I stood there, transfixed, the trickles turned into a flood. The chaos unleashed on my mind and system was thunderous, consuming my every thought.

Until a voice cut through the madness.

“Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate.”

“I—” I choke the singular syllable out but can’t manage to summon anything else. My head snaps up, gaze locking with the woman sitting in the armchair across the room. Dark eyes that appear to hold boundless information and wisdom stare back.

“Gone for almost eight years and you come back with a real bang , don’t you, Noa?” she muses, smoke-lined lips twisting into a smirk. “Can’t say I don’t love to see it. A little excitement keeps things interesting, and I grow easily tired of monotony. Though, I could do without the dreadful screeching coming from that self-important redhead. In the future, if you plan to stir up chaos within our pack, I’d appreciate it if you could do so without the headache-inducing theatrics. The girl’s got a serious set of pipes on her.”

She thinks she has a headache? I’m almost certain an Irish step dancing troupe has been using my skull to rehearse on and, I can’t be sure, but there might be an ice pick embedded in my temple, too. It sure as hell feels that way.

“Chaos?” I repeat, voice still thick. “All I wanted to do was spread my mother’s ashes. I didn’t stir up anything.”

It was Rennick who lost control and made a scene when his wolf nearly shoved through his tanned skin. His human gunmetal gray eyes were swallowed up by the pale bluish silver of his wolf’s. The somewhat ghostly shade was surrounded by a dark limbal ring, which only enhanced the intensity of the predator’s sharp gaze. An innate part of me wanted to look away, to show the Alpha the deference he was owed, but I was transfixed by the animal peering out at me.

The woman, who I’m starting to believe is the pack’s current healer based on her overly strong homeopathic scent and hippie-esque attire that seems to be synonymous with healers, raises a pencil-thin brow. “You don’t think publicly claiming the Alpha

of this pack as your mate might ruffle a few feathers? Especially the feathers belonging to that squawking parrot he's betrothed to?"

Something inside of my chest squeezes. Talis McNamara is promised to Rennick. I can't wrap my head around how this could have happened.

Ignoring the tightness in my rib cage at the unwanted reminder of this impending union, I frown at the woman. "I didn't claim anyone as my anything."

She huffs, sounding utterly unimpressed with me. "The entire pack council was there to witness it, and Yrsa, a friend of mine who's a member, said you peered up at the Alpha's face, looking like a lovesick puppy, and very clearly said, 'Mate'."

"It's true," Rhosyn murmurs softly, stepping back into the room, the metal and glass French doors clicking closed behind her. I think we're in a den. The lack of personal items and slightly stale air leads me to believe it's a space that's rarely used, which seems like a shame given how inviting the room is. The far wall lined with fully stocked bookcases and the granite fireplace with its crackling fire would have me frequently curling up with a good book if I lived here. "Cane and I heard you say it, too. Along with Talis and her father, Cathal. Nick and my mate are trying to smooth things over right now, but it's safe to say the McNamaras are pissed. In your defense, that isn't an entirely unheard of emotion for those two hotheads."

Against my will or understanding, my muscles tighten at the mention of the Canadian-based pack Alpha. Shoving the reaction down, I stare with unconcealed bewilderment at Canaan's mate.

"This is ridiculous!" I cry, making the piercing ache in my skull flare. "It was your Alpha who started to lose his shit, and I don't even know why. All I did was promise never to come back here—which, by the way, is a promise I intend to keep now more than ever—because I know exactly how this pack feels about latent wolves. I was

already pushing my luck just by showing up here today, so I thought making it clear to Rennick I'd leave as soon as possible would help my case and put him at ease. Clearly, that backfired because his wolf tried to take control instead." The deep, guttural growl from his animal half replays in my mind, summoning a fresh wave of goosebumps to dance down my spine. That sound awakened a deep, dormant part of me I had never felt before. "I don't know what happened. Maybe I panicked or just wanted to help, but I reached out for him. I put my hands on his chest and that's when I heard..." Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate. I trail off, realizing how insane I already sound and knowing it will only make things worse if I admit the truth: that I heard a voice that wasn't my own inside my head. A voice that sounded a hell of a lot like his. "Touching your Alpha was a mistake and wildly out of line. I know that now. Trust me, lesson learned."

"Latent?"

Out of all the things for Rhosyn to fixate on from my ramblings, she chooses this? I think there are bigger issues at hand right now, like the fact they're accusing me of claiming their Alpha as my mate, but what do I know?

"It's not like my status as a shifter is a secret," I grumble, arms folding across my chest, the move unapologetically defensive. It doesn't matter how many years pass or how well I've come to terms with it, my lack of ability to fully bond with my wolf will always be a sore spot. "I lived here for most of my life. Fresh gossip moves faster than wildfire within the pack." I nod toward the dark-haired woman, whose name is still a mystery to me. "If my guess is right, you're the pack's healer, which makes you my mother's replacement. I'm sure you were given all the dirty details."

She examines me, head cocked ever so slightly. "You're correct. I'm the healer now, and knowledge is power, dear girl, so of course I know the truth of what happened all those years ago." Beneath her long, obnoxiously patterned skirt, she crosses her legs. "But can you say the same, Noa?"

Well, that's annoyingly vague.

"I don't understand?—"

My question is cut off by Rhosyn, because apparently this girl really can't let the whole latent thing go.

"Noa!" Her tone has taken on an impatient inflection at this point. "What do you mean you were exiled because you are latent?"

Focus dancing between the two women, a scowl pulls on my brows. "I don't know what else you want me to tell you, Rhosyn," I shrug stiffly, years of buried shame rearing its ugly head. Discussing my shortcomings with members of the very pack I was exiled from is the last thing I want to. "Merritt refused to allow my weakness to stain his pack's image. He had a reputation to uphold, you know? He ordered my immediate removal when the disconnect between my wolf and me became evident. I was barely eighteen, technically a legal adult, but Mom wouldn't let me face the outside world alone. We left that very night, and we didn't look back. Until now, of course, and look how splendidly that's working out for me."

Reliving my past humiliation, combined with still feeling like I was run over—twice—clearly has me in a snarky mood, because this is not how I would normally speak to strangers.

Rhosyn, to my puzzlement, is now doing her best impression of a goldfish with her mouth gaping open and her hooded eyes so wide, I can make out the entirety of her green irises. I'll be the first to say it, it's not the pretty beta's best look.

"Rhosyn—"

"What in the ever-loving name of the Goddess!" she exclaims, only after she's

managed to realign her jaw. “I don’t...” Rhosyn trails off, gaze flicking briefly at the healer across the room. “I’m going to go talk to Nick. Zora, stay here with Noa. I’ll be back once I have fucking answers because someone better be able to explain this to me.”

With a newfound determination and anger, Canaan’s mate charges out of the room, the metal-framed doors slamming behind her.

My wolf, who’s still unbelievably twitchy in her impenetrable jail cell, perks up at this, nudging me to follow Rhosyn. She wants to see Rennick again and has been pleading with me since the moment I stopped dry heaving and could once again form a coherent thought. It’s not something I like to do since we’re already painfully disconnected, and I’m not overly optimistic it will work since all my attempts at doing so today have already failed, but with every bit of authority I have over my other half, I shove her down. Deep. Until there’s nothing but the faintest rattling of her cage. I’m barely processing what is happening around me as it is, I can’t have her incessant and out-of-character demands causing me more trouble right now.

After watching Rhosyn’s figure disappear down the hallway, I look back to the healer.

Zora.

“I don’t understand what is happening right now.”

The woman, who honestly looks like she’d be right at home selling homemade goat’s milk soaps and kombucha at an artisanal farmers market, plucks a piece of dry grass off her clearly hand-knit burgundy sweater. The many missed stitches and uneven arm lengths give it away. “You will in time.”

“Has anyone ever told you how frustratingly vague you are?”

A low, amused hum is my only form of response from the older woman who replaced my mother after our dismissal. The healer—whom I know to be a charmer wolf, since packs only entrust the high-valued role to those with access to magic—finally gifts me with her full attention.

“What did you hear when you touched the Alpha, Noa?”

My lie is immediate. “I didn’t hear anything.”

Zora sighs. “Do you know what an empath is?”

“I was raised by one of the strongest charmers of our time. I might not have access to my wolf or any gifts of my own because of it, but Mom made sure I learned all about the history of charmers and witches.” I don’t mention how I also received history lessons from the Ashvale Coven’s High Priestess. As far as I know, this pack has no idea where Mom and I ended up, and I’d like to keep it that way. Especially since I still have no clue how this visit is going to end. “Charmers and witches fall under different classifications. There are elementalists, conjurers, empaths, and oracles, just to name a few.”

“And on rare occasions, weavers, the strongest of our kind,” she adds, giving me a knowing look that makes my heart pang. “I’m not as powerful as Thalassa was, but like you said, there’s hardly anyone alive who has that kind of raw magic. I, myself, am an empath, which makes me a proficient healer for this pack, but it also gives me the handy little bonus gift of being able to sense when I’m being fed a load of bullshit, and you, my dear, are stinking up the place with your lies. I’ll ask you again, what did you hear when you touched Rennick?”

Lying to an empath like her would be like a toddler insisting they didn’t eat a brownie while their face is literally smeared with chocolate. Whether it’s a shift in scent, a change in aura color, or just some kind of innate sixth sense, deceiving Zora is

pointless—she’s practically a walking lie detector. The coven would call an empath with her gifts a Truthscreyer. One of Eldrith’s elder friends is a Truthscreyer and it’s a well-known fact that you don’t play poker with that old bird. She’ll run you dry.

“It was nothing,” I mumble, still determined to find a way to deflect. “Like we’ve established, I don’t have any gifts, which means it was just my mind playing tricks on me.”

She makes another humming sound, and the way her dark orbs glint with concealed wisdom has me shifting uneasily on my couch cushion. There’s something unnerving about sitting across from someone who clearly knows something you don’t. “You drew that conclusion yourself. I’ve established no such thing.” The cryptic-as-hell woman doesn’t give me the opportunity to demand she elaborate further. “Why did you claim Alpha Fallamhain as your mate, Noa?”

I don’t know if it’s the relentless pounding in my skull, the exhaustion of this entire situation, or the heft of the last eight months finally crashing down on me, but I snap. Throwing my hands up, I all but shout at the woman, “I didn’t claim him!” My wolf does not appreciate this sentiment. Her distant, wounded whine makes that clear. “I don’t know how, and I don’t know why, but I heard him in my head. Over and over again. Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate . It wouldn’t stop. I didn’t mean to repeat it out loud, and I sure as hell didn’t mean to claim him, I swear. This whole thing is just a misunderstanding. It’s not like we’re actually fated mates, so none of it means anything, anyway.”

Zora’s lips purse as she regards me, that knowing look she’s been wearing since I woke up in here with her taking on a hint of curiosity. “How do you know?”

“How do I know what?”

“How do you know you’re not Rennick’s fated mate?”

Now it's my turn to gape like a goldfish. "I—" I choke. "Because I would know ."

Discovering your scent match, your fated mate, is not something you'd mistake as something else. It's ingrained into our very DNA to recognize the person we're destined for. This knowledge is preached at shifters from a young age. It's a moment in time that every wolf looks forward to. It would be impossible for you to miss it if it were happening to you.

The healer frowns at me, her lips, lined from years of smoking, thin to the point of near nonexistence. "Would you, though? You said it yourself, Noa. You're a latent shifter, and your connection with your wolf isn't where it should be. Your instincts are dulled, your bond strained. If your wolf were to recognize her scent match, can you truly be sure you'd interpret her desires the way she intended?"

Well, fuck me, I think this hippie bitch just stabbed me, because ouch .

I'm officially reeling.

A storm of emotions crashes over me, too fast and too many to name, but denial—yeah, that one is sharp and obvious. It's the only thing keeping me afloat, the life jacket I cling to in this emotional riptide. Without it, I might just drown, because if this healer is right...if Rennick is truly my?—

No. I can't think that. I won't.

I refuse to believe, even for a second, that Zora is right. That the bond between me and the creature sharing my soul is so fractured, we're incapable of recognizing our own fated mate. Because if that's true, if I've lost something that fundamental, that sacred, it would ruin me.

And worse, if there's even the faintest chance that Rennick is mine, then somewhere in

this house, he's trying to make peace with the woman he's already promised himself to—the same woman who overheard me inadvertently claim him as my own—and that's a reality I don't know how to face.

“You're wrong. Whether I can sense my fated mate or not, I know for a fact Rennick Fallamhain isn't mine.” I try to sound strong, but the tremor in my voice gives me away. I'm too shaken to hide it.

“And how can you be so sure of that?”

My trembling hand gestures around the quiet room we sit in. “Because he's not here. I may not have full access to my wolf, but Rennick does. If we were truly fated, he would have scented it. Felt it. And we both know if that were the case, nothing could keep him from me. But he's. Not. Here. He's with his betrothed, making things right with her.” My wolf isn't just whining now, she's howling, her agony almost too much to bear. “Which is where he should be. He chose her long before I showed up here and he was reminded of my existence. Talis should be his priority in every situation, no matter how unbelievably fucked it is. That's how it needs to be between mates.”

“I think you're underestimating how incredibly emotionally dense men are.” Zora makes an exasperated sound, shifting forward in her armchair. “I also think you truly believe the story you're trying to sell me, but even without my gift, I'd know you're lying to yourself. The tears currently dripping off your chin are betraying you.” She gives me a pointed look, watching as I hurriedly wipe them away. I have no idea when I started crying, but I'd like it to stop. “You're also purposely overlooking an important detail, dear girl.”

“And what's that?”

“You heard him,” she says. “You heard his thoughts. You heard him say ‘mate’ . What does that mean to you?”

My head is shaking before she's done asking her question. "I told you. It was nothing. Just my mind playing tricks on me. It was a slip of the tongue on my part."

Deny. Deny. Deny.

Zora's next attempt is cut off when a sound pierces through the tense air of the sitting room. She doesn't so much as flinch, meanwhile I'm flying to my feet, eyes flicking frantically around as if searching for a threat. It takes longer than I'd like to admit for my frayed nerves to settle and for my brain to finally recognize the source.

My shaking and clammy hand yanks my phone from my pocket.

Fuck.

"I have to go," I murmur, eyes skimming the alerts I've received from both Seren and the Craddock Pack's Alpha, Lowri.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say our Alpha is going to want to have a word or two with you before you leave," Zora warns me, but there's no real heat behind it. She stands from her chair, stretching her back as she does. I didn't notice how short she was when she was sitting. Her long skirt and oddly-shaped sweater helped conceal her frame. Now that I can take her fully in, I have no doubt this healer and charmer wolf is also an omega. Just like my mom was.

"I don't have time to wait around for him." I'm already moving toward the French doors Rhosyn had disappeared through many minutes ago, my wolf protesting every step, wanting to lay eyes on the Alpha again. Yeah, that's not happening .

I feel guilty I'm going to leave without telling Rhosyn goodbye, especially since the poor girl held my bucket of puke. Maybe I can send her a thank-you note in the mail. A nice mini muffin basket, perhaps, for when she regains her appetite.

“I’m needed at home. I need to leave right now.” Phone already in hand and my car keys in my back pocket, the only thing I’m missing are my sunglasses, but I’m okay sacrificing them if it means I can get out of here as soon as possible. And ideally without too many eyes seeing me. A fast and easy escape, that’s what I’m in need of.

That knowing look, the one I really fucking hate, returns to Zora’s sun-weathered face. “Okay, I’ll show you the way out and run interference if I need to,” she offers easily. I’m already opening the doors and glancing down the seemingly empty hallways when she so casually adds, “We don’t want to leave your new omega waiting for too long. They’ll need you there to help them.”

Freezing in place, a fierce protectiveness washes over me. I turn back to look at the Truthscreyer. “How do you know about?—”

“How do I know about the omegas you help?” she interjects, her thin brow rising.

There’s no accusation in her tone, or threat in her posture, yet it does nothing to settle the unease now creeping through me.

When your life is dedicated to protecting society’s most vulnerable members, you learn to watch for danger lurking in the shadows. There’s always something—or someone—waiting to exploit the weak. The omegas who find their way to us are usually running from something. Abuse from a parent or partner, maybe a past they can’t escape. It’s my job to give them a place to heal, to feel safe, and to start anew. Keeping our operation as secret as possible helps ensure we can safely offer them that.

I give her a stiff nod.

“Do you really think Thalassa started an underground sanctuary for omegas without having a system of friends and allies to help her? Who do you think are the ones

covertly sending them to Ashvale? How do you think omegas know to find you in the first place?" She grips my shoulder, giving me a reassuring squeeze. "There's so much you've yet to learn, Noa, but one thing you should know with absolute certainty is your mother always had a plan."

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Chapter 6

Rennick

“ I heard her say it, Rennick.” Talis, the woman I’m betrothed to, the one who is pushing twenty-eight years old, just stomped her foot. Lovely. “We all heard her say it.”

My fingers are once again pressed to my right temple, the ache that has been steadily increasing since I first found Noa Alderwood standing on my back deck flaring with each vexed syllable out of Talis’s mouth.

“We need to take a breath,” Canaan interjects, his usual calm cutting through the tension stuffing up the conference room. Ever the peacemaker of our leadership duo, he adds, “We won’t be able to get anywhere with this conversation if we keep letting high emotions run the show.”

Copper hair flies around her shoulders as Talis whirls on my second. “Another female just publicly claimed your Alpha as her mate. Do I have to remind you he’s already betrothed to me ? So, pardon me for taking offense to the whole embarrassing display we just watched.”

With a cutting attitude that would make his mate proud, Canaan’s gaze sweeps coldly over the redhead. “Talis, I don’t think there’s a single wolf in this pack who needs a reminder of your impending union. You do such a damn good job at reminding us of it every chance you get that it would be near impossible to forget.”

“You’re such a?—”

“Talis!” I cut off her shrieking insult, one I have no doubt was aimed well below the belt. When words are all you have to fight with, you learn to wield them like knives. And if there’s one thing Talis McNamara excels at, it’s turning insults into weapons. Even if they’re cheap shots more often than not.

“Get your man under control, Fallamhain,” Cathal, who’s been silently stewing across the room since we all funneled in here, grumbles from where he sits at the table. “My daughter is your Luna-to-be, no one should be permitted to speak to her in such a manner.”

Aside from Oswin, a council member who is pushing eighty years old, Cathal is the only one sitting at the long oak table. The way the other pack Alpha has claimed a spot at the head of the conference table doesn’t go unnoticed by me or my wolf. Despite my animal’s grumbling, I don’t have the bandwidth to entertain a petty display of dominance right now. Not that it would be a hard-won battle for my wolf. There’s a certain power in a quiet kind of dominance. It’s the kind that doesn’t need to be flaunted. It’s always there, pulsing just beneath the surface. It’s the type of authority that commands respect without the need for words or a single growl. There are only two other people I’ve encountered whose dominance rivaled my own, and neither of them are in this room right now. One of them is Rook, and the other is the nearly feral Alpha of the equally volatile pack based in northeastern Montana.

“Then again, she’s only your intended mate if our contract still holds,” Cathal continues, one thick ruddy blond brow arching, the challenge in his brown eyes clear. “Is this little conundrum with the Alderwood female going to interfere with the arrangement we’ve agreed on?”

The arrangement. The one where I sacrificed my future to ensure the safety of my pack’s omegas.

“Do we know for certain if this girl—Thalassa’s daughter—is our Alpha’s mate?” a council member asks, but I don’t bother looking to see which one. “Should we not be trying to confirm this before a conversation regarding our packs’ alliance goes any further?”

My mind is a battlefield right now and I am in the trenches fighting for my life. Despite the panic and outrage coming from the McNamaras and a few of the council members after they overheard Noa’s declaration, I refused to leave the little unconscious female until I knew she was under the supervision of our healer. Zora, a woman who moves at her own pace and dances to the beat of her own drum, answered my summons uncharacteristically fast. My wolf fought me tooth and nail when I put Noa on the den’s sofa and left her in the care of both Rhosyn and the eclectic empath. His persisting unrest has me vibrating as I stand here nearly half an hour later. He wants to see with his own eyes that she is all right, even though both Rhosyn and Zora had assured me that Noa may be unconscious but she’s stable. His devotion to her is steadfast, and no less perturbing than it was when he first caught her scent.

“With all due respect to Alpha Fallamhain, whether the Alderwood girl is his scent match or not is a moot point,” Yrsa, the alpha female who’s built like a shield-maiden with her near pure Scandinavian bloodline, pushes off the far wall she’s been leaning against. “He agreed to the accord with McNamara Pack months ago. For our Alpha to break his word now wouldn’t just be dishonorable and in poor taste, it would be a heedless betrayal of our people’s safety.”

Oswin hums his disapproval, cloudy eyes narrowing at the alpha female. “An Alpha’s loyalty to his pack should be second to only one. His mate. If this female is truly Rennick’s scent match, then it’s safe to assume our pack’s participation in this prescribed alliance is all but null and void.”

A rage only a mother’s grief can ignite flickers across Yrsa’s features, her eyes

shifting into the yellow gleam of her wolf's. "That may be easy for you to say, old man, but those of us whose children have vanished don't have the luxury of sitting back and letting a theoretical fated mate bond take precedence over the safety of our young. We need action, and more importantly, we need protection. As of now, seven unmated omegas from our pack have disappeared, one of them my daughter. The alliance with Cathal offers us that security. If we'd had his extra guards at our northern borders seven months ago, my daughter might still be here. Instead, I'm left wondering if she's alive!"

The Eklund girl vanished from our territory within the first month of my reign as Alpha. She had only presented as an omega the week prior when she came into her wolf four days after her eighteenth birthday. For three days, I ran in wolf form, forgoing sleep and food, chasing every trace of her scent. I was desperate to bring her back to her mother. For the first time since my mom had passed, I'd prayed to the Moon Goddess for her assistance, but it was in vain. Just like the young omega before her and the six after, Yrsa's daughter disappeared without a trace.

It was the soul-piercing howls of despair, the hollow anguish in Yrsa's eyes, and the grief etched into the faces of every family with a missing loved one that drove me to accept the Canadian pack Alpha's offer for support. By the time we'd started to discuss terms, four omegas had gone missing from under my nose, and I was damn near willing to agree to anything. Even taking his beta daughter on as my chosen mate and the Luna of my pack.

But that was before.

Before her.

Noa.

Now, the ground has been ripped out from under me, and I'm barely holding myself

upright. I'm questioning everything I thought I knew about finding your supposed scent match. And yes, I'm using "supposed", because I'm still trying to wrap my mind around what happened out there when my wolf lost his damn mind.

Every story I've heard about finding your fated mate share the same defining moment—the instant you meet the one you're destined for, you just know. There's no hesitation, no doubt, because your wolves recognize each other on a level beyond reason, beyond logic. It's pure instinct.

And there shouldn't be any division between wolf and man on this matter. Yet, I can't ignore the doubt creeping in, questioning the echoing declaration my wolf made in my mind. He and I are not on the same page, something that seems to be happening more frequently as of late. A rift has formed in our once seamless bond, and it's only deepened with the arrival of Noa.

“Alpha Fallamhain .”

The sharp bite of my name snaps my head up. My downward spiral had pulled me away from the room, tuning out the voices of those who now argue over a matter that, under different circumstances, I'd say is none of their business. A mate bond—confirmed or not—is a private matter, something that should be discussed between the two parties bound by it. Not debated by a room of people with their own agendas. No matter how well-intended their motives are, they're still motives all the same.

My love life—my future mating bond—stopped being solely mine the moment I allowed it to become a bargaining chip.

My focus locks onto the impatient culprit, a silent warning flashing in my eyes as my wolf pushes forward, reminding Yrsa exactly who she's speaking to with that tone. “What is it?”

Oswin doesn't permit the piqued female to speak, instead he's the one who asks the question on everyone's minds. Including my own. "Is Noa Alderwood your scent match? Your destined mate?"

You know those scenarios where there is no right choice? This isn't one of them. There sure as shit is a right answer. It doesn't matter what I say, it's going to stir up untold problems with varying parties. Then there's the other complication—who's answering? Me or my wolf? If it's up to him, there's no hesitation. He's furious this is even up for debate, and his answer is an unwavering, resounding yes. In his eyes, the little female with cascading espresso-colored hair is his. But if it's me? Well...

"I don't know."

Like the punchline of a bad joke, everyone in the conference room goes still, silence falling over us like a wet blanket. Every gaze locks onto me. In another scenario, being the center of attention wouldn't faze me. I'd take it in stride, but right now it feels very much like the most intimate parts of me have been laid bare only to be picked apart.

It's my right-hand man, and the person I'd much rather be discussing this privately with, who breaks the tense moment. "What do you mean you don't know?" Canaan questions beside me, the concern in his hazel eyes unchecked.

"For the sake of your pack's omegas, I'd figure it out—and fast—Fallamhain," Cathal drawls, slowly standing from the leather rolling chair he's been using as his personal throne since we gathered in here. The man is built like a typical alpha male, tall and burly, but years of inactivity has made his middle soft. His gut that is tucked into a dark green button-down shirt hangs slightly over his brown belt. "We don't want that number to increase to eight, do we?"

"This shouldn't be up for discussion." Yrsa steps forward again, the handful of

council members who were also big supporters of the alliance with the McNamara Pack watching her closely. It was these four that were the most hesitant to lend their support when I took over as Alpha. This agreement is what brought me into their good graces and helped stop them from seeing me as the cocky teen I think they remembered me as. “Since Cathal’s men took up station as extra guards along the northern edge and began closely monitoring the border between here and Canada, we’ve only lost one omega. Before their help? We lost six in half as many months. Mate or not, you would be a fool to put this alliance at risk.”

Her supporters nod their heads in silent agreement.

And that right there is the reason this deal with Pack McNamara was originally proposed. The border. My pack is sizable, strong, but insular. Self-reliant to a fault. We’ve spent generations thriving within our own borders, but that isolation left us vulnerable the moment outside threats started slipping through and stealing our omegas.

I inherited a fortress without a network of allies to call upon.

There was only Cathal McNamara.

He’s been a friend of my pack’s—of my father’s—for half a lifetime. Our packs’ history and mutual trust made taking him up on his offer for support the most sensible option. Especially since I’d stepped into this role as Alpha unexpectedly, without any of my own forged alliances to bring to the table. It wasn’t until I left for college and met Rook Draven that I formed my first friendship with someone outside of our pack.

Rook’s pack doesn’t have the extra manpower to spare. With no other connections to exploit, I was left to rely on the one partnership my father had bothered to nurture during his era.

Admitting we needed help was a blow to our pride—my pride as our new leader—but the reality was clear, we couldn't watch both sides of the border alone. Four of our missing omegas had been tracked that far, but once they reached the boundary line between the two countries, their trails vanished. We needed help from those who knew that side of the border better than we did. And we needed whoever is trafficking these poor souls to know that their route is being watched on both sides.

As it stands now, the extra support has greatly slowed down the number of missing persons. I know this. Yrsa knows this, but that does not give her the right to speak to me in such a way.

“It would do you all well,” I say, my voice measured, as I slowly scan the room, locking eyes with everyone present until they drop their gaze to the floor, “to remember that your role is to advise your pack Alpha, not to command him. It is not your place to demand anything of me. To order me to act.” I let the silence stretch, let the weight of them settle. “Every choice I make, personal or not, is made with the well-being and stability of this pack in mind. And if that isn't already clear to you, then you haven't been fucking paying attention. I've done everything I can to show I'm worthy of your support, but I'm growing tired of constantly needing to prove it. You hold your positions because I value your insight and believe your guidance can help me be a better leader. But make no mistake, I am more than capable of doing this job without your input.”

Yrsa doesn't lift her head, but the moment my focus settles back on her, she feels it. A shiver runs through her, and her chin dips even further toward her chest. “I can't begin to understand the crippling grief of having your child disappear, and if it were within my power to bring your daughter home, I would do it in a heartbeat. But your fear and your pain—however justified—do not give you the right to demand anything of me, Yrsa Eklund. Continue to do so, and I will show you which of us is the fool. That goes for everyone in this room. Do I make myself clear?”

Aside from Cathal and his daughter, everyone in the conference room echoes various versions of “Yes, Alpha ”, their heads still dipped in deference.

I nod, my wolf satisfied with the level of submission he’s been shown. “Everyone get out,” I snap, not bothering to contain my alpha bark. I need to think, and I can’t do that with these people breathing down my fucking neck. As if they’d all been poked in the ass with a cattle rod, everyone jumps in place and files toward the door. Everyone aside from Canaan and the McNamaras. I arch a challenging brow at the other pack Alpha. “I will find you soon to discuss where we go from here.”

The asshole still doesn’t make a move to leave.

“Like I said, Rennick, I’d figure it out quickly if I were you. I can have my men pulled from their posts within an hour if our deal goes to shit over this... girl .” Cathal spits the word out with a vitriol I don’t think Noa’s earned. Mate or not, she’s innocent in all of this. My wolf’s ears flatten, a warning growl rumbling my chest. The Alpha, while still scowling, is wise enough to take a step back toward the open door. “For your pack’s sake, I hope you make the right choice. And when you do, I expect a public apology for the embarrassment you’ve caused my daughter with this whole dog and pony show.”

Talis looks at me, her dark, fox-like eyes shimmering, on the verge of spilling tears. But I’m not conceited enough to think the threat of waterworks has anything to do with the possibility of our so-called love being in jeopardy. No, our union was never built on genuine emotional connection. Some days, I think it barely qualifies as toleration. At least on my end. The moisture in Talis’s gaze isn’t for me. It’s for the title she stands to lose. Being my future Luna, that’s what she truly loves.

As a beta, that title is something rarely— if ever —donned by someone of her designation. Pack Alpha is almost always a role passed down through generations, specifically, to the next alpha in line. Gender doesn’t matter, designation does. While

alphas often take betas as chosen mates, their union will never produce an alpha heir. Only an omega can do that. That's why the title of Luna is almost always reserved for an omega. A pack Alpha choosing a beta as their mate all but guarantees that their family's reign ends with them. A pack needs an alpha at its head. The dominance required to lead a pack isn't something a beta or omega possesses.

I knew this when I signed the metaphorical dotted line, agreeing to Cathal's caveat for our deal. At the time, sacrificing the future of my own bloodline felt like a fair trade if it meant I could better protect the pack's omegas. I made peace with this months ago, or at least I thought I had. But now, like everything else since I laid eyes on her, I'm questioning it all over again.

I don't speak another word to either of them as they turn and follow the path the council took out of the room. And hopefully out of my goddamn house.

It's not until the door closes behind them that I let the emotions that have been warring beneath my skin to wash over me. Like being slammed by a tidal wave of confusion, doubt, and an aching need for something I can't even name, I stumble back against the wall. Bent forward, elbows on my thighs, I let my head hang between my shoulders and just breathe.

Canaan shifts to stand beside me, his large hand patting my shoulder. After a moment, he just lets his palm rest there, showing his silent support. As wolves, we're tactile creatures and find immense comfort in physical touch, especially if it comes from a pack member. And even more so, from a mate.

"Talk to me, brother," he urges. "What's going on in that head of yours? How do you not know if she's yours or not?"

I momentarily let myself to get sucked back into the memory of that moment when Noa's sweet-as-sin voice whispered that one little word. Mate . It'd been so soft,

almost fragile sounding, and yet the havoc its wreaked is anything but.

“My wolf is adamant she is,” I admit, exhaling deeply as if that will help expel some of this hectic energy racking me. Unsurprisingly, it does fuck all. “He caught her scent and he just...lost it. Completely infatuated with her on the spot.”

“And you? How do you feel about her?”

“I just keep thinking that it doesn’t make sense.” I shove myself up, forcing my body to stop using the wall for support. Walking forward a few paces, my fingers shove through my hair, tugging at the strands. “We were basically raised together. Her mom was the pack healer before she...” I trail off, knowing I still need to find a way to address that shitshow with Noa. “Thalassa was a pillar of our pack, and she worked closely with my dad, because of that, Noa was always here. I can’t for the life of me figure out why I haven’t thought about her in all these years, but we were around each other all the time growing up.”

Memories of running around this very house while our parents worked late or summer days down by the lake surface from the depths of my subconscious. Hell, I think I may have been the one to teach her to swim, now that I think about it.

“What part of that confuses you?”

“I came into my wolf a year early at seventeen.” In the long line of Fallamhain, I’m the only one to have done that. At the time, my father boasted to everyone who would listen about how it meant I had a powerful wolf, and I’d make a good Alpha one day. “That means my wolf had almost four years before Noa left the pack to sense this so-called mate bond. Yet, he never did. Don’t you think that’s odd?”

Canaan’s big shoulders shrug. “Can’t answer that one. Never experienced finding a fated mate, not that I think I’m missing out. I have Rhosyn, and I’d choose her every

damn time.” Some Alphas hold out hope for the rare chance of finding their scent matched omega. Others, like Canaan, don’t sit around waiting for fate to decide. They fall, hard and fast, destined or not. Rhosyn may not be his fated mate, but that means jack-shit to them. They chose each other, and every day, they keep choosing each other. “But from what I’ve heard? When you find your scent match, there isn’t any questioning it. You just know . Your wolves recognize each other and that’s it.” He watches me closely. “Let me ask you this, Nick, are you questioning it because your wolf didn’t pick up on a bond with Noa when you were younger? Or are you just flat-out denying it to protect your arrangement with McNamara because you think that’s what you owe the pack?”

“Both—”

The conference room door opens so hard, I’m surprised—and relieved—the drywall doesn’t crack when the door handle connects with the wall.

As if he’d summed her, Rhosyn charges into the room.

“Canaan Orion Roarke!”

Damn, my buddy’s mate looks pissed .

“Rosie?”

After slamming the door closed just as effectively as she opened it, the beta stalks toward her mate. I don’t know how she manages it, but her wild, fawn-colored curls even look pissed off. She stops before him, long, slender finger stabbing into the middle of his wide chest.

“Please tell me I didn’t mate with a man who would move me to a pack that exiles latent wolves from their ranks?” Oh shit. Her ire makes sense now, but I will admit,

I'm confused why she's directing it toward Canaan. Poor guy. "My mama's been trying to convince me you were a dog since the day I brought you home, and I've always defended your ass to that unpleasant as hell woman. You better swear to me I didn't waste my time and breath doing that, because if I find out you knew about this policy, I will personally hand you to Mama on a silver platter and she'll eat you alive."

There are only two instances in which you'd know that Rhosyn was born and raised in the swamps of Mississippi. When she's two drinks past tipsy and when she's madder than hell. And right now, she's basically spitting fire.

There's genuine fear in my second's gaze when he looks at me over his furious mate's shoulder. "Rosie, honey, I have no idea what you're saying right now."

Like an owl—or the goddamn Exorcist—Rhosyn turns her head, setting her sights on me. "You. Are you exiling pack members who can't shift?" There's marginally less heat in her tone as she addresses me, a wise choice since she's speaking to her pack Alpha, but the fury is still clear as day on her pale face. "I swear to the Goddess herself, Nick, if what Noa said is true I'm going to?"

"What did she tell you?" I demand, wondering if Rhosyn got more information than I did about Noa's version of the past.

Rhosyn shifts so she can look at both her mate and me. Her arms tighten angrily across her chest, and she's so full of simmering anger on behalf of the little stranger, her foot taps as she talks. "Noa told Zora and me about how she was cast out of this pack when she was still basically a child because your father refused to allow a latent wolf to tarnish his pack's fearsome reputation or some bullshit like that. Tell me she's wrong."

"Fuck." I scrub a hand down my face, my trimmed facial hair scratching against my

palm as I do. “She truly believes that story, huh?”

“And what story should she be believing?” Canaan asks. “What’s the truth? That she was banished or the one we’ve always been told about her mother?”

Rhosyn nods. “I want to know how a sweetheart like her ends up believing she’s been banished from this pack.”

I drop my hand from my face and shove it into the front pocket of my wool trousers to stop myself from rubbing the ache in my chest. The ache that deepens every time I think about what was done to that poor girl. The girl my wolf still insists is ours.

“Noa wasn’t exiled from this pack for being a latent shifter,” I start, hating that for the past seven years, she’s been living a lie. “Thalassa, for reasons no one knows, broke one of the most sacred laws as a charmer and used her gift to bind her daughter’s wolf.” Despite the fact this story has been shared amongst the pack like its own personal ghost story, the way Canaan’s tanned face drains of all color it’s like he’s hearing it for the first time. I guess it’s different when you can actually put a face to the name. However, the dramatics of Rhosyn’s gasp has me wondering if this really is her first time learning this lore. She’s still relatively new to the pack having only been here a handful of years. “She escaped with Noa in the middle of the night before my father could intervene and punish the vile bitch. Dad told me he sent enforcers out to find them, but Thalassa was too clever and powerful to be easily tracked. They were just...gone.

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Chapter 7

Rennick

“A nd Noa has no idea?” Rhosyn asks from her place at the conference table. After a few minutes of discussing the atrocious crime committed against Noa—by her own mother, no less—Canaan’s mate had to sit down.

My head shakes. “I’ll ask Zora. She’d know more about the full extent of Thalassa’s charmer gifts than I do, but from what I remember, she was a damn powerful weaver with the ability to manipulate energy and magic to her will. One of those wills, I know for a fact, was mind manipulation.”

“Meaning, not only did she bind her daughter’s wolf, but she also fucked with her memories?” Canaan surmises, still looking grim over the whole situation. “Who could do that to their child?”

Silence falls over our trio, each of us grappling with what has been done to Noa Alderwood. All this time, she’s been living who knows where with the very woman who altered the course of her life. She could have had a pack, this pack, had she known the truth. Instead, she’s spent the better part of these years believing us to be heartless, prejudiced people who would shun someone who couldn’t shift. There’s no saying what damage that line of thinking and belief has done to her self-worth. It’s no wonder she hasn’t found a new pack to join. She probably believes she doesn’t deserve to. Latent shifters are rare, nearly unheard of, but that doesn’t make them any less of a shifter at their core. They’re still pack animals.

My wolf mourns for the little female, aching over the fact that she's been alone all this time. Knowing he wasn't there for her is causing him real, tangible pain.

Shit, this whole thing is a mess.

"Okay, why are we still sitting in here then?" Rhosyn pops up from her chair, a look of determination overtaking the displeasure that's been etched on her pretty features since we started talking about Noa's past. "Let's go tell her the truth. She deserves to hear it, and it should come from you, Nick. Especially, since you're her mate and all."

"That has yet to be confirmed," I correct her, pretending I don't notice the way Canaan is subtly rolling his eyes.

She pauses, her hand on the door handle. "What do you mean it hasn't been 'confirmed' ? What the hell does that mean?"

Canaan pushes off the wall and joins his mate by the door, his big hand resting on her lower back. "Our Alpha has firmly planted his flag in the land of denial when it comes to Noa and the fact she claimed him," he explains on my behalf, not bothering to suppress the judgement from his tone. Asshole . "Or that his wolf has claimed the girl, too." I guess he's just laying it all out there for his mate. Great .

A frustrated groan rumbles out of Rhosyn, her disappointed gaze scanning me over. "You and Noa need to talk because you're both being absolutely ridiculous. Do you know how incredibly rare true scent matches are? You guys are letting denial cloud your judgment and by doing so, you're all but spitting in the Goddess's face."

Followers of the Moon Goddess, like Rhosyn, believe her to not only be the creator of wolf shifters but also the one who chooses our fated mates. It's their belief that she's the architect of our destinies. I, myself, have never put much stock in the deity as I much prefer putting my faith in real people.

“Rhosyn,” I start with a sigh, but her irksome mate cuts me off.

“He's also worried about the consequences of shattering his treaty with the McNamaras.”

“I honestly can't think of a better outcome than one where you end your engagement to that spoiled brat.” Rhosyn shrugs as she finally steps out of the room and leads us down the quiet hallway toward the den. Toward Noa. “Can I be there when you tell her to get her ass back to Canada? I promise I won't say a word. I just want to see the look on Talis's face when you break the news.” She looks back at me, a gleeful grin spreading across her face.

There are some moments where I'm thankful that Rhosyn didn't present as an alpha female. The ruthlessness she shows as a beta would be multiplied tenfold if she had the disposition of an alpha, and I'm almost certain the pack wouldn't have been able to handle her. That being said, her bloodlust makes her fiercely loyal, a trait I find admirable. Despite the occasional attitude, I'm thankful my friend found her and brought her home. The pack is better for it. My second sure as shit is a better person because of her influence.

We pass by the open-plan kitchen and main living area, both of which are blissfully empty. I don't have the patience to deal with any lingering council members or Talis right now.

“Have you forgotten why I made that bargain in the first place?”

“Of course I haven't.” She doesn't turn around, but I can hear the eye roll from here. “I want our pack's omegas protected just as much as you do, but I still think there has to be a different way to do it. A way that doesn't require you to sacrifice your happiness and your whole fucking future.” Rhosyn stops before the closed French doors of the den and meets my eyes. “Make no mistake, Nick, if you take Talis as

your mate, that's exactly what you'll be doing. You'll be miserable with her as your Luna, and we all know it. And now Noa's in the picture. If she's your fated mate, can you really live with yourself if you walk away from her for someone else?"

I fully grasp the depth of Rhosyn's question, but I can't bring myself to answer it. Not right now. Not when my wolf has just alerted me to something imperative.

Beyond the glass doors before us, the cozy den is void of all life. There's no sign of Zora or Noa. Wolf stirring restlessly within me, I step around Rhosyn and Canaan, and stride into the room. The strongest scent is the burning logs in the lit fireplace, and any traces of either female aren't fresh. Neither one of them have been in here in at least ten minutes.

"Where is she?" I demand, the power of my wolf pushing into each syllable. The anger rises within me, joined by something else. Is that fear? The fact the female he's enthralled with isn't where he left her has a snarl building in my throat.

Before either of my friends have the chance to respond, I'm turning and charging toward the front door. I'm vaguely aware they're both close on my heels murmuring harried words to each other, but I don't care what they're saying, not when I have no idea where my ma—Noa—is.

Slamming through the door, I discover two things at once that have my wolf's low snarl ramping up into a thunderous growl. I recognize every car that sits on my circular driveway. Each one belongs to a pack member. There isn't any sign of Noa's vehicle. She's already fucking gone. The second thing I notice is the very woman who was tasked with watching over her. Zora sits on the hood of her well-loved wood-paneled station wagon, a joint lit between her fingers. From here, the distinct mixture of burning tobacco and her homegrown weed reaches my nose.

"Tell me where the fuck she is, Zora!" I don't bother keeping the bark out of my tone.

The force of it snaps her upright, her posture going rigid. At least the healer has the decency to look unnerved as I storm toward her. “Why would you allow her to leave?”

Dark, thin brows drawing together, she gives me a slight shrug that puts my already fried nerves on edge. “My apologies, Alpha, I wasn’t aware I was to act as her jailer. The poor girl got more than she bargained for when she came here today. As you can imagine, she wasn’t processing it well and wanted to go home. Who was I to force her to stay?”

My fingers rake through my hair as my eyes scan the surrounding area, as if there’s still a chance I might catch a trace of her. Canaan and Rhosyn turn to head back inside. My second has his phone to his ear, no doubt trying to get me answers.

“You didn’t think I might need to have a conversation with her before she left?”

The healer has the audacity to scoff at me, her dark eyes twinkling with a type of humor I don’t appreciate as she takes a small drag from her joint. It’s taking everything in me to not smack the damn thing out of her hand. “Oh, I very much imagine a conversation is needed between the two of you. I do believe there’re a few pertinent things you need to discuss. Like, for starters, the small matter of you being mates.”

My denial is instantaneous, a gut reaction that increases my wolf’s grumbling exasperation. “I don’t know if we’re mates.”

Zora sighs. “Noa said the same thing.”

I pause the slight pacing I’d begun doing and meet the charmer’s eyes. “What did you talk about with her?”

“Not much considering she was unconscious and then busy emptying her stomach for a large chunk of our time together, but we briefly discussed her sordid history with this pack—a history both you and I know isn’t completely factual. And then we talked about the lack of emotional awareness you men seem to have.” The glare aimed at me speaks volumes more than any words she could say.

“You said it yourself, Zora, Noa also isn’t sure of our...connection.”

“Noa’s wolf was bound by Thalassa before she ever had the chance to truly bond with her animal half. Her ability to interpret and connect with her wolf’s emotions and desires isn’t exactly up to par.” Zora puts her joint out on the hood of her car before placing both hands on her cocked hips. “What’s your excuse, Alpha? Why are you struggling to acknowledge the truth that is right in front of your damn snout.”

“I don’t know if it’s the truth,” I snap, turning away from her and starting back toward the house. Once I hear her start to follow me, I add, “We’re told when we meet our scent match that we will know without a shadow of doubt that they are our destined mate. I have doubts. I can’t say with complete certainty she’s meant for me, which leads me to believe there’s a chance she isn’t.”

“Well, what does your wolf say? He won’t steer you wrong. You should listen to him.”

Mine. Mine. Mine.

That’s what my wolf says.

“It doesn’t matter what he says or what he wants, not when I can’t be sure of anything myself.” And not when I’m already bound in an impending union, a union that will help ensure the safety of my most vulnerable pack members.

“Liar,” the healer huffs. I turn to find her standing ten feet away, lingering in the foyer with her lips pursed.

“Excuse me?”

“Not only are you lying to me, Rennick Fallamhain, but you’re also lying to yourself,” she says, eyes flicking to where I’ve been absentmindedly rubbing the center of my chest. I drop my hand to my side. “I’m just wondering what your reasoning is.”

The silent and tense staring contest I’ve found myself in with the pack’s healer is interrupted when Canaan charges back into the room, Rhosyn close on his heels.

“I’ve got Mercer on her,” my second-in-command informs me. His easygoing nature has vanished, replaced by the no-nonsense edge he carries when he’s knee-deep in pack business. Not only have I always been impressed by the way he’s able to switch it on and off, I also envy the ease in which does it. “According to Danny, who’s on shift at the front gates, Noa has about a fifteen-minute head start on Mercer, and you know that enforcer is a fucking bloodhound. He’s the best tracker we’ve got. He’ll find out where she’s headed and where she’s been living all these years.”

I’m frozen in place, every fiber of my being screaming to jump in my car and chase after Mercer, the overwhelming pull of my wolf making it nearly impossible to resist.

Canaan picks up on my internal battle and tells me, “I can have Mercer share his location so you can follow behind him, man.”

My wolf perks up at this, demanding I take my second up on this offer. The strength it takes to stiffly shake my head is astounding. “No.” The word tastes like ash on my tongue and my hand raises on its own volition to rub at the odd tugging sensation in my chest. “I want updates from the enforcer every half hour and the second he has

her home's location, I want it shared with me.”

The chances of me getting any sleep tonight are slim to none, but there's no way in hell I'll get any rest without knowing exactly where Noa is laying her head tonight. On that, my wolf and I are in complete agreement.

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Chapter 8

Noa

I t was pure autopilot that got me home in one piece. Lost in a daze the entirety of my drive back to Ashvale, it wasn't until I parked in the carport beside the rich burgundy painted Victorian manor I call home that I finally registered my surroundings. I might have been secretly impressed with my muscle memory if I didn't find the whole thing unnerving as hell. Yeah, that could have ended poorly. Whoops, but also, go me!

Still slightly shell-shocked from getting my world fucking rocked—and not in a good way—I step through the squeaking front door of the house. Moving at a snail's pace, I'm still pulling the key out of the deadbolt when Seren appears from the hallway that leads to the cellar stairwell. Her upturned, powder blue eyes narrow and then widen when she spots the urn I'm cradling like a football against my chest.

“Are you kidding me?” she snarls, doing her best to keep her voice low to avoid waking the baby resting in the bassinet in the room to our right. “That asshole actually turned you down?”

Finally getting the brass key out of the pesky lock, I close the door behind me and then move to place the urn on the round front hallway table. I guess it's time to come up with a plan B for Mom's ashes because I'm not sure I'll ever set foot in Fallamhain territory again. At this point in time, I think I'd rather put a bonfire out with my face than relive that.

Can you blame me?

Today was...shit. It was shit. I don't know if I can come up with a more elegant word for what today was. "Insane" could be a contender, but it doesn't feel strong enough.

"Noa?" My best friend softly says my name when I don't answer her question after a long moment. Silently walking past her, I head toward the kitchen and she follows. Just as I don't have to say anything for her to know something is wrong, Seren doesn't have to say anything for me to know she's growing concerned. It's oozing off her in a thick fog.

Tossing my keys in the marble bowl we keep on the little built-in desk in the kitchen, I flip on the antique stained-glass pendant lights and head to the stainless-steel refrigerator. I don't know what I'm looking for, but when I see the jug full of mint green tea that I usually love, I quickly grab a bottle of water instead and close the door. The last thing I want to do right now is drink something that reminds me of him. I'm desperately trying to get my thoughts straight, and that'd be a difficult task to accomplish when sipping on something that carries hints of his scent.

Vetiver. Leather. Mint.

Delicious.

Seren leans against the reclaimed worktable we use as our kitchen island and watches me as I chug half the bottle.

"So, based on your deafening silence and the complete lack of color in your face, I'm going to take a shot in the dark and assume the meeting didn't exactly go well."

Even if I tried, I couldn't hold back the laugh that escapes me. It spills out, triggering a fit of hysterics. The look of horror on Seren's elfin face only makes me giggle harder until I'm bent over, a hand resting on my knee to keep me steady.

The second my friend's hand is placed on my back, a sign of silent solidarity, the laughs turn to sobs. Just like that, I break. I can't pinpoint the exact reason for my tears, but all I know is I welcome the emotional release.

Yeah, I was right. Today was shit.

Chapter 9

Noa

It's been an hour since I stopped crying long enough to recount everything that happened during my reunion with my childhood pack and Seren still watches me with open unease as I carry the basket of supplies down to our newest guest. Just as I assured her I could shower without needing her there for support or supervision, I told her I could handle delivering these essentials and introducing myself to the new Nightingale on my own. But my friend isn't having it. She's my shadow whether I think I need one or not.

I wanted to meet the girl as soon as I got home, but between my super-cute little breakdown and needing to shower off the scent of the males I'd come into contact with today, it's taken me longer to get down here than I'd like. Using scent-neutralizing soaps or sprays before interacting with a Nightingale is something we try our best to adhere to but meeting this traumatized girl while reeking of alpha males definitely wasn't an option. I don't know her story yet, but so often, the omegas that come here have suffered at the hands of alphas. I want her to trust me, and that won't happen if the possible familiar scent of her tormentors is clinging to my skin and clothes.

"What do we know so far?" I ask Seren over my shoulder as we descend the narrow stairwell that leads to the basement.

We have a few extra rooms in the manor, but omegas tend to feel most comfortable in dark, enclosed spaces. Being underground resonates with their wolf halves, tapping

into the instinct to burrow and create dens. My mom knew this when she had the blueprints for this underground space made. Of course, it wasn't an engineer who ultimately constructed the system that resides beneath the manor. The coven's High Priestess herself, the highly gifted elemental, used her power to shape and manipulate the earth. Every sturdy passageway and room down here was carved directly from the dirt and held in place by Amara's ample magic. A coven member's contractor husband then fitted the plumbing and wired the electricity because while the wolf half might enjoy being underground, the human side needs a running toilet and the ability to charge their phone.

There isn't anything that documents these changes. As far as public records go, the manor only has the simple cellar that is original to the historic building, and unless you know what you're looking for, that is all an uninvited guest will find down here. The Ashvale Coven's illusionist, Vardis, ensured it. Her flawlessly crafted glamour shields the secret entrance to the underground, dwelling from prying eyes. With the constant threat of a Nightingale's past coming to hunt them down, we do everything in our power to keep them protected.

We've seen many cases where some transition from needing the enclosed space of the cellar to feeling secure enough to move into one of the bedrooms in the main house. Seren herself is one of those success stories. Now she's a permanent resident here and in my life.

"I haven't been able to get her to say a word," Seren admits, the sorrow she feels for this poor girl clear from the way her face falls. "Lowri also tried, since she was the one who found her after she crossed Amara's shields, but the girl was unresponsive to the Alpha's attempts, too."

Around the entire perimeter of Ashvale, Amara has shields placed in the earth and air. Unless you're an extraordinarily gifted witch or charmer, you wouldn't be able to sense their existence. Which is exactly how we want it. Every time someone enters

town, Amara feels it. Her shields are so finely tuned she can immediately sense what kind of person has arrived, too. Wolf, witch, or human. Alpha, beta, or omega. The High Priestess knows before she ever lays eyes on them.

Before Mom's death, we didn't have to rely solely on the coven leader for this type of additional security. Mom had her own alarms woven into the borders of town. Since I lack any magic, and Seren, like Zora, is blessed with her own unique empath gifts, we're unable to create these needed radars on our own.

Between Amara's shields and Lowri's pack watching the borders, our Nightingales are well guarded here.

"Any visible injuries?" It goes without saying, the poor girl is currently riddled with all kinds of emotional scars, and we, well, mostly Seren, since she's the empath, will address them in time, but right now, I can at least tend to any physical ones she might have.

We stand before the far wall of the cellar. Setting the hand-woven basket at my feet, I press both palms against the cinder blocks. Seren follows suit. Vardis's magic stirs, reaching out like a staticky mist. As it recognizes us, sensing no threat, the illusion dissolves, taking the cinder blocks with it.

With the passageway revealed, its walls made of smooth stone and the path illuminated with welcoming strings of lights, I place the basket back on my hip and we head through. Once we pass, the illusion falls back into place. It's moments like these that I'm unapologetically jealous of the witches and their magic. I'm also deeply grateful to them and their willingness to help us build and protect this place.

"She's got one hell of a black eye, and I didn't get a good look, but I sensed that a couple of her fingers might be broken." Seren gives me the rundown, speaking softly to ensure the girl's sensitive shifter ears don't overhear us. "She was barefoot when

she escaped whatever hellhole she'd found herself trapped in. I have no idea how long or how far she ran, but her feet are ripped to shreds, Noa."

It doesn't matter how bad their condition is when they arrive or what drove them to flee in the first place, seeing an omega in distress is never easy. Whether they're bloodied and broken, or simply down on their luck and in need of a helping hand, every omega's story cuts deep. Omegas are meant to be loved and cherished, yet they're the ones who are continuously abused and failed by society. Their smaller statures and sensitivity to an alpha's dominant aura are exploited. A bond between an alpha and their omega is a gift and too often it's twisted into something dark and ugly instead.

The sick reality is it's their innately submissive nature and ability to take an alpha's knot that often makes them targets. Commodities. Too often over the years we've cared for omegas that were sold into various forms of sex slavery. Their bodies abused and used for an alphas pleasure. Of the three designations, omegas are the rarest and over the past two decades, their numbers have started to decline. With the population dwindling, alphas are getting more desperate to get their hands on omegas, which means they're willing to pay or steal to do it. It's disgusting and heartbreaking.

This was never the Goddess's intention when she crafted the intense and breathtaking bond between an alpha and an omega. These people have taken something beautiful and corrupted it.

Turning the corner, the passageway opens up into the main living space. A large, low-slung sectional sofa dominates the room. Its soft, indigo velvet cushions are deep, perfect for sinking into to watch your favorite comfort show. The corner spot is coveted and understandably fought over. Pieces of rich emerald fabric are draped meticulously across the already low ceiling, adding warmth, while a plush jewel-toned rug softens the stone floor beneath the couch. It's a haven for omegas and every piece of décor selected reminds me of my mom, her personal style reflected in each

element.

Across the open layout, the back wall of the room houses a long, fully stocked kitchen. Every Nightingale who comes to us is constantly reassured that they can help themselves to anything in the cabinets or refrigerator. For those who have had their food controlled or withheld, adjusting to this freedom isn't easy. In the past, some have struggled to accept any food offered to them, even the meals the coven's elders take turns preparing daily when we have guests staying with us. The older women, most of whom have retired from their day jobs, have essentially become den mothers. On rotating shifts, they cook and do light cleaning around the sanctuary, but, more importantly, they act as another safe and comforting presence for the recovering omegas to lean on. Even Eldrith, with her lethal hootch and no-nonsense attitude, is a fan favorite around here. Our Nightingales seem to appreciate the lack of coddling and blunt honesty they get from the crone.

"We've got a badass on our hands," I note, leading us to the alcove that serves as our little medicinal workstation.

For our omegas' privacy, we don't actually treat anyone out here in the communal area, but the apothecary-esque table and the open shelving above are where we keep our stock of products, most sourced directly from Potion if you hadn't been watching closely, you would have missed it.

Seren had remained in the doorway, adding to my one-sided conversation every once in a while, until the baby monitor on her hip had gone off. Before leaving to feed Ivey, my friend had reassured the scared female that she was safe here and that she was proud of her for finding her way to us. A sentiment I echoed immediately. Every time we've promised her that no one would harm her here, her stiff shoulders had relaxed a touch. We'd keep doing it until she believed us.

"One time, I was running through the shallow part of the creek, and I tripped."

Explaining the memory that's suddenly resurfaced, I carefully use a swab to dislodge dirt and other small pieces of debris from the open wounds on her sole. "Totally face-planted. I think I was almost thirteen, and of course I was embarrassed as hell because those new teenage emotions are never anything less than dramatic, but when I'd managed to pull myself up, I found a sharp pebble embedded in my palm. Normally, I would have just gone to my mom since she was the pack's healer, but we weren't actually supposed to be down at the creek that day. My friend had to dig it out himself, so our parents didn't find out that we'd skipped school."

The image of a sun-tanned hand with defined veins cradling my much smaller, bleeding one reemerges from the depths of my mind it was buried in. I bit my lip to stop myself from wincing too loud as he'd gently removed the rock from my skin. When he was done, he'd lifted my chin, and his thumb had tugged my lip from my teeth...gunmetal irises that were basically metallic had locked with mine as he vowed I would be okay.

Those eyes.

I'd recognize them anywhere.

Rennick.

My body goes rigid, locking in place as the realization crashes over me. The person I'd secretly slipped away with that day was him. The memory unravels further, and suddenly, more fragments from my past rise to the surface. Different moments, different days, but at their core, they're all the same. They're all tied to the Alpha's son and the time we'd spent together as pups. Time together I'd forgotten about until now.

How is it possible I didn't remember any of this until now?

There's a tugging sensation in my chest and my wolf keens, her quiet sorrow over the memories like a punch to the gut. Had she remembered these moments we'd spent with Rennick all along? Was that why she'd lost her mind when she'd picked up his scent? And if that was the case, why could she remember our time with the Alpha heir when I couldn't?

These are the questions bombarding my brain when the omega, the person who deserves my full attention right now, shifts in front of me. Her hands, which have been held stiffly at her sides since I finished splinting the two broken fingers Seren had clocked, lift slowly to rest on her lap. The movement is hesitant, but the tension in her limbs seems to have eased tremendously.

Lifting my attention from her wounded foot, I'm equal parts surprised and relieved to find an expectant look in her eyes. When my brows lift, the omega nods her chin at me, silently encouraging me to continue my tale.

I can't help the small smile that lifts my lips. "Right, okay then." Clearing my throat, I allow myself to delve back into the memory of Rennick. "Thinking we could get away with playing hooky was so dumb. Like I said, my mom was the pack's healer and his father was the pack Alpha. Word got back to them before our swimsuits were dry. It's safe to say the Alpha was not impressed."

Merritt Fallamhain had scolded us both, but more so Rennick, growling about how he didn't need his heir to be acting like some kind of "delinquent". You would have thought we'd stolen a car and robbed a bank by his reaction. I remember cringing and instinctively baring my neck to the furious pack leader, but Rennick remained steadfast. At sixteen, year before he'd present as an alpha himself, he had refused to bow to his father's dominance. Looking back at this newfound memory, I think this was the moment Merritt realized his son was going to outmatch him.

Her eyes dart toward my hand that is currently carefully using a swab to apply an all-

natural, honey-based antibacterial cream, and then she does the same to my other gloved hand. She repeats this twice more when I don't immediately pick up on her unspoken question.

"It was this hand." Holding out my left hand—my dominant hand, just like Mom's—I gesture vaguely to the area on my upturned palm where the rock had embedded itself. "Obviously you can't see it because I have gloves on, but it was here. I still have a scar to this day." A scar I never really gave much attention to because it was simply just there. I guess, a part of me had assumed it happened when I was too young to really remember.

This has her wheat-blond brows, the same shade as the long and mattered strands on her head, lifting in surprise. Not so subtly, her nostrils flare as she tries to scent me. To scent my wolf.

"I'm doused in scent-neutralizing spray right now," I explain when her face scrunches up in confusion. "But even without it, you wouldn't catch my wolf's scent. She's locked away down deep. I'm latent, never been able to shift. Which is also why this scar is still hanging around after thirteen years. I don't heal like you guys do without my wolf's help, so any scars I get, they're sticking with me."

Unless a wound is caused by an exceptionally dominant alpha, a shifter's advanced healing will knit flesh back together until the skin is once again smooth. Any evidence of damage is washed away. Some injuries take longer than others for the scar to vanish, but if given time, most will heal completely.

But like any other kind of trauma, just because there's no physical reminder of what you've endured, it doesn't mean you don't remember the pain.

She stares at me, unmoving, tension thick between us. But as the seconds stretch, I can feel her slipping away. Her eyes grow distant, her already gaunt face paling more.

Slowly, with a shaky, almost mechanical motion, she lifts her arms in front of her. Her deep blue irises are haunted as she studies the smooth expanse of her exposed skin. Any evidence of whatever she lived through has been smoothed away.

As if a swarm of cicadas has taken up residence in my skull, a near-deafening buzz erupts between my ears. My body flinches, instinctively trying to shake it off, as if I could escape the sound, but it's useless. It keeps growing, amplifying, until, like a glass bowl with a fissure, everything cracks.

Shattering.

Making way for another sound.

No, not sound.

A voice.

“Broken. Dirty, omega whore. That’s all I am anymore. Just like he promised I’d be.”

Like a scratched record stuck on the most painful part of a song, the words keep looping. I don’t know where they came from, only that they consume me. Drown me. Repeating, repeating. I lose myself in them.

The sterile gauze in my hand is long forgotten, my task momentarily neglected.

It’s the choked sob that pulls me back, snapping me out of the fog and anchoring me into my body once again.

Before me, the Nightingale presses her trembling hands to her ears, wincing slightly at the contact of broken fingers against her skull. Her knees pull tight to her chest, her whole body racked with shudders. She bites down on her lip, desperate to hold in the

sobs, but it only lasts a second before the dam bursts.

She starts rocking, her movements uneven. Between the tears and gasping breaths, her lips move, whispering. Her voice is so quiet, I can barely make out the words.

But some cut through, clear as day.

“Dirty, omega whore.”

The same words rattling through my own mind.

Tossing the supplies cradled in my palm to the side, I rip off the gloves and scramble to my knees. Normally, I wait, watching for the signs an omega is ready for physical touch, but not this time. I can't bring myself to summon that kind of patience for this one. She's breaking before my eyes and the only thing I can think of to stop her from unraveling completely is to wrap her up in my arms and hold tight. She flinches at first, her body instinctually rejecting the contact, but then slowly she melts into me.

It's an awkward angle and my knees are screaming at me from being pressed into the stone floor, but I refuse to move until she's ready to. She's a wolf shifter, a pack animal, how long has she gone without physical touch that offers comfort and not pain?

Bruised knees forgotten, I settle into the discomfort and hold her tight.

The string of self-deprecating thoughts gradually quiet in my mind until only a single one remains.

“I don't know who I am anymore.”

Following a gut feeling, an instinct I didn't think I had, I swallow down the emotion

that's bubbled up in my throat and whisper, "You are not who he tried to make you, omega. He didn't win. You're here. You're safe. And I swear, I'll hold your hand until you remember who you are. Until you remember who you've always been."

She stiffens in my arms for just a moment before another choked sound slips from her. Then, slowly, almost shyly, she pulls back, just enough to look at me. The same mix of wonderment and confusionswirling inside me is reflected in her eyes, because, yeah, holy shit, I'm pretty sure I just heard her thoughts.

And a twisting ache in my chest is gnawing away at the denial I've been clinging to since I woke up in the pack's den. Whatever this is with the Nightingale, it isn't the first time it's happened today.

"Mate. Mate. Mate."

That's what his thoughts had said. The thoughts I'd repeated in a daze.

I may have unintentionally claimed Rennick aloud, but the voice in his head had claimed me first.

How is this possible? I'm not a charmer. I don't have gifts. No wolf, no magic. Right?

Reaching inward to the place she's locked away, I search for my wolf, hoping for answers, but she's still and patient, like she's waiting for something just out of my reach.

Chapter 10

Rennick

I haven't been here before. This is all new, and, yet, I'd recognize the small, warm hands sliding up the hard planes of my back anywhere. In no world, waking or dreaming, would I be unable to identify the brown sugar and spiced fig scent that trickles from her pores and wraps around me like smooth silk, tugging tight to draw me in closer.

The room we stand in is dark and every wall is lined with large windows, each one wide open, allowing the silver light of the moon to flood the space and the misty night air to enter. The white fog that is a constant in every one of my dreams slowly drifts over the window ledges, snaking across the wooden planks of the floor. And with it comes a breeze that shifts and billows the sheer white curtains around the open panes of glass.

A warm, soft kiss is pressed to the center of my spine. My muscles slacken, utterly relaxed by the minimal contact, but my cock has the opposite reaction. It grows heavy, throbbing. Begging for her attention.

"Noa," I whisper, her name a prayer on my lips.

Her fingers trace across my shoulder blades, her touch featherlight, and yet searing. It scorches into my skin, branding me. I want more. No, I crave more of that blazing heat. I check in with my beastly side, curious to see what my wolf thinks of this, but I find him silent. At peace. Nothing more than a watching presence within me.

A trail of warmth follows her hands as they drift down the sensitive flesh of my sides. As she grazes my ribs, her body shifts, the front of her naked form gliding against mine. The top of her dark head reaches just shy of my collarbones, and as she stands before me, her delicate finger traces the defined muscles of my chest and abdomen, making my breath catch in my throat.

“Do you feel me?” she murmurs, pressing forward, her sleek, naked body molding against mine. The pressure against my aching cock is just enough to tease me.

I can’t stop the low rumble of a groan as it escapes. My hands find her waist of their own volition, grasping the warmth of her skin. The feel of her slight body in my hold sends a hum of pleasure through my chest. The moonlight makes her soft, pale skin glisten, and the primal side of me demands that I mark it. Mark it as mine.

Her focus remains on my chest, her face not once tipping up so I can make out her delicate features. I need to see her. The innate desire consumes me.

Sliding my hands up her body, pausing to caress the sides of her neck, I clasp her face and tilt her chin. Her pert little nose and plump pink lips are just as I remember them to be, but her eyes...

They’re made of the same white fog that is trickling into the room from the open windows. Within her irises, it moves with the same ghostly fluidity. The tendrils coil and float, restless, never settling. You’d expect her gaze to feel cold, lifeless, but I’m met with a warm intensity that beckons me. Imprisons me.

Her fingers wrap around my wrists, holding me in place, as she stares back at me. Here, in this dream, she is ethereal. Goddess-like. I am enraptured by her. A craving I’ve never felt before burns in my veins, burning for her. Every fiber of my being calls to her and demands that I claim her.

Noa lifts onto her toes, bringing her face just close enough that I can feel her warm, shaky breath ghost across my chin.

“Pick me.”

The words slice through the haze of need, an ache I couldn't name tightening in my chest.

“I—”

Her hold on my wrist tightens, her fingers digging into my skin as though she's afraid I'll slip away. The broken look in her gaze guts me. My previously silent wolf rises within me, ears pricked, muscles coiled. He watches her through my eyes, searching for what's caused our mate to look so crestfallen.

“You have to pick me.”

Her voice is a breath, a plea, that rattles something deep in my bones.

I open my mouth to answer, to make a vow to her that is as easy as breathing, but I never get the words out.

The dream shatters.

“Nick!” A strong hand grips my shoulder, aggressively shaking me awake and away from her .

My wolf charges forward, breaking through the barrier that keeps me in control. One moment I'm sprawled on the cream sofa in the den that's entirely too small for my large frame, and the next I have the offender who dared to rip me from my dream—away from her—against the bookcase across the room. I'm vaguely aware of

the distinct sound of wood splintering and the way paperbacks and hardcovers go flying, their pages fluttering as they fall to the floors.

Beastly side still holding our reins, I snarl in my wrongdoer's face, the force of my blazing alpha aura demanding their complete submission. It's not until their distinct hazel eyes, ones I know well, fall and his head awkwardly turns to the side, baring his neck as best he can with my hand wrapped around it, that I fully return to my body.

With one last, low warning growl, I release him and back away.

He stumbles, catching himself before he can join the discarded books on the ground. Heaving to replenish his air flow, Canaan stares at me in bewilderment. "Fucking hell, man. I tried waking you up the nice way, but you didn't so much as twitch. You were dead to the world." He gestures in the direction of the coffee table. "Shifter or not, looks like a whole bottle of bourbon doesn't discriminate and will knock anyone on their ass."

Oh. Right. The bourbon.

Without the rush of adrenaline pouring through my veins, the lingering effects of my bad decisions creep back in. The most prominent of which is the pounding headache that makes my eyes hurt with it. It's notoriously hard for a wolf shifter to get a hangover, but nothing is impossible if you really put your mind to it, and fuck if I didn't put in a valiant effort.

Groaning, I slump my exhausted ass back onto the couch and cradle my throbbing skull in my hands. The faint morning light streaming through the big windows only makes the ache in my eyes worse.

I can feel Canaan's concerned gaze raking over me, but he has the decency to give me a minute to fully wake up and recenter my alcohol-soaked system before

speaking.

“Took me a minute to track you down. Searched the whole damn house. Obviously, you weren’t in your room. That’s where I checked first. Even checked out back to see if you crashed in that chair of yours again.” Grudgingly lifting my head, I find him glancing around the room, expression of poorly concealed understanding written on his face. “Probably should have guessed I’d find you in here sooner than I did.”

I stare back at him, waiting for him to acknowledge what we both know.

“Still smell like her in here?”

The way his chest expands and his nostrils flare has my wolf’s hackles rising. He doesn’t want another male, trusted friend or not, to scent her. The way my teeth are grinding, I’d have to reluctantly agree with his sentiment, but I find I don’t give two shits if it’s a male or not tasting her sweetness in the air. Male or female. Friend or foe. I don’t want to share it with anyone. Bottling it up and huffing it like a greedy bastard is more the lane I’m running in right now.

Scrubbing my face with my palm, I grunt, “It did last night.”

Subtly, I test the air myself and find it stale, her tempting fragrance nowhere to be found.

Last night, when I stumbled in here and collapsed on this sofa—a piece of furniture I don’t recall ever using in the past seeing as this room is rarely touched—her sweet and slightly spicy scent had bloomed from the fabric and wrapped around me. Bottle of Angel’s Envy in my right hand, I’d laid here and allowed myself to just breathe her in.

It was taking everything in me to not open the message I received from Mercer. The

one that informed me of Noa's location. I knew if I learned exactly where I could find her, I wouldn't have the strength to stay away. Through my internal battle, I found solace in the fact that I had one of my most trusted men watching over her. My wolf, however, did not share that viewpoint. He didn't, and still doesn't, trust her safety in anyone else's hands but his.

I thought drinking would take the edge off, but it wasn't until I allowed myself to succumb to Noa's scent clinging to this room that I found any semblance of peace.

With the last ounce of liquor burning down my throat, I'd fallen asleep with my brain wrapped in thoughts of her.

Noa.

Mine. The possessive growl comes instantaneously from my wolf.

Canaan nods, a quiet understanding and sympathy rolling off him, grating my exposed nerves.

The way he's shifting anxiously where he stands finally catches my attention. Like a switch being flipped, I go from groggy and hungover to sharp and alert. My wolf perks up, his borderline sulking behavior ceasing. His focus narrows, scanning for threats.

"What's going on?" I question as I drop the shield I'd placed to block my connection to the pack last night. The panic coming from my people is immediate, slamming into me like a freight train. I'm on my feet before my next breath, my wolf so close to the surface I know my eyes have shifted to his pale orbs.

"Enforcers found something on their patrol," he admits, sounding and looking alarmingly grim. "It's not good."

There are sounds in life that stick with a person. A father's voice the first time he tells his kid he's proud of them. A lover's laughter. A baby's first earthly cry. All emotionally impactful in their own ways, but none compare to the sound of a mother's anguished scream when she's told her missing child has been found.

Or, more accurately, what is left of her daughter has been found.

Carly vanished at the same time as Yrsa's daughter. They were best friends. Where one went, the other followed, and for that reason, we had briefly contemplated the possibility the two wild spirits had run off. That theory went up in smoke when my enforcers tracked their scents to the western side of the lake where they were taken. There's an inlet there that has always been popular with the pack's teen population. There were notable signs of a struggle left behind in the sandy shoreline and a bloody earring that looked like it'd been ripped out in the skirmish. We'd done our best to track them, but any trace of them disappeared about two miles away from their abduction site and we ended up losing the trail. That, coupled with the fact their captors didn't leave behind any scent markers of their own, left us to believe they're using military-grade scent-neutralizers to conceal themselves. I've also been silently pondering the possibility of a witch or charmer assisting this band of bastards and their cause. The way they are able to wipe away any evidence of their presence on my land is borderline magical. The direction they were headed in before we lost them was clear, though. North. Toward the border.

It was after this that I banned omegas, mated or not, from going anywhere without escorts. Until I can figure out how these assholes have been able to slip past our patrols and move about our territory without notice, I can't risk it. The very fact that I can't seem to keep my people safe in their own home is a weight I don't know how much longer I can bear.

I thought I'd found a solution by allying with McNamara, but now as I stare at the abused and mangled body of one of our missing omegas, the realization I'm still

failing my people nearly brings me to my knees. The grief and pure, liquid anger are eating away at me. It's hardwired into an alpha's very DNA to protect and care for omegas. It is, at our core, what we were put on this planet to do. That is why fated scent matches are a phenomenon shared between just alphas and omegas. Our existences go hand in hand. And yet, I'm failing at it.

It's a battle to momentarily tune out the heart-wrenching and guttural sounds coming from Carly's mother so I can focus and determine what our next moves are.

"Canaan," I bark, my attention still locked on the remains. The remains we only know belong to Carly because of her scent. Her once memorable facial features are indistinguishable from whatever horrors she's been forced to suffer through these past months.

The crunch of snow at my left alerts me to my second's presence. "Alpha?"

"Assemble two teams of enforcers. Have them sweep the surrounding areas and track down any trace of the ones responsible. I need to know how they got onto our territory with her body and how they left without anyone noticing."

"Consider it done." He dips his chin. "I already sent a couple guys back. They're going to drive one of the side-by-sides out here. It'll make transporting her— Carly—back easier."

"No."

Canaan's brows shoot to his hairline. "No? You don't want to bring her back? Nick, her mother and siblings are going to need time to properly say goodbye?—"

Hand rising, I cut him off. "I'll carry her home. There's no need for the side-by-sides."

He holds my gaze, the silence between us heavy with grief and a simmering rage we can't yet act on. Not here. Not now. With a single solemn and understanding nod, he turns and strides toward Rhosyn, who kneels in the snow beside Carly's mother. She's trying desperately to console her, but how does one mend the soul of a mother shattered by unimaginable loss? Her world has just been ripped apart at the seams and there are no words that we can offer her that can repair it. Canaan whispers something in his mate's ear that has her bloodshot green eyes shooting to where I stand. Not looking away, she reaches for the extra flannel blanket she'd brought and hands it to him.

Something pinches in my chest when I observe the tender way he presses a kiss to her temple. I don't currently have the time nor the mental bandwidth to try and identify what that emotion is.

Canaan returns and passes me the blanket before tucking his hands into the front pockets of his worn jeans.

"Do you need help?" he asks, keeping his voice low. It doesn't matter if he'd yelled the question, we can both already feel the loitering pack members' attention falling on us.

I don't bother with a response. Words feel empty in the face of this. Back straight, shoulders squared, I force myself forward, each step heavier than the last as I approach where Carly has been unceremoniously left. No one deserves an end like this. Cold, discarded, stripped of their dignity. But the thought that this is how a bright, bubbly nineteen-year-old's life was stolen from her is a dagger to the gut.

I kneel beside her, my hands trembling despite the tight grip I keep on my emotions. The flannel blanket is soft, a painful contrast to the broken, bloodied body I carefully wrap inside it. I try to be gentle, though I know it doesn't matter now, but it's all I can offer her in this moment and she deserves it. Lifting her into my arms, I nearly falter.

She's too light, too fragile. Another painful reminder of all she endured before death stole her.

My throat tightens, but I manage to whisper, "Okay, honey, let's bring you home."

There's no longer any room for doubt. The internal battle I've been waging with myself and my wolf is irrelevant. The choice I've been wrestling with, the price I've been dreading...it's inevitable now. For my pack. For their safety. My duty demands sacrifice, and this one may just haunt me forever.

"You have to pick me." Her achingly sweet voice cuts through the chaos in my mind, a ghostly echo of her plea.

I can't.

Please forgive me, sweet Noa.

"You've finally pulled your head out of your ass and decided to not go back on your word, huh?" Cathal's ruddy brow arches as he takes a long drag of his hand-rolled cigarette. The casual way he sucks on his cancer stick and leans against his shiny silver sports car—a vehicle that makes little sense in our mountainous climate—irks me. Especially after what my last thirty-six hours have looked like. "You going to honor our alliance, Fallamhain?"

"I don't recall ever saying I wasn't going to honor it, McNamara." I match his emotionless tone and cold indifference with my own, a skill I've been learning to hone since I walked the six miles to the healer's cabin with Carly's lifeless body in my arms. The constant pull in my chest, persistent and aching, makes it harder than I'd like to admit, but ignoring it is another skill I've been sharpening. "You came to that conclusion all on your own."

The unimpressed sound that rumbles from his throat ignites a violent urge in me to wrap my hand around it and squeeze until his eyes pop out of his skull. It takes every ounce of control to shove the impulse down, barely keeping a lid on it.

“The Alderwood girl isn’t going to be a problem, then?” he questions, an incredulous gleam in his dark gaze.

“No.”

My wolf balks at this, his teeth bared and hackles raised. At me . The budding disconnect that started to form with Noa’s arrival has turned into something vast, an open chasm stretching between us that’s deepened drastically over the past day and a half. His defiance, his refusal to accept my decision, has forced me to lock him away deeper than I ever have before. Right now, I don’t trust him enough to let him loose, to shift, and I have no idea when that will change. His unwavering devotion to the woman who is not my betrothed leaves me with a gnawing worry because if I set him free, I don’t know what he’ll do.

“Hmm...” Cathal hums around the unfiltered end of his cigarette.

I snarl at this, the sound I emit purely animalistic. “I don’t take kindly to being doubted.”

This has his lips curling into a cruel grin. “And I don’t appreciate my daughter being made to look like a fool. A second choice.”

“Your daughter is hardly my first choice, McNamara. That’s no secret,” I remind him, my newly sharpened iciness settling back into place. “This is a strategic alliance, nothing more. A means to protect my pack. Let’s not pretend it was ever a matter of emotional sentiment.”

He knows exactly what I'm sacrificing by taking his daughter as my chosen mate. He understands the future I'm tearing away from my bloodline, from the pups I'll possibly father. The Fallamhain Alpha dynasty will die with me, a cost I've accepted. But Cathal doesn't care. To him, this union isn't a sacrifice, it's an opportunity. A way to secure his beta daughter a place of prestige.

"Nonetheless, if you want me to continue with this partnership, you're going to fix it."

My jaw tics, teeth clenching. "And how, precisely, do you propose I do that?"

Never, in all the years I've known Cathal McNamara, have I sensed any real joy or happiness when he smiled. Each time before, it always read like a threat. A taunt of sorts. But now, as he drops the butt of his cigarette and stomps out the embers with the sole of his leather dress shoes, the grin on his face is alarmingly gleeful.

Bracing for what he has to say, my defenses strengthen.

"If you want what my pack can offer you—your omegas—you're going to reject her. Publicly," he declares, his posture turning smug. "The little wolfless bitch claimed you publicly, it's only fair you return the favor, don't you think? For Talis's sake, that is."

My wolf wars and rages against the restraints I've been forced to place on him. The very notion of this is unfathomable to him. The tugging sensation in my chest surges, sharp and relentless, yanking so hard I almost stumble forward. I haven't admitted it, but deep down, I know exactly where it's trying to pull me.

"That isn't necessary. She's not?—"

My blatant denial is cut off.

“Are you willing to risk another dead omega being dumped on your damn doorstep?
You want this treaty? This is my price.”

Chapter 11

Noa

“ Everything in here is brand new, or if it’s not, it’s been thoroughly washed with scent-neutralizing detergent.” I push the door open to what we call the nesting closet. The sheer size of the space makes it the furthest thing from an actual closet, but the name’s stuck nonetheless. All four walls have built-in shelving units that are stocked to the brim with various color-coded nesting supplies. In the middle, we have bins that are stuffed with more fabric and pillows. “Like I told you before, you’re welcome to anything here. You can take as much or as little as you want. This is your space—your nest—and you need to be comfortable in it, and if twenty-seven pillows and thirteen blankets is what you need to accomplish that, then so be it.”

After five nights with us and countless gentle offers from Seren and me, our new Nightingale has finally chosen to make her new room her own. This is so much more than simply decorating. It’s deeper than that. For an omega, curating a nest is something that borders on ceremonial. It’s sacred. The fact she feels safe enough to take this step is a testament to her resilience. Having access to a genuine nest of her own will only aid her healing process here. There is nowhere an omega feels safer than in her nest.

And who knows when Siggy’s next heat will hit? More than once, simply being in a safe, stable environment has triggered a heat cycle in one of our Nightingales. Once their bodies are no longer trapped in a constant state of fight or flight, they can finally relax, allowing nature to resume its regularly scheduled programming. It would be detrimental to Siggy if she didn’t have a proper nest ready in time.

Stepping into the room, I look over my shoulder to make sure she's still with me, but she remains three feet before the open doorway. The panic-stricken look in her big blue eyes tells me everything I need to know.

"Siggy." I softly say her name to redirect her attention to me. Yesterday, during a quiet moment at breakfast, she'd found her voice and whispered her name. I'm still trying to uncover her last name and where she comes from, but, for now, just knowing her first name feels like a victory. Calling someone "omega" for too long starts to feel impersonal, bordering on dehumanizing. Siggy deserves more than that. "We don't have to do this today. This is all at your pace, love. No one will mind if you want to wait a few more days."

Her head shakes, her thick wheat-blond hair falling forward into her face. We'd spent a good hour the day before last detangling the strands and then trimming the dead ends away. She's still far from looking healthy, but it's incredible what a good shower and the safety of a warm, secure place can do for the body.

"It's not that." Her voice is still painfully soft, just an octave above a raspy whisper. "A week before I was taken, I presented. I never even had the chance to try making a real nest as an omega. I have no idea where to start...what if I mess it up?"

With plenty of sleep and a steady diet, Siggy's broken fingers have healed, but that doesn't stop me from being overly gentle when I reach out and grasp them in mine. "You can't mess this up because it's yours. Your omega instincts will guide you, showing you exactly what you need and where everything belongs. All you have to do is trust yourself and listen." I give her hand the faintest squeeze. "Okay?"

"Okay." She takes a deep, soothing breath, her attention flicking between all the varying shelves and bins. We try to keep the basics stocked here, but if there's something specific a Nightingale wants, we have no problem ordering it for them. We shuffle into the room, and I grab her one of the empty rolling bins. The whole thing

will be like a little shopping spree, but without the price tags for her.

Siggy's quiet for a moment while she explores the first shelf, thin fingers dragging over the soft materials that are all in different shades of blue. I stay back, leaning against the doorframe, letting her process this however she needs to. My role here is to support her in whatever capacity she needs me, but nesting is such an intimate process, there's not much I can do other than lend her my silent reassurance.

She glances at me over her shoulder. "Noa?"

"Yeah?"

"What does your nest look like?"

Her question has me shifting on my feet, a long-buried yearning flaring in my chest. An inaccessible instinct itching beneath my skin. "Oh," I start, standing up straighter, my movements feeling awkward. "Well, I don't have one. I have a really cool room, though. It's the attic of the manor and it has these kick-ass vaulted ceilings and windows on every wall..."

This has her turning fully around to face me. "You don't have a nest? Why not?"

"Nesting is something omegas do, and I'm not an omega." My shoulders shrug in a falsified show of nonchalance.

Dark blue gaze, wise beyond her eighteen years, scrutinizes me before she makes a surprisingly sassy huff. It's a small thing, but it's wonderful to see traces of her personality coming back to life. "That doesn't make sense."

"Oh? And why's that?" I chuckle, thoroughly enjoying the moment of levity between us.

The past five days have been hard and heavy. Between the chaos at the Fallamhain territory and tending to Siggy, it's been a lot. I haven't stopped moving since I got home, and I know why. Deep down, I'm afraid of what will happen if I give myself even five minutes to think about him . It's hard enough ignoring the persistent tugging in my chest, the beckoning pull in my heart. My poor imprisoned wolf has been beyond restless within her glass cage. If I stop and focus on him—his stormy gunmetal gray eyes and his effortlessly messy dark hair—that fissure that formed five days ago will only deepen, tearing apart a piece of me I never even knew was there.

And on top of all of that, I'm still trying to get to the bottom of why I've been able to hear a handful of other people's thoughts. So, yeah , to say I've had a few things on my plate would be a freaking understatement.

“Noa, I've spent a lot of time around omegas these past months.” Some of the lightheartedness that'd graced her face only a second ago falls away, memories of the horrors she's recently escaped—horrors she's yet to share with me—no doubt filling her poor head. Siggy blinks rapidly, head shaking ever so slightly as she attempts to disrupt whatever darkness that's crept in from her subconscious. “You're built just like one of us.”

One of us. That's the thing. I've never fully belonged anywhere. I exist on the edges, close enough to brush against acceptance but never quite fitting in. I'm a wolf shifter without a wolf. The daughter of a charmer living among witches, yet powerless myself. My life is devoted to the care of omegas, though I don't bear that title either. Always close, always almost , but never enough.

Caught between worlds, never truly a part of any.

“Maybe I'm just short,” I deflect, but the blank stare I get in return tells me she's not buying it. Okay, fine . “We're supposed to find out our designations during our first shifts. But, as you know, that never happened for me. Alpha, beta, omega...whatever

I was destined to be, I'll never know."

But she's right. Of those options, omega is the most likely. I can stand up for myself and others when it matters, but I don't thrive in confrontation. I can lead and take charge when needed, but "dominant" isn't a word I'd ever use to describe myself. Deep down, at my core, I'm a nurturer. And, shit, I do love my collection of fluffy blankets—not that this is the be-all and end-all of being an omega, but, let's be real, comfort items are kind of their thing. Any genuine omega instincts I may have are locked away with my wolf.

Siggy's pale hand waves me off. "You're definitely an omega."

"Perhaps, but we'll never know for sure."

I don't think she consciously knows she's doing it, but she reaches for an incredibly soft pillow in a shade that matches her irises almost perfectly. Her fingers stroke the fabric for a heartbeat before she tosses it into her empty cart. Siggy's just selected the first item of her nest and the action has me silently applauding her. I know the second she realizes what she's done because her body locks up and she glances between the pillow she's selected and the shelf she pulled it from, as if she's trying to figure out how it got there in the first place. Slowly, her focus lifts back to me, a flicker of shy excitement breaking through the dullness still lingering in her features.

"You're the one who told me to listen to my instincts." With more gumption, she selects a matching pillow in a lighter shade and enthusiastically adds it to her collection. "Maybe you need to take your own advice and listen to yours."

"She feels lighter," Seren murmurs softly behind me as she watches over my shoulder. "There's obviously a lot she still needs to work through, and we'll get there but, right now, she's not drowning in the darkness the way she was when she first got here. Don't get me wrong, she's still scared shitless, but who could blame her?"

“Not me,” I utter back just as softly so we don’t disrupt the Nightingale who’s diligently placing her new nesting materials around her room.

Once Siggy chose that first pillow, there was no stopping her. It was like flipping a switch. She moved through the space in a trance-like state, picking out more items without hesitation. Her omega instincts took over completely, even driving her to scent mark a few things before adding them to her ever-growing collection of goodies. It was cute as hell.

“She said earlier that she spent a lot of time around omegas. With everything else we know, I’m starting to think she was trafficked.” I don’t have to verbalize the rest. We’re both already thinking it.

Sex slavery.

When I think of hell on earth, I picture the underground networks that buy and sell omegas like cattle, stripping them of their freedom, humanity, and dignity. The very thought of it and its growing prevalence makes my skin crawl and my stomach roll with nausea. And knowing that Siggy might have lived through that kind of nightmare? It’s nothing short of horrifying.

“Have you been able to...” When Seren’s question trails off, I glance over my shoulder at her with my eyebrows lifted in silent question. “You said you heard her thoughts that first night. Just like you did with you-know-who. Have you picked up on anything else that will help us piece together her story?”

Of course, after I’d said good night to our new Nightingale that first night she was here, you can bet your ass I ran straight to Seren to tell her what had happened for the second time that day. If you start hearing voices in your head, common sense says you should tell someone, unless you’re aiming for a one-way ticket to starring in your own psychological thriller. Things like that can spin out of control, fast, and the only

thing that stopped me from panicking about the health status of my mind was reminding myself that I am, in fact, riddled with dormant charmer DNA.

Seren, ever the trooper, sat with me for over two hours while I tried to tune into her thoughts. She's a saint, not just for putting up with my silly late-night experiment, but for believing me even when I couldn't make it happen again. While I'd continued to set up camp in the land of denial, Seren had waved me off with a scoff. "You are the daughter of one of the most powerful charmers on record. Did you honestly think you'd never manifest gifts of your own, you cute but delusional dingbat?" were her precise words.

The question is, why would I be manifesting gifts of any kind now ?

Neither of us had an answer for that one.

My head shakes. "I haven't heard anything else. I've tried to stay open or whatever, but it's not like I was purposely eavesdropping on them before. It just...happened. I don't exactly have control over it. Who knows? Maybe it was just a fluke. One of those one-time-only kind of things."

Seren ponders this for all of three seconds, lips pursed in contemplation, before she comes to a decision. "Nope, not buying it. You've got royal charmer blood in your veins, babe. Randomly developing a gift as rare and revered as telepathy isn't something that just pops in for a day for a casual visit. There's more to it, and you know it."

"Yeah..." I sigh, palm rubbing at my chest. "I was worried you were going to say that."

We fall into a heavy silence, our attentions returning to the omega who is currently debating the placement of a dove-gray faux mink blanket in her bed. All the rooms

down here are equipped with beds that are sunken into the floor with a four-poster canopy over them, both of which aid in giving an omega that enclosed atmosphere they crave. Siggy has woven soft fairy lights into the sheer blue fabric she's hung between the bed posts. There was a minute there when she was struggling to connect the ends, but I made no move to assist her. Until she invites me into her space, I am firmly planted on this side of the doorway. This room is officially her nest now, and you don't enter an omega's nest without an explicit invitation. I can count on two hands how many times I've stepped foot in Seren's room in the house, and she's basically my sister at this point. Respecting an omega's nest is something that should always be taken seriously.

Siggy finally decides where she wants the blanket. Her gaunt face peeks over her shoulder, that unsure expression from earlier once again grips her.

I don't need to be able to hear her thoughts to understand her unspoken question. "Siggy, it looks amazing in here. You should be proud of yourself, love." My big, genuine grin almost hurts my face as I give her a horribly cheesy thumbs-up. I'd prefer to offer her a hug, but I can't do that from here. "We can look at rugs online later like we talked about."

"Okay." She nibbles on her bottom lip, her uncertainty still clear, but she doesn't offer more insight into where her head's at and I don't pry. Siggy will tell me when she's ready. "Thanks, Noa."

I wave her off and smile when she gets busy attacking more blankets.

Knowing she'll be busy for a while longer, Seren and I slip away down the short hallway into the kitchen. Because she knows me better than anyone alive, Seren immediately gets to work on making a fresh pot of coffee. I'd prefer to head upstairs to the manor's kitchen where our beloved espresso machine lives, but you know what they say about beggars and choosers. If I'm really honest, I think I'd sip caffeine

straight out of a dirty puddle if I were desperate enough. We all have our vices, right?

“She’s chosen you,” Seren declares, leaning against the butcher block countertop. She doesn’t have to elaborate further. We both know what she means. Every Nightingale who comes to us receives support from everyone involved in the sanctuary, but, in the end, an omega almost always chooses one person to be, well...their person. For Edie, that someone was Lowri. The pack Alpha took her under her wing almost immediately. “I’m trying to decide if I should be offended since, you know, I was actually the one here when Siggy arrived. But then again, I guess I’m at a bit of a disadvantage these days seeing as I can’t fucking read minds like you can. Hard to compete with a damn mind reader.”

I roll my eyes and mirror her lighthearted teasing, “That’s rich coming from the girl who can not only sense everyone’s emotions but can also soak up all the negative ones like some kind of empathic Dyson. Don’t stand there and try to paint yourself as some basic bitch. It’s beneath you.”

Seren tries her best to pout, but it’s hard to take her seriously when she looks less like a sulking child and more like someone’s fan art for one of those smutty fairy romance books. Minus the pointy ears, of course. No, my girl’s got badass pointy fangs and claws instead. She’s about two inches taller than the typical omega, but she’s got those curves that are synonymous with the fairer designation. Siggy is adamant I’m built like an omega and while there’s no arguing that I’m short as hell, I wouldn’t classify myself as being overly curvy. Like everything else in my life, I can break myself down into all the ways I almost fit and all the ways I never quite do. And honestly? It’s an exhausting game to play.

“Ha!” Seren barks out a laugh. “Touché, pussycat. I am pretty amazing, something you would know if you’d let me help you.” Her fingers waggle at me, her silent offer hanging between us.

“I don’t need you to take any of my hurt for me to know that you’re awesome,” I tell her. “Siggy may have chosen me now, but I chose you as my person a long time ago, Ser. That’s not going to change.”

Wordlessly, she leaves her post beside the gurgling coffeepot and comes around the narrow kitchen island where I’m seated on a barstool and wraps her arms around me from behind. Her grip borders on too tight and her defined chin digs into my shoulder, but I don’t care. I lean into the soundless show of support.

Our quiet moment shatters as two sets of determined footsteps echo from the hallway leading to the cellar entrance. Seren steps back, giving me just enough space to slide off my seat and stand beside her. I don’t need shifter senses to feel her anxiety as it’s a perfect reflection of my own.

Eldrith, our favorite hooch-brewing crone, appears first. Edie, with Ivey settled on her hip, is only a step behind her. The concern and confusion on their faces only make my inner worry increase. Seren moves first, her mom instincts no doubt on high alert with the sudden shift in the air. She scoops her daughter up from her favorite babysitter and holds the fair-haired infant tight to her chest.

“What’s going on?” I ask, already running through our emergency evacuation procedures in my head. The thought of uprooting Siggy so soon, just as she’s beginning to trust this place, makes my stomach twist. But if it means keeping her safe, then so be it. A nest can be rebuilt. Her safety comes first.

“Amara sent us to get you,” Eldrith explains, her aged and sun-weathered face tight. The way she dresses, you’d never guess she’s pushing seventy. She always looks like she’s one step away from heading to a rock concert, and today’s no exception. Her eighties hair band graphic tee is just another testament to her unapologetically eccentric style. I can only hope I’m as cool as she is when I’m her age. “Someone—multiple someones—passed through her wards.”

“Who?”

“Wolves,” Edie says, hands ringing nervously in front of her. “And it’s not the Craddock Pack.”

Chapter 12

Rennick

It doesn't surprise me in the slightest that Thalassa Alderwood fled to a town ruled by witches.

She was always more witch than wolf, and I'm sure she felt right at home here in Ashvale. What does surprise me, though, is that she managed to do the impossible by not only befriend the notoriously secretive Ashvale Coven but also gaining the trust of the all-female Craddock Pack. The weaver had set up the perfect refuge for herself and her daughter, a place where they could remain not just hidden, but truly protected. Thalassa, despite all her glaring faults and the crimes she committed against her own child, was always the sharpest mind in any room. Her choice of allies is just further proof of that cunning wit.

The moment our caravan crossed the border into the small, picturesque Washington town, my wolf—still shackled with every ounce of restraint I could muster—snapped to attention. His focus sharpened, instincts humming with awareness. I didn't have to dig deep to know what he sensed, because I felt it too.

Noa.

My reaction to being in her hometown was so visceral I discreetly checked the others in my SUV, wondering if they had felt it too. But Canaan, silent and statue-like in the passenger seat, remained unbothered, his sharp focus locked on the passing surroundings. His mate, seated behind him, was lost in her own storm of emotions.

Her usually fiery green eyes were dim with sadness, her freckled skin pale. Like with most causes she believes in, she had been the loudest voice of disappointment over my decision to come here today. Canaan and I had both insisted she stay behind, but she refused, determined to act as a witness. I couldn't tell you why it mattered so much to her, but the disapproval in her eyes cut deeper than I was willing to admit.

And then there was the last passenger. The one whose presence I despise more than anything.

Talis.

My betrothed.

There was no mystery about why she wanted to tag along on this quest. Her cat-that-ate-the-cannery smirk made her intentions painfully clear.

We'd made it no more than thirty yards into Ashvale before the wolves emerged from the trees. Ten in total, their massive sizes and fluid movements gave away their shifter status. As one, they broke apart to run along the sides of our two vehicles. Keeping perfect pace, they made no move to attack or stop us. They watched, observed, and corralled us. Their message was clear but not threatening. It was the Craddock Pack's way of reminding us that we were on their terrain now.

My fingers had tightened around the steering wheel as I kept a vigilant eye on them in the car's mirrors. Muscles coiled and ready to act if the tentative civility took a turn, my wolf paced beneath my skin. He was more than ready to meet their challenge if one arose. As I've done the past five days, I kept him locked down. We weren't here to make enemies.

The female wolves herded us away from the road that leads toward Ashvale's tree-lined main street where Noa's apothecary sat and instead pushed us to the unpaved

single-lane road that runs along the river on the edge of town. And that's where we were greeted by her.

Lowri Craddock. Pack Alpha.

Because Ashvale is not technically her territory, my pack showing up here today unannounced is not officially a slight against her, but had I known the town was under her pack's protection, I would have given the Alpha female the common courtesy that is expected and alerted her of our arrival.

She stood dead center in the road, completely unfazed by the approaching SUVs. Lowri, who is probably nearing fifty, is a tall, fit woman, and like any Alpha worth their salt, commands attention without having to bare her teeth. From inside my vehicle, I could sense the no-nonsense energy that radiated from her. She could and she would take down anyone foolish enough to underestimate her. She had my respect almost instantly.

Her wild red hair was bound in a thick braid down her back and her gaze was sharp as a blade as she watched us approach.

I'd slowed to a stop and shifted into park. Mercer, who drove the twin SUV behind mine, did the same. When I'd reached for the door handle, Canaan, always the one to watch my back, had mirrored my movement until I'd silently ordered him to stay put. I ignored his unspoken protest and climbed out alone to meet the female Alpha.

The wolves that had flanked us on the drive in moved to stand in an evenly spaced half circle behind their leader. All of their stances were alert, but not outwardly hostile.

My own wolf, pacing just beneath my flesh, continued to keep a watchful eye.

For a long moment, no one moved or said a word.

Lowri continued to observe, her calculating eyes sizing me up until finally her head tilted and she huffed, “Well, don’t just stand there and look pretty. State your business, Alpha Fallamhain. And before you think about getting smart on me, know that we’re already aware of the man you sent here last night. Was he sent to stalk his target or to scout ahead for you?”

It doesn’t surprise me that they were aware of Mercer’s presence last. We’re in a town full of witches, who the fuck knows what they’re capable of?

Suppressing the low snarl from my wolf, who didn’t take kindly to being so openly challenged, I kept my voice steady. “We didn’t come here for a fight. I need to speak to Noa Alderwood.” Just saying her name out loud sent a ripple of tension through the wolves. Their muscles tightened and a few even flashed their fangs. I lifted a brow but retained my relaxed posture. “I was under the impression she wasn’t part of your pack. Or any pack, for that matter.”

Lowri’s easy demeanor hardened, her eyes narrowing as she took a measured step forward. “Pack or not, it doesn’t matter. Noa is precious to us and under our protection.” Her voice was steady, but there was no mistaking the warning beneath it. “It’d do you well to remember that, kid.”

My wolf thrashed against the restraints I’d only recently forced upon him, furious at the very suggestion that Noa needed protection from him. From us .

The sickening reality that he’s yet to fully grasp is that he’s wrong. She does need to be safeguarded from me and while I dislike it as much as he does that the task wouldn’t fall to us, I had found a semblance of relief in that tense moment with Lowri, knowing Noa will have protection after I was gone.

“Noted,” I’d ground out, every one of my nerves exposed and aflame. My gruff behavior is something I earned after these past five days. Finding Carly and dealing with the subsequent fallout of that had been a lot to bear. The heaviness of the responsibility fell upon me as their Alpha to lead the pack through her funeral service and pyre. To be their symbol of strength through such a devastating time. All the while the knowledge I would have to come here and face Noa hung over my head like a taunting cloud. It had stolen my ability to sleep and my appetite, two things that have only aided in my secret, internal downward spiral. “As I said, I only need to speak to her.”

Lowri’s intense scrutiny amped up before she gave a single, stiff nod. “There is a clearing about two miles from here. It’s neutral ground. My enforcers will lead you there and stand watch while you wait for us.”

I hadn’t bothered asking who “us” consisted of, but I had allowed her wolves to guide us to this clearing where we all now stand and silently wait outside of the cars. My team of four enforcers has spread out, scanning the area for threats, while Canaan and I stand in the center.

Without looking, I feel both Rhosyn and Talis glaring at me. Their reasons are different, but the weight of their judgment is equally heavy. Talis, who’s perpetually in a shit mood, is pissed because I ordered her to stay back by the car. Rhosyn, meanwhile, remains locked in her silent protest, arms crossed as she leans against the driver’s door, her disapproval written all over her face.

The bitter truth is I don’t want to be here any more than she wants me to be. And I sure as hell don’t want to go through with this. If there were another way, I’d take it. That’s exactly what I told her days ago when I first admitted my intentions to Canaan and her. Even going as far as to admit Cathal McNamara’s involvement in my decision to them. Rhosyn hadn’t hesitated in arguing. “Nick, please. Just stop and take a breath. I know you can’t see it right now because of Carly, but there’s another

way. I swear, it's there. If you let them push you into this, there's no undoing it. And trust me...you'll regret it and once you realize what a mistake it is, it'll be too late."

I had clung to my waning denial, arguing that I was only giving up the possibility of something, that whatever connection Noa and I shared hadn't been confirmed as anything more. The scoff and eye roll I got from my second's mate were downright award-winning and would have put a weaker man on his ass.

Rhosyn has the luxury of seeing this whole mess from the outside, unburdened by the weight of an alpha's responsibility. She has the freedom to be a little selfish, to argue from a place of emotion rather than duty. I don't have that privilege. I know what's at stake and a solution has been offered to me. The cost is steeper than most could bear to part with, but if it means keeping more of my omegas from ending up like Carly, then I'll pay it.

Even though the longer I stand in this clearing, waiting, the harder it is to keep my resolve intact. My stomach churns with something close to nausea, my body screaming at me to walk away before she arrives. Before I have to see her and shatter whatever fragile, unspoken thing exists between us.

I clench my fists to the point of pain and focus on the ache in my knuckles, anything to keep my mind from drifting back to that damn dream.

Her voice, soft but desperate.

Her eyes, full of something raw, something I didn't deserve.

Her plea.

"Pick me."

For about five seconds, caught between the living and the dreaming, I had made my choice. I had decided to shove aside my doubt and follow the ache in my chest, to reach for the thread that, without question, would have led me to her.

But then Canaan's arrival and harrowing news had shattered it.

For those five fleeting seconds, I had felt a kind of peace I never knew was possible. And then it was gone, and I was bitch-slapped by reality.

My eyes squeeze shut for a brief second, forcing the memory of the haunting dream—and the subsequent emotions—out of my mind and heart. It wasn't real. It wasn't. Real. But the guilt doesn't agree. It slithers around my ribs, tightening like a noose, strangling what little composure I have left. I can't afford this right now.

A slow, steady breath does little to elevate the crushing weight. With a heaving shove, I push it all down, burying it beneath ice. There's no room for emotion, not here, not today. Piece by piece, I lock it all away and let myself turn cold. Emotionless. Untouchable.

That is how I will get through this.

Just as I settle into the numbness, the sound of approaching vehicles cuts through the stillness of the clearing. An army green Jeep Wrangler is the first to drive through the narrow passageway between the aspen and pine trees. It's closely followed by a dark red midsize SUV.

I sense her before I see her behind the wheel of the Jeep.

It's like a punch to the gut.

Sweet Noa.

For a second, everything within me stalls, the new precarious grip I have on my emotions, my control, slipping. My wolf shoves forward, claws scraping at the edges of my mind, his instincts roaring. She's here and nothing else should matter. To him and his primal desires, there is no reason to fight the pull between us, no reason I shouldn't go to her and bathe her in my scent, marking her so everyone knows who she belongs to.

I can't afford to allow myself to think like that— my pack can't afford it.

Smothering my reaction before it has a chance to truly take hold, I lock it away beneath the new reinforced layers of ice. My pulse slows. My face remains unreadable. I don't blink. I don't move.

But every inch of restraint feels like it's tearing me apart.

Not daring to look away from her approaching car, I don't give my full attention to Canaan as he leans close and speaks under his breath. "I'm going to ask you this one last time—are you sure? The second those words leave your mouth, there will be no taking them back. You will have to live with this choice for the rest of your days, brother."

Jeep crawling to a stop fifteen yards away, Noa turns off the engine and turns to say something to the blonde in the passenger seat. Who the woman is I don't care, because once I walk away from this clearing, Noa Alderwood will no longer be my concern. By going through with this, I'm severing the last tie, giving up any right to care. Whatever claim I had—real or not—it ends here.

"You say that like there's a choice to be made here, Canaan."

My friend exhales sharply, and for the first time in all our years at each other's sides, I feel his disappointment—blatant, cutting, unforgiving. It lands like a kick to the teeth.

“I have stood by you, supported you without question, for years, Nick. Not once have I ever doubted you as an Alpha. But right now? Right now, you are so fucking consumed by your sense of duty you can’t fully comprehend the gravity of the mistake you’re making.” His words hit harder than expected and he’s not done. “You keep saying this is the only way. That you don’t have a choice. But you’re wrong. One day soon you’re going to wake up and realize it. I just hope for your sake that you can survive it. What you’re about to do, strong men have withered away from less.” The weight of his pause hangs heavy between us. “And I hope for that girl—that innocent fucking girl—to be able to survive it too, because you’re about to wreck her.”

Canaan doesn’t wait for a response, which is probably for the best, considering I don’t have one. At least not one worth saying aloud. Without another word, he turns, heading toward his mate—where he belongs—and leaves me to face the decimation of my future.

Alone.

Chapter 13

Noa

R ennick is here.

He's here and he's here to see me.

When Amara and Lowri pulled up in front of my driveaway in the High Priestess's red Toyota and relayed this information, my heart stuttered before slamming into a harder, faster rhythm. For about ten seconds, my wolf surged forward, pressing against the walls of her glass cage with a frantic kind of desperation, as if she might finally break free of the confines she's suffered under. The knowledge alone that he came for her, for us , was enough to fill her with naive and misplaced hope.

But the rush didn't last long.

It faded almost as quickly as it came, leaving behind something cold and hollow in its place. A slow, creeping unease rolled into my stomach. At first, it was just a whisper, an aching pit, but the longer I stood there listening to Lowri, learning what and who was waiting for me in the clearing, the more it strengthened.

And along with it, so did my intuition.

I don't know why he's come, but I know with absolute certainty the pack Alpha isn't here for a casual visit. There's a nagging sensation at the back of my mind, demanding that I pay attention to it, but I can't. Not right now. Not when each of my

nerves are set ablaze with an unrecognizable dread.

On daze-like autopilot, we left Edie and Eldrith with Ivey and Siggy. The lighthearted mask I wore while telling my Nightingale I had something to take care of was some of my best acting work, but Siggy saw right through it. Like I've said, the omega is wise beyond her years. I may have lied and told her everything was fine, but I was telling the damn truth when I promised her I would be back in no time. Nothing short of divine intervention would make me break that vow to her.

Seren had been adamant she was coming with me, even when I insisted I would be okay with Amara and Lowri keeping me company. My best friend had all but laughed in my face, acting as if what I'd said was the most absurd thing she's ever heard. In her defense, if the roles were reversed, I wouldn't let her go alone either. Not a chance in hell.

During the ten-minute drive, the unease doesn't fade. If anything, the closer we get to the clearing, to him, the more suffocating it becomes, tightening around my chest. My fingers clutch the steering wheel harder than necessary, and I force myself to focus on the road ahead, but my mind keeps circling back to the same dreadful conclusion.

This isn't going to end well for me.

Beside me, Seren shifts, her sharp powder blue eyes flicking sideways, her empath abilities allowing her to pick up on every tangled thread of anxiety churning inside me. She doesn't say anything at first, just reaches across the console and takes my free hand, squeezing hard, grounding me before I spiral too deep.

"I'm fine." Like a reflex, the words shoot out of me before I even realize I'm thinking them.

“You always are,” she murmurs, her voice void of its usual teasing edge. The weight in her tone matches the thick tension choking the air inside my Jeep. With her unpolluted shifter senses, she’s probably choking on the emotions seeping out of my pores. “I know your intuition is telling you to expect the worst, but whatever happens, I’m right here, Noa.”

It’s a small thing, but it’s enough to loosen the pressure in my chest just a little. I squeeze her hand in return before exhaling and refocusing as the tree line begins to thin.

Up ahead, the clearing comes into view, and my pulse stumbles despite every effort to keep myself steady. Two matching black luxury SUVs sit in the open space, gleaming in the overcast late autumn daylight. A handful of men I don’t recognize are scattered around them, standing alert, their postures screaming pack enforcers. They aren’t the only ones keeping watch, though. Nearly a dozen Craddock she-wolves are here too, blending into the scenery on the outskirts like silent sentinels. I now understand why Lowri felt comfortable enough to fetch me herself. Her girls have things well in hand here.

I put the car in park and take it all in.

While I don’t recognize the Fallamhain enforcers, there’re a few faces I know here today.

The first and only time I met Canaan Roarke, his calm and reassuring demeanor put me at ease almost instantly. My wolf’s distaste for the opposite sex leaves me untrusting of men in general, but with Fallamhain’s second, I found myself relaxed in his presence. But the hulking man I met five days ago does not match the one who currently looms near the first Escalade. Something in my chest tightens further. His expression is stormy, his usually composed features shadowed with something unreadable, but it’s Rhosyn’s face that makes my stomach twist. She looks

utterly wrecked, her green eyes dull, her entire body radiating despair.

I don't know why she looks like that, and I don't want to know.

And then I see her.

I had been warned, just like with the rest of them, that she would be here. But knowing and seeing are two entirely different things. The moment my eyes land on her, the weight of what's coming settles deep in my bones, heavier than before.

Talis McNamara.

Leaning against one of the sleek black cars, her arms are crossed, there's an infuriatingly smug smirk stretching across her lips. She looks pleased, like she's just won some grand prize, and everything inside me goes still. The pit in my stomach turns from gnawing dread to full-fledged certainty.

It wasn't until I saw her with my own two eyes that I put it together. Talis is the reason I feel this way.

Rennick showing up here is one thing, but bringing her—his betrothed, his chosen mate—makes it something else entirely.

The realization makes my breath catch, my wolf shifting uneasily beneath my skin, whining in confusion even as my instincts scream. But it's too late now because in the middle of the clearing, standing tall and unmoving, is him.

Rennick.

The man who has all but consumed my thoughts these past five days, and he looks just as devastating as I remember.

A white, waffle-knit Henley stretches across his broad shoulders and clings to every defined muscle. The soft fabric does nothing to hide the strength underneath. His worn, faded jeans hang low on his narrow hips, effortless in a way that shouldn't make my heartbeat trip the way it does. His dark hair is exactly as I remember—longer on top, tousled in that effortless, infuriating way, while the sides are clipped short, neat. And that beard—short, well-kept, the same deep brown as his hair—only sharpens the angles of his face, making him look even more unfairly handsome. The four silver scars that start at the end of his right eyebrow and slice backward into his hairline, past his ear, only add to his dominant allure.

But it's his gunmetal eyes that undo me the most because they're already on me and even through the windshield, I can feel them. The intensity cuts through the glass, making me turn into a piece of unmovable stone in my driver's seat.

It's Seren's unabashed low whistle that effectively cuts through my Rennick-induced trance. "Damn," she whispers. "If he wasn't yours and I hadn't sworn off men for life, I would be humping that man's leg like a Pound Puppy."

"Seren."

"What?" She shrugs, completely undeterred. "I'm just saying, I get why you claimed his fine Alpha ass within minutes of knowing him. Now that I've seen him myself, I actually think he's lucky he made it through that first encounter without you sinking your teeth in his neck like a needy, feral gremlin."

"Seren," I repeat, this time with enough edge to snap my best friend out of her blatant lust fest for my ma—Rennick.

"Yes, Noa?"

"Read the room."

Her little, upturned nose wrinkles. “Right.” She at least has the decency to look ashamed of herself.

With a slow and steady exhale, a last-ditch effort to summon up a modicum of composure, I turn off the engine and step out of the car. The cool, late afternoon air does little to soothe the heat crawling up my spine.

Seren follows without hesitation, moving in step with me as the Craddock Pack Alpha and her witch lover join us, standing like silent guards at my back. Lowri and Amara may be nothing alike in appearance, but together, they radiate an unshakable presence—one of power, one of protection.

Amara, with her blunt-cut midnight hair and equally dark eyes, reminds me of a raven personified. Sharp and refined, she exudes the quiet power of someone who could strip you bare with a glance. She has angular features and a cool, calculated presence. The black cashmere shawl that is an ever-present fashion staple for the witch is draped around her narrow shoulders and chest, and for reasons I can’t explain, the garment only adds to her intensity. Lowri, with her flamelike hair, stands several inches taller than her partner and is a force in her own right. For countless reasons, these two women not only have my respect, but also my loyalty. Not to mention my trust.

Neither of them says a word, but they don’t have to. Their presence alone is a silent show of support. The last thing I’m expecting from this impromptu meeting is a physical altercation, but I know both of these women are prepared for anything and I’ll be safe with them at my side.

All four of us walk as one.

We cross the clearing with measured steps, my heartbeat thudding painfully in my ears as we approach where he stands. Rennick doesn’t move, doesn’t flinch, his stance

statuesque as he watches me with those gray eyes that have haunted me for days—years, if my resurfacing memories are correct.

The man I met five days ago, though cautious, had looked at me with such open curiosity and interest that I'd felt naked beneath his gaze more than once. But now, as I look back at him, goosebumps rise along my heated skin from the sheer coldness in his expression. There is no warmth, no recognition, no trace of the man who once studied me like I was something worth understanding.

Rennick is glacial.

Sensing this change in him, my wolf, trapped within the confines of her cage, is drowning in grief, a sorrow I haven't felt this deeply since my mother died. She's already mourning something that hasn't yet been taken from us, as if she knows the loss is inevitable.

Ten feet away, my companions stop, lingering just far enough back to let me face the Fallamhain Alpha alone.

Feeling like I'm walking straight to my execution, I drop my chin, focusing on the way my boots crunch through the dry grass beneath me. Each step feels harder than the last, dread pressing down on my shoulders like a weight I can't shake.

A foot away from him, I count to ten, steadying myself before slowly lifting my head to meet his arctic, unreadable gaze head-on.

The moment our eyes lock, my stomach plummets.

I watch as the color drains from his face, his expression shifting in a way that makes my breath catch because for one fleeting second, his facade slips, and I see the truth before he slams his mask back into place.

Chapter 14

Rennick

I told myself it wasn't real.

Convinced myself that the woman who haunted my dreams, the one who whispered my name with an intimate familiarity, who begged me to remember her, whose eyes burned into my soul, was nothing more than a cruel trick of my subconscious. A longing for something that didn't exist. It wasn't supposed to be her. It was supposed to be some meaningless trick of the mind. A product of the stress brought on by my new role as pack Alpha, or guilt for what I had to do to earn the title.

But now the ethereal entity from my dreams stands before me. Whole. All of her perfect features clear as day, no longer distorted in the white mist I've grown accustomed to. Every soft curve and elegant angle of her face is displayed for me. Staring up at me with those same impossibly familiar eyes—the left a solid golden brown while the right is flawlessly split down the middle, one half brown and the other half ice blue. The vulnerability within them makes something inside me fracture .

There's no escaping the truth. Not anymore.

The woman who's haunted my dreams and the one who's wreaked havoc on my soul since I came face to face with her again after nearly eight years is one and the same.

Noa.

The very sweet thing I've been denying and downplaying my connection to for days.

She's mine.

The perfect, inescapable truth slams into me with the force of a killing blow, tearing through the last threads of my denial like a blade to the gut.

She is my fated mate.

My scent match.

The one soul in existence designed to fit against mine in a way that no one else ever could. The one meant to balance, anchor, and complete me.

And I have to reject her.

The knowledge is slow, merciless agony, bleeding through my veins with each painful beat of my heart. I fought so damn hard against this, convinced myself that my wolf was wrong, that everyone in my inner circle was wrong. I clung to the belief that if my destined mate was ever thrust into my path, I would recognize her in half a heartbeat. That there would be no room for doubt. The fact that I had known Noa for years before her mother stole her away, and still hadn't recognized her as mine back then, only fueled my foolish denial.

And a part of me, a small, fragile sliver buried deep in my chest, had clung to something else, something just as damning. Hope. Hope that fate wouldn't be so cruel. That it wouldn't hand me my perfect match only to rip her from me. That it wouldn't force me to stand here now, looking into the eyes of the one person I was meant to spend my life with, knowing I have to give her up.

But fate has never been kind. It plays its twisted games at our expense for its

amusement. And now, it's laughing at me.

I force my jaw to lock, my breath to steady, my expression to remain ice. She can't see this. She can't see the way my entire world is collapsing in on itself, how my wolf is thrashing beneath my skin, how every instinct in me is screaming to pull her into my arms and never let go. To mark her with my scent and my bite.

But I can't because I can't keep her.

I have to sacrifice her. For my pack. For my people. For the omegas I refuse to fail like I did Carly.

A frigid weight unlike anything I've ever known settles over me, pressing into my bones, wrapping around my ribs like iron restraints. She is meant to be my destiny, my perfect match. She is my heart living and beating beyond the confines of my chest.

And I have to break it.

To break her.

Canaan was right, I don't know how I'm going to survive this. And out of pure desperation, I send a silent prayer to the Goddess herself, pleading that Noa is able to bear it as well, and what I'm about to do won't be in vain. Our sacrifice has to be worth the pain.

I fight against every instinct clawing its way to the surface and the near-feral beast inside me thrashing with raw desperation, trying to get to her, to his mate. His anguish and his absolute refusal to accept what I'm about to do nearly undo me.

Please forgive me.

My molars grind to the point I worry I've cracked them as I double down and force the ice back into place. I reach in desperation toward the mask of emotional indifference I've been working relentlessly to perfect over the last couple days. It's better this way for everyone, especially for my sweet Noa. For her I will be the monster. I will be the villain in our painfully short-lived love story, the one who walked away. The one who picked duty over our shared destiny.

She will hate me for it and maybe that is for the best.

Tenuous grip back on my control—beast and man—I think of the reason I'm here. I conjure up the bloody images that have been seared into my brain. I think of Carly. I make myself see her as she was that night, a broken, mangled thing discarded like trash on our land, her life stolen long before her body had taken its final breath.

I see her mother's face, twisted in grief and a pain no parent should be forced to suffer through. The visual of her having to be held back as I carried her only daughter away is one that will stick with me, so are the sounds of her broken wails that followed me as I wove through the snow-capped trees.

My enforcers had stood around, their usual unshakable strength gouged out by the sight of what had been done to one of our own. I remember the way they barely moved, the way their hands clenched into useless fists at their sides. How no amount of training had prepared them for the cruelty that was left for us to find.

I force myself to relive it, to remember every brutal detail as something colder clouds over the sorrow. Rage. The anger comes slow, spreading through my chest, numbing everything in its path. It settles in the space around my heart, pressing down on the part of me that wants to break at the sight of Noa.

The delicate female before me watches, her two-toned gaze more observant than I'd like. Her naturally pale skin has taken on a gray hue, the scent of her dread all but

overpowers the addictingly sweet brown sugar fragrance I will spend the rest of my life pining for. She knows, or at the very least, a part of her knows what is coming.

“Ren...” Her soft voice is barely an octave above an exhale, but she might as well have screamed the nickname that, somehow, has always belonged to her alone. Based on the stabbing agony that follows, I’m almost sure if I were to look down, I’d find a knife in my sternum. My wolf’s mournful howl is equally as painful. “Why?”

The way she doesn’t elaborate further proves my theory. Noa, a smart girl, knows exactly why I’ve shown up here today.

“You claimed me, publicly, as your mate, Miss Alderwood.” I can’t bring myself to say her name aloud, so I do the only thing I can. I keep it impersonal and use her surname, cold and distant, and it lands exactly as I intended. She winces, as if I’d struck her. “Considering I already have an intended mate for myself, you can imagine how your little outburst has caused me problems.”

Noa’s throat moves as she swallows thickly. “What about our...” She trails off, her words sticking.

“Our what ?”

She shifts uneasily in her leather boots, footwear that is highly inappropriate for the dead but overgrown clearing we stand in. “You’re really going to stand here and tell me you don’t feel it?”

I stare down my nose at her, that fissure in my chest cracking more. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“There’s a connection between us. A pull . I know you feel it, Rennick.” A twinge of distress infects her words, her elegant brows drawing together beneath her artfully

styled bangs.

My arms cross in front of me. From the outside looking in, I'm sure it reads how I intend it to. As a continued show of frigid indifference and detachment, but in reality, I'm doing my best to keep my hands from reaching out to her, from taking hold of her and bringing her into my embrace. Where she belongs.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you. The only thing I feel toward you is annoyance and mild frustration that I've been forced to participate in this dog and pony show." The words are ash on my tongue. "As I told you, I am happy with my chosen mate. Your surprise visit to my territory has been nothing but a nuisance for us both. I would appreciate it if you'd allow us to just get this over with."

This time, Noa stumbles back a half step, the physical signs of her heart breaking evident in the way her face contorts and pales to a shade I can only describe as ghostly. "I don't...I don't understand."

I'm so consumed by the way my own words are also ripping me apart—lost in the battle between my emotions and my wolf's fury—that I don't hear the confident footsteps until it's too late. A manicured hand, nails painted an ungodly shade of coral, slides over my forearm with a familiarity Talis has never been permitted.

"You silly, wolfless girl. You're embarrassing yourself." Talis speaks as if she's talking to a petulant child, and not a twenty-five-year-old woman worthy of being shown a scrap of respect. I know it's hypocritical given I've been using my own words to slice down Noa's resolve, but sitting back and allowing someone else to hurt her in any way is more than my wolf can bear. More than I can bear. "I'm sure we can thank your mother for that inflated ego. She probably filled your head with the idea that you mattered, that the world somehow revolved around you. But let me set the record straight. You're nothing, Noa Alderwood. A packless, wolfless nobody. You don't have to understand what's happening here. You just have to sit there and take it

like the pathetic little mutt you are.”

Too far. Too Far. Too far.

But the devastating truth is, the way Noa is slowly caving into herself, it’s just far enough. If I want to become her monster, this is how I accomplish it.

“She’s right,” I bite out. Canaan’s earlier words about surviving this creep back into my mind, but in this moment, I’m not sure I want to survive it. The unshed tears pooling in her eyes—eyes too beautiful for this world, too achingly poignant—might as well be the ink I use to sign my own death sentence. And since I’m dead anyway, I go in for the kill shot, knowing I’m going to regret these words for the rest of my life. “Even if I did feel this pull or whatever you’re calling it...” Pull is not a strong enough word. This thing between us, it’s something that is as vital as the air in our lungs and something as strong as gravity. “Why would I willingly take you as my mate, as my Luna, when you’re latent ?” Lies. But effective lies. “My pack would never accept you standing at my side. Especially when it was your own traitorous mother who bound your wolf and made you defective .”

Despite the way my cruelty has her swaying on her feet, Noa’s denial, while weak, is immediate. “That’s not true. You...you’re lying .”

Fuck, how I wish it wasn’t true. It’s like swallowing razor blades to use this ugly truth against her now. To use it to my advantage. I’d promised myself I would find a gentle way to tell Noa the truth about her mother’s actions days ago, but what’s one more broken promise at this point?

Talis opens her mouth, no doubt ready to throw another fatal verbal dagger, but I stop her before she can utter a syllable.

“Wait in the car while I finish this.”

“But,” she tries to argue, the glee in her eyes giving away her desire to remain in her front-row seat to Noa’s heartbreak. Her devastation.

“ Now. ” I use my alpha bark, my unchecked dominance laced within the single word. Talis has no choice but to obey me.

I don’t miss the way Noa flinches, curling in on herself like she’s trying to disappear. Behind her, the Craddock Alpha, the coven High Priestess, and the blonde elfin omega all look like they’re already planning my slow, painful demise. And honestly, with the guilt tearing through me, I wouldn’t stop them. Whatever creative demise they think I deserve, I’ll take it. Willingly. Gladly.

The silver lining in this is knowing that, despite the fact she doesn’t have an official pack, Noa still has a support system behind her. A bloodthirsty support system by the looks of it.

Noa, still trying to hang on to any strength she has left, lifts her chin and boldly meets my cold stare. The tears running freely down her face gut me. “Okay, Alpha Fallamhain, you’ve made your point.” Her voice, which was so sweet the first time I heard her speak, is a dull, lifeless rasp.

You’ve ruined her.

My wolf’s fury burns hotter, his devastation just as consuming as my own. We did this. To her. To us. And he knows it. We are hurtling toward a point of no return, and when we reach it, I don’t know what he’ll do. His distrust in me is thick, palpable, and stomach-turning, twisting in my gut like a sickness I can’t shake.

But even that is nothing compared to the sorrow rolling off Noa in waves, heavy enough to drown us both.

It's a battle to keep my touch harsh, detached, when I reach out for her slender arm. Her faint whine of pain as I yank the limb outward cuts me to my soul. Wrapping my large palm around her forearm, I force her smaller hand to do the same to mine. It's a joke. Not in this lifetime or the next will her fingers ever be able to properly wrap around my forearm.

Beneath my touch, her pulse races, each frantic beat echoing through my fingertips. With every thundering pound of her heart, mine matches it, perfectly in sync. Further proof they were never meant to beat apart.

Ice and dread creep up my throat as I stare down at the small, broken female who was meant to be mine to love. To cherish. To protect. Instead, I'm failing her in every way that matters and then some.

In my grasp, I lock on to her two-toned gaze and for the briefest of seconds, I let my ice melt away and I silently plead that she will one day find a way to forgive me. That she will understand the decision I've made.

Forgive me, sweet Noa. Please. Forgive me.

Her breath catches in her throat, her lip wobbling harder, but I don't give her the opportunity to say anything else.

Not many people have the cruel clarity of knowing, in real time, that they are actively living through the moment that will become their greatest regret. But I do. I am one of the unfortunate few who gets to spend the rest of my life knowing that no failure, no mistake, will ever compare to the pain I am causing right now. Nothing I do from this moment forward will ever measure up to this loss. Nothing could ever hurt more than this.

"I, Rennick Fallamhain, Alpha of the Fallamhain Pack, reject you, Noa Alderwood,

as my fated mate. My scent match. My destiny. You will never bear the title of my Luna, you will never wear my mark, and you will never carry my children. From this moment forward, I renounce any claim you have on me.”

The last syllable has barely left my lips when Noa lets out a hoarse, broken cry, a sound that will haunt me until the end of my days. Her weak grip on my arm slips, her body swaying, and before me, the woman who should have been the very reason my heart beats collapses to the earth.

And I’m too numb to even try to catch her.

Chapter 15

Noa

Complete and utter devastation.

That's the only way my pain riddled brain can describe what has just occurred.

"I, Rennick Fallamhain, Alpha of the Fallamhain Pack, reject you, Noa Alderwood, as my fated mate. My scent match. My destiny. You will never bear the title of my Luna, you will never wear my mark, and you will never carry my children. From this moment forward, I renounce any claim you have on me."

The pain is unbearable.

I want to mourn the future Rennick just erased in a handful of cold, emotionless words. I want to grieve the love that was supposed to be mine, the life we were meant to build together, the bond he just threw away like it meant nothing. But I can't. I can't feel anything except this.

It's not a single pain I can pinpoint. It's everything at once. Hot and cold. Sharp and dull. A dull ache and a searing stab. It's in my bones, in my blood, sinking its claws deep into the fibers of my very soul. If I were forced to describe it, I wouldn't be able to accurately put it into words. Only the unluckily few rejected by their fated mate are the ones to experience it. And the fact that rejecting your Goddess-given match is something that is so rarely done, because who in their right fucking mind would throw away such a precious gift, the knowledge of this pain is not something widely

known. I can say with certainty that I had no idea this was the parting gift that followed a rejection.

I am vaguely aware I've collapsed, my body crumpling to the clearing's dead, overgrown floor. The brittle grass beneath me itches against my clammy skin, but it's a distant sensation, muted beneath the agony gnawing at me. I want to pay attention, to stay present, but it's impossible when I can barely breathe without wanting to scream.

You will not scream, Noa. You will not give him or his cunt of a chosen mate the satisfaction of hearing you scream.

A familiar touch cuts through the haze, cool hands pressing against my skin, grounding me. The steady pressure is gentle but demanding, a lifeline pulling me from the abyss I'm fighting against. Even in this wrecked state, I silently beg Seren not to use her gift. Not to take this unbearable hurt for herself. Her empathic gift would only touch the emotional pain, but that's still too much. She doesn't deserve to feel that. No one does. I can barely endure the aching empty void in my chest where our bond once hummed. The relentless tugging I've grown used to is no more and, in its place, sits nothing but devastating silence.

"Noa! You have to breathe." The desperation in my best friend's voice barely registers through the storm thundering in my eardrums.

I'm not breathing? Well, that's news to me.

I don't know when I stopped pulling air into my lungs. It's a fight, and it hurts like hell, but I force a breath in. Then another. The burning in my chest eases slightly, and the black haze around my vision retreats just enough to keep me tethered.

Then his voice cuts through the chaos.

Rennick.

“What the fuck is happening? What's wrong with her?” The sound of his rich, smoky timbre makes everything worse.

He did this.

A violent growl splits through the air, a sound I've never heard from Seren before. My chosen sister and fiercest protector who shies away from conflict whenever possible, but she forgets that now. Forgets her innately submissive designation. She willingly steps into something dangerous, challenging an alpha like him without hesitation. She isn't just ready to fight. By the sound of it, she's ready to tear him apart.

“You take another step closer, and I will rip your throat out with my fucking teeth, Fallamhain.” There are more voices, they murmur to each other, but I can't place them or understand what they say. “I don't give a shit! He did this!”

His voice comes again, edged with something almost like panic. “I don't understand. What the hell is wrong with her?”

The fact that he has to ask feels like some sick, twisted joke. Which is on par for what this has become. A sick fucking joke.

Seren's thumbs swipe at my cheeks, faintly making me aware that tears have started to spill from my unseeing eyes.

Her laugh is humorless, the very sound of it slicing through the tense air. “What? You came here with your grand plan to reject her, and you didn't bother to do a shred of research, Alpha ?” She spits his title with such blatant disrespect it's almost impressive. “You really thought you could throw away your fated mate without

consequences?” Her hands continue to cup my face, her touch a desperate attempt to anchor me.

“I didn’t...” His gravelly voice is riddled with dread. “I didn’t know.”

I can’t decide what hurts worse. The rejection or the fact that, even now, some part of him still cares.

Through the agony-induced haze, his unspoken plea echoes in my mind, a relentless loop of remorse he tried so hard to conceal. A broken record that cut through the symphony of heartache he forced upon me that makes me question whether or not he knew. If he knew exactly what kind of physical pain he was about to inflict. If he knew the devastation his rejection would bring and still chose to do it anyway.

“Forgive me, sweet Noa. Please. Forgive me.”

His silent plea is the last thing I hear before the darkness swallows me whole. My only hope is that, within the emptiness, I will be free from the anguish he has left me to endure.

Chapter 16

Rennick

I thought I was prepared to face the fallout of my choice, ready to stand witness as the emotional weight of rejection consumed her. I expected anger, grief, maybe even hatred. But I wasn't prepared for this.

I had convinced myself that rejecting a mate bond would bring only emotional suffering. Pure, unrelenting heartbreak. The possibility that it would manifest as something worse, something physical, never occurred to me. Standing here now, watching this horror unfold before me, forces me to see how naive I'd been in my beliefs. The ones where I assumed I would be the one to bear the brunt of it, the one to suffer the most under the weight of the bond I severed. After all, I was the one who shattered something sacred, the one who spoke those dreadful words aloud. It should be me writhing on the ground.

I should be the one being punished.

But instead, it's her.

The devastation isn't just emotional. It's raw and corporeal. The pain isn't just something Noa feels, it's something she's enduring. It's breaking her apart from the inside out. It's so much more than just grief or heartbreak. It's deeper, something primal.

And I am the one who did this to her.

Sprawled in the dead grass, Noa's delicate body trembles. Her cheeks, that are too pale, are wet with the tears that still fall despite submitting to unconsciousness a moment ago. I think my heart had ceased to beat in my chest when her glorious eyes, the ones that are literally plucked straight from my dreams, rolled into the back of her head. I'd lifted my foot, every instinct woven within me screaming that I needed to go to her, but her friend, the one with the icy blonde hair, had growled at me just as she'd done the first time I'd attempted to move closer.

The way the omega hadn't hesitated to bare her fangs at me, to split the tense air with a deathly warning snarl, as her small frame had radiated unchecked fury had been impressive. It was something, under different circumstances, I may have found inspiring. I would have admired the sheer force of her strength, the way she'd refused to flinch away from an alpha male like me. It's a behavior that's not often shown by someone of her designation.

Even now, I can see the unshakable protectiveness for her friend in her stance, the way she guards Noa with her own body and how she treats me as a threat that cannot be allowed near the unconscious beauty in her grasp. It's a valid belief system and something I've rightfully earned.

For a long moment, I can do nothing but stand here, staring at the wreckage of my own doing.

My mate, the other half of my very soul I was put on this earth to protect, lies broken before me.

The icy resolve I'd wrapped around myself, the detachment I'd fought for, is cracking beneath the weight of my own remorse. Every justification, every carefully crafted reason for this choice, is hollow against the sickening horror that is clawing through my chest and up my tight throat. What once felt like a righteous sacrifice feels like nothing more than a goddamn crime.

My wolf, who had fought so hard, valiantly , against the steel binds I'd wrapped around him, has gone deathly silent, but I can't bring myself to acknowledge his absence. Not now. Not yet.

Bile rises as Noa's beautiful face twists with pain. Even unconscious, she is not free of the suffering I've inflicted on her. She's too pale, too small against the cold, unforgiving ground.

Movement catches my eye as, in my numb state, I register Rhosyn leaving her post near one of the black Escalades.

She doesn't bother offering me a single look as she pushes past and falls to her knees beside Noa. Rhosyn doesn't hesitate to reach out and offer her support alongside Noa's fierce friend. The two females share a single look that lasts no more than a heartbeat, a silent understanding passing between them, before they move in sync, trying to bring the broken woman lying between them a morsel of relief.

Canaan steps up beside me, and when I turn to look at him, I know before I even meet his eyes that it's a mistake. The disappointment on his face, the unspoken betrayal carved into every sharp line of his expression, is unbearable. I hold his gaze for only a second before I have to turn away, but the damage is already done.

I've lost more today than just my fated love.

"Seren," the willowy High Priestess, who reeks of power, calls out. Her smooth but commanding voice filling the clearing. The blonde omega looks over her shoulder at the witch. "We need to get Noa home now."

Noa's friend, Seren , looks down at my broken mate and then back at the witch, confusion etched in her pale blue eyes when she lifts her head to glance in my direction as well. "But..." she utters, sounding just as lost as her face reflects. "She

still needs to?—”

“No,” the witch interjects. “We’re done here.”

The blonde omega and the High Priestess lock gazes, some kind of unspoken understanding passing between them, before Seren stiffly nods. “All right.”

Lowri, whose scrutiny I thought was cutting before, glares at me as she moves forward. Seren shifts to allow the Alpha female enough room to kneel beside her. Together, they position their hands beneath Noa’s prone body and begin to lift the object of my biggest sorrow from the dead grass.

The Alpha shoots Rhosyn a stern look when my second’s mate steps forward with them, reaching out in a silent offering to take some of Noa’s unconscious weight. “Let me help,” she pleads, her own heartache woven into every spoken syllable. “Please.”

Lowri, reading the sincerity in her voice, gives a single, stiff nod. The tension in Rhosyn’s shoulders eases, relief flickering across her face as she moves to support Noa.

Then they begin to walk away.

A sudden, gut-wrenching desperation slams into me, yanking something deep in my chest so hard it nearly stops my heart. The sight of them carrying her away, of them taking her from me, is unbearable. They make it no more than a yard before my foot lifts to follow, that ingrained instinct overpowering the hard truth my body and mind have yet to accept.

Noa isn’t mine to follow.

The High Priestess must agree because before I can take another step, a powerful rush of air slams down in front of me. The force of it is staggering, forming an invisible wall so solid it might as well be reinforced glass. No amount of effort, no pushing or thrashing, will break through what she has placed between me and Noa. It's impenetrable.

I've heard whispers of the coven leader being an impressive elemental, but something tells me this is just a taste of what she's truly capable of.

From the other side of the wall of wind, the witch's pitch-black eyes lock with mine. They're the kind of depthless orbs that make you believe she's capable of seeing more than what's right in front of her. Her head cocks, the movement reminding me of a bird, as she silently scrutinizes me.

"I..." I begin, not having a clue what I'm about to say. What else is there for me to say at this point? I'm sorry? No. Definitely not that.

But she silences me with a quick flick of her hand.

"Life is nothing more than a series of choices, Alpha Fallamhain." It takes me a moment to realize her lips aren't moving. The words aren't spoken aloud but delivered on the currents of air she commands, carried to me like a whisper on the wind. Another display of her formidable power. "Some choices bring reward, while others carry consequences too heavy to bear. So rarely are we given a means to repair the damage made by these consequences. If granted this kind of gift, I suggest you not be so thoughtless in your decision-making in the future."

Before I have a chance to respond, or even fully grasp the full meaning of her words, the High Priestess turns away. In measured, unhurried steps she follows the path the others took with Noa.

From the corner of my eye, I catch movement. Canaan strides toward the wind-forged barrier, his posture rigid, his steps deliberate.

“Canaan.”

Disappointment still hardens his features, but beneath it, something colder lingers. Something edged with soundless disgust. He looks like he almost hesitates, as if stopping to speak to me is the last thing he wants to do, but after a beat, he does.

His jaw clenches, his shoulders tight with restrained emotion.

“Rhosyn’s with her,” he says, voice sharp and clipped.

“I’m aware.”

In the past eight months, Rhosyn has naturally stepped into a role that hedges into Luna territory. The other females, especially the adolescents, look to her for guidance and comfort. With everything that has been happening to our omegas, many have turned to her for reassurance, seeking the warmth and steadiness she offers so freely. My people trust her. She has a pure heart, a kind heart. It doesn’t surprise me in the least that she has chosen to stand by Noa now.

A part of me is even grateful for it. Noa deserves to have as many people in her corner as she can get.

But...

“Go get your mate,” I order without an ounce of tangible dominance behind it. “I’ve done what needed to be done. It’s time to leave.”

His head is already shaking in refusal before I’m done speaking. “You saw her face.

She's not going anywhere until she's sure Noa's okay. Or, I guess, as good as she can be, given what just happened. You know how Rosie is."

This has me pausing. "You're staying? Here?"

Canaan shrugs, utterly unapologetic, making it clear he doesn't give a damn what I think of his unspoken plan. The message is clear. The only way he's going to deviate from it is with a bark, and we both know I won't be doing that. Not to him.

"I'm not leaving my mate here alone, Nick. I doubt she's in danger with these people, but I'm not about to take that risk." His gaze flickers over me, unreadable and unyielding. "My mate, she comes first. You know that."

The implication sits heavy between us, the slight dig something I don't miss. I doubt I'm meant to.

He tosses me a set of keys, and I catch them on instinct. "Take the other car. You and your intended can squeeze in with the guys. It'll be a tight fit, but I have faith that you can manage."

The idea of cramming into a car with Talis makes my stomach churn. My skin crawls at the thought of being trapped beside her for hours, but this is the choice I made. I will have to find a way to tolerate her. It doesn't matter that the thought of spending time with her feels like a punishment. She is the one I chose, and that means I have to live with it.

Along with all my newly acquired and debilitating regrets.

I consider running the near eighty-some miles home instead, letting the stretch of mountainous terrain serve as both penance and an escape, but the second the idea enters my mind, the cold truth slams into me like a killing blow. I can't shift.

I can barely sense my wolf.

The presence that has been a part of me since birth is so painfully quiet it takes immense effort to follow the frayed thread that keeps us tethered. Only the ghost of him lingers. The bond between us has been stretched so thin, I can't be sure if there's anything left to mend.

Without him, I have no choice. I will have to endure the long ride home.

If Talis has even a shred of self-preservation left in that head of hers, she'll get rid of that smug grin before we're sealed in a car together. Because if I have to sit beside her for hours while she basks in the delusion that she's won something—won me or my heart—then the fragile grip I've kept on my fury is going to shatter.

She might be the face of this farce, but the real puppeteer is her father. Cathal McNamara, master manipulator, opportunist, bastard. He's the one yanking the strings, the one holding the lives of my omegas over my head like bargaining chips in a dirty game of power.

He knows exactly what he's doing, using my sense of duty and my desperation against me. I'm not an idiot. I see it for what it is. Manipulation in its most polished form. And yet, I have no move to make that doesn't end with more souls being stolen or returned to us in torn-apart and bloodied pieces.

And I fucking hate him for it.

I hate myself for

Hate even more that I need him, because I can't see another path to protect the most vulnerable members of my pack. He knows that. That's why it was so effortless for him to back me into this corner, why he got exactly what he wanted. He's the one

who pushed me to commit the worst betrayal a mate can make.

He's to blame just as much as I am for the pain currently gnawing on Noa's soul.

And if I didn't need him, if my omegas didn't need the strength of his pack watching our borders, I'd already be ripping him apart at the seams. I don't need my wolf for that. Just my hands, and the rage burning through them.

I nod stiffly, robotically, my mind returning to Canaan's last comment. "Keep me updated."

His scoff is cold, slicing with expert precision. "I'll let you know when we're on our way back."

He has no intention of sharing anything about Noa. Whatever he learns by staying behind with Rhosyn will remain between them, kept out of my reach. Not even the smallest scraps of information, crumbs I know I would devour like a starving man, will be shared.

And the truth is, I don't have the right to ask.

Noa isn't mine.

I have no claim on her, no place in her life, no right to know if she heals from the pain my rejection has inflicted. I made my choice, made my sacrifice, and as the witch said, I have to live with the consequences.

Canaan approaches the wind wall and cautiously presses his palm against it. It gives way to his touch immediately, making it clear the witch's spell is only intended to keep me away. Over his shoulder, my second glances at me, and for the first time today, I catch a flicker of sympathy in his hazel eyes. It's brief, almost reluctant, but

it's there. "Good luck clinging to your denial now, Nick. There's no running from it anymore. Not after this. What just happened...it only confirmed what we've been trying to tell you for days."

I exhale slowly, forcing my voice steady. "Confirmed what?"

"She's yours. Your fated mate."

I don't bother telling him I knew the second I looked into her eyes. That every atom in my body recognized her as mine in that moment. There's no point in saying it now. Instead, I turn around and mumble so quietly, so brokenly, I'm not sure if he hears me.

"Not anymore."

Chapter 17

Seren

Between the craptastic hand I've been dealt in life and the nifty little gift the Goddess so graciously bestowed upon me, I've endured every form of emotional pain there is. Most of it was my own hurt and what wasn't was what I'd taken from others. Pain I absorbed, carried, and lived through as if it had always been mine.

None of it has ever compared to what it feels like to live through a rejection—the severing of a fated mate bond. This pain is the kind of thing I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy, and that is saying something because I really hate that bitch.

Watching Noa, my heartbreakingly generous and too-kind-for-this-world best friend, be torn apart by the man who was meant to love her, is like witnessing someone's heart being ripped straight from their chest only to be devoured by the very teeth that should have been used to protect her.

With all the shit Noa has been forced to suffer through, this, being rejected by her scent match, is so impossibly unfair that I want to scream. At him, at the Goddess herself for choosing him in the first place, at the fucking sky, at anyone who will listen.

But I can't break down right now, not on her behalf and certainly not because of my own resurfacing hurt.

No.

Right now, Noa needs me to be strong, to be the one to guide her through this. Because there is a way through this.

Well, there is if both sides of the bond are properly severed.

The reminder of this little fact has me searching out the approaching High Priestess. Amara's eyes, dark like a cloudless night sky, are already watching me. We both know what she did when she stopped me from speaking up. What I don't understand is, why? Why would she make this harder for Noa?

If there's one thing I know, it's that the High Priestess is someone who can be trusted. She's proved that time and time again during my time here in Ashvale. And if I didn't already know that myself, Noa's trust in the witch is resolute. Thalassa's steadfast belief in Amara had been just as strong when she was here with us. For this reason alone, I don't voice the question that's weighing heavy on me.

Speaking of heavy, Noa, who's basically the size of a damn sixth grader, is surprisingly cumbersome to carry when she's knocked out cold and nothing but dead weight. We reach Noa's green Jeep and the Fallamhain beta female shifts her hold on my best friend and opens the door. Without being prompted, our newcomer jumps into the back seat and reaches out, taking Noa beneath her lifeless arms. Her grip, while strong, remains gentle, but Noa still whimpers, her deathly pale face contorting.

The female's green eyes are wide when her chin snaps up to where Lowri and I stand in front of the open door. "I didn't mean?—"

The pack Alpha bedside me cuts her off. "You didn't do anything. I doubt she's aware of any external sensations right now."

"She's not," I confirm, stomach twisting in sympathy and the unwanted memory of my own misery.

The stranger shakes her head, and I swear she's blinking away tears as she gently settles Noa's head in her lap. My gut reaction when she first dropped to Noa's side in the grass had been to pull my best friend away, to keep her guarded from anyone who wasn't one of us. But something instinctual told me this beta was trustworthy, that having her on Noa's side would be a happy addition. My wolf, who is the least trusting of our duo, had agreed. And that is why I'm not marching my ass around to the other side of the car and yanking her the hell away from Noa by her perfect fawn-colored ringlets.

"We need to get her home," I insist, heart hurting at the way Noa's body still twitches in pain. "Being in her own space will help her feel more grounded."

Confirmed as an omega or not, it doesn't matter, we all know the truth. We rarely speak it aloud, the subject of her suppressed designation just as sensitive as the topic of her trapped wolf. Her whole world was just ripped out from beneath her, the bond in her chest severed like it was nothing. She might not have a proper nest, but her bedroom is still her safe space, and right now, anything that might bring her even the smallest sense of stability is vital.

Lowri grunts in agreement before turning to join her partner at their red vehicle. Her unspoken nod before she climbs into the passenger seat is her way of telling me they'll follow us back to the manor.

I look expectantly at the beta who is currently running her hand through Noa's hair, deft fingers removing the dried pieces of grass from the long dark strands.

Sensing my attention she raises her head.

"I'm going with you," she declares without a hint of hesitation. I feel my eyebrows shoot up. "Look, usually I'd go about this in a more polite manner, but we don't have time for small talk or casual introductions. So, here it is, my name's Rhosyn

Davies—technically it's Roarke, but Rhosyn Roarke is...well, terrible . The things we do for love, am I right? Anyway, I met Noa the other day when she visited our territory. I was actually the one who got her the meeting with Nick. Rennick. Our Alpha." The way her green eyes flare with anger at the mention of that absolute twat of a man makes my budding trust in her grow. I might even like her for it. "I was there when she claimed him, and I was there for her afterward. After what just happened...please, let me be here for her now. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I walked away from Noa after that."

Rhosyn. I recognize the name. Noa mentioned her and her mate when she gave me all the gory details of her time at her old pack's land.

Speaking of mate.

I sense the alpha male's approach before I hear or smell his citrusy scent. From across the clearing, I'd thought he was a hulking beast of a man, but with him now looming behind me, I come to the conclusion I've greatly underestimated his actual size.

Shifting my stance, I angle my body so I can keep both the alpha and the beta female in the back seat in my line of sight. It's also a move that ensures he isn't directly behind my back or blocking me in. If there's one thing I've learned working with our Nightingales, it's to always be aware of your surroundings. Oh, and never turn your back to an alpha male.

"I'm pretty sure your mate here is going to want you to head back with him," I tell her, but my attempted dismissal of her idea is shot down by both of them. At the same time. Cute.

"I'm not going anywhere. If I go back there now, I'm going to kill him. I'm staying for her."

“If my mate wants us to be here for Noa, I have no issue with staying. With your permission, of course.”

Completely caught off guard by their sincerity and the genuine concern they show for Noa—a woman they barely know—I stare at them for a full, stunned minute. My internal debate is cut short when Noa, Goddess bless her soul, lets out the most pitiful, heart-wrenching whine. A noise my chaos-soaked brain recognizes as being inherently omega, but that’s something we can address at a later time.

It’s the way Rhosyn cups my best friend’s face with a tenderness rarely shared between strangers that first sways me toward accepting their help. But ultimately, it’s the sound that comes from her mate—the second-in-command of his pack, the man who should be unwaveringly loyal to him—that makes the decision for me.

He growls.

Not at us, not at the situation, but in direct response to Noa’s distress.

It’s an instinctual action that proves their presence here isn’t just out of pity or obligation. It’s something more. It’s anger. It’s disappointment. It’s disgust toward the man they are supposed to follow without question.

“Well...shit. Okay, then.” Without wasting another second, I spring into action, unwilling to leave Noa out here in this vulnerable state any longer. After shutting the door with his mate safely inside, I turn to the towering Alpha. “The only reason I’m letting you into the house is because Noa already told me she felt comfortable around you. The manor is usually a penis-free zone. So don’t make me regret this, big guy.”

Chapter 18

Noa

I 'm trapped.

Caught in the space between wakefulness and unconsciousness, pain is the only thing that exists. The only constant. My unwanted tour guide in this hellscape, its claw-like hand locked around me like an unswayable vise. It tears at me, gnawing on my bones with sharp, filed fangs. It singees my skin like a wildfire burning through a forest, and there's nothing I can do to fight it off. Even when I slip into the dark void of oblivion, where in theory it should hurt less, I can't escape it.

Instead, I'm stuck, forced to relive that moment over and over again.

"I, Rennick Fallamhain, reject you..."

The words reverberate through the newfound hollowness of my body. Of my soul. They fill the broken parts of me, leaking their poison as they play on repeat. They rip through my mind like shards of glass, shredding apart what little sense of self I have left. I'm trying so hard to protect those remaining pieces, shielding them with every ounce of strength hanging on within me.

Those fateful words continue to relentlessly loop until I can't think past them. Can't push them away, sure as hell can't just ignore them. They demand to be heard, to be acknowledged. They dig deeper until they reach the empty space where the bond should be.

It's gone.

Ripped away violently before I really knew it was there, before I had time to accept it as true. As real.

I didn't want this. Didn't ask for it. Up until five days ago, Rennick Fallamhain was nothing to me. A ghost from my hazy past. His name was one I barely remembered, his face something I'd long ago forgotten.

He was nothing. Until he wasn't.

Until his scent wrapped around me.

Vetiver. Leather. Mint.

Mine.

Despite my game of denial and doubt, breathing in his addicting scent had been the catalyst. The thing that woke up something that'd been slumbering in my soul for Goddess knows how long. It unlocked hidden memories of our time shared together as pups, as angsty teenagers. Of a time before I was whisked away by my mother that fateful night. They were proof that we shared more than an undeniable connection, but history.

And he threw it all away.

He looked me in the eye, declared me unworthy, and ripped me apart.

The fire rages, searing through me as something within unravels. Grief crushes in from all sides. Heavy and relentless, stealing my breath, my thoughts. It takes everything until I can't be sure I exist.

I want to wake up.

I want to slip into oblivion.

I want it to stop.

But I'm stranded in the wreckage of his making, tangled in the ruins of what was stolen from me and what will now never be.

Somewhere in the madness, something cool presses against my burning skin. A damp cloth, gentle and deliberate, dabs at my forehead and sweeps down my neck. The sensation is distant, barely cutting through the overwhelming haze, but it's there.

I want to lean into it, to let the coolness soothe the fire licking beneath my skin, but at the same time, I want to shrink away.

It's too much and yet somehow not enough.

Everything feels wrong, like my body doesn't belong to me anymore. My reality and sense of self is fractured. Unraveling at the edges. And this small grounding touch is both an anchor and an intrusion on my grief. My chest tightens, the emptiness he's left in there, in my soul, is still a fresh wound. Gaping and bleeding.

"I renounce any claim you have on me."

Against my will, a sob claws its way up my throat, but I couldn't tell you if it succeeds in making it past my lips. The spell the pain has cast over me makes it hard to know where my body ends and where it begins.

But the cool cloth remains. And the presence beside me, the one who wields it, is steady but soft. Their intent is clear, even through the disorienting mist. They are

keeping me from sinking too deep, from fading too far into the nothingness of oblivion. I can't focus on them. Can't see them. Can't hear them. But they're here, and somehow, that's all that matters.

I have no sense of time, no way to measure how long I drift in and out, consciousness warring with itself while my body remains exhausted from the torment, but at some point, I manage to crack my eyes open. The room is dark, familiar. I'm home, in my own bed. How I got here is a mystery to me. A mystery I don't have the strength to worry about solving.

"Noa?"

Bleary, dry eyes that still ache with every torturously slow blink drag to the figure that sits next to me on my bed. It takes a moment for my vision to focus and when it does, I feel silly that in my muddled mind, I hadn't immediately known who the steady presence with the cloth had been. There was only ever one possibility after all.

Seren.

For the first time in what feels like an eternity, I cling to consciousness for more than a few fleeting, agonizing seconds. I don't know how long this reprieve will last, so while I can still pull air into my lungs without it feeling like fire and shift my body without it being akin to rolling over broken glass, I take in my best friend. The one remaining constant in my life.

The sight of her alone tells me I've been trapped in this state far longer than a few hours. The dark circles beneath her powder blue eyes are nearly purple, and the light that usually fills them is dull and weary. Her pale blonde hair, something she takes pride in keeping perfect, is greasy and tousled, half of it is twisted into a lazy knot atop her head. The stretched collar of her gray sweatshirt hangs loose over one shoulder, exposing the delicate edge of her collarbone. Her skin, which usually has a

nice, healthy pink flush to it, is lacking all signs of color.

If I'm being honest, she looked more put together after giving birth to Ivey. Poor girl.

My throat is raw, painfully dry, and a voice whispers a heartbreaking truth—I must have been screaming. Though I don't remember making a sound.

Swallowing against the sensation of razor blades, I force the words out. "You look like shit, Ser."

She blinks at me, silent. Like she isn't sure if she actually heard me or if the exhaustion is playing tricks on her. I watch as the realization settles, as the gears turn, slow and sluggish, before she finally chokes out a watery snort. "Yeah, well, hate to break it to you, babe, but you don't look much better."

I don't have the strength to laugh, so I hum instead, hoping she understands the intention. My body already feels impossibly heavy again, my brief moment of clarity slipping. I won't be awake much longer.

"Hurts..." I grit out, my voice barely more than a breath.

The cool cloth returns, gently gliding over my skin, soothing where it can. Seren's free hand runs down the side of my head, smoothing strands of my hair in a slow, comforting motion. I don't need a mirror to know I'm a mess. Between the sweating and the thrashing, my hair must be a tangled disaster. Just the thought of untangling it later exhausts me.

The idea of showering, of scrubbing this nightmare from my skin, should be a relief. Instead, a darker thought slithers in, whispering in the back of my mind.

What's the point?

What's the point of doing something so mundane, so ordinary as bathing, when nothing about me feels whole anymore? The pain has started to slowly loosen its hold on me, but the aching, hollow void where Rennick's presence should be has taken its place. The bond that tied us together is gone, leaving behind nothing but a raw, cavernous absence. In my clouded, sluggish mind, it's impossible to care about anything outside of this.

Seren's thumb catches a hot tear as it falls down the side of my face. "I know," she whispers. "I know it does."

"Why does it have to hurt?" I choke on my words, half of them coming out like broken and weak sobs.

Seren exhales, a sound that in another moment might have passed as a laugh. Though, there's not a trace of genuine humor in it now. "There are a lot of theories, and I think there's a little bit of truth in all of them." I can't bring myself to say it aloud, but the way she speaks softly is something I'm endlessly grateful for right now. "I was always told it's the Goddess's way of punishing those who defy her divine plan, a price for breaking the bond she handcrafted for you. Some say rejecting a fated mate is the ultimate insult, like spitting in the Goddess's face. You know I don't put as much faith in the Goddess as you do, but when my bond was severed, I had felt more than inclined to beg for her mercy."

It's not very often that Seren Pryce willingly talks about her broken bond or the man she left behind before she found her way to us.

My lip trembles as fragmented memories surface—the echoes of my own unanswered pleas, my desperate begging to the Goddess—clawing their way out of the mess of my fractured thoughts. More tears fall and Seren tries her best to catch them all, but it's a losing battle for her. "What's your theory? Why do you think it hurts so bad?"

Seren's pale, chapped lips pull into a sad smile as she looks down at me. "A fated mate bond isn't just a connection, Noa. It's woven into who we are—stitched into the very fabric of our souls. You don't choose it, and as we've learned, sometimes you don't even want it. But that doesn't change the fact that it's a part of you. And when it's severed, your body doesn't know how to function without it." She clears her throat, like she's trying to steady herself, to push back whatever emotions are creeping in. "It hurts because a vital piece of you was just ripped away—like tearing out a part of your heart and expecting the rest to keep beating. We're not meant to survive without it...and yet, somehow, we have to."

"I didn't want this," I choke out. "I didn't choose this. I wasn't the one who spit in the Goddess's face, but I'm the one who's left... suffering." If Rennick had felt even a fraction of the agony that tore through me like a tidal wave made of fire and blades, he would have fallen to his knees in that clearing just as I had. But he didn't. He remained standing. Through the fog of my memory, I see the horror carved into his guilt-ridden face, the way he stared down at me. Like a murderer standing above his victim, waiting for them to bleed out. "It's not fair. None of this is fucking fair."

In my pain-riddled, disoriented mind, I can't make sense of it. How Rennick did this to me, tore me apart, left me bare and desolate. And yet, he got to walk away. On his own two feet. Meanwhile, my body had crumpled beneath the torment, unable to withstand the agony. I had to be carried, unconscious, out of that fucking clearing.

Abandoning her cloth, Seren's two hands cup either side of my clammy face. Her thumbs still tirelessly wiping away each tear that falls against my will. "I know, babe," she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. "And I'm so fucking sorry." She leans in, forehead resting against mine, grounding me. "I know saying it doesn't fix anything, doesn't take the pain away, but I need you to hear it anyway. I'm sorry, Noa."

"How did you make it through that?" I ask. "How did you keep going after he

rejected you?”

I know his name, but I don't dare speak it aloud. She had let it slip during our huckleberry moonshine night. To this day, it's still the one and only time Seren's uttered his name. And I still don't think she knows she did it.

My best friend pauses, pushing away the pieces of my bangs that stick to my forehead. The way her eyes flash with uncertainty catches my attention despite the darkness starting to creep back into the corners of my vision. “My situation was... different. It wasn't just him rejecting me, I rejected him, too. We both severed our sides of the bond.” A shadow passes over her face. “Don't get me wrong, it still hurt. If anyone understands even a fraction of what you're feeling right now, it's me, and I wish more than anything that you could have been spared from this.” Her thumbs still for just a second before continuing their slow back-and-forth over my skin. “It's going to be hell for a while. You're not going to feel like yourself. You're going to have to fight for it, Noa.” Her grip tightens, not hard, but insistent. “That empty ache weighing down on your soul? I know it.” Her voice trembles, but her conviction doesn't waver. “But I swear to you, on everything I have and hold dear, it gets better. The pain will fade. It won't disappear, but it will fade. It will always be there, just beneath your skin. Some days, you won't notice it. Other days, it'll demand that you remember. But you'll adjust. You'll learn to live with it just as I have. And until that happens, you have to fight like hell, because you can't let it win, Noa.”

The inky blackness I've been battling since I first cracked my burning eyes open is creeping back in, dragging me under. My limbs feel like dead weight, my ears buzz with a dull, relentless hum, and when I finally manage to speak, my words come out slow, thick, almost slurred.

“I don't know how to fight this.”

I certainly don't know how to win this battle.

And deep down, I can't be sure that I really want to.

What would be the point? Without him or our bond?

The room around me is one I'd recognize anywhere.

The wide-planked pine floors, scratched and scuffed from years of wear, stretch beneath my feet. The river rock fireplace dominates the living room, bundles of drying herbs hanging above the hearth, just as they always had. The scent in the air is familiar, a mix of sage, peppermint, and the countless other natural remedies my mother crafted by hand. It smells like home. It smells like her.

I don't question why I'm here. I should, but I don't. My heartsick soul is just thrilled to be surrounded by a space that holds so many warm memories.

My feet move of their own accord, guiding me toward the back window with the faded and sun-bleached, rust-colored curtains. Through the glass, the land slopes gently downward, opening into the valley where the creek winds its way through the Fallamhain territory, heading toward the lake that sits behind the Alpha's house. The view is just as I remember it to be. It's beautiful, peaceful, exactly as it was when I was a child.

The peace doesn't last.

A presence stirs behind me, a prickle of awareness running down my spine. The air shifts, becoming almost electric as the energy surges.

Blind, deaf, or underwater—I'd still recognize that feeling.

I turn, and she's there.

Mom.

She stands in the middle of the room, watching me with soft eyes that always saw too much. But she doesn't look the way she did eight months ago, before she passed. She's younger. By the looks of it, almost a decade younger. Her dark hair, the same shade as mine, falls in loose waves over her shoulders, streaks of silver are just starting to frame her temples. The charms, hand-carved by a coven with ancient bloodlines, that were passed down to her, are braided into the hair near her ears, just as they always were. She always told me the symbols etched into the small metal medallions are ones of protection. They gave them to me with the rest of her belongings after the accident. They now sit in my jewelry box in my dresser at home.

She looks as she did over seven years ago, around the time we fled from the Fallamhain territory.

My stomach drops as my eyes flick to the dining room, where green and white balloons are still tied to the chair just as they had been the night everything went to shit.

My birthday had been that week. My eighteenth.

I know where I am and now, I know exactly when .

My pulse pounds in my ears. My fingers curl restlessly at my sides. I don't know if I'm breathing.

"Mom?" My voice sounds wrong, too distant, too unsteady.

She smiles, a sad, knowing thing that twists my gut.

"Noa," she says, and the way she says my name makes me feel small again, like I'm

still that girl standing in this cabin, believing I belonged. Believing I was safe and wanted, that I had a future ahead of me here.

I try to take a step toward her, but the space between us stretches, like the room itself is pulling away from me. My throat tightens. The fireplace flickers, casting strange, elongated shadows against the walls. It's disorienting and makes my stomach roll, almost as if I'm experiencing seasickness.

Forcing my feet to remain still, firmly planted where I stand, the room rights itself.

"I don't understand why I'm here," I tell her, voice floating, sounding almost disembodied, to where she stands across the space.

"I know, my girl." Mom's voice takes on the same, disjointed and ghostly quality as mine. "But you will. It's time you start remembering, Noa." My pulse kicks up, uneven and frantic, but I can't speak, can't move, can't do anything but listen. "What I did—the memories I stole—I never intended to keep them forever," she continues, her face unreadable, even as something like sorrow flickers through her golden eyes. "I was always going to return them. But when I realized I wouldn't be here to see this through, I had to find another way to make sure what I did was set right."

My chest tightens. My mind scrambles, trying to piece together her meaning. His words from the clearing slamming to the forefront of my mind, the ones where he accused Mom of being the reason I am the way I am. Wolfless.

"What are you talking about?" My voice is hoarse.

She doesn't answer right away, just watches me with a kind of patience that makes me feel small. Childlike. Then, continuing on with her frustratingly vague bullshit, she says, "Reuniting with him is the first step. He's the key to opening the door."

My stomach plummets.

I don't have to ask who she means. I already know.

Rennick .

My head begins to shake in denial instantly. "He rejected me, Mom. Ripped apart our bond. He's not the key to anything. Not anymore."

The slight tilt of her head sends a sharp pang of grief through my chest. It washes over me, her signature tell, no matter the emotion. Happy, sad, mad, curious... Mom always did that and seeing it now, in a place I can't be sure isn't just a vivid creation of my subconscious, makes my heart ache.

"Your bond isn't ripped apart, only frayed, Noa," she insists. "You'll see soon enough that a bond like yours isn't something so easily destroyed. Trust me, my girl, I tried. The best I could do was delay it."

An inky mixture of betrayal and hurt forms in my gut. "Why would you do that?"

Once again, sadness darkens Mom's face. "Temporary heartache is a wound that heals. A lifetime of grief is one that never stops bleeding."

I can't commend her for her poignant words. Not now. Not when I'm drowning in confusion. "Were you always this fucking cryptic?"

The room once again starts to shift, but this time it's starting to slowly slip away into nothingness.

Panicked that our time together is coming to an end, my attention shoots back to where Mom stands. She looks unfazed by the disintegrating walls around us and the

floor beneath our feet. That's when I see that she's fading away too, the edges of her silhouette turning into a white mist.

"It's time to remember, Noa," she repeats one last time. "The threads have already started to unravel. The binds are starting to break. He will help with the rest."

When I wake again, I'm alone.

My room is dark, the only light coming from the half-moon and stars outside the too big windows of my attic bedroom. Someone, I'm assuming Seren, has left the long white curtains open on all four, leaving me surrounded by the vast, endless night sky. There's probably a witty analogy in that, some poetic bullshit about how the dark, empty space mirrors the vacant, gaping abyss inside me. Gotta hand it to the universe, it really hit the nail on the head with this cinematic, and slightly symbolic view.

Oh, look at that, your sarcasm is still firmly intact. Not all is lost. Maybe there is hope of survival, after all.

The pain is still there, humming beneath my skin, simmering in my blood, rooted so deep I'm almost positive it's been carved into the very marrow of my bones. But it's different now. It no longer steals the breath from my lungs or threatens to yank me into unconscious oblivion. It lingers, a cruel reminder of what was ripped from me—out of me.

My mind feels sluggish, like it's wading through fog. The thoughts are there, but they're slow to form, as if my neurons can't quite remember how to spark with their usual fire. It takes me a solid minute to decide that I'm firmly in the present, that I haven't found myself in another disorienting and cryptic dream.

That dream. Mom's message. I want to pick it apart, find the meaning. But who's to say it was anything more than grief? Maybe it wasn't her at all and it was just my

mind clinging to comfort in the middle of all this devastation.

I'll talk to Seren about it, I still need her help to confront the words Rennick had used as his killing blow... "It was your own traitorous mother who bound your wolf and made you defective."

My first instinct was to reject it completely, to fight against it with whatever scrap of internal strength I had left. But now, entwined with the lethargy and cloudiness, there's a sliver—sharp and persistent—that whispers maybe he was right. Maybe it's not impossible, after all.

I can't tell what's up or down anymore. My body feels foreign, like I'm just borrowing it, and the thoughts in my head don't even sound like mine. So, really, what's the harm in considering it? That everything I've believed—everything I've built myself around—might be a lie. That the one person I trusted above all else, the woman who gave me life and shaped who I am, might've taken my memories...and my wolf along with them. I'm broken enough right now that accepting this possibility doesn't hurt like it should.

I look inward, checking in with the being I share my soul with. As expected, she's curled up in her glass cage. Her heartbreak and misery mirroring mine just as intensely. She raises her heavy head and howls. The sound is raw, a cry of mourning meant for someone who won't answer.

He chose someone else.

I push myself upright in bed, the movement slow, my body stiff from too many hours—or days?—spent floating in and out of the black abyss. Time feels irrelevant in the wake of his rejection. My dark jeans and high-neck thermal cling to my skin, stale with the sweat from my fevered sleep. I still don't know how long I've been wearing them or how long it's been since I stood across from Rennick and he tore my

heart out with nothing but a handful of carefully executed words.

What I do know is that I need to pull myself together.

And I desperately need a shower.

My mind screams it's too much, too big of a task, but I think of Seren telling me I have to fight. That I have to choose to keep going. So, I cling to that, hold on to it with everything I have left, and force myself to move. The second my feet hit the floor, my muscles protest. My legs threaten to buckle, my bones groaning under the weight of simply standing on my own. For a moment, I consider falling right back into bed, pulling the twisted blankets over my head, and giving in to the allure of nothingness.

Instead, I push forward. One step. Then another.

Until I make it to the bathroom and turn on the shower.

The Victorian manor's old pipes take forever to warm the water. Eventually steam starts to billow up and over the glass shower stall. I peel off my clothes, movements stiff and clumsy, and catch sight of myself in the fogging mirror.

My next breath is held captive in my tight throat.

I expected to look different. Forever changed, somehow. To see some kind of physical proof of what I've endured. A scar. A mark. But I don't. I still look like me, just faded. My skin is too pale, my eyes dull, lifeless. Haunted. I look...broken, like someone who's been eviscerated and stitched back together wrong.

It's a battle to force my gaze away and to step into the shower.

The hot water burns as it cascades over my skin, and for a fleeting second, I welcome

it, pretending the scalding heat can erase everything he did to me.

The process is slow. Too slow. I have to force my heavy arms to lift and my hands to move, to scrub my hair, to wash the remnants of this nightmare from my body. At too many points, I consider just giving up, sinking to the tile floor, curling my knees to my chest, and letting the boiling water drown me in its heat.

But I don't.

By the skin of my teeth, I finish.

And by the time I step out, wrap myself in a plum-colored towel, and shut off the water, the cold air slams into me. I'm freezing. The kind of cold that cuts to the bone. Violently shivering, I hightail it out of the bathroom, making a beeline for my closet, already reaching for my heaviest sweatshirt and a pair of leggings.

I'm so lost in my own head, concentrating on the simplest movements, things that used to come without thought, like breathing or walking, that I don't notice the figure seated near one of the windows.

Not until they say my name.

"Noa!"

The voice isn't menacing or threatening, on the contrary, it's bright with relief. Cheerful. But that doesn't halt the embarrassingly theatrical yelp from escaping my throat or stop my feet from leaving the hardwood floor in a bone-jarring little jump.

"Fuck!" I shriek, my hands still clutching my clothes, pressing them to my chest, where I silently will the organ residing within to return to its regular scheduled beating. Whirling to the intruder, my jaw just about hits the ground. "Rhosyn?"

Chapter 19

Noa

“ I know what you’re thinking!”

She jumps out of the cream boucle chair, hand rising in silent surrender. Rhosyn, the mate of Rennick’s most loyal man, is in my bedroom looking entirely too at home in pink striped pajamas. Her riot of curls is up in two space buns, giving her a sleepover vibe that doesn’t match the reality of our situation. The one where she’s a long fucking way from where she should be. Which is, you know, back with him , in their territory.

“You probably think I’ve been sent here to spy on you and then report back to Lord Stubborn McDickface, but I swear I’m not. Honestly, it’s probably in his best interest that I stay out of the same zip code—hell, state?—as him for a while longer. I’m still mentally workshopping what he’d look like with his wiener cut off and stapled to his forehead like some sad, pitiful little unicorn. My wolf is fully on board with that plan, by the way. Just give me the word, and I’m sure I can make it happen.”

After my brain, still not firing on all cylinders, finally processes her rapid-fire words and threats, I come to the realization that I believe her. I believe if I waved a little checkered flag, Rhosyn would do exactly what she’s described. Probably with embellished flair, too.

But it’s more than just believing her threats. There’s a pull, a little flicker in my gut, the same one I felt the day Seren showed up on our doorstep with sad eyes and an

even sadder heart. It's not loud, not flashy, but it's there. A quiet understanding that settles in my bones.

Rhosyn and I were meant to cross paths. Fated, not in the mate-bond way, but in the found-my-people kind of way. And just like that, I know we're going to be friends. The fiercely loyal, mildly feral, help-you-bury-a-body kind of friends.

And there's a sense of peace that settles over my aching being with this knowledge. The kind that quietly whispers that life can't be all loss, that something good has to come from this pain, and maybe that something is her.

Maybe this kind of steadfast belief makes me insane, but even if it does, I don't give a shit.

I wonder what Seren will think about our duo becoming a trio? Hold up, Noa, you dumbass. You're getting ahead of yourself. What if Rhosyn doesn't want to be part of your little unofficial lady gang? Wait, why wouldn't she want to be friends with us, we're awesome. You know, when we're not having our souls ripped ? —

"Noa?" Rhosyn's worried voice brings me out of my internal and one-sided ramblings. Her green eyes are full of the same concern when I look into them.

I find myself shaking my head and answering her earlier question, "I didn't think that."

Her fawn brows lift in silent question.

"I didn't think you were here to spy on me," I clarify.

Her face lights up with relief, a tentative smile pulling on her lips. For the first time, I note the little gap she has between her two front teeth. It's endearing as hell. "I'm

really glad to hear that. I know trust probably feels impossible right now. Especially when it's coming from someone tied to...him. But I mean it, Noa. We wouldn't be here if I wasn't on your side."

My question asking what she means by "we" is overtaken by the violent shiver that erupts down my spine and then down my limbs, making my already sore muscles convulse.

As if suddenly horrified by her own obliviousness, Rhosyn's hand slaps over her mouth, concealing some of the embarrassment now reddening her cheeks.

"What the hell, Noa!" she exclaims through her fingers, bulging eyes taking in the way I'm still standing in nothing but a bath towel, my clothes still clutched to my chest, and the water dripping from my hair making a small puddle at my feet. "You're literally standing there half naked, and I've been ranting about limp-dick unicorns. Why didn't you say something?" Without another word, she spins on her slipper-covered feet—she really is dressed like she's here for a slumber party—and moves toward my open en suite's door. "Get dressed, I'm going to grab your blow-dryer. I'll help you dry that mane you call hair. It looks like a two-person job."

My refusal is like a gut reaction despite the way my body and mind protest the very thought of putting the energy into doing something as trivial as styling my hair. Before I found Rhosyn in here, my plan had been to just throw it up into a wet bun and then crawl back into bed as soon as possible. The energy expelled to make it through my shower has left me feeling exhausted.

"You don't?—"

She won't hear it.

"But I'm going to anyway!" Hand on the doorframe, Rhosyn looks over her shoulder

at me. “Look, I have an aunt—on my mom’s side. Her fated mate broke his side of their bond. I was little, but I still remember how hard it was. How unbearable it looked. She tried to go it alone, kept telling everyone she didn’t need help, that she was fine. She wasn’t.” Her voice softens. “But, Noa, wanting to be strong doesn’t mean you have to do this by yourself. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in being here these past three days, it’s that you’ve got people in your corner. More than you probably realize. And letting us help you through this? That’s not weakness, it’s the bravest thing you can do.”

Her kind words, too kind for someone who really is a stranger to me despite my budding inherent connection to her, are what start the ache in my throat, the squeeze around my heart. But it’s the small detail she said so innocently, almost offhandedly, that nearly steals the breath from my lungs.

“It’s been three days?” I rasp.

I spent three days drowning in the agony he left me with when he decided I wasn’t worth it. That the Goddess got it wrong when she chose me for him. That he and his pack were better off with Talis.

“Yeah...” She nods. “It’s been three days since Rennick did what he did—since he severed his side of the bond.”

The steady ache in my chest spikes the moment Rhosyn says it, like she spoke life into the emptiness, and it’s now demanding that I give it my full attention.

It gets its wish.

The whimper, which sounds awfully like an omega whine to my ringing ears, escapes my burning throat and bounces off the walls. And I’m helpless as my body caves in on itself and my legs collapse under me. Rhosyn is at my side before I can fully

comprehend the pain radiating in my kneecaps.

It takes the entire duration of Rhosyn blowing out my waist-length hair for the sharp, excruciating pain to settle back into something duller. Manageable, if only barely. The steady ache I'd first woken up to, the one that allows my lungs to take in air without it burning and I can think without wanting the darkness to consume me, returns like some twisted prize.

She didn't ask me anything, didn't try to fill the space with mindless chatter or try to drag words out of me that I wasn't ready to give. Bless her. Still, I didn't miss the flickers of curiosity, the thoughts she was clearly keeping back when our eyes met in the vanity mirror. She kept them to herself, something I was thankful for because I wasn't ready for another emotional collapse.

She had said they—whoever they are—have been here since we left the clearing. Three days ago. Between Potion soft, too quiet to make out, but urgent. My spine straightens, every nerve in my body flaring to sluggish awareness. The floor creaks under a set of approaching footsteps. No, two sets. Quick. Deliberate.

It takes my scrambled senses a second too long to realize the sound is coming from around the corner.

From the hallway that leads to the cellar stairs.

As far as I know, the only people down there right now are Edie and Siggy. And as far as I know, Siggy hasn't wanted to leave the solitude or safety of the basement dwelling since she arrived. I'd offered to sit outside on our covered patio the day before my world turned upside down, but she had refused me. Still too raw, too on edge. If she's come up here...something's wrong.

The whispers grow louder, the footsteps more determined.

I push away from the table and stand.

The motion is too fast.

The room tilts sideways, the edges of my vision darken, and my poor legs scream in protest as they shake beneath my weight. They're stiff, sore, still weak from the events of the past few days. But I lock my knees and force myself to stay upright, gripping the back of the nearest chair for balance.

Instinct tells me my Nightingale won't be in any danger with Rhosyn and Canaan, but instinct only gets a partial vote. The rest is ruled by years of lessons drilled into me by Mom. Lessons that taught me to be ready, always. To step between danger and the people you're meant to protect, no matter what condition you're in. So, yeah, my body might be shot to hell, but I'll still throw myself in front of Siggy without a second thought.

The footsteps are getting closer now, steady but rushed. Still muffled by the hallway, still out of sight.

I turn to face the arched entrance of the kitchen, faintly aware that the Fallamhain Pack members and Seren have also stood from the table. Canaan's presence is a quiet weight at my back. Heavy. Watchful. My anxiety spikes on Siggy's behalf, not knowing how she's going to react when forced to confront strangers. One of them being an alpha male.

"I don't believe you anymore." Siggy's voice carries down the hallway, disembodied but growing clearer with every step. There's strength in it, sure, but each word is laced with worry she's not quite able to hide. "You and Seren told me days ago she was just sick or something, but that she was getting better. If that were true, Noa would've come to see me. Even just for a minute. She would've checked in. But she hasn't."

Oh, Siggy. I'm so sorry.

The fact that she's left the safety of the basement—her nest—to come looking for me makes my heart hurt with guilt. That space is her newfound sanctuary, the one place she's felt secure enough to exist without all-consuming fear, and yet here she is, braving the open space above ground because she's worried about me. That shouldn't be her job. She's the one who needs protecting right now. Time to heal. It's supposed to be me who checks in to make sure she feels safe. Me who shows up for her. Not the other way around.

"We're not lying to you," Edie says gently, her voice carrying the kind of exhaustion that only comes from repeating the same truth over and over. It's the sound of someone who's been trying to reassure a frightened omega for hours—maybe days—and is running out of ways to say the same thing. "Noa just hasn't been strong enough to make it down to see you yet."

"Whatever," Siggy huffs, skepticism woven into the sound. I can't fault Siggy for the intense level of distrust she's displaying. If I had to live through what she's endured, I wouldn't easily trust another damn soul, either. "But I'm still going to find her so I can see with my own two eyes that you haven't been trying to feed me a bunch of bullshit?—"

Right as she's passing the kitchen entrance, the Nightingale stumbles to such an abrupt stop when she catches sight of me out of the corner of her eye that poor Edie, looking frazzled as hell, slams straight into her back.

Siggy barely flinches, her posture rigid, attention fixed on me and only me.

Big, sharp dark blue eyes rake over me from head to toe, quietly assessing. She doesn't say a word, but the furrow between her wheat-colored brows is enough. I can practically see her mentally cataloging every visible sign of damage, and from the

way her expression tightens, I know it's taken her less than five seconds to clock how bad it really is.

"Noa," she breathes my name, relief twining with her obvious concern. "What happened to you? You look..."

The weight of her unfinished sentence lingers in the air, thick with emotion, but it doesn't get a chance to settle because a sharp gasp cuts through the silence like a whip.

"Sigrid ?"

The girl's gaze darts past me, locking on to someone over my shoulder. I see the shift in her expression instantly. Recognition and disbelief sparking in her wide eyes.

"Rhosyn? Canaan?"

Chapter 20

Rennick

I haven't moved on from the moment Noa collapsed like her soul had been yanked out of her body. Physically, I may have numbly left that clearing after they'd carried her from me, but, mentally, I'm still back there reliving it. Regretting it while simultaneously trying to remind myself why I did it—why I had to—as vivid flashes of her broken, unconscious body flood my mind, each one a brutal reminder that she ended up that way because of me.

It was three days ago now—I think. Time has ceased to have any meaning. Morning, night, midday, it all bleeds together in this office, in this box I've locked myself inside. The curtains—the only thing left unscathed from my rampage—are drawn tight, the fireplace left cold. I haven't eaten. Can't remember the last time I drank water.

I don't sleep.

Can't.

Not because I'm punishing myself—though the guilt might argue otherwise—but because I know what's waiting for me if I do. The dreams that started eight months ago, long before I caught her scent on the wind in my backyard. Before I knew what her sweet voice sounded like. Before I looked into her two-toned irises and the memories I never should have forgotten started to resurface.

If I close my eyes and try to find relief in oblivion, I know I will be brought back to that place where between the snowcapped pine trees, her figure is carved into the white mist. Waiting for me. Always waiting for me. Every part of her face obscured except for her eyes. I never realized until recently how much that detail mattered. One solid golden brown. The other split straight down the middle—half gold, half glacial blue. A distant voice used to whisper to me that I was staring into something sacred, something important.

It was Noa. It's always been Noa.

She had begged me to remember her and when I'd woken up, I was left feeling like I was missing a vital piece of me. I hadn't understood it then. But I do now. And knowing that I failed her? That I spoke the words that destroyed us with my own mouth while her soul had been crying out to mine for months?

That's what keeps me awake.

The last few days have been a blur of silence and shadows. And rage. At myself, at my choice, at the people who used this hallowed connection as a bargaining chip against me.

My office has borne the brunt of my fury. Not a single piece of furniture or decoration is left untouched. My laptop is a pile of twisted metal and shattered glass in the corner. Feathers from the pillows on the sofa float across the oak floors in silent whispers of wind.

Yrsa came by. Oswin knocked, more than once. I ignored them both. I couldn't bring myself to open the door, couldn't handle the looks they'd give me. No doubt the grieving mother would praise my sacrifice while the latter would condemn it just as fiercely as Canaan had.

Canaan.

His absence proves how far I've fallen this time.

The one who's been my anchor since the day I took over as Alpha, the man who never hesitates to knock sense into me before standing at my side, has been noticeably absent. Normally, he'd be the one at my door, checking in, refusing to let me wallow.

I haven't seen him since the clearing, when he looked at me like I was a stranger before he walked away. That same expression had been etched across Rhosyn's face, too. They didn't say it aloud, but I felt their decision settle like stone in the air between us.

They chose her.

They chose to go with Noa.

The text came through that night, hours after I'd arrived back home and had just finished taking my wrath out on my desk and brown leather sofa.

Canaan: We're still with her.

That was it.

That was all he said. But I didn't need more. I understood. His unspoken message was loud and clear.

They were only supposed to stay for a couple of hours, show support, and help Noa's people help her. That's what I told myself. What I'd convinced myself would happen.

But it's been days. And they're still not back. They're still with her.

And it's killing me that I haven't received a single update and it's even worse knowing I have no business wanting one.

So, I've let myself rot in this office.

Three full days of silence, darkness, and this sick, festering pit in my gut that won't let up. I keep telling myself I did the right thing. That this pain, hers and mine, is the price of protecting my people. That aligning with Cathal, as twisted and manipulative as the bastard is, was the only real option. I want to believe it. I need to. Because if I don't, if I let myself question that for even a second, then I'm just a monster who broke his fated mate for nothing.

But even as I cling to that justification, I hate myself for it. And I hate Cathal more. For knowing exactly where to strike. For seeing my fear and using it to back me into this corner. For dangling my omegas' lives over my head. He forced my hand, and I played right into it because I'd rather bleed than let another one of my own get taken, abused, eviscerated, and then dumped in the snow. But if this is what doing the right thing feels like, I don't know how much more I've got left in me.

As it stands now, I feel like I've lost everything but the pounding heart in my chest, and if I'm being honest, I don't know if I want to keep that. Not when it was meant to beat in sync with hers.

My second's trust, my mate's bond, and my wolf.

All broken or missing.

It takes everything I have to look inward, really look, and face the wreckage I've caused.

I go searching for him, for my wolf, who has remained gone since I shattered every inch of trust shared between us by committing the unforgivable. Since I stretched our connection to the point of breaking. Desperate for even the faintest flicker of his presence, I need to know that I'm not really alone in this. When I reach into the place where he's always lived, I find... something . Not him. Not fully. He's there, but distant, simmering with a fury that keeps him just out of reach. I can sense the rage vibrating in the void between us. His detachment isn't a result of the mate bond fracturing, no, this is a choice the sentient being has made on his own. This is his way of punishing me and despite the strange loneliness that comes with his aloofness, I can't blame him for it.

I'm so focused on the quiet rise of my wolf's presence, relieved he hasn't completely abandoned me, that at first, I miss what he's guarding. He's crouched low in the center of my chest, teeth bared, hackles raised, every inch of him coiled over something small. Something fragile. I almost dismiss it as nothing, just more wreckage from the last few days, until I look closer.

That's when I see it. No, feel it.

A thread.

It's barely there at all. Brittle and nearly translucent. I blink. I almost can't breathe for fear that acknowledging it will make it vanish. It doesn't, but sensing my attention, my wolf growls, low and warning, protective in a way that tells me this isn't an illusion or a cruel leftover dream. It's real.

And it's her.

My spine stiffens. Every muscle locks up as I stare inward, frozen by the weight of it. I was certain that space in my chest would be empty now. But it's not. That piece of her is still there, buried under my guilt and rage and fear—and my wolf has been

protecting it. Shielding it. From me.

A sliver of the precious thing I thought I'd destroyed still lives inside me, and I'm too much of a coward to ask why. And just as selfish, because I won't do the smart thing—the right thing—and bury it deep where I'll never find it again. I can't. I'm not strong enough to give up my remaining piece of her.

And neither is my wolf.

I'm thinking about what a bastard I am when my phone, glass screen now full of fresh cracks from when I'd hurled it across the room after reading Canaan's text, vibrates on the desk before me.

Speaking of bastards.

Cathal.

I've been screening his calls since the night I got home.

I knew if I picked up, the fury simmering just beneath my skin and the resentment clawing at my ribs were going to encourage me to say something I can't afford—my omegas can't afford—so I've kept my distance, choosing silence over a mistake I can't unmake. I learned from one of Oswin's visits to my office door that Talis left the morning after arriving home from Ashvale. She's temporarily gone back up to Canada where she belongs. This is the only reason Cathal hadn't ordered her to hunt me down and pass along whatever message he has.

Knowing this plan isn't sustainable, and that it will ultimately backfire if he decides to send Talis back down here so soon after she left, is the only reason I finally stop avoiding his calls and pick up.

“What?” I bark, putting the phone on speaker and leaning back in my chair, trying to put as much physical distance between me and his disembodied voice.

“I don’t appreciate your tone, boy,” Cathal snaps, voice oily with condescension and the smugness he’s passed down to his daughter. “What would your father think if he were here and learned you’d spoken to another pack Alpha like that?”

My patience is hanging by a prayer, and three days without sleep and this soul-crushing torment have stripped me down to something raw and razor-edged.

“Which version of him are we talking about, McNamara? The one he was eight months ago before a pair of sharp teeth put him out of his misery? Because that man was too far gone to care about my tone . He was feral. Delusional. Screaming at shadows and threatening the moon like it owed him a blood debt.” I lean forward slightly, voice dropping into something deadly. “But if we’re talking about the man he was before the sickness—the one who raised me, the Alpha we both respected—then we both fucking know he’d be disgusted by what I’ve tolerated. He’d call me a disgrace for letting your bloated ego stomp around my territory unchecked and under the guise of allyship. He’d remind me exactly who the hell I am. He’d remind me that I don’t bow to weaker alphas, and I sure as shit don’t answer to some manipulative cunt who hides behind the image of being a righteous champion for omegas, when we both know you’re exploiting their pain to get exactly what you’ve always wanted. Your daughter as my Luna. Which will hand you more influence and leverage. It’s just a trophy for you to parade around while you try to sink your claws into a power that will never be yours. So, no, my father wouldn’t have had anything to say in regard to my tone.”

The second the words leave my mouth, a brutal silence follows, but there’s no regret. I’ve been biting my tongue for months now, chewing on the truth until it bled, keeping a death grip on my temper in the name of diplomacy. Walking that thin line between holding the alliance together and latching on to what little pride I had left.

But Noa shattered that balance. Or maybe I shattered it myself the second I opened my mouth in that clearing and ignored every instinct begging me not to do it.

I can't pretend anymore. I can't keep playing this game like I don't see exactly what Cathal's doing. Hiding behind his big talk and his concern for omegas when all he really wants is leverage. Legacy. Power. A daughter on a throne that doesn't belong to her. And a leash wrapped around my neck.

He needs to know that I see him. Every calculated move. Every veiled threat. Every smug fucking smirk he's worn since the moment I let this deal infect my pack. He needs to understand I've never respected him, not even when I was a boy forced to shake his hand. Whatever tolerance I had for him is long gone, burned to ash by the guilt I carry like a second skin, by the sound of Noa's body hitting the ground like I struck her myself, by the hollow silence she left behind.

I'm done playing the game.

Cathal's silence is long enough to almost pass for a retreat, but I know better. His quiet is never submission—it's calculation. And right on cue, it breaks.

"That all may be true, pup," he says, his voice coated in smug satisfaction. Where he should sound ashamed, he's proud. "But it doesn't change the fact that you need me. Your precious omegas need me. They need my guards on your borders if you want any hope of stopping them from being picked off one by one."

His words hit like a gut punch because there's some truth in them. Ugly, manipulative truth. He's not wrong. My people do need the extra manpower while we sort out who's taking our omegas and how the hell they keep slipping through. I'd be a bigger fool than I already am if I let pride blind me from the threat still clawing at my territory's edges.

As much as I hate the bastard breathing down my neck, I won't risk another omega ending up like Carly.

But this arrangement? This reliance on him? It's not forever.

Not anymore.

Because I've made a decision. One that's been a long time coming, but I was too blind to accept it. I'm going to do the thing Rhosyn and Canaan have been begging me to do since the moment this cursed treaty slithered its way across my desk.

I'm going to find another way. One that doesn't cost me everything or hand power to a man who thinks he can treat lives like bargaining chips. I thought if I told myself enough times it was necessary, that it was about my duty as Alpha, the pain would dull and settle into something that resembled numbness.

But that was before her.

Before I watched her break before me and I could do nothing but watch as she convulsed in pain. I told myself I could make the sacrifice. That offering up my own future was enough. But somewhere along the way, I did the unthinkable and convinced myself that sacrificing hers was necessary, too. I was willing to burn myself for this cause, but I never should've dragged her into the flames with me and expected her to survive it. To carry pain that was never hers to begin with. I told myself she'd endure it like I have to.

It was agonizingly unfair, and crafted from delusion, because I was wrong. Dead fucking wrong. I can't live with this. I can't breathe knowing I chose to break her. That I sacrificed the one thing I was supposed to protect most.

She's my other half, my scent match, and I've spent three days pretending I can exist

in a world where she's not mine, but it's a lie. One I can't keep telling myself because if I do, it's going to eat away what little remains of my soul. And I need those pieces. I need them if I have any hope of making right...of fixing what I broke.

So, for a while longer, I will play Cathal's game.

"You're right, McNamara," I begrudgingly admit through clenched teeth. "My omegas do need you, but I'm done upholding this facade of mutual respect and pretending I don't know your true motives."

"How very noble of you," Cathal sneers, his voice dripping with mockery and thinly veiled contempt. "Spare me the tortured martyr routine, boy. It's grating. As long as you continue to play your part, I take no issue with dropping this fake narrative between us. I think it will be better for both of us if we be straightforward with one another. It leaves less room for...misunderstandings or incorrect expectations, don't you think?"

This fucking asshole...

"Agreed."

"Wonderful," he chirps, sounding more than pleased with himself. "With that being said, I want to make my expectations clear where my daughter and you are concerned. Talis reassured me that you've taken care of the wolfless girl and her rejection was effective. Nice touch bringing Talis with you." It wasn't a nice touch. It was cruel, and letting that venomous redhead open her mouth or contribute in any way to Noa's suffering is something I'll regret until my last breath. "With her out of the way, you can focus on what's important—your union with my daughter. It is on you to ensure she is shown the respect she is due as your future Luna and that your pack falls in line and accepts her because one way or another, this will end with your mark on her neck."

For the first time in three days, my wolf stirs. He lifts his head, a guttural snarl vibrating low and dangerous in my chest. It doesn't carry the full weight of his usual fury, but it's more than I've felt from him since that goddamn clearing. It's a sign. A shared vow between us. Whatever fractures still exist between man and beast, we agree on one thing—if there's one line I won't fucking cross, it's putting my mark on Talis McNamara.

I may have only just accepted that this alliance can't stand, but the urgency to find another way roars inside me like a battle cry. The very idea of committing such a sacred, irreversible act with Talis makes my skin crawl. Mating marks are meant to be a symbol of a pair's unwavering devotion to one another. They should be worn with pride, and I'd sooner burn my own flesh off than wear her claim on me.

“This brings me to the reason for my call. Your official betrothal party is happening two weekends from now, and I want to ensure everything, along with yourself, is prepared for it. It will be the first official gathering of our two packs since Talis was announced as your intended mate. It will give my daughter and you a chance to show up as a united front, as a mated pair. I expect it to go off without a hitch.”

The thought of standing beside Talis at some spectacle of a betrothal party makes my jaw clench hard enough I hear it pop. Pretending she's mine, letting her drape herself all over me while our packs look on like this is something to celebrate, is the last thing I want. Every forced smile, every false word of admiration, will feel like sandpaper on my soul. Because the only hands I want on me are hers. Noa's. The only touch I crave is the one I rejected before I got the chance to really know it, like a fucking coward. I'll have to fake it, smile through gritted teeth, let Talis play her part, all the while my thoughts would be consumed by the woman I'll never stop needing and will do everything in my power to get back. It's a performance I have no interest in giving, but one I'll endure just long enough to buy myself time. Because the only thing more unbearable than feigning a future with Talis is the thought of letting Cathal think he's already won.

“I’m sure all the appropriate people are on top of everything, and I’ll confirm with Rhosyn just to be sure.” It’s a bald-faced lie, considering I have no idea if Rhosyn or Canaan have any plans to return anytime soon. But Cathal doesn’t need to know that. He’ll recognize her name and the critical role she plays in keeping this place running, and that’s all that matters.

Letting him think everything’s under control and on track is imperative. I need him focused on the illusion while I quietly start making the moves that will lead me to a real solution—one that doesn’t end with Talis wearing my mark or Noa bearing the weight of my betrayal alone.

“Very well,” McNamara says. “I’m glad you finally deigned to take my call. For a minute there, I thought I was going to have to drive back down there to speak to you in person about this.” His threat is so poorly concealed, but I think that’s the point.

“We definitely wouldn’t want that,” I agree, sarcasm dripping off my tongue.

I don’t bother waiting for a reply or wasting time on a polite sign-off. I hang up and shove the cracked phone across the desk, the device scraping against the ruined surface before settling among the wreckage. Groaning, I settle back into my chair. The torn and ripped cushion below me reminding me of the destruction I’d wreaked in this room. On top of needing all new furniture and electronics, I’m fairly certain I’ll need someone to come in and repair the walls. I can’t be sure if the holes were caused by me throwing shit at them or if it were my own fist going through the drywall.

Those repairs are the least of my worries right now, though.

No, I have much more vital things to repair.

If they can even be repaired.

Fuck.

I slump further into my seat. My hands drag down my face, scraping over the short beard that is probably in need of a good trim, and I lean my head back, eyes closed. Exhaustion hits me all at once. I've been running on nothing but anger and guilt, and now that the call has ended, now that I've finally let some of that decay bleed out, I feel the crash. My bones ache. My thoughts are a tangle of sharp edges and regrets.

I should be planning. Plotting the next move. Finding a way to untangle this disaster without losing any more of what I've already sacrificed. But the quiet is loud, and for a second, all I can do is sit in it. Breathe it.

And while I do, I let myself focus on the thread still nestled in my chest.

It's faint, but there. That fragile connection still pulses between me and her, the bond I thought I'd severed. It should be gone—burned out, stone cold—but for reasons I don't understand, it's not. It's there, flickering like the last ember in a dying fire, clinging to life.

It's my private symbol of hope. Hope that, even if I don't deserve it and the odds are not in my favor, I will somehow be able to mend the ruin I've caused.

The phone vibrates against the desk with a text.

I ignore it. If it's Cathal again, he can stew in his own self-importance for a while longer. Then it buzzes again, longer this time, a persistent hum that slices through the quiet. Reluctantly, I lean forward and flip the phone over.

Canaan.

Every muscle in my body locks.

Three days. Nothing but silence and distance. Just one short message to let me know where they stood. We're still with her. I haven't stopped thinking about those words since. I've accepted, no, braced, for the possibility that he wouldn't reach out again. That he and Rhosyn had drawn their line and decided I wasn't on the right side of it.

My thumb hovers for half a second.

Then I answer.

"Yeah?"

His sigh is the first thing I hear, the sound mirroring just how exhausted I feel. "Hey, Nick."

Unable to stay still for this conversation, I stiffly rise from the desk chair. "What's going on, Canaan? Are you both okay?" Against the instincts screaming at me, I force myself to not ask about her.

"We're good. Safe," Canaan says, his voice steady, but more subdued than I'm used to. "Everyone here in Ashvale has been welcoming. Haven't run into any issues with the Craddock Pack or the witches. Not that I really anticipated to."

No, I hadn't expected any either. Both of those groups of people made it clear where their loyalty lies. With Noa. With her well-being. By leaving with her, Rhosyn and Canaan proved the same. They all share common ground, and it's her.

Shifting to the large window that takes up most of the far wall, I drag back the heavy curtain for the first time since locking myself in this room. Late afternoon light floods in, sharp and unforgiving. My pupils shrink and burn, but I don't look away. I force myself to withstand it, to let the light cast away the shadows I've been cohabitating with.

“I’m relieved to hear it,” I say, and it’s the truth, even if the relief barely makes a dent in the dread coiled in my gut.

There’s a pause. Heavy. Awkward in a way that’s never existed between Canaan and me. That alone tells me something other than the obvious is seriously wrong.

“Listen, man...there’s something you need to know. Something we found out while staying here with her.”

My heart stutters, a painful lurch behind my ribs, like it’s trying to stall out. Every worst-case scenario hits me at once. All of them centered on Noa.

My wolf howls, his own dread a mirror image of mine.

“Is she okay?” The words are out before I can stop them, laced with every ounce of fear that’s currently eating me alive. “Fuck. I know how you feel about what I did, but just... please . Tell me she’s okay?—”

“Stop,” he snaps, sharp enough to cut through my spiral. “No, she’s not okay. I mean, yeah, she’s stopped screaming and convulsing, so I guess that’s a fucking win, but no, Nick. She’s not okay . She’s barely hanging on, but this isn’t about her. Not directly. It’s something else. Something big. And I need you to pull your shit together long enough to actually hear what I’m saying.”

I drag in a breath that feels like razor wire and broken glass. Then another. And another, until I can fake the calm I don’t feel.

“I’m listening.”

His next sentence nearly brings me to my knees. The mixture of shock and the fatigue from the past few days sucking out every ounce of strength my muscles possess.

“We found Yrsa Eklund’s daughter,” he tells me. “Sigrid. Siggy . She’s alive and she’s here with Noa.”

Chapter 21

Noa

My bones begged for sleep.

Every inch of my body ached like I'd been dragged behind a school bus and then spat on for good measure, and still, rest didn't come. Which feels like a joke at my expense considering I spent three days trying to claw my way out of unconsciousness. But last night, when I actually wanted to sleep? The bastard ran off and left me hanging. Which was rude as hell. I just laid there, staring at the ceiling, trying to make sense of everything. How quickly it all unraveled. One trip back to Fallamhain territory and suddenly the axis of my life spun in reverse.

The pounding in my skull didn't help matters, either. It had been sharp and persistent. That's what finally drove me to bed last night, putting an abrupt end to Rhosyn, Canaan, and Siggy's unexpected reunion. A fact that made me feel selfish and weak, but the awful truth was, I couldn't stay upright a second longer.

We agreed to pick things back up this morning; there was still so much to unpack, and both sides had more to say.

Having given up on the prospect of sleep an hour before sunrise, I now sit curled up in the sunroom on the back of the manor. The glassed-in space full of hanging plants and an unbelievably cozy sitting area was a favorite of Mom's. She spent almost every morning out here drinking her tea while she planned out her day or had quiet moments with our past Nightingales. Before, it's always been a space that radiates

warmth, no matter the weather, but now, huddled under two blankets and my heavy hoodie still firmly in place, I'm cold. Not in a way a heater could fix—it's the kind of cold that lives in your marrow. It's not an actual temperate issue, but a lingering effect of my still raw rejection.

Trying to ignore the ache settled deep in my bones, I let my thoughts drift to what happened last night with her .

Siggy.

Or rather, Sigrid Eklund.

A member of the Fallamhain Pack.

I didn't know. Not even an inkling. There'd been no flicker of recognition, no long-buried memory clawing its way to the surface when I met her. While I now recognized her last name as being the same as one of the long-standing council members for Merritt Fallamhain, I hadn't remembered Siggy at all from my time as part of the pack. Our seven-year age gap probably playing the biggest contributor of that.

Rhosyn and Canaan, however, had recognized her instantly.

They all stared at one another like ghosts. Like seeing Siggy alive and breathing was too much to wrap their minds around. Awe and disbelief tangled in the air, thick enough I could feel it pressing into my ribs.

It was Rhosyn who broke first, because of course it was. The beta female is fearlessly led by her gut reactions, and appears to have the emotional restraint of a windstorm. One moment she was standing behind me at the kitchen table, and the next she was flying toward Siggy, arms wide.

I winced before Siggy did. My entire body tensed on instinct, bracing for impact on the Nightingale's behalf. She's still so touch-sensitive, still flinching when I so much as brush her arm when she's not expecting it. So, when Rhosyn wrapped her up in a full-body hug, I'd braced and stopped breathing while I waited to see how Siggy would react.

She didn't move. Didn't return the gesture. Didn't even blink. She just stood there like stone, her big, blue eyes staring right over Rhosyn's shoulder—at me.

That look...

It gutted me.

Her internal battle was so painfully clear. She wanted to lean into the comfort the familiar female was so freely offering her, but the trauma she's endured has left her unwilling to accept it. To trust it. All of her unease, her discomfort, was written all over her face. And the second Rhosyn released her, Siggy moved. Not away. Not back.

Toward me.

Wordlessly, like it was the most natural thing in the world, she stepped closer and pressed her side to mine. I didn't hesitate. I reached out and took her hand, wrapping my icy fingers around hers like I'd done countless times during our days spent together. My grip wasn't tight. Just enough to say, I've got you and I'm not going anywhere.

Neither Canaan nor Rhosyn missed the move. I felt the weight of their eyes alongside the speculation and confusion. They were silently trying to figure out how Siggy and I had crossed paths, but they didn't voice their question. Yet. And for that I was grateful. Especially since that was around the time my headache really decided to

make itself known.

While everyone's attention was firmly on her—rightfully so—her sharp, worried gaze was once again locked on me.

“What happened to you?” she asked, her voice just above a whisper, as if attempting to keep this conversation just between us.

It hadn't worked, of course. We were in a room full of shifters with advanced hearing, after all.

“Sigrid. Siggy ,” Canaan said gently, his tone soft but steady, like he was afraid to spook her. “We'd really like to know what happened to you .”

Rhosyn interjected before the question could hang too long in the air, clearly sensing the tight tension winding through Siggy's frame and her fragile state. “If you're willing—or ready—to tell us, that is. We've been worried sick about you, Sig. You've been missing for over seven months. We thought...” She trailed off, throat bobbing. “We're just really happy to see you.”

I saw the moment Siggy retreated inward, Canaan's gentle question pulling her straight back into whatever hell she'd escaped. Her fingers clenched around mine and she leaned more of her weight into my side, making my fatigued muscles shake as they fought to keep both of us standing.

Broken. Dirty. Omega whore.

It was when the hateful words she'd first had running rampant in her mind the first night she came to us returned, their ugly loop cycling through my own muddled head, making my headache reach a new nausea-inducing fever pitch.

That's when I called it. Enough for one night.

Everyone agreed, reluctantly, to wait until morning to finish what had been started.

So, while I wait for the rest of the house to wake up, I sit out here, staring at nothing, locked in a quiet war with the darkness that's settled in my mind and the anguish still crawling beneath my skin, in my soul. I keep telling myself I'll learn to live with these things—like Seren said she did—but it's the vacant space in my chest that unravels me. The space where something sacred and fated should be thrumming with life. I don't know how to coexist with that kind of loss. I don't know how to breathe around it.

Canaan's cooking smells good, something warm and savory, but it's wasted on me. The plate in front of me might as well be filled with gravel with how nonexistent my appetite still is. I notice Siggy hasn't touched hers either. She sits beside me at the table, knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped tight around them like if she lets go, she'll fall apart. Her eyes are fixed straight ahead, unfocused. Somewhere else entirely.

The others don't push. Rhosyn, sitting across from her, is quiet but alert, fingers laced together on the table like she's willing her presence to be enough. Seren leans against the counter, Ivey on her hip, watching us both, no doubt filtering every emotion rolling off us in suffocating waves. I feel bad for my best friend during moments like these, when emotions, specifically negative ones, are high. I know she can block some of it out, but that's only so effective.

Canaan, he just sips his coffee and waits.

It's Siggy who finally breaks the stillness.

"It was the inlet," she says, barely above a whisper. "At the lake."

No one says a word while the omega at my side shares her story. She tells us about the inlet—how she and Carly were at a casual get-together with some of their classmates. A speaker, a few beers, nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone else decided to head back early since school was the next morning. But Carly and Siggy had just presented. Finally able to shift. They wanted to run. I can hear the ache in her voice when she says that part, like she's mourning the girls they were before it all went to hell. Everyone else had loaded up into their cars and side-by-sides but the pair had wandered farther down the lake's beach, away from any possible lingering eyes so they could shift in peace. Even though nudity wasn't a big deal among wolves, she said it still felt awkward. They were still adjusting.

Then it happened.

She doesn't explain the moment in vivid detail, but I don't need her to. I can see it in the way her hands tremble, even though they stay clenched against her legs. I can feel it in the way her voice catches when she describes hands— multiple pairs —grabbing them from behind. Carly screamed. Siggy fought, and one of her earrings was ripped out in the process. But then someone got close and whispered in her ear.

“Go to sleep, dear.”

Siggy says there was no fighting it, that darkness swept her away almost instantly. The look I share with Seren tells me we're thinking the same thing. A witch or charmer was there that night.

Siggy hugs her legs tighter to her chest, and I reach out, gently placing a hand on her back. She doesn't flinch in surprise, which feels like progress.

“I don't know how long we were out. Hours, maybe days. When I woke up, we were locked in the cages. In some kind of basement. A club.” Her voice cracks on the word, and her gaze finally flicks to mine, dull and haunted. “Not the kind with music

and drinks.”

No one breathes. No one speaks. We understand exactly what kind of club she means. The kind where omegas don’t leave. An illegal, underground sex ring. A nightmare you think only exists in whispered horror stories. Except Siggy lived it. Carly too.

Siggy’s voice may have quieted, but the shame and anger that clings to her story lingers in the air long after she’s stopped talking. And even now, as I sit beside her, the weight of it presses against my ribs like I’ve absorbed some of her pain by proximity.

Maybe I have. Maybe that’s part of being a Nightingale. They don’t just carry their own pain. We are here to take some of the weight of it for a while.

“Do you know where this club was, Siggy?” Canaan questions. From where I sit, I can practically see the gears grinding behind his eyes—calculations already forming, scenarios being built, plans taking shape. The tension in his jaw, the way his shoulders square, it’s clear he’s already thinking about how to find this place, how to burn it to the ground piece by piece. It’s comforting. And deeply, deeply intimidating.

Because this is what an Alpha is supposed to be. Unyielding in their defense of omegas. That primal drive to protect, to shield, it’s built into their bones. Which is why it’s so disturbing, so enraging, that some of them ignore that instinct completely. That they use that power not to protect, but to hurt. To exploit.

And it’s just becoming more common as the omega population continues to regress.

“South. I think it might have been close to northern Nevada, but I can’t be sure,” Siggy tells him.

Rhosyn shifts in her seat, looking nervous to speak the question that’s clearly on her

mind. Probably on all our minds. “Honey, can you tell us how you were able to get out of there?”

For the first time since she began speaking, Siggy’s voice cracks, her big blue eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “It was another omega,” she rasps, barely getting the words out. “I don’t even know her name. But she’s the one who got us out.”

Siggy tells us about the omega who risked everything to get the pair of Fallamhain omegas out that nightmare. Her eyes turn into haunted orbs as she recounts the way the omega, who was probably a good ten years older than the girls, had appeared to have had the life syphoned out of her. Whatever will to live she’d once had was stolen by the monsters who kept her at their mercy for Goddess knows how long. Siggy thinks that emptiness, that absence of hope, was what gave her the courage to act. With nothing left to lose, the woman found a way to unlock their cages and open the back exit of the warehouse where they were being held—where the “club” operated.

“She opened the door and told us which direction to run,” Siggy says, her voice thin and trembling. “We could already hear the commotion below, they knew we were gone.” Her eyes glisten, glassy and distant, and I’m not sure she’s really seeing any of us anymore. “She didn’t say your name, Noa, but she told us about your sanctuary. Said if we made it to Ashvale, we’d be safe. ‘Just get there,’ she said. ‘Run like hell.’” Siggy swallows hard, her voice cracking. “Then she turned and went back inside, back toward them. We heard her scream.” Her breath shudders. “She sacrificed herself to give us time.”

Before Siggy continues her harrowing tale, Rhosyn and Canaan both shoot me a pointed look—the question clear in their expressions, a question they’ve likely been holding on to since Siggy walked into the kitchen last night. Why Ashvale? Why me?

In the briefest summary possible, Seren and I explain the basics of the Nightingale

program. We keep it simple, leaving out critical details—especially about the witches' involvement—because even though we trust them, some secrets must remain ours alone. The less people who know about our security, the safer everyone stays.

Satisfied enough by our vague explanation for now, Rhosyn and Canaan ease back, and I gently encourage Siggy to continue.

“Carly started to fall behind,” Siggy whispers, the words shaky and frayed at the edges. “They were...harder on her. I think it’s because she never stopped fighting. Even after everything. Even after being held there, used like she was...she still fought them.”

My stomach rolls with nausea.

For two days, Siggy and Carly had run in their wolf forms. They hardly stopped, didn’t eat anything. Siggy keeps reiterating how they both weren’t willing to give up. They just wanted to live. They wanted to come home.

“We were close to a river when they caught up,” she goes on. “I thought if we made it to the water, we could use it to lose our scent. I got there first, and I was panicking, so exhausted I couldn’t see straight. I slipped.” Her voice cracks. “The cold shocked me into shifting back, and when I came up for air, she wasn’t with me. I looked back through the spray...and I saw her. She was still on the bank.”

Siggy blinks, tears cascading down her pale face.

“They grabbed her. And I couldn’t help. I couldn’t get back to her. The current was too strong, and I was too weak. It just...took me.”

Miles away from where she’d fallen into the river, Siggy woke up on a bank. Naked, freezing, and alone. That’s where the “mean ol’ crone,” as she called her, found her.

According to Siggy, the witch wasn't actually mean, just grouchy and sharp-tongued in a way that made you think twice before pushing your luck.

She lived alone in a one-room cabin and gave Siggy shelter for the night. A warm bed, food, clothes. She even knew about us. About the Nightingale program. That detail alone made my heart stutter, pride blooming sharp and sudden in my chest. Because it proved what Zora had told me—that my mom's network was far-reaching. That somehow, through her efforts, word of our sanctuary had made it to witches in the remote outskirts of nowhere. She did that. She built this.

"The crone was going into the nearest town the next morning and offered to take me," Siggy explains, quiet and full of guilt. "Said that was as far as she could get me. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave without Carly. But I knew there was nothing I could do for her. Not anymore."

That kind of decision—leaving someone you love behind—it's the kind of wound that carves deep. It'll take time for her to accept that she made the right choice. That surviving was the brave thing. The necessary thing.

"She had one of those ancient phones. You know, the ones without a touch screen," Siggy adds, a ghost of a smile tugging at her lips at this specific detail. "And the town was so remote the signal barely worked. But she told me to try the number anyway. I did. I heard you answer, Noa. I tried to talk but you couldn't hear me. Then the call dropped."

After that, she left. Alone. For days, she made her way here. She notes how it became harder and harder to stay in wolf form, like her body just didn't have enough left to give. She walked on bare feet, stumbling through the forest a lot of the remaining way.

"I kept tripping," she murmurs. "Branches, rocks...I think that's how I broke my

fingers.”

Images of her rough shape when she’d first arrived here replay in my mind and my heart breaks all over again as they do. But now, knowing what she endured to make it here, that heartbreak is tangled with awe. She clawed her way through hell to reach us. Survived things no one should have to. I don’t think she realizes how resilient she is yet, how brave. But we’ll remind her. Every damn day if we have to.

Head lifting, she slowly looks at each of us in the room, and then, with a tremble in her lip and tears shining in her already glassy eyes, she whispers, “I don’t know how, but I know in my heart that Carly didn’t make it. I know she’s dead. My wolf knows it too.”

Her admission sits heavy in the air.

It’s the way Canaan shifts where he stands, deliberately placing his now empty coffee mug on the counter, like he’s stalling for a few extra seconds to gather himself, that tells me whatever he’s about to say is going to destroy her.

Across the table, Rhosyn shifts her weight, eyes fixed on her folded hands as her throat works around a thick swallow.

“Siggy, there’s something we need to tell you,” he starts, “it’s about Carly.”

Chapter 22

Noa

O ur Nightingale needed time alone in her nest after learning about her best friend. Not that any of us could blame her. If I'd found out Seren had been discarded, left bloodied and broken, I don't think I'd be able to get out of bed for a month. Minimum.

Edie had come over to take Ivey as well, leaving Seren and I alone with the Fallamhain Pack's mated pair. A heavy silence we all knew wouldn't last long fell over us as everyone worked to clean up after breakfast. I'd tried to get up and help, but one sharp look from Seren had me plunking my tired, aching ass right back down. No words, just that stare that told me if I even thought about moving, she'd tackle me. It made me inwardly wince for teenage Ivey.

At some point, Canaan quietly placed a protein shake in front of me. We don't keep them in the fridge, so I knew right away he'd bought it specifically for me. It was a gesture that made something deep in me soften, a flicker of warmth in the cold ache that hadn't let up since the clearing. Some quiet, instinctive part of me stirred, tickled pink by the idea of being cared for by an alpha. Even if he isn't my alpha.

He even poured it over ice and stuck a pink bendy straw in it, like that would magically make the chalky sludge more appealing. It was sweet. Almost endearing. But one sip told me it was a lost cause. The second the thick, chocolate-flavored liquid hit my tongue, my throat closed up like it was protesting the entire idea.

Nice try, though, buddy.

Now, his hazel eyes are equal parts sad and concerned when he catches me nudging the full glass of protein shake farther away from me on the antique kitchen table.

“This won’t be sustainable much longer, Noa,” Canaan says quietly, finishing the last of the breakfast cleanup. In a way that feels painfully domestic, he tosses a striped dish towel over his broad shoulder and comes to sit across from me.

“I know,” I admit, my voice small. The truth tastes worse than the shake.

Rhosyn brushes past him, giving his arm a gentle nudge as she drops into the chair beside him. “Give her a break,” she says. “It’s only been a couple days. She needs time to adjust from the...from what Rennick did.”

The way she not-so-gracefully stumbles over the word “rejection” isn’t something that goes unmissed. By me, or Seren, from across the room, another damn cup of tea in her hand, no doubt intended for me. My best friend rolls her eyes.

“There’s no reason to pussyfoot around it,” Seren says as she strides over and places the tea beside the untouched shake. My nose crinkles as the peppermint and lemon scent hits me. Emotional distress reliever, my ass. I might have to do some rebranding. “Rennick rejected her. It was cruel. A top-tier dick move. But it’s done. Now we need to focus on making sure Noa heals from the fallout. And she will. She’s going to get through this.”

Goddess, how I want to believe her. I want to wrap myself in Seren’s unwavering belief, let it stitch me back together from the inside out. Borrow her strength until I remember what it feels like to have my own. Because today, I’ve been faking it. Hiding the winces. Swallowing the whimpers clawing at my throat. I’ve been sitting here pretending I’m surviving, putting on a brave face, all the while I can feel it

growing. The rot stems from the vacancy he tore into my chest. The bond he severed left an invisible wound, wide open and festering. And the infection is spreading. I can feel it—this slow, merciless deterioration—and I still have no idea how to stop it.

What could possibly cure something like this? I've spent years learning the art of healing, but how do you treat an injury you can't see? There isn't a salve or antibiotic that can treat a wound that is soul-deep.

And that terrifying realization leaves me staring across the table at my best friend, wondering how the hell she's still standing. How she made it through her own rejection over a year ago. How she smiles. How she thrives.

Was her rejection that different from mine?

"Speaking of Rennick." I can't help but flinch at the way she so easily throws his name around. I can't recall if I've had the strength to say his name aloud since I woke up from my...episode. "We never finished our conversation of why he rejected her. We were in the middle of it last night when Siggy walked in and we took that much-needed but depressing little detour."

Canaan's words from last night resurface, their weight settling heavier now that the truth about Siggy—and poor Carly—has been laid bare.

"He thinks he's doing right by his pack."

The same bitterness and disappointment I saw on both of their faces when we last spoke about their Alpha's betrothal returns. Rhosyn's usually bouncy curls seem to deflate whenever Talis McNamara is mentioned, as if even her hair can't pretend through the bullshit.

"Yeah..." she says with a heavy sigh as she props her head up with her fist on the

table. “The man’s heart is in the right place, but he’s too blinded by duty or guilt or...whatever the hell else is clouding his judgment to see what an idiot he’s being.”

My mind is still fighting with one hand tied behind its proverbial back, but the pieces begin to fall into place anyway, one miserable domino at a time. The way he looked at me with poorly concealed remorse and nausea-inducing guilt while simultaneously his unspoken, mental plea— Forgive me, sweet Noa. Please. Forgive me— plagued me is something I’ll ever forget, but I think I now understand why.

“It’s the omegas,” I murmur, my voice steadier than it’s been since I woke up soaked in sweat and pain. “More than just Siggy and Carly have gone missing, haven’t they?”

They don’t answer right away, but they don’t have to.

With the work I’ve dedicated my life to, I’m well aware of the rise in missing omegas. It’s something we’ve been tracking closely—us here at the sanctuary, the witches, and the pack of she-wolves. And the fact that most of the missing population is originating from the states that share borders with Idaho is also something we’re acutely aware of.

It never occurred to me that my birth pack’s omegas would have been targeted. Which, in hindsight, is naive—maybe even foolish—but I think it just proves how deeply I conditioned myself, in the name of survival, to stop thinking about Fallamhain altogether.

It’s Canaan who confirms my suspicions with a grave incline of his chin. “Yeah, they have.”

Seven.

That's how many omegas Canaan and Rhosyn say have gone missing from Pack Fallamhain in the past year. All presumed kidnapped. Trafficked. My stomach turns as I absorb the weight of that number, which includes both Siggy and Carly, and the horror behind it, but what has me swallow back bile is when they tell me about Cathal McNamara's offer for an alliance. And how he dangled the promise of additional guards to patrol the Fallamhain borders like a lifeline, knowing Rennick was desperate enough to take it. But it's the next part that knocks the air out of me. The condition. Rennick had to agree to take Talis as his mate in exchange for McNamara's help. And fuck, it makes sense. I remember the way Merritt Fallamhain and Cathal pushed their kids together during those exasperating visits. It was obvious, even then to my adolescent brain, they wanted their children mated—to tie their packs together permanently. But the plan went to shit when Talis presented as a beta. And everyone knows—whether they admit it or not—that alphas only take omegas as Lunas if they want to preserve the bloodline. Omegas birth heirs. Betas don't. That made Talis worthless. Until now. Until her father found a way to make her valuable, by exploiting dead girls and desperate measures.

“And Rennick agreed to this?” The question flies out of me, like if I don't say it quickly, I'll choke on it. My mouth floods, warning me too late that the nausea isn't a creeping possibility, it's surging. I press my lips together hard, trying to swallow it down, but my body's already decided this is too much. I'm not going to win this one.

Even if I were at full strength and my legs could carry me there without screaming their complaint, I wouldn't have made it to the powder room down the hall. It's crude and humiliating, but all I can do is shove back in my chair and put my head between my knees. Seren moves fast, but not fast enough to gather my hair away from my face. Her hands have just barely landed on my distraught body when my painfully empty stomach heaves and expels nothing but bile onto the hardwood floors at my feet.

The sad truth is, I think it would've been easier if he'd rejected me because he was in

love with someone else. Love is irrational, all-consuming. A beast that doesn't answer to logic. If that had been the reason—if his heart had truly belonged to Talis—I think, eventually, I could've accepted it. Could've mourned what we were supposed to be and found peace knowing that, fated or not, his soul had already chosen someone else.

But this?

This is harder.

Because he didn't walk away from me out of lack of want or because he didn't feel the unmistakable connection between us.

Rennick rejected me because he felt he had no other choice. No other option but to sacrifice himself, and me , for the lives of his omegas. And that's how I know the universe has a twisted sense of humor, because, somehow, we've both dedicated ourselves to the same fight. Devoted to the same cause. A cause that, in another lifetime, we might've stood side by side for. We could've battled it together, but instead, here we are, sacrificing each other in its name.

Something that's happening because he never bothered to have a single conversation with me before making this decision for us both. If I'd known, I may have been able to help him, but now we'll never know because he took that possibility away.

And the worst part? I don't have it in me to hate him, not because I don't want to, but because I can't .

The strength I have left is spent just trying to breathe. Just staying upright feels like a battle I'm losing by the second. I don't have the energy to spare to hate him. Not even a flicker of it. And Goddess, I wish I did. I wish I could scream, rage, let the fire of betrayal burn through me until it sears the ache clean out of my chest. Because that

would be easier than this. So much easier than this slow, gnawing pain that never lets up. And after what he did in the clearing, after what he said—after what he let her say to me, and how he stood by and let her humiliate me—hating him should be easy. Second nature. But I’m too fucking tired. The marrow-deep exhaustion left behind by his rejection has stripped me bare, drained every last spark from my body until there’s nothing but the weight of what’s missing pressing down on me.

In his mission to save his omegas, he ripped me apart and then left me lying there with integral pieces missing.

And if I’m honest with myself, a part of me understands and that only makes this harder.

Because being able to understand his reasoning, to sympathize with it, doesn’t make the hurt go away. If anything, it just makes the pain sharper—heavier—because now I’m carrying our heartbreak for the both of us.

“Seren,” I choke.

“I’m here, Noa,” she reassures me instantly, the hand that doesn’t have my hair gathered in it glides down my spine in a soothing manner. “I’ve got you.”

“I’m going to pass out.” I’m slurring my words now, but I feel it’s only fair I warn her. “Don’t you dare...take my pain while I’m...out.”

I can’t be sure of what happens next because the darkness stirring at the corners of my vision consumes me.

I wake to the all-too-familiar, awful throb behind my eyes.

For a split second, I forget where I am—or how I got here—until the dull ache in my

chest reminds me. Right . Kitchen floor. Puking bile. Falling apart. Again. Awesome ...

The attic ceiling I know well stares back, and I blink against the fog clouding my vision. My mouth tastes like death. Everything hurts, but it's not the same sharp pain from before, it's deeper now, a worn-in ache that settles into my bones like it belongs there. Like my body's finally too tired to protest and has slumped into quiet, miserable acceptance.

Déjà vu hits me hard. I've done this before. Forced myself out of bed when my muscles are protesting the very thought of holding weight and my head is swimming with dizziness, both things threatening to knock me back on my ass as I shuffle toward the bathroom with a steadying hand on the wall.

It's the same as it was when I woke up yesterday, but now I'm not drowning in the question of , Why? I know exactly what pushed him into reaching into my chest and yanking out a piece of my soul.

And somehow, the knowledge just makes everything worse.

I manage to take care of things quickly on the toilet before moving to the vanity to wash my hands and brush my teeth. I'm standing with my palms pressed to the cool marble countertop, waiting for a new wave of nausea to subside long enough that I can lift my head.

When I finally do, I wish I hadn't.

Somehow, I look worse than I did last night. Which, frankly, I didn't think was possible, but yikes . My skin is pale—gray—and my eyes, a feature that has always stood out on my face, are dull and full of barely-concealed anguish. The dark circles below them are nothing but puffy bruises. The strands of my long, dark hair, usually

something I can count on looking decent thanks to Mom's epic hair genes, are tangled and knotted.

Grimacing, I turn on the tap and quickly wash my hands and scrub the foulness out of my mouth before moving on to washing my face with trembling fingers. Out of bed for no longer than ten minutes, and already, my fatigue is setting in. Canaan is right about the food thing. I'm going to have to find a way to push through this new aversion because dehydration and the mild case of starvation I have going on right now is not sustainable. Not if I want to keep fighting my way through this.

And I do want to do that, right? Yeah, of course I do.

I think?

I'm almost finished rinsing out the small amount of shampoo I used, when I feel it. Someone behind me. Heart tripping over itself and against my rib cage, I spin around, hands still tangled in my hair.

"Shit, Siggy!" My raspy shout bounces off the subway tiling of my bathroom.

The young omega stands just outside the doorway, red-rimmed eyes and messy braid making her look as worn down as I feel. Her expression is soft, but there's weight behind it. A weight I'm not sure will ever fully ease now that I know the full extent of what she's survived for the past seven months. Trauma, of any degree, doesn't just vanish. It leaves a scar that we can't erase with time or a really good therapist. It lingers. You don't get rid of it, or simply move on from it, it's something you learn to carry. You learn how to navigate around it while you simultaneously relearn how to live your new normal.

"Sorry!" She offers me a quick smile before looking over her shoulder, and says with a casualness that sounds forced to my ears, "So this is your nest?"

“I don’t have a nest,” I answer automatically as I get the last of the soap residue off my face. Reaching for the small hand towel I keep folded next to the sink, I use it to dab my skin dry.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I herd us farther into my room. The late afternoon sun streaming through the big windows tells me how I’d been knocked out for a good chunk of the day. You’d think that would mean I feel more rested, stronger, but I’m starting to learn that sleep can’t fix this soul-deep exhaustion.

Watching me rummage through my closet, Siggy waves me off like she anticipated my quick, knee-jerk denial. “You’re an omega, Noa. You even smell like one now.”

This makes me blink and stare numbly into the hanging clothes in front of me. Robotically, I grab a fresh sweatshirt, this one a dark gray that definitely doesn’t remind me of anyone’s specific eye color, before turning around to face the Nightingale.

I don’t need a mirror to know that confusion is written so glaringly across my face that it might as well be a neon sign. Siggy’s wheat-colored brows lift with a quiet question.

“What? No one told you?” she asks. “Your scent’s changed. When I first met you, you didn’t even smell like a wolf, but you do now. I picked up on it last night, too. You’ve always smelled sweet, sugary, but now there’s something else layered under it. That distinct omega sweetness.”

She’s right. Omegas do smell sweet. But it’s not a sweetness you can easily place, like caramel or berries. It’s its own thing entirely. Unique. Unmistakable. Innate. The kind of scent that settles into your senses and whispers, Omega .

I don’t say anything. Just wordlessly replace my stale, hoodie with my new

sweatshirt. When I'm done, hands smoothing out my now staticky hair, I finally tell her, "I don't understand why that'd be."

She shrugs, her narrow shoulders bunching up in her own three-sizes-too-big sweater. An omega will sacrifice fashion for comfort every single time and I learned quickly that there is nothing Siggy loves more than soft, oversized clothes. One day, when she finds her mate, I have no doubt that she'll have a field day stealing their clothes for herself.

"It's probably because you met your mate." She offers this answer so painfully casually, I find myself flinching. "An omega coming into contact with their scent match does all kinds of crazy shit to their bodies. Hormones are wild." When she looks away from the window that's grabbed her attention mid-conversation, she turns back to me and offers a sympathetic smile that makes a pit form in my stomach. "Seren and Rosie told me what happened. With Rennick. Don't worry, they weren't gossiping or anything like that, but when I came back upstairs to find you, they told me you'd passed out and were up here momentarily dead to the world. I kinda...freaked out on them. Again ." Her button nose wrinkles as she cringes with guilt.

"I'm fine," I say automatically, and as I shuffle across the room and collapse onto my bed, I wonder, just for a second, if repeating "I'm fine" enough times might actually convince my brain and body to believe it. Wishful thinking, clearly, because my muscles tremble with effort as I try to shift into something resembling comfort on my oatmeal-colored bedding. It smells like fresh detergent, because of course it does. Seren strikes again. Somehow, in the middle of everything, she managed to wash my sheets. She really is superhuman, because how the hell did she manage this domestic sorcery? Either way, it proves just how far from fine I am, because "fine" people don't need other people to wash their freaking sheets.

Siggy appears to not believe my little fib either because she gives me a look reeking

of skepticism. She hesitates at the edge of the room, uncertain, and clearly trying to show proper omega etiquette by not intruding on my space. Like I've told her, this isn't my nest. She doesn't need to ask to come closer. I pat the spot beside me and give her a tired nod. She crosses the room and sinks down, keeping her movements careful and slow.

"You're not fine, Noa. Seren told me about the rejected mate syndrome."

The words clang in my ears.

Rejected mate syndrome.

I've heard the phrase before. Who hasn't? It always sounded like one of those exaggerated warnings thrown around by overdramatic shifters. Like when people say heartache caused by a bad breakup feels like dying and you laugh because it's dramatic, not because you think it's true.

But this? This isn't some tragic breakup sob story.

This is rot. A slow decay.

This is what it feels like to be severed from someone you were created for.

For someone who's spent so much time around omegas, it's embarrassing how out of the loop I was on this—on the process of rejecting a mate at all. Like I said, it's so rarely done that no one really talks about it. And when they do, it's in hushed tones, like saying too much might summon it into your own life. Honestly, it feels like a taboo. A quiet, unspoken rule: don't name the nightmare unless you're ready to live it.

Way to pay attention to the important shit, Noa.

I guess while I've been focused on other things—like scrambling for a perch that resembles a will to live—I've been officially diagnosed by those around me.

Rejected mate syndrome.

“All right,” I relent with a burning throat. “So, I’m not fine right now , but I have every intention of being fine sometime soon.” It’s a shaky promise at best, I don’t know if I believe it myself, but I say it anyway. Siggy chose me as her person, and I can’t let her think I’m going to fade away on her now, even though internally, I know it’s a distinct possibility. “Enough about me. You obviously came up here for a reason. What’s on your mind?”

Her smile wavers but she still tries her best to appear as lighthearted as possible. Even attempts to tease me by asking, “What? You can’t read my mind?”

I try my best to match her energy, rolling my eyes and chuckling softly, both things that make various parts of me hurt, but I refuse to show it. “Yeah, I’m still working on understanding that newly developed skill. Seems it comes and goes.”

“And it’s another thing that’s changed since reuniting with Rennick,” she reminds me with a pointed look.

Mom’s words from that cryptic dream—the one I haven’t had the time or the nerve to fully unpack—echo in my mind again.

“Reuniting with him is the first step. He’s the key to opening the door.”

It’s the way that dream lingers that gets me. Every second of it is carved into my memory like it was branded there. And that alone makes me think it wasn’t just some grief-fueled fever dream or my subconscious throwing shit at the wall. No, this felt like a message. A carefully woven thread planted by Mom. Something meant to be

found when the time was right.

Zora told me when I met her, in her frustratingly vague way, that Mom had a plan for everything. Perhaps this was one of them?

If that's true, and if what Rennick said, that Mom was behind my severed connection with my wolf, is also true, then what the fuck was she planning?

Why would she do that to me? Me . Her daughter.

The bitter truth? Of all the powerful people I've crossed paths with over the years, Thalassa Alderwood is the only one who could've actually pulled something like that off.

And I hate how much that makes sense.

And really fucking doesn't at the same time.

Shit, my brain hurts .

"Noa?"

"I'm here," I tell Siggy, my voice still thick with that far-away quality. "Just taking the scenic route to my downward spiral, that's all." With a sound I can't be sure is a sigh or groan, I pull myself together and turn my head to look at the omega curled up on the other side of my queen mattress. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

Deep blue eyes lock with mine, a mixture of anxiety and guilt shining back. "There's a couple reasons I didn't just go home after I escaped," she says, voice low like she's afraid someone will overhear her. "Part of it was shame. I don't want to see the look on my mom's face when she realizes I'm not the same daughter she lost seven

months ago.”

She pauses, glancing down at her hands like they hold the rest of her confession.

“Another reason was I no longer feel safe there. It’s the only home I’ve ever known, I was born there, but I was also taken from there. I don’t know how I can ever go back there and be at peace like I once was. It’s tainted now.”

She’s not looking for reassuring words right now, only a listening ear, and that’s what I give her.

“I get it,” I offer.

“But the biggest reason I didn’t go back...” Her voice wobbles. “I was ashamed to return home alive. Changed. Kind of broken. But breathing. And have to tell Carly’s mom that I left her behind. That I didn’t go back for her.”

Again, my gut response is to argue. To tell her she isn’t being fair to herself and reassure her that she did the right thing. Carly’s mom will see that, too, but I stay quiet and let her get whatever this is off her chest. I have an inkling of where it’s going and my own anxiety is spiking at the very notion of it, but still, I stay quiet.

“But?”

“But...” Her straight teeth gnaw on her bottom lip for a second before she admits with tears forming, “But Carly’s already home. For good or bad, we no longer have to wonder anymore. I don’t have to tell her mom I don’t know what happened to her after I got away and she didn’t. We know. I wish we didn’t, but we do. Canaan said they already had her funeral and pyre, but she has a headstone there and I need to go say goodbye. And that I’m sorry.” Siggy’s tears finally fall as she adds on a choked-back sob, “I also really want to see my mom.”

I reach out and gather her hand in mine. “Are you saying you’re ready to go back, Sig?”

Her head shakes immediately. “Not move back. Not yet. I’m not ready for that. I’m not ready to leave here. I don’t know if I ever will be. I feel...safe here. With you; with Seren.”

“You can stay here as long as you want, love, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know,” she agrees, returning my hand squeeze in a silent sign of gratitude. “I’m not ready to move home, but I think...I think I’m ready to visit.”

It’s a huge step. One I’m so fucking proud of her for.

“Okay,” I nod, “Rhosyn and Canaan are probably heading back soon. You could tag along?—”

“No!” The terrified edge of her voice has my heart lurching in my chest and my head zinging, the abrupt change in octave making my headache flare. Wincing, I force my stiff frame to sit up a little so I can get a better look at the now panicked-stricken omega. “I can’t...I can’t do this without you there. I know it’s unfair to even ask you to go back there after what happened with Rennick, but I won’t be able to face being back there without you.”

Of all the omegas I’ve helped, of all the times I’ve thrown myself into someone else’s healing, I’ve never regretted it. Not even when I got clocked in the jaw by an omega mid-night terror.

But right now? As her tear-filled eyes plead with me to walk back into the very territory that shattered me?

Right now, the part of me that's barely holding on—the selfish, trembling part clawing for any kind of self-preservation—is screaming in regret.

And worse?

It's screaming yes anyway.

Because, like Rennick, I'm willing to put the well-being of the omegas in my care above everything else. Above my own sanity and, apparently, above the still bleeding mess that used to be my heart.

“All right, Siggy,” I say, the words landing like a nail in my coffin—which is fitting, really, since I'm pretty sure I'm already halfway to death's door. “Go find Canaan. He'll need to give your Alpha a heads-up. I don't think showing up there unannounced is an option for us.”

Hell, for all I know, they'll slam the gates in my face.

And a large part of me thinks that might be a mercy because I don't know how I'm going to survive being in Rennick's territory again, let alone facing him head-on. Not when the last time nearly killed me. But Siggy needs me. So, for her, I'll show up, even if it destroys what little remains of my...everything.

Chapter 23

Rennick

My knuckles whiten on the steering wheel, my pulse pounding in my ears as the road ahead blurs from more than just speed.

Ever since Canaan's call yesterday, I've been living in the space that exists between relief and dread.

Seven months, seven torturously long months Siggy has been missing, enduring fuck knows what. My second wouldn't offer details when I'd pressed for them, but the rough, clipped way he spoke told me enough. Whatever hell she escaped, it left scars deeper than anyone should bear. Let alone someone her age.

But it's not just Siggy I'm driving—well above the legal speed limit—toward.

It's Noa.

The weight of that name alone has my stomach flipping. Guilt coils tighter in my chest, a constant companion these past handful days, but this, the idea of seeing her again, is something else entirely. I tore her apart. Watched her collapse and did nothing to catch her. And now I must stand before Noa again, an executioner before his victim, and pretend I deserve to still breathe the same air as her.

At the thought of her, my wolf snarls, a low, warning rumble deep within. Instantly, he curls tighter around that precious, barely-there thread. The remnant of the bond I

thought I'd destroyed in its entirety. He's fiercely protective of it, and of her. Even now, he won't come near me, won't grant me control or let me shift, his anger a constant punishment, but he's dedicated every ounce of his strength to guarding that tiny piece of her left inside me.

I want to tell him I'll fix it. That I'll never hurt her again. That I'd rip myself to pieces and gift them to her as a peace offering if it meant undoing what I did. But he doesn't trust me or my promises anymore, and, honestly, I don't blame him.

Outside, the late morning sky darkens further, heavy gray clouds swirling angrily overhead. We've had snow already this year, but the crisp bite in the air and the scent of frost warns me that the worst is yet to come. Winter in Northern Idaho is unforgiving, brutal, and somehow fitting. A harsh winter to match the cold desolation in my soul.

Canaan had requested that we first meet outside of our pack's territory, emphasizing that it would be better for everyone involved that we meet on neutral land first. It was his not-so-subtle way of reminding me that Noa's wishes were woven into this decision as much as Siggy's were. My second had also boldly demanded that I not bring any additional guests along for this rendezvous. His unspoken words were glaring.

In case you didn't learn your lesson from last time, don't you fucking dare think about bringing Talis with you.

While I understood and respected him silently for demanding that of me, I still bristled at the implication. But the truth is, I couldn't fault him for it—not when nothing I've done this week has given him any reason to believe otherwise. He doesn't know yet that I've made my decision. That in the wreckage I've created, I finally see the path he's been urging me toward for months. I only pray I haven't seen it too late...that there's still time to salvage what I've broken.

When I'd tried to learn what Noa's involvement was in Siggy's rescue and why she was going to be part of this reunification, Canaan had only said, "It's Siggy's call." No further explanation offered. Just that. Whatever his reasons for withholding that information, it gnaws at me, leaving a bitter taste on my tongue.

My mind tumbles through theory after theory, some more outlandish and painful than others. But the darkest one, the twisted notion that Noa had any involvement in Siggy's initial abduction, is one I dismiss immediately, vehemently. She may have been raised by Thalassa Alderwood, a woman whose legacy is tainted by her unthinkable choices, but Noa is good. Too good for this world. With one look at her, you know she's nothing but a pure heart. She would never willingly partake in the abuse of omegas.

Which leaves me pondering her connection to Siggy as I glance down at the dashboard clock. Ten minutes out. My pulse thuds even harder at the realization that I'm about to reunite Yrsa Eklund with her daughter—something I never thought I'd get to do. Especially after Carly was returned to us as she was. Guilt seeps in, remembering I left the pack's territory half an hour ago without telling anyone, including Yrsa, where I was headed or why. It's selfish, bordering on cruel, but there's a bitter, cynical part of me, a part that believes every damn thing I touch lately turns to dust, that couldn't bear to give Yrsa false hope. Not until I have Siggy safe, breathing, and alive in front of me.

Because I don't think I can handle hearing the hopeless and devastating screams only a mother is capable of so soon after Carly's mom filled the forest with her symphony of sorrow.

I can't handle letting down another person I was meant to protect.

With a sigh that sounds painfully exhausted even to my own ears, I remind myself that with Canaan and Rhosyn back, we can develop a real plan—a plan that doesn't

rely on McNamara and his damn ultimatums. And if the remaining thread in my chest, the one that seems to shine brighter with every mile I close between us, truly means what I hope it does...then maybe there's still a chance. A way to fix what I broke. A way to find my way back to Noa.

This line of thinking might teeter dangerously close to delusion, but it's all I've got. The only thing keeping me upright, keeping me fighting. Because without her—without Noa as part of me—none of this means a damn thing. There's no point to any of it. A truth I learned excruciatingly too late.

Taking the winding, one-lane dirt road that leads to the overlook, I guide my black GMC Sierra over the familiar bumps and sharp turns, muscle memory doing most of the work. The spot Canaan picked for this meeting wasn't random. It's a place I've returned to again and again over the years, especially when I needed a moment alone, a moment where I could just be and no one was watching my every move as the "Alpha heir". It also became my haven when I'd come home from college for breaks, and being back with my pack didn't feel like it once did. It felt off and I could never figure out why. The overlook is close enough to our territory that I could drive back quickly if I were summoned by Dad unexpectedly but more often than not, I ran here in my wolf form. It's rare we shift and roam in our other forms outside of the boundary of our territory, but this was an exception for me. I ran here many mornings when it was still dark out and I would get here just in time to watch the sun rise.

I pull into the small gravel parking area beside the overlook and turn off the car. The growl of the engine fades, but the dread in my chest doesn't. I'm parked a few feet from one of the most stunning views in the Selkirk Mountains. Pine trees decorate the slopes and snow-covered granite peaks stretch majestically into the distance, but I don't see any of it.

It's not the view I'm here for, it's not what has captivated my attention.

The two figures are huddled together atop a battered old picnic table.

Twenty feet away, and I already know everything has changed.

Siggy's smaller than I remember. Not physically, though I have no doubt she's lost weight, but it's as if something in her spirit has shriveled. She doesn't look anything like the sharp-tongued, blue-fire-eyed omega I remember trailing after Yrsa around the pack house. The young woman that thrived when bathed in attention. Any kind. She wasn't particular. Now, she shifts, folding into herself beside Noa like she's trying to take up as little space as possible. Physically, she doesn't seem to bear any wounds, but that means jack shit when her emotional wounds are letting themselves be known with the haunted look across her too thin face. I have to remind myself to be thankful that she's breathing, and that's all Yrsa is going to care about when she gets her daughter back in her arms.

And if that doesn't gut me, it's the woman sitting beside her that nearly takes me to my knees.

Noa.

It's been five days. Just five. That's how long it's been since I last laid my eyes on her, but she looks as if she's lived through a lifetime of hell in that short amount of time. She's got her knees drawn in, arms wrapped tight around herself, her espresso hair hanging around her face like a curtain. Or maybe it's armor. She doesn't lift her head. Doesn't shrink. Doesn't acknowledge me. But I know she hears me. My truck's engine would have given away my arrival minutes ago.

She's shivering, even under that thick gray hoodie. The parts of her hands visible from the bottom of her long sleeves tremble from something more than just the chill in the wind. And still, her entire focus is on Siggy, like she's holding her together with sheer will alone.

Siggy equally deserves my attention, and she'll get it fully, but for a minute, I just allow the cascading and suffocating remorse to wash over me as I catalog every detail I can make out.

My wolf, who's spent the last few days keeping his distance, guarding the fragile thread, finally shifts. I feel him rise inside me, a low, desperate sound curling in his chest like a growl coexisting with grief. For the first time in days, he doesn't curl tighter around the bond. Instead, he nudges me toward her. Urges me forward.

Go to her. Fix this.

My steps are stiff, slow. Every movement deliberate. I don't want to spook her—either one of them. The tension in her shoulders increases with every crunch of dirt and rocks below my boots, but still, she won't look at me. Her eyes stay locked on Siggy, scanning her like she's memorizing every twitch, every shift. Like she's bracing for the girl to fall apart again and wants to be ready when she does.

Her scent is carried to me by the wind. The brown sugar and spiced fig scent, unmistakably her, is tainted, twisted with something metallic. Noa is trying so fucking hard to conceal it, going as far as to not grant me access to her eyes, but her scent gives her away. Fear. My mate is afraid. Of me. The guilt claws up my throat like bile because it's not as if I haven't earned this reaction from her. Every inch of caution now ingrained into her bones, I put it there.

But it's the subtle thread beneath the fear, the note nearly lost under the acrid bite of panic, that has my wolf going still then rising. Alert. Omega .

Noa smells like an omega.

My omega.

When did that happen?

Ten feet away, a wall rises in front of me. Canaan, posture tight, broad frame blocking the path like a gate that won't open unless you're deemed worthy. His mate flanks him and together they form a shield.

Canaan's voice is calm, but there's a weight behind it. "Nick."

His eyes meet mine, and I read the question in them instantly. Are you a threat?

I want to be furious. I want to bristle at the implication. But what have I done lately to prove I'm not? So instead of giving in to the emotion that's nothing more than a reflex, I just shake my head once.

"I'm going to fix it." My voice scrapes as it leaves me, hoarse with too many days of silence and too little sleep. I mean every word, though. I let it show. Whatever they see in my face must be enough, because after a shared glance, they step aside.

I walk past.

Siggy looks up when I approach, and the combination of relief and distrust warring in her big blue eyes is heartbreaking. She wants to trust me like she once did, but she can't. Not yet. That's okay, though. I will find a way to earn it again. Starting with finding a way to ensure that she's safe in her own fucking home. It's such a basic necessity that as an Alpha I'm meant to provide her, but a thing I've already failed her on. At a cataclysmal level.

Never again.

"Hi, Alpha," she offers, voice quiet but steady.

Dropping into a nonthreatening squat in front of the table, I make myself small enough that Siggy has to look down to meet my eyes.

As shifters, our predestined designations govern our place in the social order. Omegas, with their naturally submissive instincts, are wired to show deference to alphas. Eye contact is one of the clearest tells. Most alphas take it as a challenge. She tries, but she can't hold it for more than two seconds before her gaze darts away. Then she tries again. And again. It's a loop I've seen too many times before. I've never been the kind of Alpha who finds power in forcing an omega to speak to my chest or the floor. I don't need her submission to prove the weight of my dominance. It speaks for itself. But it's clear Siggy's been spending time around an alpha, or alphas, who didn't share that belief.

"It's really fucking good to see you, kiddo." My voice breaks around the words, thick with too much emotion. Grief, guilt, relief. All of it. I swallow it down.

I don't know what does it, if it's the way I make myself smaller or the way the words come out sounding strangled and raw, but I feel it when it happens.

Her eyes.

Noa's eyes finally find me.

It's like taking a punch to the ribs and being thankful for the pain because you're just delighted that you're feeling something. Doesn't matter if it hurts. Her gaze hits hard, and it makes something shift inside me. It's like I've been holding my breath for five days without realizing it and I just inhaled for the first time.

I want to look at her, really look at her, but I don't. I'm afraid if I meet her eyes, she'll look away, and then what?

So, I keep my focus on Siggy, which feels right, anyway. She deserves that much. Deserves more than I can ever give her.

Her chin wobbles, lashes wet.

“They told me about Carly,” she whispers. My heart cracks again, splintering for her. But then she adds, even softer, more broken, “I didn’t mean to leave her behind, Alpha. I promise.”

Fuck.

Before I can offer her some comfort or tell her whatever she did to survive—to get here —is not something that needs to be forgiven, by me or anyone, Noa moves.

She leans forward, slow and trembling, like every inch of her being is tender and bruised, but she still does it. Still reaches for Siggy’s hand and curls her delicate fingers around it. Squeezes, like she’s desperately trying to anchor the girl to something tangible.

“Love,” she says gently, and her voice is hoarse but clear. It’s like fucking music to my ears and a homing beacon for my wolf, calling him home. “You had no choice. I know you don’t believe that right now. But if you and Carly had switched places...would you blame her?”

Siggy barely gets the word out. “No.”

“Then you can’t blame yourself,” Noa says, her voice steady in a way her body isn’t. She’s pale, shaking, clearly still deep in the aftermath of what I did to her, but, somehow, she’s still managing to hold someone else together. Watching it breaks something open in me. Siggy looks at her like she’s her lifeline, the only person she can trust completely.

My throat works around a knot of emotion I can't name as I speak, my voice quiet but steady. "Siggy...were you with Carly when...?"

I hate asking. Hate dragging her through this again. But I have to. Her mother will need answers.

Siggy's eyes fly to Noa, her panic immediate. And just like that, Noa's there again. Her free hand lifts, slowly as if making sure Siggy's tracking every miniscule movement, before her quivering fingers brush the strands of dark blonde hair that were freed from Siggy's ponytail by the wind. The gesture is so tender, it nearly undoes me.

"It's up to you, Siggy," Noa tells her, her hand lingering near Siggy's ear after tucking a lock of hair behind it. "You get to decide how you tell him. If you want Canaan and Rhosyn to do it for you, that's okay. If you'd rather wait and tell him when your mom's with you, that's okay too. No one's going to push you either way. We're moving at your pace, remember? This is all on your terms."

My mate—something I don't really have the right to call her anymore, but fuck, if it isn't the truth—stands there, body trembling from the cold, and if the subtle winces she tries so hard to hide mean anything, pain too. And still, she chooses kindness.

And the fact I lied to her and told her that she wasn't ever meant to be a Luna...

I already accepted yesterday that there's nothing I can do to take it all back, but that doesn't mean I can't fight like hell to make it right. Already, I'm brainstorming ideas for my next steps forward, but right now, as I watch her freely give the kind of comfort she deserves herself, I decide I also need to find a way to take her pain for myself. That this can't stand.

I'd love to say that I'm going to be gentlemanly and give her a choice in the

matter—it's the least I could do since I'm the one who fucked up in the first place and she probably wants nothing to do with me—but I ignored my instincts once before when it came to her, and nothing has ever backfired more devastatingly. I'm not about to make that mistake twice. Everything inside of me is howling, demanding that I scoop her up and take her somewhere safe. She needs to build a nest. With things marked with my scent. My wolf approves of this, nudging me from that spot where he stands over the waning thread, telling me I need to tend to her obvious sickness.

When I don't move fast enough for his liking, my wolf lets out an impatient huff and throws his full weight behind the urge to reach her—our omega. The force of it slams into me like a body blow. To stop myself from landing face-first in the gravel and pine needles, I stand to my full height. The too fast movement has Siggy starting and at her distress, Noa's two-toned gaze cuts to me in a sharp glare. It's a look I find myself pleasantly thrilled to see on her face. Means she hasn't lost all her fight. Not yet, anyway.

She turns her full attention back to Siggy who's now staring up at me with wide eyes. "I don't want to have to tell it twice." Her hesitation in her voice, the flicker of vulnerability, is unmistakable. "Can I tell you what happened...to me, when my mom's there too?"

The fact she feels like she needs to ask permission for something this simple...

Canaan and Rhosyn, who've been giving us space from a respectful distance, step in closer now.

Rhosyn asks, "Does Yrsa know she's coming home today?"

I shake my head, jaw tight. "No. I didn't want to say anything until I knew for sure. Until I saw her with my own eyes. I couldn't risk getting her hopes up if it didn't

work out.”

The Viking-like woman is probably going to hand me my ass for this decision, but hey, at least we’re sticking on brand for what this week has been like for me. What’s one more pissed-off female? At least with the council member I know she’ll get over her initial anger once her daughter is in front of her.

Canaan pulls the keys from his pocket—the ones for the vehicle he commandeered at the clearing—and tosses them once in the air before catching them. “Then let’s not waste any more time. Are we ready to head out? It’s getting fucking cold out here, anyway.”

I nod and because I can’t stop myself from seeking her out, I look to Noa. She hasn’t said a word since Siggy pulled away from her, and now she’s standing just off to the side, the wind catching in her dark hair in a way that reminds me of my dreams. The dreams I now know she was the star of. For months. Her hair, colorless then, would billow around her just like it does now in those dreams.

“Are you...” The words catch in my throat. Coughing once, I force them out. “Are you coming back with us too?”

Her face shifts. Tightens. Her brows pinch and her eyes flash. Not with anger but hurt. Shit. She thinks I’m questioning whether she should come. That I’m implying I don’t want her there. Which is both true and the biggest lie at the same time. I want to keep her a safe distance from my pack until I’ve sorted out a genuine solution to my McNamara problem, but in the same breath, I want to throw her over my shoulder and march right to my home with her. I want her in my bedroom where I can lock her in and guard the door while she recuperates from the wounds I’ve carved into her.

I can’t tell her this, of course, but when I open my mouth to fix it another way, Siggy beats me to it.

“I’m not going back without Noa,” she tells me, steady and strong, her voice surer than it’s been since I got here. She stands straighter when she says it too, like she’s drawing a line in the sand. This isn’t a request; it’s a condition.

While Noa doesn’t look surprised by the declaration, there’s a shadow in her expression. Something tired and heavy. A complicated mix of wariness and quiet resignation.

Canaan nods his head once when I mutely turn to him for confirmation on a question I think I already know the answer to just from observing the two omega females interact these past few minutes.

The way Siggy leans toward Noa, the way she looks to her for guidance, says everything. In her climb out of the dark toward recovery, Siggy has tethered herself to Noa. That bond, whatever shape it’s taken, is clearly the thing keeping her steady right now. And Noa, shit, she looks like she’s running on fumes, but she’s still standing. Still offering herself to be someone else’s foundation. She can barely keep herself up, but she has no intention of letting Siggy face this alone. I don’t know if she knows how strong that makes her. It’s a quiet kind of strength, but strength, nonetheless.

“I have no intentions of making you do that, Siggy,” I tell her, meaning every damn word. “Now, come on, Canaan’s right, it’s starting to get cold as hell out here.”

Even with my higher-than-normal shifter internal temperature, the chill in the air is starting to work its way through my clothes. As if on cue. Noa’s entire body trembles within her oversized hoodie. The tip of her pert little nose is bright pink and the high points of her cheekbones, which are already looking more defined than they did five days ago, match. The instincts woven into my makeup, the ones I tried to pretend didn’t exist when I first caught her scent on the wind that day, demand that I get her somewhere warm.

I also can't help but be worried about her being behind the wheel when she's this unsteady. If the shadows under her eyes mean what I think they do, then she's been sleeping about as well as I have this past week. Which means barely at all. The very idea of her exhausted state driving the winding mountain pass roads up to our territory's gates makes my skin feel too tight, the fear tearing at me.

"Leave your Jeep here," I tell her, keeping my voice as even and calm as I can manage. "I'll drive you and Siggy back to the territory. Then, whenever you're ready to head home, I'll bring you back here myself."

Home. A place that's only been hours away all this time. Without realizing it, Thalassa took my mate away from me over seven years ago, and still somehow kept her just under my nose. I can't stop the gnawing suspicion that it wasn't an accident, that every move the weaver made had a purpose, some deeper reason I haven't uncovered yet.

Noa flinches at my offer, her brows pulling tight under wind-tousled bangs. "I'll follow behind Canaan with Siggy just like I did on our drive here," she says softly, her eyes flicking anywhere but my face. It's not until she draws in a breath and lifts her chin that I see her full, bracing effort to meet my eyes. "I'd feel better if I knew I had access to my own vehicle in case I need to leave. I'm sure you understand why."

She picked her words carefully and they have her desired outcome, because inwardly I wince like I've taken a hit to the sternum at their implication. Noa wants an out, an escape route. From me.

"Yeah, Noa, I understand."

Her name tastes as sweet as her flowering omega perfume on my tongue, but it quickly sours when she shrinks at hearing her name come out of my mouth.

I vow, right here and now, that one day, hearing me say her name will be the thing that heals her, not breaks her.

Chapter 24

Noa

This whole day feels like some cruel test of how much dread a person can endure before they break. Like the universe, or maybe the Goddess herself, is watching with morbid curiosity, tallying every time I manage to keep breathing while my lungs, my bones, and every hollow part of me fill with the suffocating weight of grief and fear.

The first test was the drive to the overlook. My hands shook on the steering wheel the entire way, fingers clenched so tight they ached. The second—the test—was seeing Rennick again. Not just seeing him. Interacting with him.

At that point, I figured this wasn't a test anymore. The only plausible explanation I could see was that this was a cosmic joke. A petty kind of revenge served up by a deity I must've pissed off something fierce in another life. They're watching me unravel now, and apparently, they're enjoying the show. Watching the man who didn't just break my heart, but carved out my soul, walk around like not only does he have a right to do so, but as if he wants to be in my orbit.

The only thing I've been silently grateful for since he climbed out of his truck and his scent hit the air is that I could barely smell it. Before, Rennick's scent allured to me in ways I didn't think possible. It was addictive in the kind of way that made me imagine rolling around in it, doing freaking snow angels in vetiver, leather, and mint. But now, it's nothing more than a whisper. Faint. Distant. I thought, maybe, this was the Goddess giving me a shred of mercy, letting me not crave the scent of the man who tore me apart.

But that hope was short-lived. Because it wasn't just his scent that's gone. Siggy's distinct sweet omega perfume? Barely detectable. The amber and orange candles Seren insists on burning at the manor? Nothing. I don't even remember smelling the coffee she brewed this morning before we left. And the food I've tried to force down over the last few days? It hasn't tasted like cardboard just because I've got no appetite. I think...I think my taste is going, too.

Rejected mate syndrome, aka the gift that just keeps on giving, am I right?

And then came the next test. The one I swallowed down for Siggy. Because I promised her I'd be here, no matter what. So, I gripped the wheel, stared ahead, and drove us through the iron gates I now associate with the beginning of my descent. It was *déjà vu*. But instead of my mother's urn riding shotgun, I had Siggy. Instead of bringing my mom home to her mate, I was here to return a daughter to her mother.

It was beautiful, in theory.

In reality? I wanted to turn around and run. Every second spent on those familiar roads that led back to his house made my skin feel too tight. I felt sick. Because being here—near him —my already bruised and broken body is bracing for more pain. Every glance, every shift of his posture, every time he so much as parts his lips to speak, my nerves go tight like pulled wire. I keep waiting for him to finish what he started in that clearing.

It never comes, of course.

But that doesn't make it easier.

Anticipating pain that never lands is its own kind of torment. Exhausting in a way that gnaws through my bones and threatens what little strength I have left.

But watching Yrsa Eklund gather her daughter into her arms like one hug has enough power to repair the damage of the past seven months? Hearing the broken, guttural sob that ripped from the alpha female's chest when her eyes locked on Siggy? That made it worth it. All of it. Every bit of unease clawing at my lungs. Every twinge of pain that sparked in my chest when I felt his presence. It made being here, in the same room as him , worth it.

Because I've dedicated my life to saving omegas, but more often than not, I'm helping them run from broken homes, from manipulative parents, from their so-called protectors who use their designation against them. I've never, not once, had the absolute honor of watching one of my omegas reunite with someone that loved them. The way Yrsa's arms trembled, the way she cradled Siggy like she might vanish again if she blinked...it brushed against my broken, sharp pieces and smoothed a couple of the edges out. It didn't heal me, by any means, but for a couple minutes there, it wasn't such a chore to breathe.

Back in the den I'd woken up in after passing out after our first "incident", I stayed close. Within arm's reach. Hand-holding distance, because that's where Siggy told me she needed me to be while she told her story. She stammered and broke a few times, but who can blame her, but we—Yrsa, Rennick, and I—sat there and gave her the time and grace she needed to get the words out.

And when she got to the part where the omega at the club told Carly and Siggy to find me, to get to Ashvale because they'd be safe there, before sacrificing herself for them, I saw it happen. Rennick's gunmetal gaze shot to mine, heavy and searching, and Yrsa's brows pulled tight with suspicion. No doubt the seven omegas—including Siggy and Carly—that've gone missing from their land making them wary of anyone tied to omegas. Their silent look said, What the hell does she have to do with this?

It was Yrsa who asked. Bold, blunt. "What does she mean, get to you ? Why would someone tell her that?"

I kept my face neutral as best I could, trying not to whine beneath her intense suspicion. “I help omegas in need,” I told her simply. “It’s my job. My purpose.”

“But I thought you owned an apothecary?” she countered, confusion laced with an edge, her protective motherly instincts in overdrive.

I didn’t bother asking how she knew about Potion & Petal. That answer was obvious since I have no doubt I’ve been the topic of discussion around here lately. That just comes with the territory of being the idiot girl who accidentally claimed their Alpha as mine. So, I shrugged, casual even though my insides were twisting.

“I do. That’s just the thing that pays the bills.”

I also help people there in various ways, but we don’t have to get into my other vigilante side quest. I had this sneaking suspicion that if I were to pop off and say something along the lines of, “Yeah, I basically run an Underground Railroad for abused omegas and offer them a safe place to rehabilitate. Oh, and sometimes, for some of them, when starting over isn’t an option, I provide them with remedies that take care of the problem instead. I also sell really nice tea blends and candles, though, if you ever need stocking stuffer ideas.”

So, I didn’t elaborate further. Sure as hell didn’t mention the witches, or the hidden sanctuary beneath our feet, or the magic-woven protections we’ve built around our girls. That’s not a story for just anyone. Not even for the woman who just got her daughter back.

It had been Siggy’s pleading to stop haranguing me that finally chilled Yrsa out.

The alpha female transferred her intensity back to listening closely to her daughter speak.

While Siggy spilled her heart out, reopening the barely-scabbed wound so her mother and Alpha could finally know what had happened to her during her disappearance, I felt his eyes. Even as his pack's omega trembled her way through the story of her survival, Rennick's gaze kept flicking back to me. Intense. Unreadable. Like he was trying to memorize something he'd already broken. Every pass of those gunmetal irises had my skin burning, my pulse stuttering with a concoction of emotion I didn't have the strength to untangle.

And my wolf? She refused to entertain it. Too tired, too upset herself. She turned her back, her resentment sharp and simmering, not even dignifying his attention with acknowledgment. Not after what he did. Not after the choice he made, the one that shattered us both and left her to deteriorate within her cage. The cage that now floated within the dark abyss where our bond lived.

Rennick's attention hit a new, almost obsessive level once bits of my involvement with omegas came out. I know it's something he's had to be wondering about since he learned from Canaan that one of his missing omegas had ended up at my front door of all places. The irony alone was probably enough to make his emotionally constipated alpha brain glitch out completely.

He was still looking at me, as if waiting for me to willingly spill my own life secrets along with Siggy, when Carly's mother had appeared in the den's doorway. She looked like a wraith, pale and drawn into herself, but when her glassy eyes landed on Siggy, there was relief. Not joy. Not happiness. But the kind of desperate, grateful relief that still makes my throat burn just thinking about it.

Siggy had stiffened beside me, her hand reaching for mine and clenching it so tight I thought we might both bruise. But she didn't run. She didn't shrink. She held that grieving mother's gaze like it was an act of self-induced penance. It was Carly's mom, whose name I never got, who broke first. My Nightingale had crumbled before us, but it was the two mothers who stepped up to console her together.

The moment shared between the three of them was painfully sad and intimate, and as if we'd rehearsed it, Rennick and I both stood to give the three a moment alone. Yrsa had met my eye over her daughter's shoulder, nodding once, signaling she'll come find me if Siggy needed me.

"I won't be far," I promised, before stepping into the hallway and on autopilot, followed the familiar path to the sliding doors that lead to the back deck.

Returning to the scene of the crime...because I'm a glutton for punishment, apparently.

Now, leaning against the familiar railing, I close my eyes and tip my head up toward the swirling clouds still threatening to blanket the world in snow. My insides, which seem to be in a state of perpetual iciness these days, already ache from the cold. But I don't move. Don't flinch. Not even when the slider opens and closes softly a second later.

I don't need to look. I know who it is.

It's a mix of stubbornness and pure emotional exhaustion that keeps me frozen in place. And physical exhaustion, if I'm being honest. But mostly...mostly I'm just scared. Like a kid hiding under the covers, eyes shut tight, convinced the monster can't see them if they just stay still.

But I can't cling to that kind of childhood naivety, even if I wanted to.

So, I brace myself for whatever he might say, whatever possible hurt he might drop in my lap next. But it never comes. Instead, I feel the brush of his arm against mine, barely there, but enough to have my body snapping tight with tension, and then something warm settles over my shoulders.

My eyes fly open.

He's wrapped an unzipped hoodie around me, soft and worn-in, the sleeves long enough to swallow my hands if I were to stick my arms in. It's the unmistakable scent, the one I've been spared from today, thanks to the lovely side effects of rejection, that seeps from the dark green fabric and confirms it's his. It's too close to miss now, too strong to pretend I don't notice. My body reacts before my brain can stop it. Like someone shocked back to life, something inside me jolts. A spark. The faintest hope of survival.

And just as quickly, I flatline.

Because all it takes is one heartbeat, one instinctive reach for the thread that used to tether me to him, and coming up empty, to remember that scent is no longer meant to symbolize "home". It's loss.

I'm too stunned to move. The cold is still biting, but the warmth of the hoodie is already seeping into my skin, curling around the part of me that misses the bond like it's a phantom limb.

"You've been shivering all day," he says quietly, gently. Like if he speaks any louder, I'll bolt. "It's too cold out here for you right now."

Something tightens in my chest.

There's an innate part of me, a weary, soft part, that wants to melt under the weight of that concern. That wants to lean into the comfort he's offering. But another part, the smarter part, the burned and scarred part, rears back, blinking at him in disbelief. The audacity of this man...

"You don't have to pretend you care about my well-being now, Alpha," I say, the title

sharp as broken glass on my tongue as my hand, as if of its own volition, clutches the open lapels of the hoodie and tightens the weighted fabric that smells of him around me. If he notices he doesn't say anything. "I think we've moved past that, don't you?"

His reaction is instant. He jerks back like I've slapped him, expression cracking. And for the first time today, I really look at him—don't just flick my eyes in the direction of his face. I take him in and note the matching dark circles and the grim set of his mouth. He doesn't look like the man who eviscerated me and then left me bleeding.

He looks like he's also bleeding.

Like whatever damage he did to me, he carved it into himself just as deep. And maybe that's supposed to make me feel better—like some twisted form of justice—but it doesn't. All it does is make the air between us heavier. Sadder.

"I..." he starts, like he might argue, might defend himself, but something in his expression closes itself off. His jaw flexes, then tightens. I catch the way his lips part slightly before he exhales and shakes his head, like he's trying to shake away the line of thinking he'd just fallen down. Straightening, his shoulders squaring, he looks at me with practiced composure. "I want to know what you're doing with omegas," he says, even-toned. "And why people would know to send them to you for help."

My spine stiffens instantly, something combative twitching inside me. Every protective instinct I have coils, ready to strike. My first thought is no and my first instinct is to tell him to go straight to hell. That he doesn't get to ask me questions. Not about that. Not about them .

But then, his voice softens.

"Please ," he rasps, sounding a little bit like a man who's drowning. "I want to know

how you were able to help Siggy when I couldn't."

That one fucking word. Please.

It shouldn't matter, but it does. It's him asking—pleading—not commanding. And that, more than anything else, deflates my fight. With a sigh that scrapes across my dry and tender throat, I lean heavier against the railing.

It's bullshit, really. That I'm about to offer him the explanation he didn't extend to me before deciding I was expendable. Before deciding that our bond, my heart, was an acceptable sacrifice for a political arrangement he doesn't even want. One he was backed into out of desperation.

Still, I give it to him.

Not in full. Not with every sacred detail. But enough.

"From what I've learned from Rhosyn and Canaan, it sounds like we want the same thing . To protect and help omegas , " I tell him. "We're just going about it differently." That last part? It's a knife I mean to twist. I don't even try to conceal my intentions for that one.

He flinches. Subtle, but it's there. The color drains slightly from his sun-kissed skin, a tell he probably doesn't realize he's giving away. He knows that I know . Knows I've been told enough to connect all the dots—the omegas, the deal, the alliance, her . I see it all now. And maybe he thought that would make it easier somehow. It doesn't. It just makes it hurt with sharper edges.

He stays quiet.

So, I explain. I tell him that after my mom and I left Pack Fallamhain, Thalassa used

her healer background and dedicated it to the designation that was constantly targeted. That she saw and heard too many stories about omegas being battered, hunted, used, and she wanted to help where she could. Describe to him how I helped her build and shape it, but explain that Mom was the reason it is what it is today.

She used her vast connections to spread the whispers, to build the network that created the safe haven.

I keep the witches vague. A passing mention. Enough to draw his attention but not enough to break the trust of the tight-lipped Ashvale Coven. He listens, stone still. His eyes widen, just barely, when I state how many omegas we've taken in. How many we've rehabilitated. How many we've saved.

When I finally fall quiet, the silence between us stretches long enough that I start to regret saying anything at all.

Finally, he tells me, "Protecting omegas...it's an incredibly noble cause."

My already broken heart pangs, pumping a fresh wave of anguish through my veins. I barely manage to keep my wince off my face.

"Choosing to sacrifice everything for the vulnerable—for the weak—normally is." I don't have to spell it out. He knows exactly what I mean. The air between us constricts. Borders on suffocating.

He stares down at me, and this time, he doesn't bother masking it. The guilt. The remorse. The kind of sorrow that sinks into a man's bones and becomes a permanent resident there. It's all over his face, lurking into every shadow, and my chest aches from the weight of it.

Because as much as I wish I could hate him, I wish he hated me.

I wish he loved her—Talis—and hated me instead. It'd be easier to carry. Easier to stomach his rejection if it were fortified with contempt instead of this. Instead of longing. This ache he wears when he looks at me, the ache I recognize because it mirrors my own, it breathes life into the slivers of me that still hope. And that's crueller than anything.

He opens his mouth. I can see it coming. The explanation. The why. And I can't let him say it.

"Please don't," I whisper, lifting a hand between us, fingers shaking, but not from the cold. "Just...don't. It's taking everything I have to be here today. To look at you. But if you try to explain—try to justify —what you did to me..." It might break me. The lump in my throat rises but I push the words through anyway. "Because I already know. I know why you did it. You did it for them. For your omegas. If anyone was going to understand this, it was going to be me. I... get it."

Saying it out loud feels like a lie, a rationalization that I have to keep repeating to myself so I don't dissolve into dust.

"And that's what kills me," I continue, even when I just want to stop and turn away from him, but he needs to hear this. Rennick needs to know what a mistake he's made in the name of what he thought was a noble cause. "You never gave me the chance. I might have been able to help you. I could've helped them . And maybe we could've done it together. But it never occurred to you to talk to me first. You just made the decision, and now we'll never know because you broke... everything."

He looks like with every word, I've stabbed him.

Rennick's nod is resigned, defeated , as he murmurs his agreement.

"You're right."

Now it's my turn to wince as if someone has just plunged a knife into my sternum.

"But have we passed the point of being able to fix it? Is there no repairing what I've destroyed?"

Even at my strongest mentally, I don't think I would have been prepared. It's the last question I expected to hear come out of him, after everything, and it catches me so off guard that I let out a laugh. It's not pretty and it's more like a sob catching in my throat. It lacks any real humor. It's a sad sound.

Beneath the oversized sweatshirt he draped over me, my hand runs down the front of my chest, I stop to grab the fabric of my own hoodie, right at the center, above where the bond used to live.

"Look at me," I say, voice nothing but a broken rasp. "What do you see that makes you think there's anything left to fix?"

Rennick lays his palm over his own chest, almost protective. "But our bond?"

"Our bond is dead," I cut in, sharp and final. It hurts to do it. "Carved out of me. There's nothing left but emptiness." The words leave a bitter taste in my mouth, but I don't stop. "And even if it wasn't—if by some miracle you were freed of your obligation to McNamara—how would I ever trust you to not hurt me again, Rennick?"

He can do nothing but stand there and listen, it's as if our roles have reversed from that day.

"How could I ever look at you and not see the man who stood in that clearing and said those things to me? Who let her speak to me like that. Who let her stand beside you like she belonged there." My voice trembles, because the truth is, she does

belong there. He chose her as his Luna and a Luna's position is at her Alpha's side. Always. "You made me feel unworthy. Of you. Of everything."

His jaw flexes, chest rising like he's about to interrupt.

"You used my mom against me," I rasp before he gets the chance. "You accused her of binding my wolf."

"Noa...I never wanted you to find out the truth that way—" he starts, strained.

"We don't even know the truth," I say, stepping forward. "And if it is the truth, if she really did it, then I know there was a reason. Because she would've never done that lightly. Not to me. Not to her only child." My stomach turns just thinking about it, but I push through. "You said it anyway. You said it to hurt me."

He doesn't deny it, because he can't. He only nods, once, reluctantly.

The fire I've been running on sputters out just as fast as it sparked. The exhaustion hits all at once, dragging through my limbs like concrete settling in my bones. I pull his hoodie tighter around myself, burrowing deeper into it.

Sighing—more a whimper than breath—I meet his gaze one last time.

"But none of it matters, does it?" I say quietly. "At the end of the day, you're still betrothed to someone else. You still chose someone else as your mate." I pause, letting the silence hang. "Right?"

He looks like he's going to be the one who's sick this time. "Right."

I don't know what I expected. Maybe that hearing him admit it would help. That it would make the ache easier to live with. But it doesn't. It just makes the hole inside

me wider, darker. Like his words gave the rot permission to take another piece of me.

I offer him a sad, trembling smile. “Your sense of duty to your pack is admirable, Ren.”

The nickname slips out before I can stop it. I don’t wait to see how it lands. Don’t want to see the expression on his face when he hears it, so I dip my head, and walk past him. Leaving him outside with the gray clouds and his regret for company.

When I shut the sliding door behind me, the ache of our interaction doesn’t lift, but I notice something else. I don’t feel so alone. I’m still tired, still in pain, still wrecked. But not alone. My wolf is here, closer than she’s ever been. The walls around her don’t seem to be as thick. I can almost feel her pressing back. My mother’s words echo in my mind, “The threads have already started to unravel. The binds are starting to break. He will help with the rest.”

While my mom isn’t here to ask, I know there’s another annoying cryptic charmer close by who might be able to help.

Chapter 25

Noa

I stuck my head into the den to check on Siggy, half expecting the room to be blanketed in sorrow. Instead, I found three women huddled close together, flipping through photos of Siggy and Carly on their phones. On the coffee table sat a tray with mugs of hot chocolate and a bowl of sliced apples, one of which Siggy was munching on while recounting a story about Carly. The tray of sustenance had Rhosyn written all over it even if I hadn't seen the beta female since we arrived. She and Canaan had taken off to regroup at their own cabin, after being away for an extended period of time unexpectedly.

The laughter shared between the three women was watery, but real. They're grieving, yeah, but they're doing it together. And in that shared heartbreak, there's healing too.

Siggy might not be ready to move back permanently. As of now, I don't know if she will ever want to live here full-time again, but coming home was the right call for the young omega's soul. She needed her mother's arms and love wrapped around her to help her mend some of those broken pieces, and she needed to talk to Carly's mom so she could find the strength to forgive herself.

Lingering by the doorway, I asked her if she'd be okay with me stepping out for twenty minutes, that there was someone I needed to talk to. She looked uneasy at the thought of me leaving, but Yrsa jumped in before she could spiral. Promised they wouldn't leave the den. That's the only reason I felt comfortable enough to go.

Now, parked in front of the healer's cabin, the one I was raised in, my palms sweat against the steering wheel. The moss is still thick on the shingled roof. The log exterior hasn't changed much, though the front door's been painted some sunny, blinding shade of yellow. Weird choice, but whatever. I don't live here anymore.

Steadying myself, I climb out of my Jeep and walk up.

Before I can knock, the door swings open like it's been waiting for me to arrive all day.

"I was wondering when you'd show up, dear girl," Zora says, her wild patterned flowy pants clashing with an oversized red sweater that looks like it used to belong to someone twice her size. Her outfit choice I'm starting to learn is typical Zora, even if she looks like she went thrifting blindfolded and bought the first items her hand landed on.

She gives me a once-over that feels like more than just a glance. Like Seren, she's a healer, so Goddess knows what her gifts are allowing her to sense. Her thin, dark brows knit together. "Would you rather sit out here on the porch?"

She gestures to two old chairs flanking a chipped mosaic-topped table with an ashtray perched on it. I nod without really thinking. Yeah. I'm not ready to face the inside yet. Too many ghosts. Too many memories waiting to ambush me. And if the front door is any indication, too many changes.

Mom's rolling in her urn at that paint color.

We shuffle across the worn decking to plop down into the chairs. I hadn't really taken into consideration the shitty weather when I agreed to this location, and as the wind picks up around us, I instinctually pull the green sweatshirt over my shoulders tighter around me, snuggling down into the thick fabric.

Yeah, so I forgot to give it back. Sue me.

Looking up, I find Zora's black eyes on me. "Lovely, sweatshirt, Noa, Where'd you get it?" She takes a deep, drawn-out breath. "Smells an awful lot like our Alpha."

"He's not my Alpha," I reply, like a reflex, before frowning deeply at her. "Shut up."

The charmer cackles before holding her hands up in surrender. "All right, fine. Still on the denial train, I see."

"It's not denial—not anymore, anyway." I turn my head and watch the trees sway in the crisp wind across the way. The big tree her beat-up station wagon is parked under used to have wind chimes decorating the lower branches. They'd drive me up the damn wall on slow mornings when I was trying to sleep in, but Mom loved them. Said the noise cleared the energy around the house. Whether that was true or not, I couldn't tell you, but arguing with her about it was a lost cause. "Didn't you hear? Your Alpha rejected me."

The last time I was with the charmer, she was trying to convince me that, even if I couldn't access my own wolf like I should, that the pull I felt toward Rennick was a fated mate bond. I was so caught off guard, unsure, of what she was saying, it was easier to just flat-out deny everything. Claim it was a trick of the mind. She saw through me the last time and she sees through me now because we both now know without a shadow of a doubt that Rennick is mine— was mine.

That became painfully clear to me as my thread connecting me to him was ripped away.

"Oh, don't you worry," Zora says, her tone dry. "That little redheaded demon child made sure the news of your rejection was spread far and wide."

Despite the various emotions rolling beneath my skin, all I can offer is an eye roll. I'm just...tired. My tense interaction with Rennick took all the energy I had to spare, and I don't really have any to spare right now.

"Why am I not surprised?"

Zora smirks from her perch across the little table, but her dark eyes are pinned on me like she's reading more than what's physically there. Which is probably exactly what she's doing. Empathic charmers are like that. Can sense lies, emotion, probably the super chill and not at all unhinged flare of jealousy in my ribs when Talis's name is mentioned.

"Because you're smart and a good judge of character." She smirks like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "You proved it by choosing to come see me."

I try to laugh, really I do, but it comes out like a broken puff of air. More pain than humor. Will I ever laugh again? Goddess, I hope so. Though, at the rate I'm disintegrating, I don't want to get my hopes up.

"I didn't come here to prove anything," I tell her, pulling Rennick's hoodie tighter around me before I can think better of it. "I came because I have questions. And I thought...maybe you knew more about my mom than you let on."

Zora leans back in her seat, folding her hands in her lap like she's settling in for a story. "What do you want to know, Noa?"

I hesitate, not because I don't know the question—it's burned into the inside of my skull—but because saying it aloud might make it real. Might take that last shred of denial I've been white-knuckling and shred it to pieces.

Still, I ask.

“Do you think it’s possible my mother bound my wolf?”

The second the words leave my mouth, I brace myself like I’m anticipating a physical blow.

But Zora doesn’t blink. Doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t look remotely surprised. No, if anything, she looks as if she was expecting it.

“True latent wolves don’t display any traits of any particular designation,” she says calmly, like she’s reading it from a textbook. “Their wolves are too dormant for that. When I first met you, I knew with one look that you were an omega, even if you didn’t smell like one. And now...” She takes in a deep breath as her gaze drifts down to where I’ve curled up in the chair. “That typical omega sweetness is wafting off you, and I’m sitting here watching you practically burrow in a sweatshirt—one that does not belong to you—like you’d make a nest right there in that dinky chair if I let you.”

Heat crawls up my neck. I didn’t realize how slumped into myself I’ve become or how much I’ve snuggled up in his hoodie. I sit up a little straighter, trying to preserve what little dignity I’ve got left.

Zora watches me like she’s cataloging every microexpression. “Have you been showing any other omega traits lately?”

My brain glitches for a second. This whole week’s been a blur of agony, and, if I’m being honest, I don’t think I remember what day it even is. How am I supposed to remember if I’ve done anything that’s textbook omega?

I could call Seren. I have no doubt that girl’s been keeping a list in her Notes app.

“Like you said, I smell more... omega now,” I mutter, trying to discreetly test my

scent but end up getting a face full of his hoodie instead. Great. “And I’ve...whined. A couple times. I think.” Week’s been a blur, remember?

Zora hums, smug, nodding like she’s connecting puzzle pieces I didn’t know were on the board.

“And voices?” she asks, throwing me for an absolute loop.

“Voices?”

“Yes, have you heard anyone else’s voice in your head after you heard the Alpha’s that day?”

I stiffen. She knows. Of course she knows. I told her, didn’t I, about what I heard? The chatter in my mind that accidently led me to claim Rennick as my mine.

Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate. Mate.

“Yeah,” I admit, cheeks warm at the memory of waking up in that state with Zora, Rhosyn, and the handy puke bowl waiting for me. “Only a couple times, but it’s only happened during ...”

I trail off, trying to figure out the best way to explain what was happening at those times without giving too much away about Siggy’s own pain.

“Emotionally charged moments?” Zora’s smile is irritatingly knowing.

I narrow my eyes at her, then reluctantly nod. “Yes.”

“That’s how most oracles start out,” she says, like it’s no big deal.

I blink. “ Oracle? ”

“Mmhm. Most hear things before they see them. Gets a lot of young charmer pups in trouble, overhearing things they shouldn’t, seeing things no one is meant to.”

I try to process that while my mind spirals. Oracle . Me. That...explains some things, but not nearly enough.

But Zora’s already shifting gears. “Latent wolves aren’t omegas, Noa. And they sure as hell aren’t charmers. It’s our wolf’s essence—lifeblood—that gives life to those things. A latent’s wolf is too disconnected to bring to life those special traits. So, yes, to answer your earlier question...I believe your wolf was bound. Caged. And there’s only one person we know powerful enough to not only weave the bindings but also leave a loophole so they’ll unknot themselves when the time is right.”

“ Mom ,” I whisper.

The confirmation lands like a brick. It doesn’t shatter me, because deep down, I’ve known, but it settles in my bones like a new kind of ache. One of betrayal.

Unknot ...with how things are changing, that word seems more than accurate. It also makes me think of my mom’s warning from my dream again.

“It sounds like the more your wolf shakes free of the binds, the more your designation will reveal itself and your charmer gifts will strengthen. Who knows what you’ll be capable of when you have the full strength of your wolf behind you, dear girl?”

I don’t speak for a long beat. Then I ask the other question. One I’ve been wondering about since the first image of a younger Rennick resurfaced in my mind.

“I think my memories were manipulated. There are...chunks missing. I didn’t

remember how much time I spent with Rennick growing up until I came back here. And now...now the memories are trickling in. Slowly. Like a door cracked open.”

Zora’s face darkens. “Mind weaving was where Thalassa excelled. It’s why Merritt kept her close. A mind weaver is a precious tool to have in your back pocket when you’re an Alpha whose reign isn’t exactly met with unanimous approval. In the charmer and witch communities, manipulating memories—bending minds—that kind of magic is heavily frowned upon. Dangerous, even. People with the gift tend to push the boundaries. And once you cross that line, it’s hard to come back.”

The senior Alpha Fallamhain’s mixed reception isn’t news to me. My memories of Merritt are firmly in place, and he was not a kind man. He didn’t have the warm, reassuring dominance that makes a good Alpha. Like Lowri. Shit, even like Rennick...when he’s not being an emotionally inept asswipe. But his father was cold, stern, and unforgiving.

What is news to me is hearing that my mother was a master mind manipulator, that this skill I had no idea she possessed was the reason for her long tenure with Merritt.

A cold chill runs down my aching spine as I start to silently panic and wonder what else she may have altered in my mind. What memories that occupy my mind are actually mine and not created by my mother’s magic? Rennick knew my wolf was bound, but I have memories of the night my mom came home to this very cabin in a panic—reeking of fear—to tell me we had to leave, that Merritt was exiling me for my latent status. But what if that’s not what happened at all?

My mother—my protector—my deceiver?

"Do you think she could’ve...left dreams behind?" I ask, my voice scratchy, barely making it past the tight band of anxiety around my throat. "Like, tucked them away in someone’s mind. For later."

Zora doesn't answer right away. Her gaze sharpens, studying me in that unsettling way of hers, like she's peeling back skin and bone and looking at whatever truth lives underneath. Finally, she nods, slow and thoughtful.

"It's possible," she says, tone weighty. "Dreams are just another kind of memory, after all. And a skilled enough weaver could bury them deep, keep them dormant until something—or someone—unlocked the thread."

My heart sinks because I already know who the key is. Mom told me herself in my dream.

Rennick.

"Have you been having odd dreams?" she questions, when my heavy silence drags on too long.

"Yeah," I mumble, as my mind sorts through all the pieces to the puzzle I've been left, but it's like I'm trying to see the big picture without having access to the vital corner pieces. The pieces that keep the whole damn thing together. There's one thing I think I know for sure, though. "My bound wolf, my missing memories, my dream...they all tie back to Rennick. Do you think...do you think Mom knew we were destined for each other? That we were mates?"

Zora's already nodding before I'm done talking. "I'd bet money on it," she tells me, before adding, "I also don't think she would do something like this unless she felt she didn't have a choice."

The growl that tears from my throat isn't intentional. It's raw and guttural—animalistic—slicing through the air, leaving the front porch in thick silence. Both of us freeze.

I don't apologize. I'm too tired to pretend I'm not unraveling.

"Why," I bite out, "do I keep having to be the sacrificial lamb every time someone important to me gets backed into a corner? Why am I always the one who pays the price for the decisions they're forced to make?"

"We make rash choices when our backs are against a wall. We don't think about the long-term cost—about what it'll destroy. That regret comes later when the dust settles and we're left standing in the ruin of our own making." She pauses, that observant gaze of hers raking over me long and hard, as if searching for more visible signs of my hurt, before adding, "Did you know the only reason we identified Carly's body was because of her scent? Her face was so mangled, we didn't recognize her as... her . Rennick carried what was left of that girl six miles back to this cabin. Alone. Just him and the weight of his perceived failure in his arms. When you're forced to look that kind of devastation in the eye for that long, Noa...you'll pay any price to ensure it never happens again. Because in that moment, nothing— nothing —could have felt worse than that. Worse than what happened to Carly."

Zora lets that settle, heavy and unmoving.

I feel like I'm going to be sick, the dark details of Carly's recovery, the ones Rhosyn and Canaan had purposely left out, slithering around my mind.

I'm consumed, busy focusing on breathing through my nose to fight back the roiling in my empty stomach and the nausea clawing at my throat, when Zora speaks again.

"I can't speak for why your mother did what she did, only what I've told you before. Your mother always had a plan. Her gift made her the shrewdest person in the room, and she used that to her advantage in everything she did," Zora explains tenderly. "What I can tell you is why Rennick was driven into making the choice he made. Is it one I wholly agree with? No. Nor does it stop the pain you're in because of it, but I

can understand what drove him there. Now, we need to discover a way to fix the damage he made with his rash choice.”

“There is no fixing it,” I respond, feeling so much like I’m having a repeat of the same conversation I had with Rennick before. “He broke the bond.”

Her hand reaches out like she’s going to place her palm on my shoulder. I don’t know what comes over me, but I jerk away before she can make contact. And it’s not because I don’t want the physical reassurance from her, it’s because I don’t want her to touch it . His sweatshirt. Oh, Goddess, what the hell is wrong with me?

Zora’s lips purse as she eyes me, my dramatic move clearly not going unnoticed by the healer.

“He broke his side of the bond,” she shocks the hell out of me by saying, because hello? Has this hippy chick been paying attention, or did she smoke too much before I showed up here, because with a single glance at me and the state I’ve been left in, she’d know the bond is very much severed. “But yours? Unless I heard wrong, you didn’t reject him back. That means your side of the bond is still very much alive within the Alpha.”

My blood turns to ice.

“What are you saying?”

She stares at me like she’s shocked I don’t know. “Until you formally reject Rennick just as he did you, your side of the bond will remain tethered to him. The only problem with this is one half of the bond can’t survive without the other. It starts to rot away...” She trails off, but the unspoken implication is clear. “Rejected mate syndrome presents itself in a few ways, but as I’m sure you’ve discovered, this is the worst of it. As the surviving bond shrivels and dies a painfully lonesome death, it

tries to take the owner with it. And sometimes it succeeds.”

Nearly suffocating under the severity of her words, I sway in my seat. “Did...did Rennick know about this when he?—”

I don’t think I’d be able to take it on top of everything else, to learn that he knew what would happen. The ground beneath my feet that has been tumbling away like quicksand would vanish completely and take me with it. Swallow me whole.

“Based on the wrecked state he’s been in for the past week, I find that highly doubtful.” Zora tries to sound hopeful, as if for the two of us, but it has little effect on my fragile grasp on sanity. “It’s ridiculous, but this pesky little loophole is something many aren’t aware of, and causes all kinds of problems. I swear, if people were more honest about what happens during a mate bond rejection, people would know how to avoid this kind of thing. But, alas, people turn all waspy and keep it to themselves, acting like it’s some scandalous affair for some fucking reason.”

She’s right, I had no clue that breaking the bond went both ways.

But Seren would have known.

Of all people, she would have known what would happen and she should have warned me, but for reasons I can’t begin to fathom, she stayed silent. She didn’t say a word while she watched me suffer, watched me wither away until I resemble nothing but a raw, exposed nerve. She, of all people, would know the process of dissolving a fated mate bond. She’s lived through it herself. I think back to when I’d woken up, her hand running a cool rag over my fevered skin. I remember the way her voice faltered when she said, “My situation was...different. It wasn’t just him rejecting me. I rejected him too. We both severed the bond.”

She’d looked uneasy, guilty, even. And if I hadn’t been in too much pain to think

straight, I might've caught the meaning behind her words then.

She knew. And she didn't tell me.

But why ?

Swallowing down the burn of betrayal, I frantically look to Zora for more answers. "If I reject him now, if I sever my end of the bond, will I stop feeling like... this ?" Like I'm decaying from the inside out? Mind, body, and soul?

The pained, guilty look that crosses the healer's face answers the question before she ever opens her mouth to speak. "It would have...if you'd rejected him when he rejected you, but now..." She falls silent, before continuing on after a heavy pause, "It's too late for you to break your end of the bond. The damage has been done."

"So, that it? I'm just left to rot away?"

Zora sits up straighter in her chair, wincing with regret. "Not necessarily."

I motion impatiently with my hand, urging her to cough up whatever morsel of information she might have that will get me out of this fucking mess.

"The only thing that's going to save you now, is the thing that broke you in the first place. Him. Rennick." She says it like she's bracing herself for the fallout, but I'm too far gone for rage. At this point, it barely even surprises me that Rennick Fallamhain is once again the answer to every catastrophic twist in my life. My long-standing theory that I pissed off some very powerful divine being in a past life creeps back into focus and pulls up a chair, smug as hell. Its taunting smirk making me want to growl.

"Specifically, his claiming bite," the charmer clarifies. "It's the only force strong

enough to reconnect you to what's left of the bond—the only thing capable of reviving it. Once that happens, it won't just restore the bond. It'll revive you, too. Because that kind of claim isn't temporary. It's binding. It will tether you to him and to life.”

“That's bullshit!” I want to sound mad, affronted, but I'm sad to report, it comes out sounding more like a distraught whine.

Zora arches one brow at the innately omega sound I've embarrassed myself by making, and it's not judgment I see in her eyes, but something worse. Pity.

“I'm inclined to agree.” Once again, she falls silent, and I know before she opens her mouth again that I'm not going to like what she has to say. “There's something else we've been overlooking. You're already presenting more omega traits,” she explains carefully, like she's trying not to spook me. “And as your wolf continues to break free of the binds that hold her, those traits will only get stronger. You've got nearly eight years of suppressed instincts ready to slam into you without an ounce of remorse.”

I look at her with an unashamedly perplexed look, not catching her meaning.

“Noa, you've had seven years of suppressed heats. Whether you knew you were an omega or not. And now, all that built-up need, all that strain your body's secretly withstood, it's about to break through,” Zora says, her voice carefully measured, though the tension beneath it is impossible to miss. She's trying to be gentle, but her worry seeps through every word. “An omega in peak condition would struggle under that kind of hormonal ambush. But you?” She exhales, shaking her head. “In your state, dear girl...when I say I'm concerned for you, it's a gross understatement.”

Oh.

Oh, fuck...

My stomach flips and my brain shifts into overdrive, already trying to form a plan, a strategy, something that might prepare me for what's coming. At the sanctuary, we've guided dozens of omegas through heats. But those were normal. Manageable. Standard heat cycles that still wrecked them for days. And even then, the herbal blends we gave them were just enough to dull the edge, to take the teeth out of their need. The knotted toys we offered were a joke compared to what their bodies were really begging for. Safe nests, soft lighting, calming voices, it all helped, sure, but it never truly eased the ache.

Not really.

Because none of it—not the herbs, not the luxury sex toys—could ever replace what their bodies were built to crave. What they needed.

An alpha.

They happen every other month, and Seren's gone through three since Ivey was born. I remember how wrecked she'd been each time. How helpless I felt watching her suffer through it, trying not to break under the pressure of hormones and instincts she couldn't satisfy.

And she's healthy and I'm...just about half dead.

Maybe if I forgo the natural remedies and go for the big guns... What if I just sedate myself ? —

Zora tsks from her seat across the small table.

"I see where that mind of yours is wandering to, Noa Alderwood, and I'm going to

tell you right now, it's a shit plan. Going through this... super heat is going to wreck your system as it is. But if you try to outrun it or suppress it? That's not just reckless, it's a death sentence. Your body's already hanging on by a thread. You try to force it through a storm like that without proper help, it'll give out completely. At least, with an alpha's... assistance through it, you might be able to bear it."

"And where am I supposed to find an alpha to help me, Zora?" I question. It's a battle to force the words to sound sarcastic and not as fearful as I actually feel about this revelation. "Should I go through your pack and find an alpha who's willing to lend his time and knot to me for a couple days? A week?"

It's her equally bland are you seriously asking me this right now? face that has my hackles rising and head shaking vehemently before she has the nerve to actually suggest it aloud.

"You're joking," I all but shriek, my tenuous grasp on my composure slipping. "You're not seriously suggesting?—"

"I am," she interjects. "He's your mate, Noa, and fractured bond or not, he's the only person that will be able to tether you—act as a lifeline of sorts—thought this. You need him. Your heat will, naturally, trigger his rut, though, which will no doubt lead to him claiming you. Which would be ideal since you also require his bite?—"

"No." My refusal comes out strong, unwavering.

"No?"

I shake my head, firm, needing her to hear it. "Rennick made his choice, for his pack, for his omegas. That alliance with McNamara, as fucked as it is, is the path he's resigned himself to. Taking Talis as his... mate ," the word is a choked noise, scraping over all my raw wounds on its way out, "is the price for their protection.

Even if he were to... want me , he can't just make me his mate now instead of her. He didn't sacrifice everything to walk away from it, and I didn't claw my way through this week, fighting for every breath in my lungs and enduring every heartbeat that hurt like hell, just to let him feel..." I pause, grasping for the right word. "Obligated . Like he has to choose me now just because I'm..." I can't finish.

Can't make myself say it. Not out loud.

Zora shakes her head. "You're not going to tell him? You're going to what, let yourself be sacrificed ?"

"I was already sacrificed, Zora," I murmur. "I'm just finishing the job."

"You're making a mistake, Noa. Rennick wouldn't want— If he knew, he wouldn't allow this."

I let out that same broken laugh from earlier, hollow and hopeless, because maybe she's right. Maybe if he knew, he'd try to stop it. Try to fix it. The regret was all over his face earlier, carved into every tense muscle and shining in his somber gaze. Like he's been shouldering the wreckage of us ever since the moment he tore it all apart. But Rennick made his choice. He chose his omegas. He found a way to protect them. I won't be the reason he throws that away just to swoop in and save me. Not when I'm the one thing he already decided he could live without.

"What did we say about making rash choices? That the regret comes after the dust settles?" I ask, my voice a thick rasp. "Well, if you're right, I won't be here to see that happen."

I guess I should be thankful I was too scared to even entertain him when he asked if there was a way to fix what he broke—to fix us . That kind of question, the kind that dangles possibility in front of your nose, it only leads to one thing: hope. And there's

nothing more dangerous than hope when you've already almost completely lost yourself, when you've already dragged your broken body through the wreckage of your bond. This way—by choosing to let it die, to not give him a chance to save it—I don't have to fear more heartbreak. There's a kind of peace in knowing I won't have to survive another rejection. I can just...let go. Of him. Of all of it.

Chapter 26

Rennick

This room feels wrong.

After my little rampage earlier this week, all the splintered furniture and shattered décor have been cleared out. I don't know who handled it—and I haven't asked—but I'm grateful for the silent help, because I haven't exactly been in a state to deal with redecorating. Everything is gone now, except for the cracked bookcase in the corner, its shelves stripped bare of books and knickknacks. A new chair and desk were brought in to replace the ones I obliterated. I'm sitting in the leather rolling chair now while Rhosyn is perched on the edge of the large metal desk, kicking her feet in that deceptively casual way that doesn't match the weight of the conversation we're circling around.

A conversation I'm not as invested in as I should be since my mind is still locked on her.

Our little trio had locked ourselves in here about an hour ago, right after Noa returned from wherever she'd disappeared to. She didn't stay long—just enough time to say goodbye to Rhosyn and Canaan, and to collect Siggy.

That part hadn't gone over well. Yrsa had been under the impression her daughter was staying. I'd silently hoped, maybe foolishly, that Siggy would want to come back. That she'd feel safe enough here. That this place, these people who love her, might be enough to pull her home. But fear doesn't let go so easily. Her trauma still

clings to her, its claws sunk too deep for her to feel safe here yet.

Another failure I'll carry with me until I fix it too.

I didn't blame her for choosing Ashvale. I wouldn't have blamed her for choosing anywhere Noa was going.

Yrsa tried to argue, throwing the weight of her alpha designation around more than I was willing to tolerate. With a low warning growl that told her to watch her tone around Noa, she'd adjusted appropriately. But she didn't give up her cause, going on to claim she could protect her own daughter and that the borders were better fortified, thanks to the McNamara enforcers stationed throughout the territory.

A statement that made both Noa and me grimace.

The critical and disappointed look Siggy had sent me over Noa's shoulder told me the young omega was more than aware what it is costing to have those extra guards. It also proved Siggy was just as fiercely protective of Noa as Noa was of her. It was endearing and made me oddly proud of my mate that she's so easily able to bring people into her graces.

Yrsa kept pushing, saying Siggy would be better off in her own bed, here in the safety of her pack. But Noa stood up for her in a way I don't think the alpha female had expected. Calm but unwavering, she told Yrsa it wasn't our choice, it was Siggy's.

Yrsa eventually relented.

Maybe it was Noa's restraint, the way she never once raised her voice. Maybe it was that Canaan and Rhosyn backed her without hesitation, further proof of their fast-growing loyalty to one another. Or maybe, deep down, Yrsa knows what I do—that Siggy trusts Noa in a way that isn't easily earned, in a way that doesn't shift just

because someone else thinks she should feel safe. She found her healing in Ashvale.

In Noa's warm, gentle energy.

That's where she feels safe.

And I can't say I don't understand why.

When Noa left, she looked up at me. Just once. Long enough to knock the air right from my fucking lungs. There was no anger in her expression, no hurt. Just quiet, tired resignation. It's as if she'd made peace with something I'd yet to understand.

And I still don't. The memory of it has been gnawing at me ever since she walked out and didn't glance back at me despite the way I'd silently been pleading with her to.

Even now, with Canaan leaning against the wall near the busted bookshelf and Rhosyn perched on the edge of my desk—seriously, I need to get a damn couch or a couple of chairs in here—we're trying to brainstorm alternatives to the alliance I'm desperate to burn to the ground.

And all I can think about is the look on her face as she left.

She's my mate. That truth lives in every thought I have, every steady, stubborn beat of my heart. It's imprinted into the marrow of me, undeniable and constant—Noa.

And seeing her today only confirmed what I'd figured out too late.

I will never claim someone else in her place. Not for protection. Not for peace. Not even to save my own damn life. Because as long as Noa is out there, breathing, existing, walking this world, there isn't a single part of me that could ever accept another. There's no version of this life, or the next, where I could stomach that kind

oflie. My wolf would destroy them. And I, willingly, viciously, would destroy myself as well.

It's a realization that came too damn late. A mistake so obvious in hindsight, I can't believe how blind I was not to see it sooner. But it's mine now, mine to bear the weight of and mine to fix. Because I will spend every breath from here on out trying to make it right.

To do right by her.

My sweet Noa.

Because the only mark I will allow to grace my throat is hers.

Just the thought of her teeth sinking into my neck, staking her claim, binding us in a way no diamond ring ever could, sends a low jolt down my spine. My cock stirs at the image, thickening with interest, straining against the confines of my faded jeans despite the company in the room. Inappropriate? No question. But fuck, it's the first time in...shit, I can't even remember, that it's responded to anything that wasn't coaxed by my own hand and a tired routine.

It's her.

And the mental visual of her breath on my throat. The brush of her soft lips. The scent of her skin—now sweetened with her awakening omega designation. The thought of her claiming me, fiercely, unapologetically, makes my blood burn hot in my veins, my body hungry in a way I don't ever recall it being. I want to feel the sting of her bite and I want to feel her wrapped around me as I surrender to it.

Because I've never craved anyone like I crave her.

My father used to ask if there was someone special. Every time I came home from college, or during the years when I split my time between here and run the business with Rook, the question always came. And every time, my answer was the same.

I hadn't found anyone worth noticing. My cock had always backed that sentiment up.

I spent those years brushing off offers like they were obligations. Rook, who was never shy with his own conquests, never let it go. "You turning down pussy is starting to feel like a cry for help," he'd say, like I was defective.

But the truth was, it was easy. I didn't want it. Didn't crave what they offered. No matter how eager the attention, how warm the bed, it all felt empty. Mechanical. Jerking off in the shower was easier. More honest. Still is.

And I'm starting to realize it's because it's always been her. Whether I knew it or not, whether I remembered her or not. I think some buried part of me always knew who Noa Alderwood was meant to be to me. It mourned her in silence, even while staying fiercely, stubbornly loyal. Like some part of me—my wolf, my soul—was waiting for someone it couldn't name but deeply missed.

Which just further proves that I need to make this right. I tried to ask her today, tried to find the words. The right ones. I wanted to ask if there was any hope of fixing this. Of repairing the damage I caused in my blind desperation to be the Alpha I thought my people needed. I let duty warp my instincts, twisted myself into someone I barely recognize, all to prove I could protect this pack. That I was worthy of the role I was forced to take.

But the broken way she looked today, standing in front of me days after I turned my back on the most sacred bond I'll ever have...it hasn't left me. And I doubt it ever will. She looked like someone surviving on willpower alone. The guilt crashes through me like cold water, and just like that, the tension in my jeans eases, desire

swallowed by shame.

I'm almost thankful that she hadn't pretended to entertain my questions today on the back deck. She'd cut me off almost instantly before cutting me down with her own brutal truth. It's for the best because I'm not free yet, still tied to McNamara's bargain. The last thing I want is to give Noa hope when I'm still tethered to that smug bastard across the border.

All I wanted to do was take her into my arms, to breathe her in and swear that I'm not going through with it. That I'd sooner burn everything to the ground than mark someone who isn't her. But I can't—not yet. Not without a plan. Not without a damn good alternative.

Because Cathal McNamara is a petty son of a bitch with a glass ego, and I wouldn't put it past him to retaliate the second I back out of our deal. His pride is laughably fragile, and if he even thinks I've embarrassed him—or worse, bruised his precious daughter's feelings—he'll come for blood, just to soothe his own damn insecurities.

So, yeah, I need to be smart. Fast. Thorough. I need backup. And I need leverage, enough to shit in his Cheerios and wreck any shot he has at retaliation before the thought even crosses his petty little mind.

“Nick.”

Rhosyn cuts through my spiral, her voice calm but edged with urgency.

“I got a number for Lowri Craddock while I was in Ashvale,” she says, crossing her arms, her feet ceasing their rhythmic swinging. “Thought maybe we could reach out. See if the she-wolves and maybe the Ashvale witches might be willing to help. Lowri and the High Priestess are together, so if you get one, you're bound to get both of them to help.”

My body tightens, revolting at the very idea of encroaching on Noa's space—her people—for this. Official or not, they are Noa's pack. And besides, would they want to help me and my pack after they stood witness to what I did?

Sensing my hesitation, Canaan pushes off the wall. "You can't afford to be picky right now, man."

He's right, and I hate that he's right. Silently, I agree that if it comes down to it, I will contact Noa's people. I just hope that by doing so, it's not another mark against me in Noa's book.

She told you she would have helped if you'd only given her the chance, a voice in my head reminds me, echoing Noa's words from her justified, shrewdly worded verbal beatdown earlier. She probably would have involved them anyway.

And yet, here I am, feeling like I need permission, like I need to fix at least some of the damage I've done to her before I dare use her connections for my own purposes. It feels selfish. It feels wrong.

My fingers drum once against the desk, then still. I glance between them, heart thudding in my chest as I say the words I've been turning over in the back of my mind for days. "What about Grimm Faolan?"

The room goes quiet. Dead quiet. Rhosyn stares at me like I've sprouted a clown nose, and Canaan lifts his eyebrows before letting out a low whistle, shaking his head slowly like he's torn between disbelief and concern.

"I know I just said we can't be picky," he mutters, "but Faolan? Are you serious? That Alpha is basically feral."

He's not wrong. Grimm Faolan and his Montana-based pack are more beast than

man. From what I've heard, they live half wild, letting their baser instincts govern them. They walk on four paws more often than two feet, and they handle threats the same way a rabid wolf pack would in the wild. By ripping them limb from limb with their teeth.

I thought my father kept our territory isolated, but Grimm puts him to shame. I don't know a single soul who's ever stepped foot on their land and come back with a firsthand account. I only saw Grimm once at a national Alpha summit my father dragged me to when I was sixteen. Even then, the heavily tattooed man radiated something dangerous. Wild. Untouched by politics or pack diplomacy. The most dominant Alphas in the room knew better than to look him in the eye.

But maybe that's exactly what I need. Someone who answers to no one. Who doesn't give a damn about alliances or traditions.

This will only work if he gives a damn about omegas, though.

Canaan's still shaking his head, but eventually he nods with a resigned sigh. He knows as much as I do that we are desperate. I am desperate. "It's crazy, but all right. I'll see if I can dig up a contact number."

Rhosyn adds, "I've been able to make a few contacts myself with other packs' admins. I'll see if anyone knows anything useful about the Faolan Pack." She types notes into her phone as she speaks.

Silence settles again, but my mind's not quiet. It drifts, as it always does, back to her. To Noa.

I let out a long breath, hand tightening into a fist against my thigh. Even if I'm determined to win her back, I can't shake the creeping doubt that she'll ever accept me again.

Inside me, my wolf remains still, but not cold. He lies there, the frayed thread between his paws. And this time, when I reach toward it, he lets me. He doesn't growl or pull away. He watches me. It's a start.

Progress.

The connection is distant, but there. Alive. Humming away, just waiting for me to put it back together again.

I glance up, breaking the silence with the question that's been gnawing at me since the moment I saw her at the outlook.

"How bad was it?"

It's been days since the initial blow, and yet she still looked like she was one strong gust of wind away from blowing over, from dissolving into dust. She moved like everything hurt. If it's still this bad now, how bad was it when they first got her out of that clearing.

The mated pair look lost at first by my question, but as it dawns on them, their faces pull tight. The disappointment and disgust that had been slowly easing since they got back slams back into place, full force, like I've ripped the scab off all over again.

Rhosyn doesn't answer with words at first.

She just smacks the side of my head.

Hard.

"Bad, you fucking idiot, it's bad," she snaps, her voice thick with frustration. "I adore you—as my Alpha and my friend—but you fucked up, Nick. You fucked up so

bad .”

I nod, slow and stiff. “I’m going to make it right.”

“Well, you’d better work fast,” she shoots back, arms crossed. “You saw what she looks like.”

I did. And it’s burned into me now. A part of me that I will carry everywhere I go.

“I didn’t know a broken bond would do that to her,” I say quietly, the words tasting like rust in my mouth. It’s not an excuse, I know that. I’m not trying to make one. It’s just the truth. “I didn’t realize it could be like this. I...I just didn’t know.”

“You’re right. You didn’t,” she says, tone softer now. But there’s something in her voice. Guilt, maybe, or pity, that makes my skin crawl. She hesitates, looking at her mate briefly, before she speaks again, and when she does, her voice carries the weight of something I don’t want to hear. “It’s more than just a broken mate bond, Nick. She has rejected mate syndrome.”

My heart stops.

She keeps going, like the words will hurt less if she gets them out quickly.

“She didn’t reject you back, her side of the bond is making her he’s wasting away.”

I don’t fucking breathe. Can’t.

My wolf lifts his head, howling in agony.

It’s the only warning I get before he rips out of my skin.

Chapter 27

Noa

By the time we get home to the manor, I'm pretty sure I'm being held together by a piece of chewed bubblegum and a whisper of hope. Neither of which are known for their structural integrity. And, honestly, I don't even know what part of today was supposed to give me that ridiculous emotion in the first place. It sure as hell wasn't my conversation with Zora, I can tell you that much.

And there are pieces I really wish I didn't know.

I've started putting the puzzle together, thanks to Zora, but there are still missing parts. And some of what I've managed to uncover? I selfishly wish I could have stayed blissfully in the dark about.

Like the part where Seren might have known.

I'm fortunate in a lot of ways, I know that, but I've also had more than my fair share of things ripped out from under me. Not lost...stolen. And through it all, I thought if nothing else, I could count on my trust in my best friend to hold. Unshakable. Incorruptible.

A part of me doesn't want to ask. Doesn't want to hear it out loud. I'm already too worn out to take on the weight of betrayal from the one person I thought I had left to count on. But I have to know. Seren's lived through a rejected fated bond, she knows firsthand how it works. Which makes it really damn hard to believe she didn't know

what would happen if I didn't say those words back to him. Even if some naive, desperate part of me, the part that's been white-knuckling it since we left Pack Fallamhain's gates, still wants to believe otherwise.

I wait for the soft click of the cellar door to shut behind Siggy. Count to ten—Mississippi style—in my head, just to be safe. She'd said she wanted to head down to her nest for a little while, claimed she needed to unwind after today, which makes sense. Facing her home. Her mother. Carly's mother. That's more than enough to send anyone retreating into their safest space.

And if anyone deserves peace right now, it's Siggy.

I sent her down with a mug of hot chocolate—yes, her second of the day—and told her I'd be close by if she needed me. But this conversation? This one doesn't belong anywhere near her ears. She's got enough to carry without adding my shit to the pile. Seren's her friend too. Someone she leans on. And Siggy needs every ounce of support she can get if she's going to keep healing. I won't be the reason she starts questioning one of the only people she's started to trust.

So, I wait.

Then I turn away from the kettle, turning off the burner as I do, because I had zero intentions of drinking any tea. I just needed something to do with my hands while I waited for Siggy to quickly catch up with Seren before excusing herself.

Also? I'm officially tea-ed out.

It's felt like the last few days that every time I've turned a corner or just sat down, Seren, or even Rhosyn, was there offering me a new cup of tea. Canaan didn't bother with tea, he just continued on with his campaign for protein shakes. Yeah, no thanks, dude. I think I'd rather just sip on my own hot tears at this point. He didn't listen

when I told him that just because there's a chocolate chip cookie decorating the bottle, it does not mean that chalky shit is going to taste like a baked good.

I gaze at the familiar kitchen before my eyes land on Seren. She's perched on the antique workbench we use as an island, her pale blue gaze already locked on to me. Not a surprise. Her empathic charmer gift probably picked up on my spiral the second I pulled into the driveway.

She doesn't speak. Doesn't ask me a question or pry for answers. She waits.

I hate how long it takes me to get the words out, but finally I manage to push them out, proud that I'm able to avoid infusing them with the riot of emotions warring within me.

"Did you know?"

Seren's brows knit in confusion, her head tilting slightly. "Know what, babe?"

I swallow against the tight, aching knot in my throat. My next words come out softer, raspier, some of my resolve slipping.

"Did you know what would happen to me if I didn't reciprocate his rejection?"

Her face drains of color. Her mouth parts, but no sound comes out. And then her eyes fill with regret so thick it nearly chokes me. Her chin wobbles, and she blinks hard before turning away.

I should have told her sooner. I never should have kept it from her. Mistake. Mistake. Mistake.

Her agonized voice floats through the tense air between us, coiling up like a dark fog

of despair in my mind. Before I have time to comment on it, she opens her mouth and says aloud, “Yes...I knew.”

The betrayal I was anticipating slams into me. My already broken body feels like it might buckle under the weight of it. My knees ache from holding me up.

“ Why? ” The word rips out of me, rough and raw, before I can stop it.

Seren shakes her head, and tears start to fall.

“Amara...” she says, voice cracking.

Of all the names she could’ve said, that’s the one I never saw coming.

“What?”

“Amara told me not to,” she explains. “She said it was part of the plan when I tried to ask her about it...after. And I knew how much you and Thalassa, especially, trusted her. I was trying to do the same, Noa. I swear I was. I thought she was right.” She looks me over then. I can feel her gaze cataloguing the damage. Every hollowed-out piece. Every unraveling thread. “I tried to tell you in the clearing. That day. I tried, but she told me not to. And I listened. I shouldn’t have. If I knew it would go this far—if I knew you’d suffer like this—I would’ve told her to go to hell.”

My trembling hand rises to my temple, fingers pressing into my skull like the pressure might somehow soothe the pounding ache that’s taken up residence there.

“I don’t...” My voice trails off, the words dissolving into the air as I try to make sense of yet another puzzle piece I never wanted to find. “I don’t understand. What fucking plan is she talking about?”

Seren sits up straighter, the familiar fire lighting behind her eyes. “Yeah! That’s what I wanted to know too. Which is why I marched my happy little ass over to her house today while you were out with Siggy. Actually, I went over there to rip her a new one, because whatever this ‘endgame’ is, it’s bullshit. It’s not working, and I’m done playing along.”

That sharp, protective edge I’ve always associated with her pours off her in waves. It fits her better than the version who kept this from me. That other Seren—the one who sat on something this big—I don’t know who she is. But this? This I recognize. This I still trust.

“She told me it wasn’t even her plan,” Seren continues, eyes wide with frustration. “She said it was Thalassa’s. Your mom’s. And of course she was vague as hell about it. But she said your bond to Rennick was ‘the key to undoing her binds.’ Whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean.”

Why does it feel like everyone around me has answers I don’t? Like I’m the only one fumbling in the dark while they play along with rules that were never explained to me?

And why does everything always lead back to the same two people?

Rennick and Mom.

Seren might not understand what Amara meant, but I do. If what Zora and I pieced together is right—if my mother really did bind my wolf, tamper with my memories, leave behind these vague dreams like cryptic instruction manuals—then what Amara said wasn’t just a riddle. It was confirmation.

“Whatever Mom did to my wolf and my memories, I think...” I drag my fingers through my hair, breathing hard through my nose. “I think she tied it to him. To the

bond. I think accepting Rennick, completing the bond, is the only way to undo what she did. To get it all back—my wolf, my memories, everything she took.”

Seren stares at me, stunned, her mouth parting, but no words coming. The confusion and guilt swimming across her face say enough.

“I beg your finest pardon ?”

Oh, yeah . Right .

She didn’t know.

“I’m really fucking mad at you, Ser,” I snap, hands dropping limply to my sides, the weight of it all dragging me down. I know I need her help more than I need to cling to this grudge. I’ll come back to it later, let the anger breathe when it’s safe to. But right now? I need to get this shit out.

All of it.

“I know,” she whispers, wincing. “I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“Yeah...” I sigh, lowering myself onto one of the kitchen chairs. “Seems to be a lot of that going around lately.”

She doesn’t ask what I mean. She doesn’t need to.

She just nods.

And I inhale, steadying myself, ready to lay it all out. Everything I know, everything I don’t and everything in between. Because I can’t carry this alone. And despite her lie, I still want it to be her who helps me hold the pieces. She’s my person, and we

don't get a lot of those in life.

"You have to tell him, Noa."

Seren's voice rings in my head, just as desperate and afraid as it had been in the kitchen many hours ago when she first said it.

She'd said it after I spilled everything—every twisted, tangled thread Zora helped me pull free. I told her Rennick had been right. That Mom had used her weaver magic to bind my wolf, to twist my memories of those final days in Pack Fallamhain, making me believe we were exiled because I was latent. I told her that more memories, especially the ones tied to Rennick, had been tampered with too. And how I'm almost certain now that Mom knew he was my fated mate even then, that something must've happened, something big enough to make her tear us apart.

It wasn't just the shifting she stole when she bound my wolf. It was my designation, my charmer gifts, everything that made me me.

Her eyes had nearly fallen out of her head when I told her I'm an oracle.

"Well, fuck, I should have guessed that when you said you were hearing voices," she'd offhandedly commented with an apologetic grimace. "Probably a bit of a relief to know you're not actually losing your noodle, huh? Not to freak you out, though, but it's probably going to start feeling like you're part of a psychic group chat that you were added to against your will. And there's no silencing your notifications. Buckle up, buttercup, shit's a wild ride."

Then I explained how being near Rennick after all these years cracked the first fissure in the binds, and how every second I spend around him weakens them further. Because like Amara had told her, he is the key.

Whether I want him to be or not.

That was enough to shake her. But it wasn't what broke her.

What broke her was the rest.

I laid out what comes next. That when the binds lift completely, my suppressed omega instincts won't just resurface, they'll crash down all at once in what Zora called a "super heat". Which is possibly the most horrifying combination of words anyone's ever said to me. Seven years' worth of suppressed cycles, all detonating at the same time.

And with my body this weakened, already breaking down, there's no surviving something like that.

That's when the fear in Seren's face turned into full-on panic. Her calm cracked. She looked at me like I was already dying. I could see it sinking in, just how close I might be to leaving her.

When I told her there was one thing that might give me the strength to make it through the intense heat and stop the slow decay—a completed mating bond; his mark—her expression changed again. It lit up. With that pesky little bitch hope .

Hope I crushed immediately.

She stared at me like I'd lost my damn mind.

"You're not thinking clearly, the pain and hurt from the rejection is fucking with your mind. He has to know, Noa. You have to tell him so he can help you," she pleaded, tears spilling down her face. "His bite will get you through it. It will save you. You have to see that."

I took her hands in mine, voice hoarse and low. “I was already a sacrifice Rennick was willing to make. I won’t allow myself to become an obligation he’s bound to as well.”

You can’t get wrecked by rejection if you never put yourself in the position to be rejected in the first place. And even if I could set my pride aside and resign myself to being an obligation, how the hell am I supposed to look that man in the eye, tell him I probably won’t survive this, and then hand him the solution like it’s his responsibility to save me?

How do I trust him with my life, with my heart, with the last fraying pieces of my soul when he’s the reason they’re broken to begin with?

She tried to argue. Of course she did.

But I reminded her that Rennick chose his duty. Chose his omegas. And I, of all people, can respect that kind of choice.

That’s when she snapped, jumping up from her chair.

“You’re almost as bad as he is,” she seethed. The fury in her voice didn’t quite match the heartbreak leaking from her eyes. “You’re a stubborn twat, Noa Alderwood, and it’s going to get you killed.”

Then she left to pick up Ivey from Edie, leaving me to carry my crumbling body and my many emotional wounds up two flights of stairs to my attic bedroom.

I decided I was done for the day.

I thought sleep might give me something. A break. Maybe my mother would send another dream, another clue she’d embedded in the tangled mess of my mind. But

sleep is a petty little shit and refused to come. I lay there for hours, sifting through every thought, every revelation, until I couldn't take it anymore.

Now it's hours away till sunrise. I'm curled up on the chaise lounge in the garden that is basically a glorified outdoor bed, wrapped in two blankets, thick sweats, and not one but two hoodies. One of them being Rennick's green one. At this point, I've basically turned into a child dragging around her emotional support blankie. And yeah, I know how pathetic that sounds. I just don't have it in me to care.

This spot, on the back edge of our fairly large backyard, was one of my mother's favorite places. She'd lie out here during the warm months, sun on her face, plants blooming all around her. She looked so peaceful.

But now that I know about her weavings, about her lies, about the drastic steps she took to take me away from Pack Fallamhain and Rennick, I have to wonder if she ever knew what peace was.

Did she spend our years here waiting for all her intricately placed threads to unravel?

She knew it would all fall apart one day, though, that's why she left the fail-safe in her spell by making Rennick the key.

That thought has been eating at me for hours.

If reuniting with my mate was always part of her plan, if she knew I'd find him again and complete the bond, then who was she really trying to keep me from? Because if it wasn't him ...what the hell was she so afraid of?

I lean my head back and stare up at the sky. The clouds are still heavy and gray, churning like they're thinking about snowing but haven't made up their mind yet. The cold in the air says it's quickly becoming a stronger possibility, that if it were to drop

a few more degrees, the flurries would begin.

My fingers, hidden deep in the oversized pocket of Rennick's hoodie, are slowly going numb, joints locking up in the cold. My nose is already a lost cause, numb and burning all at once. But I let the chill in. Welcome it, even.

It suits me.

My insides have been frozen since the second that bond tore itself from my chest. The rest of me is just catching up. Cold, aching, empty. It's a kind of pain I've gotten used to. And that's probably the saddest part of all this, how quickly I've adapted to hurting.

I breathe in through my nose, hoping to catch the scent of the oncoming snow, but the air is blank. My senses are dulled. Even the familiar trace of him on this hoodie is almost gone now.

Some part of me mourns it, quietly heartbroken, but it's like it expected the loss. Knew it'd be like everything else that's been fading lately.

My eyes close, lashes brushing against wind-chilled skin. I don't think. I just lie here. Just breathe. Just exist.

And then I hear it.

Crunch.

A step. Subtle, but distinct. A crunch against the dry grass somewhere near the trees that sit around the fence line.

The sound snaps me upright. My body stiffens, aching muscles dragging into motion

on instinct. The rational part of my brain reminds me there's no real reason to panic. If anything had made it past Ashvale's borders, the coven or Lowri's pack would've dealt with it, or at the very least, someone would have warned me.

At this, my icy fingers slip into my sweatpants pocket and curl around my phone. I leave them there, knowing it'll vibrate if anyone tries to reach me, because there's another part of me that's been quietly preparing and anticipating the day one of our Nightingale's—old and new—might lead the past or darkness they're running from right to our doorstep.

My body, numb just moments ago, jerks with a wave of shivers. Heat moves across my skin, sudden and unfamiliar, pushing back the cold I've gotten used to. For one breath, I let myself feel it, the absence of that constant, aching emptiness.

That's when I see him, standing about fifteen feet away, just beyond the edge of the garden, half hidden by the shadows cast by the trees.

A wolf. Massive. Still. Attention locked on me.

His fur is black and silver, but from here I can't make out many distinctive patterns. Only that his legs, muzzle, and spine seem to be where a lot of the darker fur is concentrated. It's his eyes I'm focused on anyway. The silver-blue seems to glow in this lighting, even though I know it's not possible. It's a ghostly shade I recognize.

I don't need his scent. Or his voice.

I know.

Rennick.

My breath catches, lodged somewhere between my ribs and my throat, like breathing

alone might have the power to erase him. To make the dark, daunting shape vanish into smoke and float away in the cold breeze. That maybe I've finally snapped under the strain, and this is my mind playing some cruel, desperate trick on me. That the empty space where the bond used to live is still raw, bleeding, and it's been screaming for him for days. Maybe it got loud enough to conjure him.

I blink once. Twice. Three times.

He doesn't fade. Doesn't flicker or disappear. He's still there, solid, unmoving, a massive shape carved out of the shadows, with those pale eyes I know too well. And the way he's watching me, quiet and unblinking, I almost wonder if he's questioning my reality the same way I'm questioning his.

It isn't until I finally let go of the breath I've been holding hostage that he moves.

And that's when I know he's not a fragment of my imagination.

I don't let myself wonder how or why he's here. The fact that he is, is already too much.

His gaze softens. His head dips, and the sharp points of his ears ease back, not pinned in aggression, just angled low in something that feels like caution. The shift in his posture is subtle, but the energy around him changes. There's no threat in the way he moves, only soundless tension, like even he's nervous to be here. Unsure of how I'll react.

He lifts a massive paw—I'm not being dramatic when I say it looks like it's as big as my face—and takes a step toward me. It's hesitant. Cautious. Measured in a way that doesn't match his size.

I sit like a piece of stone.

He moves like I might bolt. Every step careful and deliberate like he knows one wrong move could send me running. And maybe he's right. Maybe I should be afraid. I should feel the urge to turn and get as far away from him as possible.

But I don't.

The wolf inside me, still bound, still pressing against the thinning walls of whatever spell my mom used to trap her, doesn't want to run. She's alert but not panicked. Not warning me to flee from him.

She's reaching.

I feel her straining forward with something between desperation and joy. Like she knows the creature in front of us didn't break us— he did. The man inside. The one who was too consumed by his sense of duty to choose us.

She knows him and she wants this. Wants him. Always has.

Because even if my memories of Rennick were altered, some part of her never forgot him. She longed for him, kept her distance from other men, loyal in a way I didn't fully understand until now. Loyal to the man. Loyal to the wolf. Always.

I can't tell if Rennick is in control of what's happening right now, or if his wolf has taken the reins completely. Is he just along for the ride, his wolf taking the lead while he hangs back from somewhere deep inside? Did he surrender control willingly, or did his wolf take it from him?

If this animal in front of me staged a coup against Rennick, I swear to the Goddess, how will I ever be strong enough to stay away from him myself?

But the thought fades as he steps over the low hedge that separates us, his huge frame

cutting through the space with careful grace. It shouldn't be possible for someone built like him to move so delicately. He approaches slowly, not once breaking eye contact, until he's standing right in front of the lounge chair where I'm curled up like something fragile and fading.

Up close, he's even bigger than I remember. I wonder, if I were to stand up, would our eyes be level? I'd bet money on it. I've mostly been around omegas and she-wolves for years. My wolf's very obvious and sometimes visceral reaction to the male population influenced me to keep my distance. I must've forgotten how large alpha males really are when they shift. Or maybe it's just him .

He holds my gaze without flinching or yielding, but there's no pressure in it. Just quiet patience. The choice is mine, and he won't take it from me. When I don't move, still locked in place and unsure how to breathe, he releases a low, almost pleading whine. The sound hits somewhere beneath my ribs, striking a place that's already too exposed to protect. Then, slowly, he lowers his head and rests it in front of my crossed legs on the cushion like an offering. Like he's waiting to be accepted and willing to wait forever if he has to.

Still, I don't move. I want to, but the uncertainty coursing through me has me hesitating.

So, he shuffles forward, closing more of the space between us, and nudges my shin with the tip of his nose. A touch that's gentle, tentative. A question that doesn't need words to be asked.

My hand trembles as I pull it free from the warm cocoon of my pants pocket. The cold hits instantly, sharp and biting, like it's punishing me for leaving the comfort of warmth behind. My fingers hesitate, stiff and unsure, curling in toward my palm before slowly stretching out again.

I don't know what I'm expecting—rejection, maybe, even in this form—but the stillness of him, the quiet patience, nudges something in me that I can't keep ignoring.

So I give in.

I let my hand settle gently on top of his head, fingertips slipping into the thick fur between his ears. It's warm. Dense. Softer than I imagined. My fingers twitch, overwhelmed by the simple contact. Before I can fully register what he feels like beneath my touch, he makes a sound that steals the air from my lungs.

A low, steady rumble vibrates through him. Quiet but undeniable.

A purr.

He's purring. Because of me.

No. For me.

The sound ripples through me, reaching some long-buried, long-silent part I didn't realize was still listening. Something locked deep inside me opens its eyes and stretches. The warmth of it is immediate, like sunshine on a frozen winter morning. My own wolf, trapped and quiet for too long, stirs with elation. She recognizes this. Recognizes him.

I move slowly, fingers tracing the space between his eyes. His lids flutter closed, breath catching in what sounds almost like relief. I glide over the fuzzy points of his ears, and they twitch under my touch, the reaction pulling a small smile from my mouth before I can stop it. It's not a forced smile, one I feel like I have to fight for. It's real.

My hand moves down, fingers sinking into the thick fur of his scruff. I can feel the rhythm of his heart beneath all that muscle and strength. It's steady, content.

And as I sit here, touching him— really touching him—I realize something I didn't expect.

I'm not hurting.

The heat that flourished from his first rumbling purr has spread, the warmth pooling into all the crevices I didn't realize were also hollow. The cold retreats. The ache loosens its grip. The constant weight pressing down on my thoughts eases just enough to let me breathe. For the first time since the clearing, I don't feel broken. I don't feel gone. I feel here. Present. Alive.

I can breathe and it doesn't feel like a task. Doesn't feel like I have to earn it.

Tears slip down my cheeks before I know they've started, they sculpt paths down frozen wind-chilled skin. I don't try to stop them. I don't wipe them away. I just let them fall, like a symbol of my pain leaving my body.

He lifts his head, like he can sense the shift in me, the quiet way I've come undone. His nose twitches, no doubt scenting the salt from my tears, and without missing a beat, he leans in and licks them from my face.

I jerk back slightly, caught off guard. The sound that escapes me is something between a yelp and a laugh. It sticks in my throat for a second, but then another one follows, softer this time, a little unsteady, but genuine. It's my first true laugh since the clearing, and it feels good.

He watches me, pulling back just enough to meet my gaze. Then he lets out a soft, questioning whine before leaning in again, this time pressing his face into the curve

of my neck.

My heart skips a beat when he inhales deeply, breathing my scent in directly from the source like he's trying to drown himself in it. Like he's been waiting an eternity to do so.

I bring both hands up, sinking them into the thick fur along his neck, holding him there without a word while he breathes me in like he's trying to memorize every piece of me.

Maybe it's delusional. Maybe it's temporary. But I let myself believe it. I stay still and let myself feel him against me. If this is what peace feels like—this warmth, this quiet, this stillness that doesn't ache—I'll take it. Even if it's only for a minute.

I keep my hands moving, slow and steady, stroking through the thick fur along his neck and shoulders, down the side of his broad back. Every part of him that I can reach, I touch. My fingers sink into warmth and softness, anchoring me to this moment and to him.

He stays quiet, except for that low, rumbling purr. It never stops. It vibrates against my cold skin, seeps into my heavy bones, and injects a quiet calm straight into my nervous system. A sedative wrapped in the shape of my would-be mate.

The exhaustion I've been fighting for hours, the one I longed for earlier tonight but had run from me, starts to press in. It dulls my senses, makes the edges of the world go quiet. I try to fight it. Not because I'm afraid, but because I don't want to lose this. The weight of him pressed against my chest and shoulder. The heat he radiates like a furnace. The way his presence is stitching pieces of me back together just by existing near me.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, a soft vibration against my thigh. I don't move.

It's probably Lowri or Amara, letting me know that someone made it past the wards. That there's been a breach. But I already know. He's here.

Which I'm sure they already know, too.

But he's also not a threat. At least not in the way they're worried about.

Physical danger isn't what he brings with him. Emotional damage? That's still up in the air, a lingering possibility that nags the fuzzy parts of my fading mind. But I'm too tired to care right now.

He pulls back from my neck slowly, like he's reluctant to leave. I feel the last brush of his breath before he steps back and pushes off the ground in a clean, quiet motion. He lands beside me on the lounge with barely a sound. He doesn't lie down, not yet, instead he nudges me with his snout. Not roughly, not urgently. Just enough to make a point.

I get it.

I ease down until I'm lying back, limbs sinking into the cushion. He curls along my side with one large paw resting across my hips like a weighted blanket I never knew I needed. His warmth surrounds me, so full and steady that I almost forget what it feels like to be cold.

When he rests his head on my chest, something inside me exhales.

It's not a dramatic release. Not some whimsical undoing. Just a small, quiet shift. One I don't try to stop. My hand moves slowly, brushing along his jaw, over the edges of his ears, across the soft fur at his temple. His purr deepens, thrumming through my chest like a lullaby made just for me.

I can feel sleep pulling me under now, heavier with every breath. My eyes fight to stay open, but they're losing. I let them. My last thought before the dark takes me is a selfish one. I wish this could last.

I wish he was mine to keep.

I wish I could stay whole.

Chapter 28

Rennick

It happened in a blink. One moment I was sitting in my office, barely holding it together in front of my second and his mate, and the next, I was gone. His anguished howl tearing through my mind at a deafening octave was the only warning I got. There was no time to brace myself, no moment to prepare.

My wolf didn't rise slowly or ask for control. He detonated.

There was no growl of protest. No building heat. Just a violent, consuming shift that ripped through skin and bone like I was nothing more than a barrier in his way. I didn't shift, I was conquered. He forced his way out, and I became a spectator inside my own body, helpless as he seized full control.

I'd never surrendered to him before. Not completely. Not like that. We'd always moved in harmony, a shared cadence, mutual understanding. But this? This was something else. This was a primal instinct. Desperation and rage rolled into one.

And he was running.

One destination, one singular goal in mind.

To get to her.

His omega. Our fated mate.

I was just a passenger, unable to do anything but hold on while my wolf tore across the terrain like if he moved fast enough, he could outrun my mistakes. My crimes against her. Trees and mountains whipped by in a blur of shadow and earth as he charged east, toward the quaint Washington town on the other side of the state line. He didn't stop, rarely slowed, the gut-wrenching truth spoken by Rhosyn his motivation—the thing that fueled his overexerted muscles, and the thing made him abandon his self-imposed isolation in the first place.

Rejected mate syndrome.

I'd heard the phrase in passing before, a rare and brutal condition. But I'd never known what it looked like. Never thought I'd be the one to cause it.

Now it was another thing I was going to have to find a way to fix—to heal—whatever it takes.

The streets of Ashvale were quiet and still by the time we reached the sleepy town. Which wasn't surprising given the late hour. My wolf moved fast, traveling through the wooded edges of the town until we found it. The dark burgundy Victorian home that sat at the end of a street, set back into the trees and the narrow river down below.

Her scent hit us before we reached the manor.

It acted as a beacon, calling us in.

But as we approached the front walk, my wolf lifted his nose to the crisp air and breathed in deep. Her scent wasn't coming from inside the house like it should have been, though. No, it was coming from out back.

The fence wasn't much. Ornate ironwork, tall but decorative—easy to clear even in my wolf form. I landed silent on the other side and padded through the backyard,

keeping to the shadows as best I could. I hadn't been expecting it to be so big. It felt more like a garden than a yard, with winding stone paths, raised beds, bare vines twisted up wooden trellises. I imagined it would be beautiful come spring, full of color and scent.

But it was the far corner that stopped me cold.

There she was.

A listless shape, tucked beneath thick blankets, curled so small it barely looked like a person at all. Seeing her like that—out in the cold instead of inside where it was warm and safe—made something crack open in my chest at the sight of her. My wolf went deathly still. The sight before us had been so wrong, it made my skin pull too tight and my stomach twist to the point of pain.

And then, like the absolute idiot I am, I'd thought, Why is she out here? What happened to put her here like this?

The answer was instant and brutal.

You did, you fucking dumbass.

I'd caused this. My rejection. My cowardice. My stubbornness. All of it had driven her out here. In the dark. In the cold. Alone.

My wolf made sure not to approach her too suddenly. Instead, he stepped on a twig. The crack loud enough to break the quiet stillness of the space. Noa had stiffened and pulled herself into a seated position, a movement that looked like it took more energy than it should have.

Her unique gaze swept across the yard until it landed on my wolf.

She stared back, disbelieving and hesitant, as if she was having trouble trusting what she was seeing, that she couldn't find it within herself to believe that my wolf—and I—would have bothered to come for her and this must just be a trick of her imagination. It stung, but I understood it.

My wolf felt just as uncertain now that he was almost within touching distance of her. Uncertainty coursed through his mind and muscles, scared that she wouldn't want him there. That she'd send us away. He had no intention of going anywhere, regardless, but he wanted her to want him there. Craved her acceptance.

He braced for her disgust...her rejection.

But it didn't come.

She just sat there, unmoving, looking at him, so he took it slow. Each step forward was deliberate and measured so she could count each lift of his paws if she wanted to. He stopped before the bed-like lounge she'd curled up on, close enough that she could reach out to him if she wanted to, but she remained frozen.

So, he'd dropped his head, resting it on the cushion before her crossed legs. A silent plea. Not a demand. Just the hope that maybe she'd reach out to us. At the same time, it was a sign of submission most alphas would balk at, but he was so far beyond caring about such trivial things like projecting his dominance.

The only thing that mattered to him was bridging the gap I'd created between us. My wolf cared deeply about our pack, about our people—the omegas under our care—but he cared about her more. The ancient council member Oswin voice echoed in my head like a bitter lesson learned too late, his words sharp. “An Alpha's loyalty to his pack should be second to only one. His mate.”

I should have listened.

Right then, I made the vow again—not just to her, but to myself. I would put Noa first. Her needs, her happiness, her life would come before everything else. I'd still lead my pack. Still protect them. But my omega...she would come before everything else. Just like she should have from the beginning.

When her hand finally came down—fingertips caressing my wolf's head—it felt like breathing after holding it too long. My wolf had gone still under her touch, reverent. She didn't pull away. She kept going, petting him in slow strokes over his head, between his ears, across his neck and shoulders. Everywhere she could reach. And I...I stayed still and let it wash over me. Even watching from the back seat of my own body, I felt every graze of her hand like it was meant for me alone.

In that moment, I've never been more thankful for my animal half. Because of him, I felt genuine hope for the first time all week.

The purr that rumbled from my chest wasn't just his. It was mine. That sound, low, steady, content, a sound I've only ever made once before. And it was for her. Only for Noa. Forever.

She looked so tired. Like she hadn't slept in days. The circles under her eyes were almost black and blue bruises, and I knew if she didn't rest soon, her already weakened body would betray her. My wolf knew it too. Which is why we'd curled up beside her, our body draped half over hers. She didn't flinch. Didn't tense. Just let go.

She'd fallen asleep fast. The kind of sleep that only comes when you feel safe enough to stop pretending you're fine. She never shivered despite the chill in the air. My wolf's heat kept her warm, tucked against him like she belonged there.

Because she did.

My wolf never slept. He closed his eyes, but he stayed alert. Breathing her in,

guarding her, refusing to let exhaustion take him under. And I let him. Because I knew, deep down, that this was the only thing either of us had gotten right all week.

The first snowflakes started falling just before dawn. Just a few. Light, slow. But it was enough. I knew it couldn't last. She needed to go inside. Needed more than a wolf curled around her and the open sky above her. And that meant I had to shift back. I had to take over.

But my wolf didn't want to let go. Not yet.

So I made promises. Quietly, teetering on desperately. Over and over. I told him I would protect her. That I would care for her. That I would make this right. Not just tonight. Not just until she was safe inside. But every day after. I swore I'd fix the bond, that I'd fight for her until there was nothing left in me to give. I'd do whatever it took.

Eventually—reluctantly—like he still isn't sure if he can believe me, he lets go.

Next to her, I shift back.

She's tucked in close against me, fast asleep, her breath slow and even. The lines of pain and exhaustion that haunted her face are gone now, softened into something I'm almost too scared to call peace. It settles something sharp and edgy in my chest. It doesn't erase the guilt, but it gives me a second of stillness I didn't think I'd get. A glimpse of the girl she was before I ruined her. A glimpse of who she could be if I repair the damage.

But that calm is hard to hold on to with her pressed up against my heated, naked skin. My body reacts on instinct, blood surging low to my cock—my knot—before I can stop it. It's not the time or place, and I hate the way it betrays me, but there's no stopping it. She's an omega curled into her alpha, even if we're not bonded—not

properly. Not anymore.

I'm grateful for the layers of fabric between us, even if they don't do much to dull the ache.

One of those layers is my hoodie.

The green one.

I'd noticed it earlier, even before I shifted back, how she'd wrapped herself in it like it was a shield against the ache. It hadn't escaped my notice that she'd been wearing it when she left my house yesterday, that she'd chosen—consciously or not—to steal it. I guess it's not really stealing when I'd secretly hoped her budding omega instincts would encourage her to keep it when I'd first draped it around her. It was a breadcrumb, a silent offering I hadn't had the courage to speak aloud.

The scent of me on it is fading, stale. I can tell. And I make a quiet promise to myself, in the faintest light of dawn, to fix that. To replace it or, better yet, leave behind a version of myself that doesn't drift away so easily. Maybe that won't happen today, but it will.

I lift my hand, slow and almost timidly, and let my fingers trace the curve of her cheek. Her skin is cool to the touch, but nowhere near as cold as it would have been if I hadn't kept myself wrapped around her while she slept. She stirs at the contact, leans into it in her sleep like she's chasing more of it. It's intimate and cleaves something open in me.

I tell myself not to do it, but I do.

I lower my head and press the barest kiss to her temple, like it might shatter her if I'm not careful. Her lips part on a sigh, and something deep in my chest stirs. The

bond—frayed and bleeding but still hanging on—vibrates in quiet response.

It's still there. She's still mine.

I give myself one last minute to enjoy the stillness of this moment, then I force myself to move, slipping from the lounge without waking her. She doesn't stir, not even when I gently pull one of the blankets from her body and wrap it around my waist. An improvised solution in case I run into someone inside. I know Seren and Siggy live here full-time, but I don't know where they sleep or if anyone else has taken up residence in this house. Noa didn't give me the space to pry for such information—her boundary clearly in place—so I hadn't.

I move slowly, carefully, as I gather her into my arms. She's far too light, too fragile, but she fits against me so easily it physically causes a pain to bloom behind my sternum. My heart. She lets out a soft, unsettled whine, unmistakably omega, the kind that calls out to my alpha instincts. My chest rumbles with a soft purr in answer, and it soothes her instantly. Her head tucks beneath my chin, her breath brushing my skin, and her body goes still again. I hold her tighter, unwilling to tolerate even the air coming between us.

Carrying her feels natural, grounding. I shoulder through the back door and step into the sunroom. I follow the light streaming through a set of cracked French doors and step into the manor's kitchen. It's updated but maintains that original charm of the Victorian era. The walls are painted a dark green that makes the space feel inviting and the vintage pendants above the workbench fill the room with dim, warm light that shines on the hanging dried herbs, mismatched jars, and everything else that makes the room feel lived in. The kitchen reminds me more of an apothecary than a place to cook, but there's something comforting in it. It's the heart of her home and it screams of... her .

It makes me—maybe foolishly—wonder what she'll do to my house. How she'll

change it. What she'll claim and make hers. Because she can have free rein. I couldn't care less what color the walls are or what ridiculous pattern she chooses for the damn throw pillows on the sectional. If she's living there, coexisting with me as my mate, my omega, my Goddess-given Luna, she can paint the ceilings neon orange and leave her witchy shit in every corner of the place, for all I care. Hell, I'll hand her my credit card with a smile on my face if it means she makes it ours. Hers. A space that feels like her personal touch is in every aspect of it. A space that feels like a home and not just a house.

I'm about to search for the stairs when a sweet scent cuts through the quiet—peony and white tea.

I turn, my body tensing instinctively.

Seren steps into one of the arched doorways that decorate either end of the long kitchen. With a cup of chamomile tea in her right hand that looks untouched and cold by the lack of steam, she leans against the doorframe. It's a movement that screams of fought-for restraint. It's the look that borders somewhere between grief and barely contained rage in her pale blue eyes that validates this thinking. Her unwavering eye contact is bold for an omega. I find I can't help but respect her confidence.

She breaks through the silence first.

"I went to check on her and found her room empty," she says. Her voice is calm, but I can hear the edge beneath it. "Thought she'd run off to do something recklessly altruistic since that seems to be where her head is these days." She pauses, exhaling through her nose as she looks past me toward the sunroom. I don't have a chance to ask what she means when she adds, "I wasn't surprised to find her outside. Her mom used to do the same thing when she couldn't sleep. But Thalassa, at least, had the sense not to do it when winter wasn't edging us."

She's clearly agitated, frustrated, but it's just as obvious that it's coming from a place of unfathomable fear for her best friend.

Her gaze returns to mine and sharpens.

"I was surprised to find you with her, Alpha," she adds, and the title is laced with enough disdain to make it feel like a slur.

"I found her out there when I got here," I say, adjusting my hold on Noa, who remains blissfully unaware of the tension in the room. Good. She needs to sleep as long as her body will allow her. "I made sure she stayed warm."

"How noble of you."

I bristle but bite my tongue. Seren's been here on the front lines, no doubt scrambling to glue the pieces of her best friend together.

She tilts her head slightly, lips pressing into a thin line. "And what exactly are you doing here, anyway, Fallamhain? You didn't choose Noa, remember? You turned your back on her. So, what else could you possibly want from her now? Or are you some kind of sick sadist who just likes seeing his handiwork up close?"

It's my turn to scowl at her, my wolf stiffening and his ears pinning to his head as a warning snarl builds in the back of my throat.

"Watch it..." I caution.

She doesn't heed my warning. The blonde omega shoves off the doorway and marches forward a few steps. It's clear her devastation on behalf of her friend is fueling her right now. "She doesn't have anything left to give you. You already took everything! So why the fuck are you here?"

At her raised voice, Noa shifts in my arms, another pitiful whimper escaping her pouted lips. Not giving a shit if we have an audience or not, my alpha side responds to her distress instantly, my chest revving back up with a vibrating purr.

Through the rumble, I glare back at my omega's irate friend. "Keep your fucking voice down. You can be pissed at me all you want, but if you wake her up when she so clearly needs sleep, you're going to find out which one of us is scarier when mad."

I feel my wolf push forward, my eyes shifting as he peers out at her.

She's wise enough to retreat a step, the air that was fizzing around her with fury waning, but she's not done yet, not really. "You can't show up here and act like you give a shit now, Fallamhain."

Her point is valid, which is why I retract some of my own terseness.

"You might not believe me, and I'm not going to beg you for your understanding or forgiveness before I've had a chance to get on my knees and plead for my life with Noa first—since she's the one who needs to hear it and not you—but I will answer your earlier question, Seren. I'm not here to take anything from Noa," I tell her as I notice I've rubbed the underside of my chin along Noa's temple, twice, since confronted by Seren. It's as if the need to scent mark her as mine in the face of someone who might possibly try to pull her from my arms has worked its way into my subconscious. Seren notices too, but I don't bother trying to look ashamed. I just do it again to be sure Noa's properly coated in my scent. "I don't want to take anything. I want to give her everything. I just want to fix it. Heal her."

Seren doesn't look convinced, but it's obvious I've piqued her interest, whether she wants me to or not. "You want to fix it?"

I nod once. "Yes."

“What about Chucky’s bride? Your Luna-to-be?”

There’s no smothering my wolf’s reaction to this, to hearing that woman’s name while his omega is nestled in my arms. In his mind, talking about Talis McNamara while cradling Noa is a betrayal against our mate. I don’t wholly disagree with his primitive, black-and-white thought process, because I end up snarling, “She will never be my Luna,” before I can rein myself in.

My reaction to her question catches Seren off guard. She recoils, taking another half step back, her blonde brows pulling together. “And may I ask what changed your mind? Because not that long ago, you were letting that sea hag rip apart the precious cargo passed out in your arms.”

Again, she’s got a point.

Sighing, I resign myself to telling her pieces of what I’d prefer Noa hears first, since she’s the one who deserves these words, but winning over the best friend is a requirement if I want to make any headway with my omega.

“There’s a long list of things I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for, Seren. Letting Talis stand beside me and say those things to Noa— my mate —will always be near the top of it.” I pause, making sure she hears it, the truth in every word. “But the very top of that list? It’s that I let Noa believe I didn’t want her. That I stood there and made her feel like she wasn’t worth choosing.” I glance down at the woman in my arms, barely breathing as I continue. “My reasons...they felt justified at the time. I told myself it was for the pack, that it was my burden to bear as Alpha. But all that logic doesn’t mean a fucking thing when the cost was her thinking she wasn’t worthy. The truth is, I’m the one who’s not worthy. Not of her forgiveness. Not of her trust. But I’ll spend the rest of this life, and whatever comes after, proving how wrong I was to ever make her believe otherwise.”

The blonde omega came at me swinging earlier, all fire and fury, so I brace myself for more of the same when I finish speaking. But instead of more venom, she sniffles, clearly fighting off tears. Her bloodshot eyes flick down to where Noa's still curled against my chest, and for a split second, my heart drops. I think she might be awake. That maybe she heard what I said.

It's not that I don't want her to hear it. I do—more than anything. But I want the words to land when they matter most. When she's looking at me and can see that I mean every goddamn syllable. I want her to hear them in a moment that leaves no room for doubt.

But she doesn't stir. Her breathing stays soft and even, cheek pressed to my chest like she's still listening to the steady rhythm beneath it.

I breathe again.

She wipes at her eyes before the tears can fall. I don't really know the full reasons for the tears, but I appreciate that she's so fiercely in Noa's corner. "Yeah, well, what are you going to do about your betrothal? Because the last I heard, you're still having an issue with your omegas..." She trails off, a contemplative look on her face, like she knows something else but isn't sure she should offer up more details. "You should really talk to Noa about that, by the way."

"I know," I say quietly. "And I will."

Seren doesn't back off. "If you're still tangled up in that alliance with the Canadian asshole, how exactly do you plan on fixing things with Noa?"

"That part's still in motion," I admit. "But what I do know—what I won't budge on—is that there's no version of this life where I wear a mating mark that doesn't come from her."

The blonde omega freezes, an expression of cautious hope that is riddled with fear overtaking her face. Her upturned-shaped eyes growing wide as she stares up at me like I might hold all the answers she's looking for.

“Do you mean that?” she asks, her voice rough with something close to desperation. “Because I will sense if you're lying, Fallamhain. So, answer carefully. I don't have a single qualm about skinning you alive and waving you like a flag outside your pack's gates if you're full of shit right now.”

Sense . Am I dealing with another empath and didn't know it? What else has she been able to pick up on since we started talking?

Has she been able to sense my sincerity, my raw honesty?

That might work in my favor, actually.

“Of course I mean it,” I tell her, without a hint of hesitation.

But when I look to her to explain herself, I find she's the one who's hesitating now. Her bottom lip between her front teeth, unease clear in her stiff posture. Finally, she exhales, and whispers dejectedly, “She's going to kill me,” before squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin. “All right. I believe you. Despite all your utter fuckery, I can sense your... desperation —” That's putting it mildly. “—to fix this. Now, we just need to make her believe you because at the end of the day, that's all what matters.”

I'm struck frozen because I think I just found myself an unexpected ally in Noa's best friend.

Chapter 29

Noa

I surface from sleep slowly, like swimming up from the depths of somewhere safe and warm. My body's heavy, but not in the way it has been lately. Not in that bone-deep ache I've gotten used to greeting the day with. For once, there's no fire laced through my joints. No weight pressing on my ribs. No cruel echo of what's missing.

It's just...quiet.

I roll onto my back and stretch, wincing in anticipation of the familiar spike of pain in my spine. But it doesn't come. My fingers curl against the softness of my comforter, my legs extend beneath the tangle of blankets, and still...nothing. No agony. No dull roar of misery already settled in for the day

My sleepy brain lingers on the dream, not wanting to fully join the land of the living because of it. It wants to cling to it a little bit longer.

It wasn't like the one I had of my mom, the one I know now was something she wove into my subconscious—strategically and deliberately planted. No, this one was new, but just as vivid. Every detail etched into my mind like it's something I lived, not just imagined. I can still feel it, even now.

The black-and-gray wolf with those pale, ghost-like eyes. The weight of him curled around me. His warmth pressing into my body, bleeding into the cold places I didn't think I could ever reach again. I remember how my fingers moved through his fur

like I'd done it a hundred times before. I remember the way my chest stopped aching for a little while.

I'd felt like...me.

Whole .

And I still feel that way, even now as I slowly release my hold on unconsciousness. Which is more alarming than anything.

Curious, maybe even a little wary, I reach inward—toward the wolf bound inside me. I expect to find her withdrawn and listless, just as she has been. She's quiet, still, but not in the mournful way I've grown used to. I find her just...calm.

It makes no sense. Not after everything. Not with how sick I've been. My eyes snap open before the confusion can fester any further.

I'm in my room. Which is expected and somehow completely not, because I don't remember coming back inside. The last thing I recall is wrapping myself in layers—his hoodie included—dragging two heavy blankets downstairs, and slipping out into the backyard. The cold had felt like a balm then, the only thing that matched the numbness inside me. I remember lying on the outdoor lounge chair beneath the heavy sky, letting the quiet settle in. Letting it all go.

And then...

The wolf had come. Not just any wolf. Him.

Rennick.

It comes back all at once. The way he stood there, unmoving, like he was waiting for

permission to exist near me. The press of his body as he curled around mine. That low, impossible purr. My fingers in his fur, his heat soaking into my frozen bones and filling the aching void within my chest.

I sit up fast, air rushing into my lungs like I've been underwater.

That wasn't just a dream.

He was here.

Inside me, my wolf is still basking in him. She's thrilled, as if everything is right again just because he showed up. But I can't follow her into that feeling. I can't forget the truth. Rennick didn't choose me. He chose the alliance. He made his sacrifice. And I was it.

So what's changed?

I scrub a hand through my hair, my breath hitching in my throat. The question twists and knots until a soft noise breaks through them. A shift, a breath, the creak of a chair. Something alive in the stillness.

I'm not alone.

My gaze swings toward the window.

And there he is.

Rennick Fallamhain, slouched in the cream boucle chair that looks like it might give out under the weight of him. He's too big for it, muscular arms awkwardly folded across him, head dipped toward his chest like he tried to stay awake but lost the battle. He's out cold. In my room.

I stare for too long, heart thudding against my ribs, caught between two truths. My wolf who wants to crawl into his lap and never leave, like that is where she lives now, and the part of me who can still remember what it felt like when the bond was forcibly ripped from me.

He doesn't belong in that chair. He doesn't belong here .

But Goddess help me, something about him feels like he does. And that's the part I don't know what to do with.

I give myself one more minute, maybe two, sitting there with the sheets gathered around me, eyes locked on him. He's so still, so unguarded, and I want to absorb every detail before he wakes. Like if I look long enough, I'll be granted some kind of access, a small detail, that he keeps hidden from everyone else. Part of me hopes that it'll be something that'll make me understand him better.

His face doesn't soften in sleep the way most people's do. His brow stays furrowed, mouth drawn like he's still thinking, still worrying. Like even in unconsciousness, the burden doesn't leave the weight of everything he bears as Alpha still pressing down on him.

My gaze drifts lower, greedy in a way I'm not proud of, but too invested now to stop it.

His chest is bare, the golden tan of his skin highlighted by the mid-morning light streaming in through my windows. Every strong and sculpted line of his torso is on display, his abs are defined, pecs rising with every slow and steady breath. Shame nips at the edges of my thoughts for letting my gaze roam the way it has. But another part of me—my wolf, I think—is delighted that we are getting this chance to drink him in like he's still ours.

My attention on the waistband of his sweatpants. They're the familiar gray ones we keep stocked in different sizes for new omega arrivals. They're not meant to accommodate an alpha's size and stretch over his thick thighs and ride up at the ankles.

A quiet huff slips out, part breath, part laugh. This has to be Seren's doing, how else would he have gotten into the cellar to get them? I can almost picture her tossing the sweats at him with some kind of muttered threat and a glower. The image is strangely comforting.

In the stillness of this moment, my wolf remains utterly relaxed.

There's no tension coiled under my skin like there usually is when I'm around males, no prickle of distrust or flicker of warning. Just contentment. And I know why.

She's waited for him. All these years, she's remained loyal to a fault to the man I hardly remembered. She held the line for him, sometimes with teeth, with instinct I didn't understand. I should've given her more credit. Instead I thought she was just crazy, all the while she knew her mate was out there. She protected his place, even when I didn't know he had one.

Driven by something I don't bother naming—a pull too strong to resist—I slip out from under the covers. The air bites at my skin but compared to the chill I've been carrying for days, it almost feels warm. My limbs move easily, no aching joints or trembling muscles slowing me down. The usual pain isn't there. Like it's been cast away by his mere presence.

I notice the green hoodie is gone from my body, leaving me in the black tank top and leggings I'd worn under all the layers last night. But my heart stutters when I spot it draped over the pillow I'd curled around in my sleep. Like he wanted me surrounded by him while I rested. It hits me in a quiet, instinctive way. He didn't just leave the

hoodie. He laid the first piece of my nest, and my omega side preens at the offering.

My heart aches at the thought, a quiet pain that feels too close to hope, but I push it away for now, wanting to bask in the lack of soul-crushing ache for as long as I can.

I cross the room on bare feet, slow and quiet, and stop when I reach him. The hardwood is cool beneath me, but I barely register it. The closer I get, the more his scent fills the space around me—deep and rich, grounding in a way I forgot I could feel. It blends with mine, the sweetness of it clinging to my skin like something alive. I shouldn't find comfort in that. But I do.

It's strange, standing here like this. A reversal of last night, when he stood before me in his wolf form and waited for something I didn't have the courage to offer. Now I'm the one just...watching. Unsure.

I tell myself I'm not looking for anything. But my eyes still roam his form.

And then I see them.

The scars.

Four raised lines, starting at the edge of his brow and cutting back into his hair. I've noticed them before, but never like this. Now I have time to really look at them. With nothing between us but air and silence. They pull my focus, more than his bare chest, more than the tight fit of those borrowed sweatpants.

I stare, something twisting in my chest I can't quite name.

Because I know what it takes for a dominant Alpha like him to still bear scars that have refused to fade with the passing of time. I know who had to be the one to inflict the pain for them to stay as they have.

Of their own volition, my fingers trail each of the four silver lines. They've barely reached where the scars end above his ear when Rennick's eyes snap open.

They're wild, unfocused. Flickering between recognition and reflex.

I part my lips to say his name, to warn him it's just me, but I don't get the chance.

In a blur of motion he's on his feet, his hands hooking around my arms. The next thing I know, my back hits the wall, firm but not punishing. Air huffs from my lungs at the sudden impact, my heart thundering against my ribs.

His eyes flash, caught somewhere between man and wolf, the color flicking between gray and pale silver blue. The snarl carved into his face falters as recognition slams into him. I see the exact second it hits him, when he really sees me, and the shift is instant. Recognition knocks the fight out of him, and horror sweeps in to take its place.

"Noa," he breathes, voice like gravel. Wrecked. His hands loosen their hold, but don't let me go. They slide down my arms in a desperate attempt to soothe, to comfort, to check for damage. Like he needs to feel for himself that I'm still whole.

"I didn't mean to startle you," I whisper, words rasping from my throat. "I should've known better than to approach a sleeping wolf."

"Shit, Noa," he breathes, shaking his head. "Are you— Did I hurt you?"

I shake my head, though my breath is still uneven. His warm fingers and palms continue to graze the bare skin of my arms. Steady and grounding, "I'm fine," I add, voice more even. "You didn't hurt me."

His gaze crumples at that, like the words land wrong in his soul.

“That’s not true,” he chokes out. “I have hurt you.”

My lip press together. I can’t lie to him, not when we both know the painful truth. “Yeah... You have.”

Rennick’s gaze searches mine, slow and careful, like he’s looking for something he’s scared to find. His hand lifts, fingers brushing at the mess of hair hanging in my face. It’s a losing battle—my bangs have a mind of their own—but he tries anyway, pushing them gently to the side. They fall right back into place. He doesn’t try again. Just lets his hand hover there near my temple, his thumb grazing the edge of my cheek like it’s second nature.

I part my lips to say something, what, I’m not even sure. Maybe to ask what he’s doing. Why he’s here. But he beats me to it.

“The fact that I made myself believe I could live without you, sweet Noa...” He breathes the words and they hit me with more force than I’m prepared for. I see the flicker of misery cross his face. “That I told myself I had to—because it was right, or honorable, or whatever fucking lie I clung to—none of it makes up for what I’ve done.”

Sweet Noa.

He called me that in the clearing, when his plea for forgiveness rang through me like a broken prayer. I hated it then. But now—reverent and rough on his tongue—it hits different. Like it costs him something. Like I’m still worth saying it to.

“You won’t believe me yet,” he says, voice steadying even as his eyes stay raw. “And that’s okay. I’ll keep saying it until you do. I’m going to make this right. I’m going to repair the bond. The damage. All of it.”

My heart stutters. Something inside me goes completely still, like the world just tilted slightly off its axis.

Because he said it. Out loud.

He wants to fix it.

The way Seren had begged me to tell Rennick that his bite could do more than just fix it, but could save me, echoes between my ears as if she's standing next to me shouting it in real time. The piece of me that wants to live, wants to believe that his words are true, mirrors her sentiment instantly. My wolf plants herself firmly in that camp too, fully convinced our mate would catch us if we fell. Guess all it took was a little quality time with his wolf to change her tune.

I can't decide if I'm envious, or just annoyed by how quickly she's let go.

But it's the part of me that shattered in that clearing that wins out. The fear that he'll eventually learn the truth—that he's the key to my survival now—and could still choose to walk away. That's what keeps me from leaning into the promise in his words. I'd rather meet the end on my own terms, with a little dignity, than watch him not chose me a second time. That would destroy what's left of my fractured soul.

Rennick's expression tightens, no doubt sensing the storm of anxiety twisting inside me. "You don't trust me and I've earned that. I haven't given you a single reason to believe in me, but I need you to know I meant every word." He takes a breath, jaw working. "I'm going to find a way to protect my pack, to keep my omegas safe without McNamara or his..." He stops short, gaze flicking away for a beat like he refuses to say her name in front of me. I'm grateful for that. It feels like a line he won't cross. A small mercy. "We're working on another way," he goes on, voice low but steady. "But even if I can't pull that off—even if I fail there—I won't fail at this. At us. Fixing what I broke with you is the only thing I'm certain about. You're my

priority now, Noa. Nothing comes before that. Not anymore.”

Something in me shifts, quiet and unwelcome, but it’s there nonetheless. Not forgiveness, not even close, but a softening that slithers through the cracks he left behind. Because the way he’s standing here now, the way he’s speaking with this quiet, careful intensity, doesn’t feel like a performance. It feels real. His chest is inches from mine, radiating heat I shouldn’t crave, and his chin dips low in that way that says he’s trying to reach me—even though we both know it will be near impossible to bridge the distance he created.

And it’s the little part of me that will never stop wanting him, broken bond or not, that has me wondering if just for a moment, I could give in. Just to have a single taste of what could have been. What could have been mine.

It’s probably the dumbest thing I could do. Even if he says they’re working on another solution, the truth is he’s still promised to someone else. He still isn’t mine.

And he’s right, I don’t trust him. Maybe I never will. But the pain that’s been rotting me from the inside out is quiet in his presence. Just him, standing here, is enough to still the ache and take the cold out of my bones. For the first time in days, I don’t feel like I’m dying. And I want to stay here, just a little longer, in this impossible moment where I don’t feel like I’m falling apart and if I try hard enough, I can pretend this can be more than that.

Just a moment.

So I place my hands against his chest, feeling the steady thud of his heart beneath my palms. I rise up onto my toes, closing the small gap between us, and pull him down to meet me.

And I kiss him like he’s mine.

His lips stay pressed to mine, unmoving, no doubt stunned by the weight of what I've just done. I don't pull away. I don't breathe. I just wait, caught in the space between hope and regret, to see if he's going to meet me there.

He remains frozen and I release a sound I don't mean to. A small, desperate whine crawls up my throat, heedless and unmistakably omega. It betrays everything I'm still too afraid to say. That I want this. Need it. Crave more of his touch, even if I know somewhere in my mind that it can't go further than this.

It's my omega nature crying out that breaks him.

His hands come up, cupping my face with a kind of care that shatters me. Not just holding—cradling. Fingers spread across my cheeks like he's afraid I'll vanish if he lets go. The first pass of his lips over mine is soft, tentative. Almost like he's asking if I'm sure.

But then I part my lips and graze my tongue over his bottom lip. And that's all it takes. He growls, the sound more wolf than man, and I feel it in my bones.

His mouth claims mine fully, no hesitation this time. His body presses harder into mine, pinning me against the wall, and I let it happen. Let the weight of him hold me steady as he devours me like he's starving. My hands slide from his chest, curling gently around his wrists where he frames my face. It's not to stop him. It's to stay connected, to anchor both of us in this kiss.

We're not smooth. Our movements aren't rehearsed. This isn't something we've done a hundred times. It's clumsy, a little desperate, but agonizingly real.

It's not like I've had chances to practice. Not that I ever really wanted them. This was never something I thought I'd need to be good at.

We explore each other for a minute—minutes? What is time at this point?—learning and finding a rhythm that makes my skin start to flush. But then he lets out a frustrated growl that rattles my bones.

Before I can fully register the sound, his hands are gone from my face, only to find a new hold. He bends slightly, gripping behind my thighs, and then I'm lifted. Airborne. In the next breath, my back is against the wall once more and his hard, defined chest is pressed to mine. My legs scramble to wrap around his waist, a little too short to hook fully, but I manage, clinging to him like I have any business deluding myself into thinking I'll ever be ready to let go.

His mouth leaves mine just long enough to trace a path down the curve of my jaw, then lower, to the overly sensitive stretch of flesh at my throat.

The moment his lips brush the skin over my pulse, right where a mating mark would go, my entire body jerks.

My hips flex on instinct, searching for something with a desperation I'm not sure I've ever experienced before.

No, of course I haven't. This is all new to me. The last guy I let close didn't get too far past the too wet kiss and grabby hands that had left me snarling at him like a feral animal before I could stop it. I gave up trying after that. That was years ago.

He shifts, pressing harder against me, and I feel it. The evidence of how much he's also enjoying this stolen moment. Through the thin fabric of my leggings, I can feel how hard he is. His cock pokes me in the ass, the knowledge that I've pushed him into this state makes my already lust-drunk brain swim a little bit more.

A sharp, needy cry tears from me, louder than before. I don't have the wherewithal to be ashamed of it. Not when my body is already giving away how needy I'm feeling.

My thighs are shaking. My hips grind against his stomach with a mind of their own. And I can feel it, feel myself getting slick, soaking through the fabric between us. My breath stutters in my throat, worried he'll notice or care that it's no doubt transferring onto his skin too.

I know the second he notices, because his growl turns into something darker, something possessive. And I come to the realization that my momentary worry was for nothing because Rennick doesn't give a shit if the scent of my slick clings to him.

He confirms this when he mutters, "Fuck, you smell so good." His nose is still buried in the crook of my neck, but we both know what he's referring to, and it's not seeping from my throat. "Sweet one..."

My inner omega whines at the praise, already craving more of it. My hips grind harder against his ridged muscles, but it's still not giving me what I need.

Rennick notices.

He pulls away from the crook of my neck and stares at me, eyes blazing with a fiery intensity that makes my insides melt.

"Tell me what you need." His words are a gravelly demand but not a bark. "Tell me. Whatever you need from me, it's yours."

He leans forward and captures my bottom lip between his teeth. It's not enough to hurt, but the sting mixes with the pleasure, and I mewl when he licks away the hurt.

My short fingernails covered in chipped nail polish dig into the skin on his shoulders. My hips still rock, my slick, needy pussy still not getting the friction I'm so painfully eager for. It occurs to me somewhere in the back of my mind that this is another omega characteristic that is awakening within me. Nothing ignites untamable desire

in an omega more than being near her alpha. That side of me must not have gotten the memo that he's not really mine and doesn't give a shit, because my instincts are going haywire, demanding that I take this further—too far.

But it might be worth the risk, right? If just his mouth moving between my kiss-swollen lips and throat can make me feel this good, then I can't even begin to imagine the ways he could wreak havoc on my center if I did as he asked of me.

If I admitted what I wanted from him.

He pulls back with a curse, chest heaving, like stopping himself took every morsel of his restraint.

Rennick's eyes lock on mine, bewildered and intense, as if he's only just now realizing how far gone he is.

"I've never..." he starts, but the words stall, his mouth working around whatever admission is trying to push its way free. There's a flicker of something uncertain in his expression, a kind of vulnerability that makes my breath catch. "Fuck, Noa, I've never wanted anyone the way I want you." His grip tightens on my thighs, like he needs the contact to keep steady. "I haven't touched anyone else. Didn't want to. Never cared what their hands would feel like or how their lips might taste. Never thought about what it would be like to have someone under me." He exhales as his gaze drops to my mouth before rising again. "But you...that's all I want."

The weight of his confession hits harder than I expected.

Because he didn't know. He had no idea I was his. And still, he kept himself from everyone else.

Held space for something he couldn't name. Just like I did. It makes it harder to keep

the ice around my heart intact. Harder to pretend like what we have isn't real. Something fragile in me softens, starts to melt around the edges. A warning. A feeling I'm not ready for but can't ignore.

Which is why I'm whispering my plea before I realize I'm doing it.

"Touch me," I tell him, and when he stares back at me like he's not sure he trusts my sincerity, I add, "please, Ren, I need you to make me feel good." And just like that, a flip switches.

His eyes are wild and hungry, and before I can take another breath, his grip on the underside of my thighs tightens.

Then we're moving.

He spins us away from the wall with a fluid, almost brutal elegance. My back hits the mattress a second later, the soft thud making me oomph . I barely register the shift in position before I'm staring up at him. He looks wild, wrecked in the most beautiful way, and he's looking at me like I'm the only thing that matters.

I don't get to admire my new view for long because his hands are already on me again. Fingers hook, tug, and the soaked leggings—drenched with the indisputable proof of my need for him—are gone before I can blink.

I arch to help, nerves sparking everywhere.

The cool air hits my thighs first, then higher, and I can feel the heat rising in my face, in my chest. The flush of slight embarrassment only grows warmer when Rennick's gaze rakes down my body, slow and intense, until it lands where I'm slick with want.

His breath hitches, just slightly, but I hear it. See the awe flicker across his face,

softening the hunger that sharpens his features.

He doesn't speak. Doesn't need to.

His fingers skim up the length of my calf, a light, reverent touch that leaves a trail of warmth in its wake. My skin prickles, but not from the cold. From him. From the weight of his attention.

His bare chest expands with a deep, shuddering inhale, and I know without question that he's breathing me in. My scent, my arousal, all of it. The alpha in him responding to the sight of his destined omega laid out naked like an offering for the first time.

His nostrils flare slightly, jaw tense, and something primal flickers in his expression.

I shift, instinct trying to tug my knees back together, but he refuses to allow me to hide from him. His hand finds my thigh, warm and steady, holding me open.

When his eyes lift back to mine, there's nothing mocking in them. Nothing smug, just that same look of awe, like I'm something he never thought he'd get to see. And that should terrify me, how vulnerable I am under his stare. But it doesn't.

Because the only thing I feel in this moment is wanted. Claimed. And maybe...safe.

And that's more terrifying than anything.

It's a fear I don't get the chance to explore because Rennick lowers himself between my thighs, his hands braced on either one to keep me open for him. When his mouth finally meets my pussy, the first stroke of his tongue slow and testing, I nearly come off the bed.

My hands fly to the sheets like they can anchor me, and I fist them as a noise slips out

of me.

A mixture of a whine and a whimper.

It's like ringing the fucking dinner bell for him.

His answering groan is low and guttural, vibrating against my slick, sensitive flesh. The sound is appreciative mixed with unfiltered hunger, and it tells me this isn't just for me. He wants this. Want to taste me.

My thighs, stiff and instinctively trying to block him out, fall open the rest of the way. All pretense of modesty or hesitation dissolves as his hands slide to my hips, holding me steady as he begins to devour me.

He starts slow. Deliberate. Exploratory like he's savoring every part of me, mapping me with his mouth, one stroke of his tongue at a time. Each pass is intentional, like he's committing every reaction to memory. And maybe he is. Maybe this is him learning what makes me come undone.

But it doesn't stay careful.

Whatever restraint he had at the start unravels quickly. His, and mine. He licks and sometimes bites, scraping his teeth across my clit in a way that makes me believe angels exist. I can't hold still. My hips jerk, seeking more friction, more pressure. More. I arch into him, a mess of heavy breathing and heated need. And when his thick finger circles my opening, dipping barely inside before retreating, I pry my eyes open and look down to find him already looking up at me from under his thick lashes. His irises look like liquid metal as he holds the eye contact and pushes his finger inside, my body adjusting to the intrusion like a fucking duck to water, and before soon, I'm begging him for more. For more of that delicious stretch. The feeling of fullness. In the back of my mind, my omega taunts that it won't feel like enough, that

only a knot can really fill that void, but I shove it away, wanting to enjoy this.

There's only one thing I can say. One name that keeps slipping from my mouth.

“Ren...”

I'm close.

It builds low in my belly, a pressure that climbs steadily, spreading through my limbs like licks of flames. My thighs tremor, hips tilting to meet the pulse of his mouth, the movement of his fingers. The warmth grows until it's everywhere—unrelenting, consuming—and then I let go.

And I fall.

The orgasm tears through me, his name once again ripped from my throat. It's the only thing I can cling to while my body seizes with blinding pleasure. But he doesn't stop. Not when I start to quiver, not when my nails claw for something to hold, slashing at his shoulders and scalp. His mouth stays on me, fingers moving in perfect rhythm, coaxing every aftershock until my body begins to unravel. Until I'm limp.

It's only when start to lethargically mewl in protest from the oversensitivity that he slows. His touch gentles, guiding me down with tender care.

I'm still reeling, breath coming in shallow pulls, when I hear his curse—guttural and strained. Then his teeth sink into the skin where my thigh meets my hip, a sharp nip that doesn't break skin but is like gasoline to my immerging instinct's fire.

I jolt, not in pain but in something that's treacherously close to need. My omega howls for more. For permanence. For the mark. I want it. I want to wear it like a badge. I shove the thought down, try to ignore the way my body arches toward the

bite, already missing it when his mouth pulls back.

That's when I hear it.

A voice that isn't mine in my head.

"My mate. My omega. My sweet Noa."

I lift my heavy head, chest still heaving, and meet his eyes.

He's staring at me, gaze molten. His lips are wet, slick with me, and his tongue flicks out, licking the corner of his mouth like he refuses to waste a drop. The sight makes heat pulse between my legs again, like I'm already craving more. Still not done.

Oh, Goddess, he's created a monster.

He rises slowly, standing tall at the edge of the bed. The front of his borrowed sweats is dark. A wet spot. The way he'd groaned before pressing his teeth against my flesh floats back to me. Rennick Fallamhain, great pack Alpha, came in his pants. It's almost endearing, and it makes my core throb with...is that jealousy?

He leans forward, fists braced on either side of my head, his heated torso pressed to mine.

Then he kisses me.

There's no hesitation. His mouth claims mine, and when his tongue slides past my lips, it carries my own taste. My arousal. It's filthy. Intimate. Possessive in a way that makes my stomach flip and inner omega prance.

When he pulls back, his voice is low and affectionate, but edged with dominance, like

he's a man who's just gotten a taste of something he's not ready walk away from. "See how sweet you are?" he breathes.

My heart stutters.

He doesn't move right away. Just looks down at me, his expression tempering, concern flickering through the lingering heat. He's watching me too closely, like he knows the regret won't stay gone for long.

I'm not naive enough to not think it won't hit me soon. I went into this knowing I'd be racked with regret when it was over. Selfishly, I just didn't care. I just wanted to pretend for a little while that he was mine and I was his, and there wasn't this gaping rift between us. Caused by him .

"Are you okay?" he asks, the question barely louder than a rasp.

The genuine concern in his face and voice battles against the walls I'm trying to rebuild between us. Blocking out the longing I still have for him.

I nod, slow and silent.

It's written all over his face. I know he wants to say something else, or ask a painfully stupid question like, What does this mean now? as if anything has really changed between us because we crossed this line. It was a line that led to a soul-shattering orgasm, but a line nonetheless.

Whatever lust-filled bubble we've slipped into is popped by the sound of commotion on the stairs leading to my attic bedroom. I react faster than he does, my hand flat against his chest, shoving him back so I can crawl out from under him. I push myself up and over the bed, scrambling across it and sliding off the opposite side with none of the grace I wish I had.

“Nick?” a voice calls out from the other side of my door, exasperated and all too familiar. “Would’ve texted to let you know we were here, but couldn’t. Since your dumb furry ass decided to run across state lines with nothing but your hopes and dreams and didn’t give us a heads-up. That was a very dramatic exit, by the way—you went through a window and everything—but next time, please drive . And bring a damn phone, will you?”

Rhosyn.

And she said we . Which means Canaan is no doubt with her.

I glance at Rennick in silent question.

“I asked Seren to text them,” he mutters, sheepish. “Didn’t think you’d be up for driving me back.”

My brows lift, but then it clicks. Of course his only means of getting back to Idaho was either a very expensive Uber or to run back in wolf form, and I don’t see the latter happening so soon after he already did it.

Rhosyn doesn’t miss a beat, thanks to her shifter hearing. “Yeah, this wasn’t really how I wanted to spend my morning either, dude. I like Ashvale. I love Noa. But I left yesterday. A more forgiving turnaround time would be appreciated in the future.” She pauses. “You’re lucky this just ended up working in my favor.”

Neither of us knows what she means, and we don’t ask.

Rennick closes his eyes and drags a hand down his face like he’s holding back a growl—or maybe just a breakdown. Honestly, same.

“We’ll be downstairs in a minute,” he calls back, sighing through the words.

Her retreating steps are the cue I didn't know I was waiting for. I spring into action, painfully aware I'm still not wearing pants, and his gaze is definitely lingering. I make it to my closet and yank the top drawer open, tugging on the first pair of sleep shorts I find.

When I turn back around, he's still there. Watching. Not in the heated, hungry way he had earlier, but steady. Like he sees through the walls I'm scrambling to rebuild.

"Noa..." he starts.

I shake my head. "It was nice," I say softly, forcing a sad smile. "Pretending for a minute that things aren't broken between us. That I'm not—" I gesture to myself, starting at my chest that is deceptively not an aching pit right now. It's because of him. His presence. It's fueling me and masking the soul-deep ache, but know when he leaves, it will all return. "That I'm not damaged."

His face falls.

"I know about the rejected mate syndrome." His admission makes me freeze in place, turning into an ice sculpture of dread. "Rhosyn told me. That's what made me lose control. What made my wolf take over and hunt you down. When I told you I was going to fix everything, Noa, I was including that."

"Do you know how to fix it?" I force the words past the tightness in my throat, my chest too full of dread. Because if he says yes, if he's known all along that his bite could save me, then maybe him coming here isn't about wanting me back, like he said. Maybe it's just guilt. Just duty. An obligation.

"No. Not yet." His voice doesn't waver, his determination clear. "But I'm going to find out. Because I won't let you keep paying the price for my mistake."

I stare at him, and my wolf lets out a soft, mournful whimper inside me. She wants to believe him. Needs to. But I don't know how.

"That won't fix the trust, Ren," I whisper, my eyes threatening tears. It's a fight to will them away. "It won't undo what you've already done. It won't stop me from thinking you'll hurt me again—worse than before. And if that happens... I won't survive it this time."

It's the truth, just without the nitty-gritty details.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't argue.

"I know." He steps around the bed and tries to close the distance between us. My wolf is ecstatic, not appreciating that I'd put space between us soon after we'd let him... do what he did. "And I get that words aren't enough. I can say I'm sorry until it doesn't mean anything anymore, and I will. Every day. For the rest of my life if you'll let me. But more than that, I'm going to show you. Prove it with actions, because words will only get me so far. I failed you once by not choosing you. But I'm choosing you now, Noa. Every day, every hour, for as long as you'll let me."

I want to scoff. Want to laugh or cry or fall into him all over again. But I don't move. Don't say anything. Because this feels like a turning point. And I don't know which way it's going to take me.

"We were meant for each other," he murmurs, voice low and hoarse, hand raised toward me in offering, but I can't bring myself to accept it. "I denied it, fought it. But it's so fucking obvious. Fuck, baby, I've been dreaming about you for months. You were always there—your voice, your eyes. Telling me it was time to remember. I even dreamt of us being in this very room." His gaze sweeps the space like it's hallowed. "You were standing right there, begging me to choose you. I didn't. And I'll regret it forever. But I'm going to fix it. I will."

The knot in my chest tightens. Because if he's been dreaming too—if my mother wove messages into his subconscious the same way she did mine—then she really went out of her way to ensure I'd find my way back to him.

She wanted me with him. But in all her wisdom and weaving, did she know that he was going to be the one to break me? It hurts to believe she'd known this was my fate, and still left her meddling spells to push us toward each other.

She had to have a good reason, the trusting—maybe to a fault—piece of me whispers.

Before I can get lost in that, I shake my head and try to pull myself back from the edge.

“I can't do this with you right now, Ren. Not when you're still betrothed to someone else.”

My eyes flick to the bed—the one we just tangled ourselves across like it meant something. Like it could be the start of something for us. “Technically, you cheated on your intended with me.”

His snarl is instant, ripping through the air with such violence it has me recoiling half a step.

“That's bullshit. Talis?—”

My wolf whines at the name, a visceral response I can't control. The pitiful sound is past my lips before I can even attempt to stop it, and it makes him wince.

“She means nothing to me. She never did.”

“But you need her,” I remind him, the crushing knowledge that there are more lives on the line than just mine. Not just any lives. Omegas. Omegas just like Siggy. He said he was going to put me before all of that, but that doesn’t seem fair. None of it is fair, Noa. “You need the alliance with her father.”

“I need you more,” he breathes.

And Goddess help me...I want to believe him.

More emotionally wrecked than I’d like to admit, my eyes flutter closed and I breathe for a second. Knowing that I’m past the point of being able to look at this logically and afraid of reacting out of emotion or, worse, my needy omega instincts, I gather all the resolve I can muster before returning my gaze to him.

“Canaan and Rhosyn are waiting for you downstairs.” Wordlessly, I grab the green hoodie that has become an unofficial token of our half-broken bond, and the first item collected for my nonexistent nest. It actually hurts to pull it free of the pillows and bedding, going against every omega instinct I have to give up the precious item. His face falls when I hand it to him. “You need something to wear home.”

“I thought you might want to keep it?” He looks genuinely devastated to ask this. “That you’d want it for your...”

I cut him off, feeling like an ass when I do. “It’s just a hoodie, Ren. I’ve got plenty. But thank you for letting me borrow it.” My eyes flick to the dark spot at the front of his pants. “I’ll go see if I can find you another pair of sweats while you wash up.”

I turn away before I can be sure, but I swear to the Goddess, I think Rennick blushed.

It’d find it cute if I wasn’t aching again.

Chapter 30

Noa

Turns out when Rhosyn said her impromptu return to Ashvale worked out for her, she meant it was the perfect time to start on her side quest of schmoozing with Amara and Lowri. Her plan was to butter up the High Priestess and the Ashvale Alpha, and win them over to the Fallamhain Pack cause before Rennick made his own plea to them at a later date.

“They probably wouldn’t help him if he were on fire right now.” She’d scoffed, arms crossed as she explained why she was going to be staying behind for the next day or two.

And, honestly? She wasn’t wrong about Lowri and Amara.

After what they witnessed in the clearing, it made sense that they'd want nothing to do with him. But Rhosyn’s thinking that the pair of women would make a good allyship for her pack was also one I’d considered when I’d learned of their issues. It was what I meant when I told Rennick that I may have been able to help him if he’d only given me the chance to. Through my years of being part of the sanctuary, and my connections I’ve made through my dealings at Potion she just had to be willing to help. And despite my own salty feelings toward the High Priestess right now, I know she has a good heart, and the protection of omegas is a cause she already stands firmly behind. I guess it just comes down to if shielding a territory as large as Pack Fallamhain’s is something doable. She’s powerful, but even she has limits.

Sending Rhosyn to start any kind of alliance talk with them was the smart move. Even if Canaan looked about ready to drag his mate back to Silverthorne with him by her curly ponytail when it was time for Rennick and him to leave. The pair couldn't stay because they had to get home to go over the logistics of some kind of pack gathering that is happening next weekend. It felt like they had bigger fish to fry than planning a party, but what the hell do I know?

What I do know is that watching Canaan have to force himself to leave Rhosyn had cracked something open in me. And when I saw Rennick hesitate just the same way, saw his jaw tense, his throat bob when he looked at me, it wasn't just a crack anymore. It was a slow, spreading fracture. The walls I'd tried so hard to hold up had already started to crumble—softened by his hands, his mouth, his honesty.

On the front porch of the manor, Rennick cradled my face and I didn't have the strength to fight him. His palms were warm, fingers rough, but his thumbs were gentle as they swept across my cheekbones. And then he leaned in and pressed the softest kiss to my forehead. Not possessive. Not hungry. Just...aching. Like the goodbye wasn't something he wanted to give.

“You can keep running, sweet one,” he said, voice low and steady, “but I'll keep chasing. One day, you'll believe that I'm not walking away from you. Not again.”

I didn't say anything. Just turned away, quick enough that he wouldn't see the way my eyes brimmed with tears.

Because I wanted to believe him.

I just didn't know if I could afford to.

Hours later, after they'd pulled away in a familiar black Escalade, I was still thinking about that tender forehead kiss and his vow. It was making me feel stir-crazy, which is why I'd decided to get out of the house, to walk down to my favorite coffee shop a

few blocks away, but that plan had almost gone to shit along with every ounce of my willpower, because when I stepped out my front door, I saw the carefully folded green hoodie sitting on the top step of the porch. I about shattered and picked up the phone to beg him to come back when I'd lifted it to my nose and found his scent had been restored from when he'd worn it for a little while before leaving.

Wolf sad, moping about in her weakening cage, my own emotions wreaking havoc on me, I'd told both Rhosyn and Seren that I was stepping out for a minute. I wasn't too worried about leaving Siggy with them both being there, not to mention today is Edie's day off, and the last I heard, they were talking about going down to the cellar's living space and watching a movie all together while Ivey napped.

I spent the walk to the café—just a few quiet blocks—trying to sort through the chaos in my head. I picked through each emotion like broken glass, holding them up to the light, asking myself how much of what I was feeling was really me, and how much of it was the rejection. The heaviness in my chest. The voice whispering that none of this mattered. Was it all just the fog of the broken bond coloring everything in shades of despair? Would I be thinking differently if I wasn't dragging around this storm cloud in my mind, making everything feel like the end of the world? Would I be willing to fight harder? To risk another heartbreak if it meant surviving?

Could I trust that Rennick truly wanted me—and not just because he felt he had to? That he felt obligated to heal me?

That's the question I'm asking myself when I step into the house again after a half hour of self-reflection and a cold brew. I need to find Seren—and Rhosyn—and talk it out with them too, because I don't feel like I can trust my own thoughts right now.

Box of cookies in one hand and coffee in the other, I make my way down the narrow cellar steps to the enchanted cinder block wall. Setting my things on the floor, I press both palms flat against the stone. Vardis's glamour dissolves into mist like it always does, peeling back the hidden entrance to the sanctuary.

But something's wrong. The string lights that usually line the tunnel with that soft, enchanted glow are completely dark. Not flickering. Not low on power. Just dead. And that shouldn't be possible—they don't run on batteries. All the electricity down here is connected to an emergency generator, because the last thing we want is for the traumatized omegas to be blanketed in darkness without warning if for some reason we lose power.

A chill skates down my spine, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. Every instinct I have begins to hum. I scoop the coffee cup and the box of cookies back into my arms, fingers trembling slightly, and step through, the glamour falling back into place behind me. The hallway stretches ahead in eerie silence. With each step I take toward the bend that leads to the common room, my unease sharpens into dread.

They should be down here. Seren. Rhosyn. Siggy. Edie. And Ivey, too, if she's awake early from her nap. I should also be hearing her by now—those soft baby babbles echoing off the stone walls.

But I hear nothing. Not even a shuffle or a breath.

It's not peaceful. It's heavy. Weighted silence, the kind that settles into your bones and screams for you to turn around.

My wolf is pacing, hackles raised and teeth bared behind her cage. She's in full defense mode, and she rarely gets like this. My instincts are screaming that something is very, very wrong.

I juggle the coffee and cookie box, fingers clumsy and nerves stretched too tight, trying to free one hand for my phone. My thumb hovers over Seren's name, just a breath away from pressing, when the ground vanishes beneath me. One second I'm upright, the next I'm weightless. My feet skid out with no warning, no grip, and then the world lurches sideways.

I hit the floor hard—bone, spine, ribs, all colliding with cold stone in a brutal thud that knocks the breath out of me. Pain shoots through my hip and shoulder, and my coffee goes flying, splattering across the floor. The cookie box slips from my fingers, skidding away in one direction, my phone in another. For a second, I just lie there, stunned and winded, heart hammering as I blink up at the ceiling.

Groaning and disoriented, I push myself up on shaky arms. My knees slip once before I catch myself. My jeans cling to me, soaked through, Rennick's hoodie too. My palms are slick. At first, I think it's the coffee that spilled across the floor when I fell. But it's too thick. It clings in a way that churns my stomach. There's too much of it.

I shift back onto my heels, unsteady, and lift one trembling hand toward my face. In the dim light, I can just about make out the dark smear coating my fingers, and then the scent hits me—metallic and heavy. Copper.

Blood.

My phone, the cookies, the coffee—they don't matter anymore. I crawl forward, half upright, half dragging myself through the tunnel, my breath ragged, vision swimming.

I round the corner into the common room and freeze.

There, in the center of the space, is a body.

Slumped. Still. Surrounded by a pool of blood so wide it stretches all the way back to the hallway. I realize in one sickening blink that the trail I slipped in wasn't random. They were dragged. Left there like a morbid version of the yellow brick road for me to follow.

My legs give out five feet away. I fall to my knees again, crawling the rest of the way on hands that shake too hard to be useful. I'm so beyond caring if I get more blood

on me. My heart is thundering, a riot in my chest. My wolf is howling in her cage.

“No, no, no,” I whisper, the words cracking and catching in my throat as I reach for the body.

We were supposed to be safe here.

The end...for now