



Vow Of A Fox (Misfit Shifters #4)

Author: *Jennifer Snyder*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Her fox knows he's the one, but he doesn't know shifters exist. Can fate—and their love—survive the darkness closing in?

Sienna Hayes never imagined a wrong-number voicemail from a handsome stranger could change her life, but fate had other plans. As a fox shifter, she's used to navigating challenges, but with Xander—a shifter possessed by the darkest evil she's ever encountered—lurking in the shadows, the danger feels more personal than ever. Balancing her undeniable connection to Ben with the growing threat to her crew, Sienna is torn between survival and surrendering to the bond her fox refuses to ignore. Can she open her heart when the stakes have never been higher?

Ben Andrews spends his days as the local vet, leading a quiet, practical life surrounded by animals. But everything changes when he meets Sienna—a fiercely magnetic woman whose presence awakens something deep inside him. She opens his eyes to a hidden world of shifters and unimaginable dangers. Despite the risks, Ben feels an unrelenting pull to protect her, even if it means stepping into the unknown and confronting threats he never dreamed existed.

As Sienna and Ben navigate the undeniable bond between them, they're swept into a high-stakes battle alongside the Misfit Shifters to confront the dark force haunting them. With time running out and the danger escalating, survival feels more fragile with every passing moment. Can Ben prove he belongs in Sienna's world, or will the weight of the fight tear them—and everything they're fighting for—apart?

Total Pages (Source): 13

1

SIENNA

The espresso machine hissed, sending up a swirl of steam as I wiped the counter beside it. My cousin Cassie was across from me, double-checking her inventory list. She looked so calm and focused.

This coffee shop was definitely her happy place.

“Let’s add an extra container of decaf vanilla, just in case,” she said, nodding to herself as she wrote it down. “We almost ran out last month, and I’m not about to aggravate Pastor Elton again and receive one of those looks he gives. I swear that man can see right into a person’s soul.”

“Pastor Elton and his precious decaf.” I chuckled. “No one should be that attached to caffeine-free coffee.”

Cassie grinned while wrinkling her nose. “I know, but it’s good for business.”

“True,” I said.

Not that this place needed any help in that department. The Caffeinated Fox was practically a town landmark, and Cassie had earned her place as its beating heart after taking it over for her mom, Regina, a few years ago. I was only here temporarily, filling in for Annette—who’d decided to stay home with her kids after finding out she was pregnant with her third—until Cassie hired someone else. It was supposed to be a

quick favor, but I wasn't sure if a few shifts would turn into something more permanent.

It wouldn't be such a bad thing.

After all, Cassie was easy to work with, the tips were nice, and it wasn't as though my dog grooming business was thriving. Getting the word out had been more of a challenge than I'd anticipated.

Another customer made their way to the counter, grabbing my attention, and I stepped up to take their order while Cassie finished making her inventory list.

"Hey, what can I get you today?" I asked the elderly woman.

I'd seen her around town but couldn't remember her name. However, I did remember her weird tortoiseshell purse and the stories that came with it. My heart started beating triple time as I wondered if the old woman had something to give me.

That was what she did—she gave things to people.

Gifts.

Sometimes it was actual trinkets and others it was the gift of advice. As I stared into her pale blue eyes, I wondered which she might give me today.

"Hello, dear," the old woman said. "I'll have a pumpkin spice latte. I'd like to see what all the fuss is about."

A little late to the trend, but okay.

"Sure. One pumpkin spice latte coming right up," I said, trying not to gag.

I hated pumpkin spice. Give me apple anything all day. That was the original flavor of fall.

“Hey, Ms. Lynette,” Cassie greeted the old woman, making her way to the counter. “How are you today?”

Ms. Lynette .

Yep. That was her name.

“I’m good, dear. Out and about today,” she said with a smile. “Figured I’d try one of those pumpkin spice lattes I see everyone raving about all the time.”

Cassie went ahead and made one for her while I rang her up.

“Let me know what you think,” Cassie said, placing it on the counter.

“Thank you, dear,” Ms. Lynette said, and then her attention shifted back to me. “I almost forgot. I came here to give you something.”

I blinked. “Me?”

Ms. Lynette set her latte on the counter and rummaged through her tortoiseshell purse. “Yes. Ah, here it is.” She pulled out a phone charger and set it on the counter. “You’ll need this.”

While I knew the woman’s reputation in town, the type of items she gave were still strange. I mean, a phone charger? I already had one at home.

Why would I need another?

Even so, I took it.

“Oh. Okay. Thanks,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

Apparently, nothing was needed because Ms. Lynette picked up her pumpkin spice latte and headed for the exit.

Cassie made a noise, and I turned to look at her. Her eyes widened and a smile stretched across her face. “You just got a gift from Ms. Lynette!”

“Yep, a phone charger.”

I picked it up, checking to make sure there wasn’t anything special about it. Didn’t look like it. It looked like a normal phone charger to me, and not even a new one. There was dirt smudged along the white cord.

Cassie nudged me. “You know what this means.”

“Now I can charge my phone while I work?” I teased.

“No.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re going to find a mate soon.”

My stomach somersaulted.

Was that what I wanted?

Sure, I was the only member of the Misfit Shifters who hadn’t found their mate, but it didn’t bother me.

Not really.

“Anyway,” I said, trying to change the subject.

Cassie lifted her hands in the air, her eyes widening. “Okay, I won’t mention it again. All I’m going to say is to be on the lookout for love.”

I laughed, but deep inside, I felt my fox stir. Love was something she wanted, something she’d always wanted. However, it wasn’t something we had any luck finding.

A small rush came through the coffee shop over the next few minutes, for which I was grateful. It kept me busy and kept Ms. Lynette’s odd gift off my mind.

It also kept the whole Xander situation off my mind, too.

He was still out there, lurking around with Lucius’s dark spirit inside him. Not only that, but the releasing phase of the moon was fast approaching, and if I couldn’t come up with a plan to get a feather from his raven soon, it wasn’t going to be good.

Cassie and I danced around one another, making more pumpkin spice lattes than I cared to. Once the rush of customers had passed, we paused and gave each other a look.

“Whew,” she said, blowing out a puff of air. “We got busy for a minute.”

“Yeah, and I think I made my twentieth pumpkin spice latte of the day.”

“Probably. They’re popular.” She chuckled.

“I don’t understand why.”

“Anyway,” Cassie said, with a slight eye roll. She was a fan of the flavor. “I wanted

to say thanks again for agreeing to help me out until I find someone else to hire on. You've been a lifesaver. The regulars miss Annette, but I think they're starting to warm up to you."

I laughed at that. "No one's warming up to me. They can all sense my lack of patience for pumpkin spice season, but I'm okay with that."

"They like the edge you bring around here. It makes things more interesting," she countered. "Besides, you know you're great with people."

"Maybe a little." I grinned. "You've got this place handled, though. I'm just backup."

"Maybe." She smiled, her tone soft. "But it's been nice having you here. Keeps things lively."

I softened at that, feeling a rush of warm gratitude for my cousin flood me. Cassie always did have a way of making people feel good. Watching her work the espresso machine or chat with the customers, I couldn't help but feel a pang of pride toward her.

"Thanks," I said. "You know, you really have a way with people. You make them feel like they belong—especially your customers."

She smiled and looked at me, her gaze soft. "Awe. That's sweet of you to say. I guess I just like making people feel like they belong somewhere. Even if it's just this little coffee shop. It's important to me that folks feel good about coming here, you know?"

I nodded, struck by her words in a way I hadn't expected.

Belonging.

It was something I'd been searching for in my own way for a while now, but here Cassie was, creating it for everyone who walked through her door. She didn't need to be flashy or fierce. She was just a friendly face with a heart of gold.

Cassie wasn't floundering through life—unlike me.

Sure, I was covering shifts here for her until she could find someone more permanent, which counted as helping family, but other than that, all I had going for me was a dog grooming business I couldn't get off the ground.

Then there was the situation with Xander's raven.

I still needed to figure out how to get a feather from him for Maribel's ritual and I had no idea how to go about it. I'd only said I would handle it because everyone else had found solid ground lately, including their person, and I was the only one in the crew who was still out there searching for both.

I'd stepped up so none of them had to.

Even so, being here, in Cassie's world of lattes and regulars, it felt good to be reminded of the other side of life—the brighter side that didn't involve possessed shifters, evil spirits, and a longing to find a sense of home.

My phone buzzed with a new voicemail, startling me. I hadn't even heard it ring. Cassie glanced at me.

"You can check that," she said.

"Probably just spam," I replied, but I pulled it out of my back pocket anyway.

Cassie grinned. "Maybe it's love calling."

“I didn’t know you were such a hopeless romantic,” I countered, glancing at my cell.

It was a voicemail from an unknown number. Curious, I tapped play and a man’s voice filled my ear, sounding slightly overwhelmed, endearing, and tired.

“Uh, hey. This is Ben. Dr. Ben Andrews, the vet you brought Rosco to. Just wanted to check in and make sure he’s, uh... mellowing out all right. I know his situation with the edible had you worried, but like I said, he’s not the first dog to have a run-in with some unexpected treats . Just let him sleep it off, make sure he’s got plenty of water, and maybe keep him out of trouble for a while.” He chuckled softly, sounding a bit amused with himself and a snort escaped me. “Anyway, if he decides to stage another snack attack, feel free to call me. This is my personal cell. Thanks.”

“Who was it?” Cassie asked, curiosity flaring through her eyes. “I thought I heard something about an edible?”

“Yeah. It was a wrong number. A vet who was calling to check on one of his patients—a stoned dog from the sounds of it—who came in today, which sounds kind of hilarious. Could you imagine?”

She cracked a grin. “Oh, no! I’m sure that was scary for both the dog and the owner!”

“Probably more so for the owner.” I chuckled.

“Are you going to call him back and let him know he has the wrong number?”

I blinked. “Should I?”

The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind, even though my fox seemed to love the idea.

“I would,” Cassie said. “What if the owners need to get in touch with him?”

I pursed my lips together, thinking. “Okay, give me one second,” I muttered.

“Take your time.”

A couple walked in, garnering Cassie’s attention as I slid into the back room.

I paced the length of the storage room, wondering what to say. When I had something in mind, I tapped his number and waited for it to ring. It rang a few times and then went to voicemail.

Perfect.

“Hi, Dr. Ben. So, you definitely didn’t reach Rosco’s owners. But honestly? I’m glad you called the wrong number because your message made my day. That poor puppy! But don’t worry, I have a feeling he’ll munch his way through these high stakes just fine. Wink. Wink.” I chuckled at myself for the pun, corny as it was. “Thanks again for the laugh.”

I hung up, feeling like that could have come off as slightly cringy but not caring in the slightest because it had made me laugh. My fox stirred, making herself known, and I realized I was grinning like a fool.

I didn’t know Dr. Ben Andrews, but he was the first man to make me smile like this in a long time, and he hadn’t even been trying.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:35 am

2

BEN

I turned off the lights as I exited the clinic, mentally cataloging the things I still needed to do that I hadn't gotten to today.

Today had been a rollercoaster.

It started with a hyperactive Labrador puppy here for a well-check tearing through the exam room, then moved on to a cranky cat with a tooth in need of extraction, a dog with a parasitic infection that had us all deep cleaning the place after he left, and finished with Rosco who'd ingested an edible. The poor guy had come in wobbly and lethargic with panicked owners. They were here on vacation and let him roam around in the fenced-in backyard of their rental while they unloaded their vehicle, only to find him out of it once they were settled. He'd apparently found someone's lost edible while in the backyard. Honestly, he'd been my most comical patient of the day.

My cell chimed, letting me know I had a new voicemail.

When had it even rung?

I pulled it from my pocket and placed it to my ear once I hit play, thinking it would be Rosco's owners returning my call.

It wasn't.

Instead, a woman's sultry voice filled my ear. I stopped dead in my tracks outside the clinic door. The exhaustion I'd felt mere seconds ago morphed into amusement. Whoever this woman was, she had a sense of humor and the sound of her chuckle had me smiling wide. Either Jane had written down Rosco's owner's number wrong or I'd dialed it wrong. It didn't matter. The call had brightened this woman's day, and in turn, mine as well.

I replayed her voicemail once more as I climbed into my truck, shaking my head at how absurd and random it all was.

"All right," I muttered, feeling a grin spread across my face. "Point to her for the pun added in there."

I sat behind my wheel, debating if I should call her back or send a text instead. Calling her back might seem weird.

So, a text it was.

I tapped her number and opened a new text thread. My thumbs hovered over the keyboard while I thought of what to say.

"Keep it casual, Ben," I muttered. "Just a simple thank you. She doesn't need to know you've replayed the voicemail twice now."

Hey, Dr. Ben here. Glad I could give you a laugh. And, honestly, if I had to accidentally call anyone, I'm glad it was you. Thanks for the top-notch pun—I needed that. Rosco's on the road to recovery. I'm pretty sure he's going to have some wild tales for his dog park buddies, though.

I hit send before I could overthink it, and as I tossed my phone into the cupholder of my truck, I realized part of me hoped she'd respond.

I shook my head, chuckling.

Normally, by this time of night, I'd have mentally checked out, already thinking about a quick dinner, getting a workout in, and having a cold one on my couch while watching whatever I could find on tv before passing out to wake up and do it all over again.

Tonight was different, though.

Tonight, my thoughts kept drifting back to whoever the woman in the voicemail was and her sultry voice while I drove home. There was something refreshing about her, something that made the exhaustion of the day fade.

My phone buzzed. When I came to a stop at the next traffic light, I pulled it from my cupholder and glanced at the screen.

It was her.

Glad to hear my corny pun hit the mark! And even happier to hear Rosco's on the mend. He'll definitely be the life of the dog park after this. While I may not be an expert in edible-induced adventures, I think I can safely say I've perfected the art of crafting humorous replies to wrong number messages. ;)

This woman had me grinning like a fool, and it felt damn good, as I replied.

It's a good specialty to have.

Before I could think about it, I tapped out another message.

Who knew a wrong number could turn into the highlight of my day? Let me know if I can return the favor.

I hit send before I could chicken out, and then thought better of it.

What was I thinking?

This woman could be married.

Honestly, she probably was because who in their right mind would skim over a gem like her?

When she didn't reply, I hit the gas and continued home.

Way to make it weird, Ben.

Just as I turned onto my road, my phone pinged with a new text. I waited until I was in my driveway before I looked to see if it was her.

I'll think on it. So, what else keeps Dr. Ben on his toes, besides dogs with a taste for adventure?

She wouldn't have asked that question if she was married or involved with someone, would she?

I leaned back in my seat and fired back a reply.

Besides emergency edible dog crises? Hyper labs and ornery cats with occasional tooth infections. I'm kidding. That makes it sound like I hate my job. I don't. I love it. I love animals. They keep me busy. How about you? I imagine a life spent perfecting the art of crafting humorous replies to wrong number messages would have a few adventures of its own.

The three little dots appeared, and I realized my heart was pounding while I waited to

see her reply.

Not really. I'm filling in at my cousin's coffee shop right now—The Caffeinated Fox—until she can find someone to hire on permanently. I'd say that's a bit less glamorous than saving animals from their questionable dietary choices, but I get to practice my coffee foam art, which is almost the same thing.

I replied back quickly.

The Caffeinated Fox? I know the place. Best coffee in town, hands down.

A plan formed in my head to wake early enough tomorrow morning to swing by and see if I could meet this mystery woman in person.

My phone pinged again.

The title is well deserved.

I sat parked in my driveway, trying to think of what to say next because I didn't want this conversation to end.

My cell pinged with a new text before I could think of anything.

Have a good night, Dr. Ben. Thanks again for the laughs.

A grin tugged at my lips.

My pleasure. Have a good night, too.

Once I hit send, I realized I should have asked for her name but thought it might make me seem like a creeper to ask now that we'd said goodnight.

With a sigh, I climbed out of my truck and headed inside. For the first time in ages, I was actually looking forward to tomorrow and starting my day with a coffee from The Caffeinated Fox.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:35 am

3

SIENNA

As I lay in bed, my mind instantly filled with thoughts of Ben and the unexpected texts we'd shared last night. It had been fun. Normal. Refreshing. The kind of banter that was easy and light without any strings attached.

I hadn't wanted it to end.

As I picked up my cell from the nightstand and read through them all once more, a smile tugged at my lips. When my fox stirred, I tried to pinpoint what had her so excited about him but couldn't.

Sliding out of bed, I started getting ready for another shift at The Caffeinated Fox. My cell chimed with a new text while I brushed my teeth, and my heart jumped. I glanced at the screen, hoping to see Ben's name. It wasn't him.

It was Dean.

My heart sank, and the cold dread of reality swept in as I read his message.

Any ideas yet on how to get that feather from Xander's raven?

I rinsed my toothbrush in the sink while I thought about how to reply. Guilt washed over me. I'd let myself get too caught up in silly texts with a guy I didn't even know when my focus should've been on something far more important—like getting that

feather.

Shit. I really needed a plan.

Preferably one that kept everyone safe and got what we needed to banish Lucius's spirit.

Cringing internally, I tapped out a reply.

Still working on it, but don't worry. I've got it under control.

My thumbs hovered over the keys. I wanted to say something more reassuring, but honestly, there was nothing more to say. It was the best I could offer while I tried to think up a plan that didn't involve ambushing a possessed raven shifter with mind-control abilities who could easily turn the tables on me.

My fox paced.

She felt as anxious as I did. We both knew that the releasing phase of the moon was approaching soon and everyone counted on us to get that feather beforehand.

Another text from Dean came through.

I'm sure you do. Worst case, we can always ambush him.

I snorted as I replied.

Not opposed to that idea, honestly.

He was quick to respond.

We'll keep it on the back burner for now.

I tucked my phone into my back pocket and pulled in a deep breath while running my fingers through my hair. My fox instincts flared to life. Her cleverness drove me to think of every possible way to get the upper hand on Xander so we could get what we needed. While foxes might not be built for brute strength, they were quick, sneaky, and always alert.

If my fox could lure him out, then she could snag a feather. I knew she was quick enough.

The only problem was Xander's mind control ability.

He could slip into a shifter's head—like Lucius had been able to—and take control. If we weren't careful, he'd have my fox and I under his control in seconds.

A rush of air passed through my lips as doubt set in.

What if I couldn't pull this off? What if I couldn't get a feather in time?

My fox nipped at me, not liking the way I was thinking. I agreed with her. That train of thought wasn't helpful.

"Focus, Sienna," I muttered to myself, shaking off the lingering doubt. Pursing my lips together, I finished getting ready for my shift and then headed out the door. Turning my phone on silent, I walked to my car, refusing to think about Dr. Ben and our texting thread from last night again.

I had to focus right now.

The drive to Main Street was short, and I found a parking space quickly due to how

early it was. As I walked to the coffee shop, I tried to think of how I could lure Xander out and get him to give way to his raven long enough for me to grab a feather. Astrid, Xander's sister and Dean's mate, had said she hadn't seen him at his house lately.

Honestly, no one had seen him in a while.

I'd assumed since he was possessed by Lucius's spirit and had his mind control ability, he would have been busy forming an army like Lucius had when he was still alive, but it didn't seem like it. Maybe Lucius had learned from his mistakes and was now laying low in his second attempt at whatever evil he was planning for us all.

Bastard .

The warm scent of coffee and vanilla welcomed me as I stepped inside The Caffeinated Fox. Cassie was already behind the counter, busy doing her thing. Her face lit up when she saw me enter.

"Morning," she said, holding a fresh cup of coffee out to me.

Gratitude filled me as I took it from her, my cold fingers soaking up heat from the cup. "Morning. Thanks for the pick-me-up."

"No problem." She flashed me an inquisitive smirk. "So, did you keep texting with the veterinarian last night after you left?"

A grin tugged at my lips, but I tried to force it away. "Yeah, but it's not a big deal. It was just a wrong number and a couple of laughs."

Cassie raised her eyebrows, clearly not buying it. I didn't blame her. I didn't buy it either. Something about Ben lit me up and excited me.

I couldn't explain it.

Clearly, my dating life had been nonexistent for too long and my life had gotten boring as hell if a wrong number was shaking things up for me this much.

"Mm-hmm," Cassie murmured. "Sure. But sometimes, fate likes to play matchmaker. So, you never know."

I laughed, a little thrown by her persistence.

Cassie was usually the quiet one—the calm, friendly presence behind the counter serving up lattes. Seeing this side of her was unexpected. But honestly? Her words struck something in me. Even my fox sat up and took notice.

Was there more to this whole situation with Ben than a wrong number and humorous text exchanges?

I blamed Ms. Lynette—as well as Cassie—for having me thinking this way.

A customer entered, gaining Cassie's attention, and I headed to the back to drop off my purse and take a few uninterrupted sips of coffee before heading out front to help.

The morning passed in a steady rhythm with regulars cycling through like clockwork. Pastor Elton came through for his large vanilla decaf, a couple of firefighters—including Cassie's friend Adara's man Dusty, who I knew was a dragon shifter—came through, and a moms' group. As I settled into the flow of things, I felt myself relax a bit. It had taken me a long time to realize it, but routine had a way of clearing my mind.

Too bad I had a hard time sticking to any type of routine.

A man I didn't recognize strode into the coffee shop. He seemed focused as he scanned behind the counter, like he was searching for someone. My fox perked up at the sight of him. He'd piqued her curiosity—and mine, too.

The guy was handsome.

“Hey, there. Welcome to The Caffeinated Fox,” I greeted him as he approached the counter, flashing my usual smile. “What can I get for you?”

His face lit up in recognition. “It's you,” he said, his voice filled with certainty.

I blinked, caught off guard. “Excuse me?”

He grinned and placed a hand to his chest. “Dr. Ben Andrews. Wrong-number enthusiast.”

My eyes widened as realization hit me like a lightning bolt. This was Dr. Ben? The Ben I'd been texting last night?

He had to be the sexiest man I'd ever seen.

Tousled dark brown hair that looked like he'd just run his hand through it. Warm hazel eyes I could get lost in. A strong jawline softened by an easy smile. He wasn't overly polished, but instead dressed in jeans and a plain button-up rolled to the elbows. His shoulders were broad and he had a tall, muscular frame that nearly had me drooling. However, there was something steady and grounding about his presence, too.

“Oh! Wow, small world,” I stammered, trying to play it cool even as my fox practically buzzed with interest. “Didn't expect to meet you in person.”

He chuckled, his confidence almost maddening compared to my racing pulse and frantic vibes. “Yeah, neither did I. But after last night, I figured I had to see if you were as quick on your feet in real life as you are over the phone.”

I bit my bottom lip, fighting the grin that threatened to take over. “Oh, I’m even better in person,” I replied, grabbing a cup. “So, what’ll it be? Plain coffee, or are you one of those fancy latte types?”

“Just a regular coffee, black,” he said with a warm smile.

I stepped to the machine. “Black coffee’s a bit safe, don’t you think?”

He leaned on the counter, a playful spark in his eyes, and stared at me. My heart kickstarted inside my chest while I focused on not spilling his coffee as I poured.

“What can I say? I’m a simple guy,” he said. “But if you’ve got any wild recommendations, I’m all ears.”

“Next time, maybe. For now, your safe order is ready to go.”

I slid the cup across the counter, and our fingers brushed for the briefest second sending a small jolt of electricity up my arm. My fox went batshit crazy, and I struggled to calm her down, worried my eyes would brighten in front of him.

What the heck was wrong with her?

Ben blinked as he took his coffee. Had he felt that jolt? He was hard to read.

“Thanks,” he said with a slight nod. “You know, I still owe you a favor for making my wrong number blunder the highlight of my day. I meant it when I said to let me know if I can ever return the favor.”

The sincerity in his voice made my heart skip a beat, and a thrill that had nothing to do with the caffeine flowing through my veins rushed through me.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, at a loss for words.

Before I could gather my thoughts fully, Cassie leaned in, grinning from ear to ear. “Actually, tonight’s karaoke night at Last Drop. Sienna loves singing. Maybe you could be her partner?”

My eyes shot to her. First, what was she doing playing matchmaker? Second, how did she even know it was karaoke night at Last Drop, she’d been there like once.

“Oh, I’m not much of a singer,” Ben said, still smiling. “But I might be open to the idea. Depends on the song, though.”

While I wanted to go out with him for a night of karaoke fun, I wasn’t sure it was the best idea. At least not until I’d crafted a plan to get a feather from Xander. Better yet, not until the ritual with him was done and over with—just to be safe, because I could tell he was human.

Cassie didn’t know about everything going on with Xander, though.

Hell, she never even knew about Lucius to my knowledge.

Few in the shifter community of Crescent Creek did. It had been a joint decision this time around that we didn’t want to panic anyone.

However, with Ben standing in front of me, looking at me with that easy grin of his, I couldn’t bring myself to say no to a night of fun with him.

I took a breath, feeling my fox stirring again. She was nudging me to go out with him.

“I’m sure I can pick something you’ll know the words to,” I said, caving to his magnetic pull.

It was reckless, maybe even a little foolish to go out with him, but I couldn’t help myself.

A spark of excitement entered his hazel eyes. “Okay, I trust you.”

My fox practically did a backflip. Her energy buzzed through me, insistent and wild. It took every ounce of control I had to shove her into the back of my mind.

Calm down , I silently scolded her, but it was no use.

This man had stirred her up, awakening something in her that she wasn’t about to let go unnoticed.

“What time should I pick you up?” Ben asked.

“How about I meet you there at seven? That’s when karaoke starts.”

“Sure. See you at seven. Let’s hope I don’t make your ears bleed.”

“Doubtful,” I said with a grin.

With one last smirk tossed my way, he took his coffee and headed to the exit. The second the door closed behind him, I spun to face Cassie. She stood, watching me, with an innocent smile plastered on her face.

“Cassie!” I hissed, my voice sounding half-scolding, half-amused. “Did you really just play matchmaker?”

She shrugged, her nose wrinkling. “Well, you didn’t exactly seem like you minded. And besides,” she added with a smirk. “I could tell from a mile away you’re into him.”

“He’s cute, isn’t he?” I asked, gushing a little.

“Definitely cute,” she said, still smiling. “Go out with him and have some fun. You deserve it. You’ve seemed tense lately.”

“I have a lot on my mind.”

Understatement of the year.

“So, go have some fun,” she insisted. “At least one of us should.”

“You could come,” I said, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

While I loved Cassie and would definitely enjoy seeing her with a few beers in her singing karaoke, I realized that I wanted to spend time with Ben alone. There had been a spark there that I wanted to explore, even if it seemed selfish.

“I don’t think so. Karaoke isn’t my thing. Honestly, neither is the bar. No offense,” she said quickly, tossing me a look.

“None taken.”

“Besides, I’ve got a new book and a bottle of wine waiting for me at home,” she said.

I grinned, knowing she meant every word—my cousin truly savored the quiet joys of life. However, I’d come to realize that I craved things to be a little more electric.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:35 am

4

BEN

I parked my truck outside Last Drop and took a moment to gather myself before heading inside. My nerves were doing their usual pre-date routine of tying knots in my stomach, making me wonder if I should've picked a better shirt.

Beyond my nerves was a sense of excitement, too.

Sienna had been on my mind since I'd listened to her voicemail. She was sharp, witty, and her energy was electric in a way that lingered. I couldn't remember the last time I'd looked forward to seeing someone as much as I did her.

Pulling in a deep breath, I slipped out of my truck and headed for the entrance of the bar. My cell chimed with a text before I made it to the door. I fished it out of my pocket and paused to see who it was.

Sienna's name lit my screen.

I'm inside already. Come find me.

A grin pulled at my lips.

When I swung the door open and stepped inside, the hum of conversations, low music, and clinking glasses surrounded me. My attention zeroed in on Sienna almost immediately. She stood near the bar, her vibrant red hair catching the dim light,

making her stand out among everyone else. Her sharp, observant eyes scanned the length of me as I walked toward her.

Damn, this woman had a presence that was impossible to ignore.

“Hey, Dr. Ben,” she said in her sultry tone as I walked up.

“Hey yourself,” I replied, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders. “Ready to make me regret agreeing to karaoke?”

Her laugh was soft, but full of mischief. “You’ll be fine. Besides, it’s good to step out of your comfort zone now and then.”

“I’m definitely doing that right now, I can assure you,” I said, my grin growing. “I need a beer before I sing a word, though.”

I stepped to the bar and motioned to the bartender for two beers. Joe nodded to me in response. While I didn’t come here often, I still knew the owners by name—Joe and Ivy.

It was a small-town thing.

From the corner of my eye, Sienna reached into her purse for her wallet.

“I’ve got this,” I said with a shake of my head.

She raised an eyebrow, a playful challenge reflected in her eyes. “You sure? I’m perfectly capable of buying my own drink, you know.”

“Not tonight,” I said, handing her a bottle. “Consider it part of my apology for hijacking your voicemail.”

She smiled, taking a sip as I paid Joe. “Fine. But the next round is on me.”

“Deal.”

I took a swig from my beer, unbelieving I was out on a weeknight—on a date. Even though we hadn’t called it a date, that was what I was categorizing it as in my head.

Sienna gestured toward the karaoke sign-up sheet before I could ask if she wanted to find a table or play a game of pool.

“I’ll go get us on the list,” she said. “Be right back.”

I watched her weave through the crowd. There was something effortless and calculated about the way she moved, like she was incredibly comfortable in her skin as she glided through the crowd. It hit me, watching her, just how much I wanted to know her. Not just her favorite coffee or what she did for fun, but the stuff that mattered—the things that made her tick.

When she came back, the grin on her face hinted she had a secret. I eyed her suspiciously.

“All right, what did you pick?” I asked, narrowing my eyes on her.

She took a sip of her beer before answering. “You’ll see.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring,” I said, trying to laugh off the knot of nerves building in the pit of my stomach again. The last thing I wanted was to make myself look like an idiot in front of her. What had I been thinking, agreeing to sing karaoke with her? Of course, I would make myself look like an idiot. “You’re not setting me up for failure, are you?”

Her grin widened. “Don’t worry, the lyrics will be right there on the screen. You’ll know the song, though. Everyone does. It’s a classic.”

I shook my head, laughing despite myself. “Well, considering I already made a fool of myself with that voicemail, I guess I’ve got nothing to lose.”

“You didn’t look like a fool,” she countered. “I mean, look what it led to.” She gestured to us and where we were.

“Good point.”

We grabbed a small table near the back, away from the noise of the bar.

“So,” I said, leaning forward with my elbows on the table. “How was your day at the coffee shop? Do you like working there?”

She shrugged, her smile softening. “Fine, but it’s not exactly what I want to do. I’ve been trying to start a dog grooming business.”

That caught my attention. “Dog grooming? That’s awesome. Where’s your setup?”

“The tiny dining room of my house,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

I couldn’t help it; I laughed. “Seriously?”

“Don’t laugh,” she said, pretending to scold me. Her eyes sparkled with amusement, though. “Okay, yeah, it’s not ideal and maybe that’s why no one’s booking with me, but the goal is to save up for a shed I can put in the backyard. My landlord already signed off on it and I’m almost there moneywise.”

“That’s actually a great idea. Smart,” I said, meaning it. “If you want, I could put

some cards out at my clinic for you.”

She took another sip from her beer and then tossed me a grin. “That would be amazing, except I don’t have cards made up yet.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “You’re really selling this business, aren’t you?”

“I know, I know,” she said, throwing her hands up in mock defeat. “I’m working on it. Just maybe not in the order I should be.”

Before I could say anything more, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at the screen and frowned. “Sorry, I need to take this,” I said, standing and making my way outside. “Hello, this is Dr. Andrews,” I answered once I stepped out into the parking lot.

“Dr. Andrews, it’s Donna Puglisi—my golden retriever, Bella. She went into labor a few hours ago, but something’s wrong. She’s panting hard, and I haven’t seen any puppies yet. I think she’s in trouble.”

“Okay,” I said, my mind shifting into problem-solving vet mode. “First, take a deep breath. Is she pushing, or does it look like she’s straining without anything happening?”

“She’s straining, but nothing’s coming out,” Donna said, her voice shaky. “I don’t know what to do.”

“All right,” I said, keeping my tone calm. “This could be a positioning issue or something more serious. I need you to check if you can see anything—like a sac or a puppy starting to crown.”

“Okay, hang on. No, I don’t see anything. She’s just straining.”

“Got it. Keep her calm, and make sure she’s in a comfortable, quiet space. Is she drinking water?”

“She’s ignoring it,” Donna said, her panic rising again. “Dr. Andrews, what if she?—”

The call abruptly cut off and my screen went black.

Damn it, my phone died.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair in frustration.

I quickly headed to my truck for a charger. After rummaging around, I realized I didn’t have one. Pulling in a deep breath, I remembered moving it to my desk at the clinic because my office charger had stopped working.

Shit.

I headed back inside the bar, prepared to let Sienna know what was going on, and that I needed to cut our night of fun short.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her observant eyes noticing right away that something wasn’t right.

“That was one of my patients calling. Her golden retriever went into labor and there’s a complication,” I said. “I need to get over there, but I don’t have the address and my phone just died in the middle of the call.”

“Oh, no!” Concern tinged her words.

“I need to head to the clinic so I can pull up her file and get the address—and my phone charger, apparently.” The weight of the situation pressed down on me. “I’m so sorry. Can I get a raincheck on karaoke?”

“Of course. Do you need help?”

I blinked, caught off guard by her offer. “Actually, yeah. I could use an extra set of hands if you’re serious.”

“Let’s go,” she said, grabbing her bag. “Oh. Wait.” She rummaged through her purse and pulled out a charger.

I stared at her, surprised. “You carry a universal charger in there?”

“Let’s just say I know someone who’s good at making sure people have what they need.” She smirked.

It fit perfectly, of course, and once we got to my truck, I called Donna back. She gave me a quick update and then I got her address. Plugging the address into my GPS app, I glanced over at Sienna.

“Thanks for this. I owe you.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said, her smile genuine. “Thanks for letting me come along.”

I backed out of my parking space and headed toward Donna’s house. When we reached it, I cut the engine and grabbed my emergency bag from the back seat. My pulse was steady, but my mind was already running through every possible complication and how to handle it. Sienna followed me to the front door, her expression sharp and focused in a way that surprised me. She wasn’t just tagging along—she was ready to help.

The front door flew open before I even knocked. Donna stood there, her face etched with panic.

“Thank God you’re here, Dr. Andrews,” she said, her voice trembling. “She’s been straining for over an hour, and nothing’s happening.”

“Where is she?” I asked, my voice calm.

“In the laundry room,” Donna replied, leading us through the house. “I thought it’d be quiet enough for her there.”

As we stepped into the laundry room, Bella was lying on a blanket, her sides heaving as she panted hard. Her eyes flicked to me, glazed with exhaustion and pain, and my chest tightened.

“Good girl,” I whispered, dropping to my knees beside her. “You’re doing great, Bella. We’re here to help.”

Sienna crouched down on Bella’s other side, her movements calm and careful as she stroked her head gently.

“You’re okay, sweet girl. Just hang in there,” she said. I glanced at her, impressed by how composed she seemed despite the magnitude of the situation. My attention shifted back to Bella as I reached for my gloves and began examining her.

“Donna, can you tell me exactly when she started showing signs of labor?” I asked, keeping my voice calm and steady.

“About three hours ago,” Donna said, wringing her hands. “But she didn’t really start straining until an hour ago, and nothing’s happened since.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “From what I can feel, it seems like one of the puppies might be stuck. It’s not uncommon, but I’ll need to act quickly to make sure both Bella and the puppies stay safe.”

“She’s going to be fine,” Sienna said to Donna, and the confidence in her voice comforted even me. “Ben’s got this. And Bella’s a fighter, isn’t she?”

“She is,” Donna said.

“Exactly,” Sienna insisted.

This woman had a knack for grounding people in moments of chaos. It was impressive as hell.

I focused on Bella, working carefully to shift her puppy. After a few tense minutes, I finally felt the shift happen.

“All right, Bella, here we go,” I whispered. “Push for me, girl.”

“You’re so strong,” Sienna said, leaning closer to Bella’s head. “Just a little longer.”

With one final push, the first puppy slid free, tiny and squirming. I looked it over, making sure there was nothing wrong.

“Healthy and strong,” I said, meeting Donna’s eyes.

She let out a sob of relief. “Oh, thank goodness!”

Sienna reached for a towel, wrapping the puppy gently before handing it to Donna. “Here’s your first grand-pup,” she said, earning a shaky laugh from Donna.

Over the next hour, Bella delivered four more puppies, each one healthy. Sienna stayed right there, never faltering, keeping Bella calm and steady as I worked. When the last puppy arrived, Bella gave a low whine and settled back, exhausted while gently licking her new litter.

“That’s all of them,” I said, sitting back on my heels with a sigh. “Five healthy puppies, and Bella’s doing great.”

Donna knelt down beside her and stroked her head. “I don’t know how to thank you,” she said, her voice thick with emotion as she met my stare. Her gaze drifted to Sienna. “Both of you.”

“I’m glad I could help and that everything went well,” I said, smiling as I took my gloves off and packed up my supplies. “Be sure you give Bella lots of water and rest over the next few days. Call me if you need anything.”

Sienna stood. “She’s a good mom,” she said, before glancing at me with a warmth that caught me off guard. “And you’re a good vet.”

For a moment, I was too taken aback by the sincerity in her tone to respond. Then I chuckled, shaking my head. “You’re not so bad yourself. I think Bella might’ve liked you better than me.”

Sienna laughed, her cheeks flushing slightly. “I just follow orders.”

I could tell she was being modest, but I didn’t push. Instead, I grabbed my bag, said goodbye to Donna once more, and we headed out to my truck.

I wasn’t ready for the night to end, though.

“Do you like cupcakes?” I asked Sienna as I cranked my truck to life. “Sugar Sweets

Bakery has these apple cinnamon cupcakes that are amazing.”

She raised an eyebrow. “No pumpkin spice?”

“Sorry, not a fan.”

Her laugh was warm and infectious. “A man after my own heart. I can’t stand pumpkin spice.”

“We’re a match made in heaven,” I said. “So, is that a yes, then?”

“Yes.”

“Great, because they close soon, but I think we can make it in time.”

“Pedal to the metal,” she teased.

I backed out of Donna’s driveway and headed toward town. We made it to Sugar Sweets Bakery just as Fern was flipping the sign to ‘Closed,’ but she noticed me and waved us inside.

“Let me guess, apple cinnamon cupcake with buttercream frosting?” Fern asked with a knowing smile.

“Two, please,” I said.

Fern packaged two in little boxes for us. Once I paid, we made our way back to the sidewalk so she could finish closing up for the night. Sienna took hers out of the box, eyeing it.

“This looks almost too pretty to eat,” she said, peeling back the wrapper.

“Almost,” I teased.

She took a bite, her eyes widening. “Okay, this is worth skipping karaoke for.”

“I’ll take that as a win.” I laughed, and then took a bite of my own.

As we strolled under the glow of the streetlights, I found myself stealing glances at Sienna. Something about her made even the simplest moments feel like they mattered. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was, but I liked that about her.

5

SIENNA

The morning rush had finally tapered off, leaving me with a few minutes to breathe before the lunchtime crowd rolled in. My thoughts, however, were anything but calm. I'd been replaying last night in my head all morning—the puppies, how calm Ben had been under pressure, the way he'd smiled at me like I was someone he was genuinely happy to be around.

I liked him.

My fox liked him too, which was saying something since she wasn't exactly impressed by most people. Even so, I couldn't allow myself to get too carried away. Timing was everything, and right now, the timing was crap. My priority had to be figuring out a way to get a feather from Xander's raven.

Nothing more.

As I wiped down the counter, the door swung open, jingling the bell overhead. I glanced up out of habit and my stomach flipped at the sight of Ben strolling in. He held a paper bag in one hand and wore that easy, confident smile that made my heart do annoying little somersaults.

“Hey,” he said, making his way to the counter. “I come bearing lunch.”

I hesitated, torn between the thrill of seeing him and the nagging voice in my head

reminding me of my self-imposed boundaries. My fox, on the other hand, was practically bouncing with joy, urging me to say yes before I could even think about saying no.

“Ben,” I started, trying to sound casual but probably failing. “That’s sweet, but?—”

Before I could finish, Cassie appeared at my side, her timing as impeccable as ever. “Go. I’ve got this covered.” She smiled warmly at Ben, her cheeks flushing slightly.

I blinked, caught off guard. “What? No. I can’t leave you to handle the lunch rush alone.”

She waved my words away. “I’ll be fine. Besides, you’ve been working hard all morning. Take a break. You deserve it.”

Ben’s grin widened, and I could see the hope in his eyes. My fox practically hummed with contentment, and I knew I was fighting a losing battle.

“All right,” I said, giving in. “But I can’t be gone long.”

“Not a problem.” He grinned.

“Let me grab my coat.”

As I stepped into the back room for my coat, I felt a buzz of excitement radiating from my fox. She wasn’t the least bit conflicted about spending more time with Ben. I, on the other hand, couldn’t shake the thought that I might be making a mistake. But as I slipped my coat on and joined him by the door, I decided I could afford one lunch break.

Just one.

After this, we would have to distance ourselves until I got the feather and Maribel did her thing, sending Lucius's spirit where it deserved to go.

Ben held the door open for me, and I stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Where are we headed?" I asked.

"How about the gazebo?" he suggested. "We can eat and people watch."

"Sounds perfect."

We headed in that direction, walking side by side. The fall air carried a crisp chill, the kind that hinted at the first frost of the season coming soon. I tugged my jacket tighter around me, sneaking a glance at Ben. He stared straight ahead like he didn't have a care in the world.

I envied that.

"I called Donna this morning," he said, breaking the silence. "Bella and the puppies are all doing good. She sent me a picture of the whole crew piled up together, happy as can be."

"That's great," I said, managing a small smile. "I'm glad they're okay."

"Me too." He nodded, his tone warm. "It was a close call, but Bella's a tough one."

I tried to focus on his words, but my mind kept wandering. Xander. His raven. The feather I still didn't have.

I was failing at this task miserably.

We reached the gazebo, and Ben held out a hand, motioning for me to take a seat. “Ladies first,” he said with a grin.

“Why, thank you,” I replied, sliding onto the bench.

He sat beside me and pulled out the sandwiches from the bag he carried.

“All right,” he said, holding them up. “Turkey or ham?”

“Turkey. Definitely turkey,” I said, grinning as I took the offered sandwich.

He unwrapped the ham sandwich and leaned back, the wooden bench creaking slightly under his weight. “So, get this,” he began, launching into a story. I tried to pay attention, but my mind was elsewhere. My brain was too tangled up in thoughts of Xander and what I needed to do to fully process the words he was saying.

“Okay, what’s up?” he asked suddenly, his voice gentle but direct, catching my full attention. “You’ve been nodding at all the right parts, but I can tell you’re not really here.”

I blinked, caught off guard at being called out. “What do you mean? I’m here.”

He gave me a knowing look, one that made it clear he wasn’t buying it. “You look like you’ve got a lot on your mind. I’m all ears if you want to talk about it.”

My fox stirred, pushing me to admit the weight of my problems to him, but I knew I shouldn’t. Dragging him into the mess that was my life right now wasn’t smart. After all, he was human. Even so, I wanted to tell him something about it all so he could wallow with me for a while. He was smart, maybe he could help me figure out a plan.

“What do you know about ravens?” I blurted out before I could think about what I

was saying.

Ben raised an eyebrow, intrigued but not thrown by my random question. “Ravens? Plenty. They’re smart as hell, love shiny things, and can be surprisingly loyal. Why?”

Of course, he would ask why. Why wouldn’t he?

I hesitated, my fox stirring inside my chest. She liked having his full attention like this.

“Just curious,” I said, feeling how ill my fox suddenly was with me for my inability to let him in more.

We barely knew him, and yet she trusted him completely.

“All right,” he said. “But if you’re planning to adopt one, I need details because you seem more like a dog person.”

I laughed, the sound surprising even me.

My fox loved the connection forming between us, but I knew I was treading on dangerous ground. Letting Ben into this part of my life was risky. However, it also felt like a relief.

I could see both sides.

“Seriously, though. You don’t strike me as the random bird trivia type,” Ben said, tilting his head as he studied me. “There’s got to be a story behind your question.”

My fox urged me to trust him, but my logical side screamed that it was too soon and too dangerous.

“I guess I’ve been seeing them around a lot lately,” I said, hoping I sounded casual. “Curiosity bit me.”

“Okay,” he said, not sounding entirely convinced. “Well, they’re fascinating creatures. Did you know they hold grudges?”

I knew, but I didn’t say as much.

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. If a raven decides it doesn’t like you, it’ll remember you and it might even teach its friends to avoid or harass you.”

That sounded about right. While Xander didn’t seem to have any friends to rope in, he sure as shit had no issues with harassing us all on his own.

“But they’re also incredible problem solvers and fiercely protective, especially when they’ve bonded with someone or something. They’ll defend their territory, their mates, and even the random shiny objects they claim as treasures. Sometimes, they’ll even guard places that hold special meaning to them. They’re insanely protective and territorial like that.”

“Guard places,” I echoed softly while my mind raced.

Was that why Xander had been lurking at Lucius’s grave? Was his raven protective of the place because of what it was? Could I use that to lure him out and get close enough to snag a feather?

“You okay?” Ben’s voice cut through my spiraling thoughts, pulling me back to the present.

I blinked, realizing I'd been quiet too long. "Yeah," I said quickly, forcing a smile. "Just thinking. I didn't realize ravens were so complex."

"They are," he said with a grin, his tone light but his eyes studying me closely. "Kind of like someone else I know."

I arched a brow. "Was that supposed to be a compliment?"

His grin faltered briefly before softening into something sincere. "It is. I just mean you have layers. One moment, I feel like I'm starting to figure you out—getting a glimpse of who you really are. And then the next..." He chuckled softly. "You pull the rug out from under me, and I'm back at square one."

His words hit me harder than I expected, warmth spreading through my chest despite the turmoil swirling in my mind. I smiled, forcing myself to push the chaos aside and be in the moment with him.

If only it were that easy—to let someone in and let go of the storm raging around me.

I shifted my focus back to my sandwich, pretending to people-watch, but my attention kept drifting back to him. There was a warmth to him, steady and reassuring, that drew me in. My fox felt it, too. She trusted him, even craved the safety he offered. It was unsettling how much I wanted to lean into that feeling and let it drown out everything else. But I couldn't. Not yet. Not when Xander was still out there, possessed by the darkest evil I'd ever known.

Lucius's grave had to mean something to him.

The thought struck me like a ton of bricks. That was where he'd attacked Ellis and Rachel while they were gathering dirt for Maribel. If his raven had bonded with that place—if he was guarding it—I might be able to use it against him.

But how? And how could I stop myself from falling under his mind control long enough to snag a feather?

My mind swirled with thoughts until it was hard to think straight.

Ben stood, stretching a bit, and my attention jumped back to him.

“Ready to head back? I don’t want to keep you away from work for too long.”

I nodded, brushing crumbs from my lap as I stood. “Yeah, I’m sure the coffee shop is busy with people looking for their lunchtime caffeine hit.”

As we walked back to The Caffeinated Fox, I listened to Ben talk about a grumpy cat he’d treated this morning. When we reached the coffee shop, he hesitated, his hazel eyes meeting mine with that familiar warmth that had started to feel dangerously comforting.

“Thanks for letting me steal you away for lunch,” he said, his tone light but sincere. “We should do it again sometime.”

The air between us crackled, and I knew there was a kiss building between us.

I wanted it, I did, but I knew it would only pull me closer to him, and that wasn’t smart right now.

“I’d like that,” I replied, keeping my voice light and noncommittal while I gripped the handle of the door. My fox bristled, annoyed by my restraint, but I ignored her. “Thanks for the sandwich,” I said before slipping inside.

“Anytime,” I heard him say as the door closed behind me.

I exhaled a slow breath while I walked to the counter, weaving through the line that had formed while I was gone. My fox nipped at me. Ben felt important to her in a way I didn't fully understand, and the way I acted had royally pissed her off.

Ignoring her, I headed to the back room and shucked off my coat before making my way to Cassie behind the counter to help.

“Good lunch?” she asked.

I forced a grin, hoping it was convincing. “Yeah, it was fine.”

My gaze dipped to the line of cups waiting to be filled. I grabbed the first one and got to work. My mind wasn't on the coffee order I was making or even on Ben, though. It was back on Xander, Lucius's grave, and figuring out how to get a damn feather so I could put this all behind me and finally move forward with my life.

Chewing my bottom lip, I made a decision.

I needed to sneak up to Lucius's grave and find Xander's raven's nest. If I could figure out where he was staying, I'd have my starting point. Ben's words earlier had sparked the idea, and now it felt like the only logical move.

My fox stirred, confidence blooming through her.

Challenge accepted .

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:35 am

6

BEN

I flipped off the lights in the lobby of the clinic and locked the door behind me as I headed to my truck. My thoughts weren't on the animals I'd treated today or the paperwork waiting for me tomorrow.

They were on Sienna.

I hadn't heard from her since lunch. It shouldn't have been a big deal—we barely knew each other—but it bothered me more than I cared to admit. She'd been distracted, her usual spark dimmed by something she wasn't saying. Her smile had been there, but her mind had been somewhere else entirely.

I could feel it.

Had I said something wrong? Done something to push her away? Or was she hiding something she didn't trust me enough to share?

The uncertainty of what was going on gnawed at me, refusing to let up. Before I could second-guess myself, I cranked my truck to life and started toward The Caffeinated Fox on impulse. As I drove, I replayed our lunch in my head, picking it apart. My gut told me there was something big she was dealing with that she didn't want me to know.

By the time I pulled up to the coffee shop, the windows were dark, and the 'Closed'

sign hung in the door. I sighed, about to turn the truck around, when the door opened.

Sienna stepped out and locked the door behind her with a quick, sharp movement. She glanced around, almost as though she was checking for something—or someone. My chest tightened as I watched her hurry toward her car, her steps quick. She looked nervous. Maybe even scared.

Instinct kicked in, and a protective pull I couldn't quite explain dug into me.

“What are you doing, Ben?” I muttered while gripping the steering wheel tighter as I eased out of my parking spot to follow her.

I kept a safe distance, rationalizing with myself that what I was doing wasn't creepy. All I wanted to do was make sure she was okay because the look on her face as she speedwalked to her car—combined with the way she'd acted at lunch—suggested she wasn't.

Something was going on, and whatever it was, I felt concerned for her safety.

As the familiar streets of downtown gave way to quieter roads, I realized she was headed to the outskirts of town.

Why?

There wasn't much out here except for dense woods and silence so thick it felt alive. As Sienna's car slowed, I instinctively pulled off the road, parking a good distance behind her. Her taillights glowed faintly ahead, cutting through the shadowy forest until she finally came to a stop.

I killed the engine of my truck and climbed out, keeping my movements quiet as I crept closer. She hadn't heard me yet—maybe because the sound of her car masked

any noise I made. Or maybe her focus was so fixed on whatever brought her out here that she wasn't paying attention.

Either way, I wasn't taking any chances of spooking her, so I remained as quiet as I could.

Staying low, I watched as she stepped out of her car. The interior lights flicked on for a brief moment, illuminating her. When she closed the door and headed toward the woods, my chest tightened.

What are you doing out here, Sienna?

Her gaze was locked on the tree line as she slipped into the forest without hesitation.

Was she planning to hike out here this late at night? Alone? In the pitch black darkness?

I slinked through the woods after her, watching as she moved like a predator with purpose.

It was unnerving and, at the same time, strangely mesmerizing to see.

Logic told me to stop. To go back to my truck, drive home, and forget I'd ever followed her. But instinct screamed at me louder, urging me forward. I couldn't shake the feeling that something big was happening here, something I wasn't supposed to see—but now I couldn't turn around and go home.

Each step I took was painstakingly slow. My whole body was taut as I tried to avoid crunching leaves or snapping twigs beneath my boots while I followed her. We hadn't walked far when she paused. My chest constricted as she glanced around, searching the shadows.

What was she looking for?

It was clear she was still on edge.

When she shucked off her jacket, my brows furrowed. Then she pulled at the hem of her shirt and peeled out of it. I looked away, shocked to see she was undressing. Maybe I shouldn't have listened to my gut and followed her out here.

What was she doing?

While it wasn't freezing out, it was still cold.

What would possess her to drive all the way out here to the middle of nowhere and strip down to her birthday suit?

It didn't make sense.

My gaze remained on my boots, offering her some sense of privacy even though she didn't know I was out here with her. However, as a strange energy filled the air, my gaze lifted.

One minute, Sienna stood bare under the moonlight and the next, her form shimmered almost like heat rising off asphalt on a hot summer day. Her body folded in on itself, and fur rippled over her skin, sprouting all over. When it was over, a red fox with a bushy tail stood in her place.

I blinked, my mind scrambling to make sense of what I'd seen. I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Sienna was a fox.

An actual, living, breathing fox.

Her coat was stunning—rich auburn fur tipped with white at her tail and paws. She was small, but I could sense strength in her. And her eyes were the same sharp, intelligent eyes I'd come to recognize, except now they watched the woods with a predatory focus.

I crouched lower behind the brush I stood near, my heart hammering so loudly I was sure she could hear it, while I continued to stare at her. The logical part of my brain tried to string together some explanation for what I'd seen, something that would make this moment fit into the world I thought I knew.

But it was impossible.

Sienna had transformed into a fox right in front of my eyes. My mind raced, replaying every interaction we'd ever had. The way she seemed so sharp, so attuned to everything around her and the things that she said. The way she'd moved through the woods earlier, quiet, surefooted, and mesmerizing.

It all made sense now.

And yet, it didn't.

I swallowed hard, gripping the bark of a nearby tree to steady myself. The shock I felt was one thing, but what unsettled me even more was the awe that came with it. Sienna had obliterated the rules of reality—of physics—and somehow, instead of fear, all I felt toward her was wonder.

I focused on the beautiful fox cautiously making her way deeper into the woods. If I didn't move soon, I'd lose her. Instinct kicked in again, and that undeniable pull I felt toward her lured me forward once more.

SIENNA

My fox crept forward, her paws silent against the damp earth, while she twitched her nose, scanning the air for the scent of Xander's raven. The forest felt alive, and the trees seemed to whisper that danger was close.

Lucius's grave was nearby.

My fox and I could both sense it. The suffocating heaviness in the air pressed against my fox. She grew more alert as the sharp scent of decay intensified.

Had it always smelled this way in this section of the woods? Or was it because of who was buried here?

When Lucius's grave came into view, a shiver slid through my fox. She didn't want to be here any more than I did, but we both knew that we had to figure out if this was where Xander's raven had decided to nest. My fox lifted her gaze to the treetops, but before she could scan for any sign of a nest, a noise sounded behind her.

My fox froze.

The instinct to run powered through me, but she didn't react the same way. Instead, she slowly turned around without a hint of the panic I felt. It took me all of two seconds to realize why.

Ben.

He stood a few feet back, partially hidden by a tree. His posture was cautious, but not threatening. It was clear he hadn't expected to have been heard or seen. The look on his face—a mixture of curiosity and wonder—made my stomach drop.

He'd seen me shift.

He knew what I was.

The truth hit me like a swift punch to the gut. There was no undoing this, no taking it back. Ben knew shifters existed now.

Why hadn't my fox noticed he was behind us?

When she straightened her posture, I realized that she had. She hadn't wanted me to know, though. That explained how I'd missed his presence entirely.

Shit.

What was I supposed to do now?

For a long moment, my fox and I stared at him. His gaze was fixed on us, too. Of course it was. Something flickered through his hazel eyes.

Understanding? Admiration? What was that?

Before I could think on it further, the sudden sharp, piercing caw of a raven shattered the silence of the night. My fox tensed, instinct taking over as she crouched low to the ground. Xander's raven swooped down from a branch high above, his glossy black feathers glinting faintly in the moonlight. My fox zeroed in on him as he landed on

top of Lucius's grave. The air suddenly filled with a darker, more ominous energy, which sent alarm nipping at my fox.

We needed to get Ben out of here.

Before my fox could do anything, the suffocating, invasive reach of Xander's mind control slammed into her. Pain lanced through her skull, nearly bringing her flat to the ground, and fury surged through us both because neither of us wanted to fucking bow to him again.

My fox dug in deep, struggling to resist the overwhelming pressure of his grip on us, a snarl of defiance ripping from somewhere deep inside her. She bared her teeth while attempting to force him out of our head, but it wasn't enough.

He was too strong.

Through the haze of pain twisting through our brain, my fox and I caught a glimpse of Ben stepping forward. I wanted to scream at him to stay back, to not get involved, but pain pumped through my fox in a near-crippling way while she fought against Xander's hold. Ben was too close, and there was nothing we could do about it. He'd underestimated the situation.

Why wouldn't he?

He had no idea who he was dealing with, or how much worse this was about to get.

Panic twisted through my fox and me. It fueled her strength to fight against Xander's grip. She'd made a vow, a vow that Ben wouldn't be harmed. It was the vow of a fox, which was something stronger than I'd ever known possible.

He meant something to her—something in a big way.

Wait.

Was he?

Before I could think the thought through, Ben reached out in one swift motion and plucked Xander's raven up from the ground. He flapped his wings wildly and cawed out in protest, but before Xander's raven could attempt to shift back into his human form, Ben tucked his head beneath one of his wings and gave him a firm shake.

The pain raging through my fox's skull vanished.

Xander's grip on us was gone, and the suffocating weight of his presence in our mind had lifted. My fox was unsettled by how easily the connection had been severed, but grateful nonetheless, and I felt the same.

Ben cradled Xander's now-limp raven in his arms, staring at him with a mix of confusion and triumph.

"What the hell is with this bird?" he muttered, shaking his head before setting Xander's raven on the ground. "And what happened a minute ago? You looked like he was causing you physical pain somehow."

His eyes lifted to lock with my fox's, and I could see how silly he felt talking to her. My fox didn't seem to notice. Her attention slid away from him to focus on Xander's raven. She inched forward cautiously, sniffing his unmoving form. He was alive, she was positive of that, but he was knocked out cold. Whatever strange dance Ben had done with him had made him fall asleep.

Now was our chance to snag a feather for Maribel.

Inching closer, my fox plucked a glossy black feather from a wing. Once she had it,

she turned to Ben and nudged his leg urgently.

“Right. Time to go,” he said, thankfully understanding.

My fox stayed alert, her ears swiveling at every sound, while Ben followed close behind as we made our way back to the road. I realized then that Ben’s truck was parked only a short distance from my car. Again, I couldn’t believe I’d missed him following me. My fox stirred, guilt powering through her, but there was no time to dwell on it. Xander’s raven could wake any minute.

We had to get out of here.

My fox stepped to the side, allowing me to shift back into my human form quickly. The cool air kissed my bare skin as she receded, taking her warm fur with her. Before I could feel self-conscious about my sudden lack of clothing in front of Ben, he shrugged off his jacket and held it out to me with his head turned away like a gentleman.

“Here,” he said.

“Thanks.” I pulled it on, clutching it tightly around me to fight off the chill in the air.

It was warm with his body heat, and his scent clung to the fabric invading my senses. I stared at him for a moment, wondering what to say. When words wouldn’t form, I bent to grab the feather from the ground and put it in Ben’s coat pocket.

Relief washed over me.

I’d finally gotten what we needed. Now Maribel could do her ritual and send Lucius’s spirit back to hell where it belonged.

Ben cleared his throat. I felt as though it was to remind me of his presence and the explanation he desired.

“Just a second.” I held up a finger and then hurried into the woods for my clothes.

My heart thundered as I dressed.

What should I say to him? How could I even begin to explain something like this to a human?

While I knew he’d seen me shift, an explanation was still needed.

Wasn’t it?

Also, I should explain about Xander and his raven. Ben needed to know everything. My fox agreed. Still, she seemed unfazed by the fact that Ben now knew what we were or that he’d been dragged into the chaos with Xander. Her attention was fixed on the feather safely tucked inside his jacket pocket and the role he’d played in getting it.

That held weight with her.

When I stepped back out of the woods, Ben was still there, waiting for me. His hands were crammed into the front pockets of his jeans and he stood, leaning against his truck. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes said everything.

“I know you have questions,” I said before he could speak. “You probably have things you want to say too, but it’s not safe here. Xander—I mean, the raven— isn’t going to sleep for long.”

He pushed off his truck and shook his head. “He’ll most likely wake in a few

minutes.” His jaw tensed and his brows furrowed. “Xander. So, that raven—is it like you? He can transform?”

“Yes. We’re called shifters,” I said simply, not daring to elaborate yet. “Please, Ben. Just follow me to my place. I promise I’ll explain everything once we get there.”

All I wanted was for us to get the heck out of here, to put distance between us and Xander.

He nodded again. “Lead the way.”

I exhaled a slow breath, then walked toward my car. Cranking the engine, the weight of what I needed to tell Ben settled heavily on my shoulders. I liked him—a lot—and the thought of him walking away after hearing everything twisted painfully in my chest. My fox nuzzled me gently. It was her way of saying she believed he wouldn’t do that. Even so, my grip on the steering wheel tightened as I drove, my knuckles turning white while I tried to piece together how this conversation might go.

Unusually calm, my fox curled up in the corner of my mind, radiating a sense of safety and certainty that things would work out fine, one I didn’t share.

It wasn’t logical—not after everything that just happened.

Even so, she trusted Ben.

Deep down, so did I.

When I pulled into my driveway, Ben’s truck rolled in behind me. Some of the tension in my chest loosened as I swept my gaze over my sanctuary.

This place wasn’t much, but it was mine.

It was safe, and it had been the fresh start I'd built for myself after everything with Lucius and the Ashen Tribe first settled.

I drew in a deep breath, bracing against the nerves clawing at my stomach while I cut the engine on my car.

This was it.

Ben had seen too much tonight for me to deflect or dodge any questions. There was no other choice besides telling him the truth.

My only hope was that it didn't scare him away.

8

BEN

The glass of water felt cool in my hand. It was a gesture I hadn't asked for but appreciated more than I expected. Sienna moved to the other side of the kitchen, keeping distance between us. I could feel the tension radiating off her. Hell, I wasn't exactly calm either. My mind was stuck on one thing—she was a fox.

A shifter.

It didn't feel as though any of this could be real. It all felt like something out of a novel or that would be seen in a movie. I knew it was real, though.

I'd seen it with my own eyes.

Sienna crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes dipped to the glass of water in my hand before lifting to meet mine.

"I owe you an explanation," she said finally, her voice softer than usual. "I know that."

I nodded, unsure what to say.

Was there a right thing to say in a moment like this?

"So... I'm a fox shifter," she began, her eyes locked on mine, as if bracing for my

reaction. “And the world you think you know —it’s just the surface. There’s so much more beneath it, things that would sound impossible but aren’t.”

The glass of water in my hand suddenly felt heavy. I set it on the counter and then met her stare again.

“A fox shifter,” I repeated. The words felt foreign, yet oddly fitting, as they rolled off my tongue. My mind reeled as I tried to merge the version of Sienna I thought I knew to the reality of what she was. “You can turn into a fox.” It wasn’t a question, but more of a statement.

Basically, I was thinking out loud.

She nodded, tension entering her stare. “Yes.”

“At will?”

She nodded again, but didn’t speak this time.

I exhaled a slow breath. “Okay,” I said, running a hand through my hair. “And this is just normal for you? Turning into a fox and what, living a double life?”

Her lips twitched, not quite a smile, but close. “Something like that. It’s normal for shifters, but I don’t exactly advertise it.”

“No kidding,” I muttered, a chuckle slipping free.

“It’s not exactly something I can explain in a coffee shop conversation or through a text.”

I nodded, even though my world felt like it had tilted, and I was now scrambling to

find my footing again.

“I can understand that,” I said. “What about that raven? Xander, right?”

Her expression darkened. “Xander is complicated, but yeah, he’s a shifter, too. A raven shifter. He’s also something more.” She pinched the bridge of her nose as though struggling to word her next few sentences. “This is going to sound batshit crazy, but Xander is possessed by an evil spirit of another shifter who was alive not too long ago. He’s not fully in control of his raven or himself anymore.”

Okay, so, apparently possession was real.

Damn, this night just kept getting stranger.

“The spirit possessing him—Lucius—controlled a group of shifters here in town using his power to manipulate a shifter’s mind,” she said, her tone dripping with disgust. “I was one of those shifters. My whole crew was. We were able to get out from under his thumb when he was killed by another shifter tribe, but that was short-lived. His spirit took up residence inside Xander shortly after.”

“Wow. That’s a lot to unpack,” I insisted, doing my best to soak everything in. “And you’re what, trying to stop him for good now?”

“We are.” Her gaze hardened. “He’s dangerous, not only to me, but to every shifter in town. If we don’t deal with him, he’ll hurt more people.”

She stared at me, as though waiting for me to say something. I crammed my hands into the front pockets of my jeans and locked eyes with her. “Shifters, dark spirits, possession.” The words rolled off my tongue, sounding nonchalant, but they felt like anything but. “I don’t even know where to start, honestly.”

“I get it. Trust me.”

“I’m not saying I’m running for the hills,” I said quickly, the vulnerability in her tone and expression catching me off guard. “I’m only trying to wrap my head around it all.”

Her lips curved into a faint smile. “Good luck with that.”

A thought came to me then. “Have I ever treated one of you? Like, a shifter pretending to be a regular animal?”

Her lips twitched, and for the first time since our conversation started, I thought I saw a hint of her usual smirk. “It’s unlikely. Shifters heal fast. We rarely need outside help. Sorry, Doc.”

“I don’t know whether to feel relieved or disappointed.”

Her smirk softened as her gaze drifted to a nearby window. I could see the weight of everything settling back onto her shoulders.

My mind should still be reeling. Unease should be twisting through me with everything I’d just learned, but it wasn’t.

Instead, all I felt was fascination.

“Thanks for telling me,” I said, meaning it wholeheartedly. She was trusting me with this secret. That meant something to me. “I always knew you were?”

“Trouble?” she interrupted, the corner of her mouth lifting into a teasing smile. “It’s the red hair. I get it all the time.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

Her grin widened, and all I could do was stare. She was trouble, sure, but the kind I couldn’t walk away from. The kind I didn’t want to walk away from.

“Seriously,” I said, my gaze never wavering from hers as I stepped closer. “Thank you for trusting me with this. I’m honored.”

Her breath hitched at the gesture, and I became acutely aware of the subtle rise and fall of her chest.

“Not like you gave me much of a choice. You followed me and saw what I am,” she whispered. “But I’m glad it was you who saw and not anyone else. I’m glad you know now.”

“I don’t know what it was, or why I followed you. I can’t explain it.” The area between my brows drew together. “All I know is there was a pull in me unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. I had to make sure you were safe.”

Something in her expression changed, and suddenly the kitchen, the world, the weight of what I’d learned faded away. It was just us. Nothing else remained.

“The pull you felt,” she said, her voice laced with something deeper. “I feel it too. It’s real.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, leaning closer without realizing it.

Our breath mingled in the practically nonexistent space between us.

“My fox,” she whispered. “She chose you. What you feel—that’s the mate bond.”

I didn't fully understand what she was saying, but I didn't need to. She'd just confirmed what I felt for her was something she felt, too. The pull, the connection, the certainty about her—she felt all of it.

I closed the miniscule gap between us, cupping her face, and brushed my lips over hers, testing the waters. Her hand lifted to grip the back of my neck as her mouth moved beneath mine. The kiss deepened into something raw, needy, and passionate like a wildfire flamed by high winds.

Utterly unstoppable.

My hands glided from her face down the curves of her body, desperate to feel every inch of her. When I reached her hips, I lifted her onto the kitchen counter, knocking over a utensils container and spilling its contents to the floor.

The noise didn't jar either of us.

Sienna wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me even closer. Heat built to a near scorching level where we touched. She ground against me, rolling her hips in a rhythmic motion that had me straining against my zipper. I trailed hungry kisses down her neck as her fingers began working on the buttons of my shirt. Once she had them all undone the fabric fell away and she raked her nails down my chest, leaving trails of fire in their wake. I groaned against her collarbone, my length nearly throbbing with want.

“I need you,” she breathed against my ear, untangling herself from me. “Now.”

In one swift motion, she unbuttoned my jeans and reached in to grip my rock-hard shaft. A groan escaped me as she pumped her hand. My head fell back as my eyes rolled into my head at the feel of her touch.

“Fuck, Sienna,” I muttered, my voice thick.

She slid off the counter and lowered herself onto her knees in front of me, tugging my jeans and boxers down to my ankles before taking me into her mouth. My breath hissed out between my teeth as I felt her warm, soft tongue swirl around my tip before she took me deep into her throat. The suction was mind-blowing as she bobbed up and down my length. I buried my fingers in her silky red hair as my hips rocked forward of their own accord to meet her hungry mouth.

“God, your mouth feels incredible,” I breathed, barely able to form words.

She hummed in response, the vibration sending tingles racing through my core and up my spine. Her tempo picked up, and my knees weakened. I knew I wouldn’t last long, so I gently tugged her hair, urging her back to her feet. Claiming her mouth in a searing kiss, I made quick work of the button on her jeans. She slipped out of them, kicking them to the side. I tugged at the hem of her sweater next, pulling it over her head. It joined the growing pile of clothes on her kitchen floor. Unclasping her bra, she slid herself free and dropped it to the floor next. I drank in the sight of her bare breasts. They were perfect. Bending my head, I captured one of her pebbled nipples between my lips and swirled my tongue around it before grazing it with my teeth. A soft moan tore from her throat.

It was the most tantalizing sound I’d ever heard a woman make.

I lifted her back onto the counter, my mouth never leaving her breast. My hands slid down her body to hook into the waistband of her lacy panties. I dragged them slowly down her silky thighs, torturing myself with the feel of her smooth skin. She kicked them off eagerly once they reached her ankles and pulled my mouth to hers. Her lips crashed against mine in a feverish kiss. My fingers trailed along the inside of her thigh while our tongues danced, and I nudged her knees wider. Finding her slick center, I circled her sensitive bud with my thumb. Another soft moan escaped her, but

it turned to a gasp the instant I slid a finger past her folds. I pumped in and out, adding a second finger to stretch her further. The soft sounds that emanated from her then were the sexiest thing I'd ever heard.

"Ben," she whimpered, writhing against my hand.

I knew what she needed, but I knew what I needed too. Dropping to my knees, I dipped my head to taste her. She cried out at the first featherlight flick of my tongue, hips lifting off the counter.

"Oh god, yes." She dug her fingers into my shoulders.

I set a slow, leisurely pace, teasing her with my tongue. Groaning, she moved restlessly against me. I pumped my fingers in and out of her while sucking and lapping at her swollen clit. Her head tipped back as she released a sharp cry and her walls tightened around my fingers. I lapped up every drop of her pleasure as she melted, boneless, against me.

"Ben," she panted.

I kissed her inner thigh before standing, and then aligned myself with her entrance. With a slow, deliberate thrust, I entered her. We both groaned at the sensation. I stilled for a moment, savoring the feeling of being joined with her so intimately, but then a primal need took over. I plunged into her while she clung to me, her nails digging into my back as her hips rose to meet each powerful thrust of mine.

"Harder," she demanded, and I was helpless to deny her.

Gripping her hips, I drove into her harder and deeper, just like she wanted. The kitchen filled with the erotic sounds of skin slapping against skin, ragged breaths, and soft moans. Her legs wrapped tightly around my waist, changing the angle so I could

go even deeper.

“You feel so fucking good,” I groaned out. “I’m not going to last.”

“Then don’t.”

Her nails raked down my back as I pounded into her. I leaned forward, burying my face into the crook of her neck and nipped at her skin. She tightened around me, and I knew she was close. Reaching between us, I found her sensitive bud and stroked it in small circles, sending her over the edge. Her body shuddered against mine, and the feel of her clenching rhythmically around my shaft was my undoing.

I followed her into oblivion.

My head fell to her shoulder as I struggled to catch my breath, my heart hammering against my rib cage. We stayed like that for several minutes, holding each other close as we drifted down from our incredible high. Finally, I lifted my head to meet her gaze. A soft smile tugged at the corners of her lips and I couldn’t help thinking how beautiful she was—cheeks flushed, hair wild, skin slick with sweat.

“I love you,” I said, without meaning to.

Her eyes widened briefly at my unexpected declaration, but then her smile softened her expression. “I love you too.” She skimmed her teeth along her bottom lip, her gaze never wavering from mine. “I think I have for a while now, but my fox realized it before I did.”

Leaning in, I captured her lips in a slow, tender kiss. When we broke apart, I reluctantly stepped back and helped her off the counter. We gathered our scattered clothes, and redressed.

Once we were both decent again, Sienna surveyed the mess we'd made in the kitchen. Utensils were strewn across the floor, a dish towel had fallen from the counter, and somehow, we'd shifted a coffee maker into the sink.

"Looks like we made quite the mess." Sienna laughed.

I grinned sheepishly, running my fingers through my hair. "Sorry about that. I guess we got a little carried away."

"Don't apologize. It was definitely worth it."

Chuckling, I pulled her into my arms again, unable to resist. "Agreed. Though next time maybe we should aim for the bedroom instead of the kitchen counter."

"Next time, huh?" She shifted to look at me, arching a brow playfully. "Awfully presumptuous of you."

"Well, you did profess your love for me," I teased back. "I figured that entitled me to at least a second round...and a third...and a fourth..." I punctuated each number with a quick peck on her lips.

"Mmm, I suppose I can't argue with that logic," she murmured against my mouth. Her fingers toyed with the hair at the nape of my neck, sending pleasant shivers down my spine.

"So, what now?" I asked. "Want to watch a movie? Go out to dinner? Or should I head home?"

"You can't leave tonight," she said. "My fox won't allow it. Not after what happened in the woods with Xander. He might know who you are, and he might come after you, which isn't a risk either of us feel comfortable taking."

“I don’t have an issue staying with you tonight,” I said. A smirk twisted across my face half a second later. “But let it be known I’m not scared of a raven—shifter or not. I’ll put him to sleep again if I have to.”

“You’re impossible,” she said with a slight laugh and an eye roll.

Warmth spread through me at the sound of her laughter.

She took a step back and reached for her phone. “Actually, I need to let my crew know I got the feather,” she explained, her fingers flying over the screen.

“What’s your crew like?” I asked. “Shouldn’t they be called a skulk?”

I knew that was what a group of foxes was called, but maybe the terminology was different in the shifter world.

“They aren’t fox shifters. We’re a mixed breed,” she said. “We call ourselves the Misfit Shifters.”

There was pride in her tone. It was clear she was glad to be a part of the specific crew.

“Nice,” I said with a slight nod. “So, what are they? Their animals, I mean.”

“There’s a wolf who’s basically our alpha, his mate is a raven who happens to be Xander’s sister, an eagle who’s mated to an owl, and a bobcat who’s mated to basically a shaman. Then, there’s me.”

“Mated to a human,” I deadpanned.

She lifted to the tips of her toes and brushed her lips against mine. “A sexy human.”

Need for this woman slid through me again.

“So, do I get to meet them?” I asked.

She pocketed her cell. “Of course.”

“Should I be nervous?”

Amusement glinted in her eyes. “Depends. Do you do well under judgmental stares and with sarcastic comments?”

“Practically built for it.” I grinned, earning a soft laugh from her.

Her cell chimed repeatedly with text messages.

“Good. I’m meeting them at Last Drop,” she said, slipping her phone back into her pocket. “You’re coming with me, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely. I’ll drive,” I offered without hesitation. “So, what are the odds it’s karaoke night again? I still owe you that duet.”

She snorted while we exited her place and walked to my truck. “One crisis at a time, Ben.”

I laughed and popped open the passenger door for her. As we settled into my truck, I cranked the engine to life and a spark of excitement flickered through me. Meeting her crew felt like a big step—like diving deeper into her world—and I was more than ready for it.

SIENNA

Ben held the door open for me, and I stepped inside Last Drop, immediately becoming submerged in the rhythm of the place. I led him to the usual table in the back corner and spotted everyone already there. A small smile tugged at my lips. Until I saw the smug look on Waylen's face as he leaned back in his chair, watching us approach. My fox bristled.

Don't even think about it, Waylen .

"Everyone," I said quickly, cutting him off before he could say a word. "This is Ben—my mate." The words came out in a rush, and my heart raced as I tossed Ben a glance.

He gave a polite smile, raising a hand in a small wave, even though he clearly hadn't expected me to be so bold with my words. "Hey."

"Tradition," Waylen said, lifting his beer in a toast and taking a swig.

Dean leaned forward, his gaze steady but friendly as he nodded at Ben. "Nice to meet you. Welcome to the crew."

"Thanks. Nice to meet you all," Ben said, returning the nod as we settled into two open chairs at the table. "Sienna's told me—well, not much about you yet, but I'm looking forward to learning more."

Astrid shifted in her seat. “You’re definitely in good company here,” she said, offering Ben a warm smile, but there was curiosity in her stare. Her gaze shifted to me. “How exactly did you two manage to get a feather from Xander’s raven? I know it couldn’t have been easy.”

“I went to Lucius’s grave to see if I could find where his raven had built a nest since Ben said that ravens could be territorial and would likely be protective of places that hold significance to them,” I said. “The plan was to figure out if he had a nest there. If so, then I wanted to come up with a way we could lure him out and snag a feather. It didn’t happen that way, though.”

“What did happen?” Waylen asked, sounding impatient with my story.

I took a breath, steadying myself. “He was there and got into my head.” I glanced at Ellis. “You’re right, he’s gotten stronger.”

Ellis frowned. “I’m sorry you had to experience that.”

“How did you get away from him?” Dean pressed.

“Ben stepped in. He didn’t hesitate,” I said, flashing him a look of gratitude. “He grabbed Xander’s raven, which shocked him I think, because I’m pretty sure his focus was solely on me, and did some weird thing with tucking his face under his wing and shaking him around. He fell asleep, which broke his hold on me completely and allowed my fox to get a feather from him.”

“Badass.” Waylen grinned, nodding.

“It was nothing,” Ben said nonchalantly. “I’m a vet, so I’m used to doing things like that.”

“That explains why I haven’t seen him at his house in weeks,” Astrid said quietly, her gaze shifting back to me. “His raven must be staying at Lucius’s grave.”

“Aunt Maribel said the spirit inside him is tied to his raven form, not his human one,” Rachel reminded us all.

Dean shifted in his chair and took a swig from his beer. “Well, now that we have the feather, we have everything Maribel needs for the ritual.”

“Not exactly,” Rachel said, tension creeping into her expression. “Aunt Maribel mentioned last night that Xander’s raven has to be there for the ritual.”

“What?” Dean demanded. “She never mentioned that before.”

“I know,” Rachel said. “I told her the same, but she said it’s because Lucius’s darkness is rooted deeper than before.”

“I can attest to that,” Ellis said. “I’m sure Sienna can, too.”

“Sadly, yes,” I said. “There’s definitely a darker presence to him.”

“Okay, so now we need to figure out how to capture Xander’s raven,” Lyra chimed in. “Any ideas?”

The table grew silent.

“Well, we know where he’ll be now. That’s good,” Rachel insisted.

“Sure, but how do we get to him without him getting into all of our heads?” I asked.

The memory of Xander’s invasive presence inside my head sent a chill down my

spine and caused my fox to pace. It wasn't something either of us wanted to relive.

"Ravens like shiny things, right?" Waylen leaned his elbows on the table, his eyes wide. "We could bait him somehow. Once he's out in the open, Ben could do whatever he did before and make him sleep or Rachel could use her power to sling him to the ground and knock him out. Then we could take him to Maribel."

It wasn't a bad idea.

"Okay, but how do we keep him knocked out while we take him to Maribel? If he wakes before we get to her, we're all screwed," Dean said.

"I can sedate him," Ben offered. "It would make sure he stayed out for a longer period of time. I can also snag a cage from the clinic to put him in for traveling as an added precaution."

"Sounds like we've got a plan," Dean said, a smirk twisting his lips.

"How much time do we have before the releasing phase of the moon ends?" Astrid asked Rachel.

She pulled out her phone, and her expression turned serious. "Forty-eight hours. Tops."

Waylen whistled. "We've got to move fast."

"It needs to happen tonight," Dean insisted. "That way, if we screw something up, we still have time to try again."

Everyone seemed in agreement on that.

“We’ll need to find a babysitter for Serenity,” Rachel said to Ellis. “I don’t want her around while Aunt Maribel does the ritual, just in case.”

“I agree.” Ellis nodded.

“I’ll need a little time to grab the correct sedative and a cage to secure him in from the clinic,” Ben said.

Dean leaned back in his chair, his steady gaze bouncing around to each of us. “Okay, nine o’clock work for everyone? We can meet in the woods near Lucius’s grave and get this done.”

Everyone agreed, and I breathed a sigh of relief along with everyone else. It was short-lived though, because, yes, we had a plan, but that didn’t mean this was going to be easy.

10

BEN

I pulled over onto the side of the road in the exact spot I'd parked my truck when I saw Sienna shift into her fox. Being back here felt like a dream. Well, maybe in this situation it would be a nightmare.

I wasn't sure yet.

There was an unnatural stillness to this place that amped up my nerves.

"You okay?" Sienna asked, her eyes on me as if she could sense my unease.

Maybe she could be what she was while also being my mate. I wasn't going to pretend to know how any of this worked.

"Just taking it all in. This place has a creepy vibe to it, you know?"

"Yeah, but don't let it get in your head. We've got this."

She was so certain. I liked that. It was what I needed to hear.

"Right," I muttered, slipping the syringe into my coat pocket.

The weight of it felt heavier than it should. Maybe it was because this wasn't just about sedating a raven—it was about stopping something darker and much larger than

I fully understood.

Together, we climbed out of my truck. I made my way to the bed, grabbing the cage I'd snagged from the clinic, while Sienna headed to where the others had gathered near the edge of the woods. As I walked toward them, I scanned them all. Dean stood tall with his arms crossed, while Waylen casually leaned against a tree trunk. Astrid stood near Lyra, her sharp gaze alert as she scanned the tree line.

Rachel strode toward me.

"Ready for this?" she asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

She nodded. "Is this your first time seeing someone shift?"

"I saw Sienna—by accident," I replied.

"Well, seeing them all shift is wild at first," she said, her tone light. "But you'll get used to it. Just keep in mind that it's still them, no matter what form they take."

"That's oddly comforting," I admitted, meaning it.

Sienna caught my eye and stepped closer, her presence grounding me in a way I hadn't anticipated. She leaned in and brushed her lips against mine in a brief but electric kiss.

"For luck," she whispered, then headed back to where the others were.

When they all began to undress, I averted my eyes, even though none of them seemed to care about privacy.

Shifters must be okay with nudity.

More so than humans, at least.

Once they'd shed their clothes, the same energy that had filled the air when I saw Sienna shift into her fox could be felt. Dean was the first to shift. His form rippled and bent while he sprouted fur until a massive wolf stood in his place. Astrid followed next, her slender frame giving way to sleek black feathers and sharp eyes as she transformed into a raven. Waylen's shift was quick, and the eagle that emerged carried a commanding presence as it took to the sky. Lyra gave way to become a beautiful owl half a second later, her feathers stark against the night sky while she flew after him. Ellis shifted next, becoming a lithe bobcat in what felt like under a minute. And then Sienna gave way to her fox. The process was as seamless and graceful as I remembered. Once she was finished, her fox stepped closer to me and I gathered she was observing if I was okay with what I'd just witnessed.

I was.

The sound of cracking bones and rustling feathers among them all should have unsettled me, but instead, it had seemed strangely unified—almost like watching pieces of a puzzle fall into place one by one. These weren't just people—they were a team, a crew, and each instinctively knew their role tonight.

They were the Misfit Shifters, and I was honored to be in their presence.

Sienna's fox stayed close to my side as we moved into the woods, following the others. I tightened my grip on the cage and pulled in a steadying breath.

Just as we were about to reach Lucius's, the air seemed to thicken. It grew heavy with an energy I couldn't quite describe. There was a palpable presence of darkness lurking here. I scanned the treetops, searching for any sign of him, but saw nothing.

However, the moment we reached the grave, he appeared.

Xander's raven swooped down in a blur of black feathers, landing on the grave in a swift and graceful motion. Moonlight caught his feathers, making them shimmer like oil on water. Everyone sprang into action, their animal forms moving with a precision that left me awestruck and momentarily stunned.

Dean's wolf prowled closer to Xander's raven, his eyes locked on him like prey, while Ellis's bobcat came in from the side, his steps silent and calculated. Sienna's fox stiffened, and a deep, threatening growl rumbled low in her throat while Astrid's raven released a sharp caw that cut through the night. Lyra's owl circled from above along with Waylen's eagle, both poised and ready to strike.

It was a coordinated effort unlike anything I'd ever witnessed in the animal kingdom.

Each of them moved instinctively, no words needed, their trust in one another apparent. My heart pounded as I stood at the edge of their formation, my hands gripping the cage like it was the last lifeline I had in this surreal moment.

Then it happened.

Xander's raven cocked his head, his beady black eyes gleaming with an unnatural intelligence, and a split second later, the energy in the air shifted. I could feel it—the invasive force of his mental attack rippled through the air, charging it with such darkness that was nearly suffocating even to me.

Everyone faltered, but my focus was fixated on Sienna's fox.

She was thrown off balance by the sudden onslaught. She shook her head, trying to shake off the raven's grip, but it didn't seem to be working.

“Sienna,” I breathed.

Every instinct in me screamed to protect her, but I knew better than to charge in recklessly. Still, seeing her like that—fighting something I couldn’t see, couldn’t touch—was unbearable. Even so, I knew my part.

I knew exactly what I needed to do.

My gaze snapped to Rachel. She nodded, letting me know she was ready to make her move. I shifted my weight, steadying myself, knowing it would be my turn next.

Rachel raised her hands, and then suddenly Xander’s raven jerked into the air, high into the sky. His wings flailed as he was yanked down half a second later by an invisible force and slammed into the ground.

The impact was thunderous.

My breath caught at the sheer power Rachel wielded, and for a moment, I was stunned. But then I remembered it was my turn to take this evil down. I sprinted forward, the adrenaline pumping through my veins heavy and thick, drowning out every other thought. As the raven showed signs of recovering, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the syringe. Plunging the needle into the muscle at the base of one of his wings, I released the sedative into his bloodstream. He gave a sharp caw as his body twisted in my grasp, but I held firm.

“Come on,” I muttered, hoping I’d dosed him heavily enough.

When his wings drooped and his head sagged, I exhaled a breath of relief and then placed him inside the cage.

Falling back on my heels, I stared at him. His black eyes fluttered shut, and for the

first time since we'd arrived at this section of the woods the air here felt lighter. The trees themselves felt as though they could breathe again.

"He's asleep," I said to the others, my voice steadier than I'd expected with adrenaline pumping through me.

The others moved in closer, their animal forms circling the cage as if to confirm the danger was contained for themselves. My gaze focused on Sienna's fox. Her sharp eyes locked with mine and I swore I saw something that resembled pride flicker through them.

"Not bad for a vet, huh?" I asked, flashing her a crooked grin.

Sienna's fox nudged my leg gently, and I smoothed a hand over her head.

"You're incredible, you know that?" I whispered. She let out a noise that I could've sworn was her fox's version of a chuckle.

Dean, in his wolf form still, garnered everyone's attention with a grumble and then we headed back to our vehicles. I carried the cage with Xander's raven, staying close to Sienna's fox as I walked.

When we reached where we'd parked, everyone shifted back into their human forms. I turned away, focusing on the trees and starlit sky while they dressed. Once everyone was decent, Sienna made her way to me.

"I don't know how this would've gone without you," she said. "Thanks."

"I'm glad I could help," I replied, loading the cage into the back of my truck. "But we should get going. The sedative should last about an hour, but that's an estimate. I'm not sure if his shifter metabolism will burn through it faster than a normal raven's

would.”

“Good point,” Sienna said.

Dean nodded. “Let’s go.”

As we pulled back onto the road, the convoy moved in a steady line toward Maribel’s. I kept glancing in the rearview mirror, my eyes on the cage in the bed, making sure the raven was still out cold.

Sienna sat in the passenger seat, her hands tucked beneath her thighs, staring straight ahead. Tension radiated off her.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, though her tone didn’t sound convincing. “Just thinking.”

“About the ritual? Or Xander?”

“Both,” she admitted, letting out a soft sigh. “We’ve been chasing this for so long. Now that we’re here, I’m just...” She trailed off.

“You’re wondering what happens next.” I glanced at her briefly, noticing the faint smile she gave didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Something like that,” she said.

“Well, no matter what happens, I think I’ve officially maxed out my weird meter tonight.” I chuckled. “A cage with a raven shifter? Check. Helping a team of animal shifters wrangle him? Double-check. Seeing a woman lift a raven into the air and then slam him to the ground with her mind? Triple-check.”

That earned me a small laugh, and I felt a flicker of relief at the sound.

“Welcome to my world,” she said dryly.

“It’s not boring, I’ll give you that,” I said, glancing her way again. “You’re not boring.”

Her eyes softened. “Thanks.”

The silence that followed wasn’t heavy like before. It was comfortable, but my thoughts still raced. The woods grew denser, and I hoped we were close to Maribel’s place. This road seemed to be narrowing.

“What’s Maribel like?” I asked, breaking the quiet, my nerves about what was to come getting the best of me.

“She’s kind of a legend. Ellis says she’s this mysterious force of nature—wise and powerful, but with an eccentric-ness about her. People whisper around town about her. They say she talks to the wind. I’ve never met her, but honestly, I kind of hope all the stories I’ve heard are true.”

I raised an eyebrow, a grin tugging at the corner of my mouth. “A wise and powerful woman who talks to the wind? Sounds like she could either solve all our problems or send us on a quest for magic mushrooms. I’m game either way.”

“Something tells me you’d take it in stride if she did.”

I laughed. “Well, I guess I spoke too soon about maxing out my weird meter for the night.”

“Definitely.” She chuckled.

The sound of my tires crunching on gravel filled the space between us. While I didn't know what the rest of the night would hold, I was certain about one thing—I was here for it.

11

SIENNA

My fox grew restless as Maribel's cottage came into view, adding to my nervousness. We both hoped Maribel could perform the ritual and rip Lucius's spirit out of Xander, ending this nightmare.

Would that end things, though?

There was no telling what Xander would do in retaliation to us afterward. The guy practically worshipped Lucius, treating him like some kind of twisted deity. Removing his spirit from him wasn't going to sit well. If anything, it would probably light a fire under him—one that would burn brightly with a need for revenge.

That was the last thing we needed.

Hopefully, Astrid could control him. If not, we might have to find a way to wipe his memory or worse.

Ben parked his truck behind the others and shifted to face me.

"Ready for this?" he asked.

I flashed him a small smile. "Yeah. I hope it works."

"From what you've said, this woman sounds magical. I have no doubt she'll do what

needs to be done.”

The tension coiling through me and my fox eased at his words.

We climbed out of his truck. I watched as Ben moved to grab the cage from the bed. “Is he still out?” I asked.

“Seems to be. Like I said, I’m not sure how long that will last though.”

We headed to where the others stood, waiting for Rachel to head inside and let her aunt know we were here. Before she could, the front door of the cottage swung open and a young woman with silver eyes emerged. Her shoulders sagged with exhaustion, and she looked as though she’d been through hell. Her gaze flicked over her shoulder to Maribel, who stepped onto the stone porch behind her.

“Thank you again,” she said, her voice rough yet filled with heartfelt gratitude.

Maribel nodded. It was a calm gesture but seemed to speak volumes. Without another word, the woman with the silver eyes slinked into the woods and shifter magic bloomed through the night air a second after she vanished.

I stared after her, wondering what she’d sought Maribel out for.

“We have everything you asked for,” Rachel said, pulling my thoughts from the woman and back to the present. “And we’re here with a little time to spare.” There was pride in her tone.

“Follow me,” Maribel said, her voice calm yet commanding, as she gestured for us to follow her into the backyard.

We all followed, not a single one of us speaking. I was pretty sure we all were

thinking the same thing—how much we needed this ritual to work.

Maribel led us to a table beside a fire pit. “Someone light a fire,” she instructed, her voice calm but firm, yet still carrying that ethereal tone of hers.

Waylen stepped forward, striking a match and tossing it into the pit. The flames roared to life almost instantly, casting long shadows that danced across everything. The firelight caught Maribel’s sharp eyes as she turned her attention to Ellis.

“Do you have all that I asked for?” she asked.

Ellis stepped forward, holding a backpack.

“I do,” he said, unzipping it and showing her inside. “And Sienna has the feather. Plus, we captured Xander’s raven. Ben sedated him.”

“Good. Close proximity is needed when untangling darkness this deeply rooted,” Maribel insisted. “Set him here.” She pointed to the center of the table.

Ben stepped forward, carrying the cage, and placed it on the table. Ellis set out the items from his backpack—fresh sage from Lyra and her grandmother’s garden, pink Himalayan salt, a jar of water from Crescent Creek, and a jar of soil from Lucius’s grave. I stepped forward and laid the feather on the table beside everything else. Maribel examined each item and then gave a nod of approval. Her lips curved into a faint smile.

“Good work,” she said simply, her attention never wavering from the items in front of her.

The fire crackled, and the air felt heavier, as though even the night knew what sort of magic was about to take place.

Maribel arranged the items in a circle around the cage. Her movements looked fluid and otherworldly. When she spoke, it was in a tone so soft her voice sounded almost melodic. Her words rolled over us all like a wave, powerful and steady, yet impossible to catch. I strained my ears, trying to hear the words she was saying, but the wind seemed to swallow them as soon as they left her lips.

Ben moved closer to me, his hand reaching for mine. He interlaced our fingers and lifted my knuckles to his lips, placing a kiss there. It was a sweet gesture, one that calmed my racing heart.

I was glad he was here—that he was a part of this all.

Of course, dragging him into this mess wasn't something I'd initially wanted, I was glad things had unfolded the way they had.

Maribel twisted a few of the fresh-cut sage leaves together and then lit the end with a match. Thick smoke billowed from it, more than I thought possible.

I guess that's what happens when you burn the fresh stuff.

She picked up the feather plucked from Xander's raven and waved it through the thick smoke. Her words came at a faster speed, but I still couldn't make them out. I watched as she tipped her head back and closed her eyes, continuing to waft the smoke with the feather. It curled around her in intricate swirls while she circled the cage. Next, she placed the sage in a metal bowl and reached for the salt. She sprinkled it around the table, the cage, and around herself, forming multiple circles.

One circle of protection must not be enough when dealing with a spirit as strong as Lucius's.

It was a sobering thought that had a chill creeping up my spine.

Next, she poured the creek water into a small, weathered wooden bowl and mixed it with the soil from Lucius's grave, making a dark paste.

My fox paced nervously, sensitive to the magic building in the air.

Maribel was strong.

As she laid the feather over the bowl with the thick paste of soil and water combined, Maribel chanted and I noticed Xander's raven stir.

Ben squeezed my hand. I knew it was because he'd noticed the raven awakening as well. Maribel smeared the paste onto the feather while her lips continued to move with words I couldn't hear. Xander's raven—or possibly Lucius's spirit—became fully alert in the next few seconds. His head twitched as a dark mist rose around his body coming from thin air. I watched it, mesmerized by its violent thrashing.

Was that Lucus's spirit being pulled from Xander's raven?

The mist continued to swirl with a growing intensity, building at the edges of the salt circle Maribel had drawn around the cage.

It wanted out.

When Maribel stepped out of her circle of salt, I noticed Rachel stiffen. Everyone's eyes locked on the cage as it rattled atop the table, the dark mist inside thrashing against an invisible barrier. Maribel tossed the feather coated in paste into the fire. The flames roared to life, releasing a plume of inky black smoke that twisted into the night sky before shifting into a radiant, electric blue, illuminating the backyard in an otherworldly glow. It was gone half a heartbeat later, and so was the dark mist rattling the cage. Xander's raven let out a piercing cry as his wings flapped weakly. The sound cut straight through me, and my fox and I knew right then that something

was different about him.

Something was off.

“Lucius’s spirit is gone,” Maribel said, her expression unreadable. “But the cost of the ritual wasn’t small.”

I exchanged a glance with Ben, unease stirring in my chest.

“What was the cost?” Astrid asked, her voice filled with panic.

“Xander is no longer among us as a shifter. What remains is only his raven,” Maribel said.

Astrid blinked, her face paling. “So, my brother,” Astrid said, her voice shaky. “He’s gone?”

Maribel met her stare, her eyes soft. “You lost your brother long ago, and tonight, all that was done was set him free.”

While we all knew there was a chance Xander might not survive the ritual because Lucius’s spirit was so dark and deeply rooted in him, none of us had anticipated this outcome.

Astrid’s lips pressed together as tears slipped down her cheeks. Dean wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close, and placed a kiss to the crown of her head.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s okay. She’s right. I lost Xander a long time ago,” Astrid said softly, her voice breaking while she wiped her tears. “I just—I hoped the cost wouldn’t be so steep.”

The sight of them holding one another so tenderly tugged at something in my chest. I nestled into Ben's side, once again grateful he was here. Despite the sadness in Astrid's eyes, she looked lighter. Almost as though a part of the burden she'd carried for so long in regard to her brother and the life he'd lived had finally been lifted.

In a sense, she too was now free.

"Thank you," Dean said, his voice rough but sincere as he nodded to Maribel.

He wasn't one for many words, but the gratitude in his tone spoke volumes. We all echoed his words, thanking Maribel for her help, too.

"You each fought hard for this peace, make it worth the fight," the old woman said, a gentleness entering her stare. "The wind speaks of new beginnings and the fresh start you've all been craving."

Her words struck a chord in me. A fresh start. It was what I'd been desperate for, especially after my first run in with Lucius.

The tension I hadn't realized was coiled tight in my chest loosened. After everything—Lucius, Xander, the complete chaos and fear of it all—I finally felt like I could breathe again.

The storm was over.

My fox stirred softly, her agreement echoing through me. We could finally build something new for ourselves—with Ben.

I glanced around at the people who had become family—each of them looked tired but relieved. Their shoulders seemed lighter, and their expressions softer. They were filled with the same hope I was, all of it hinged on one notion—we'd won.

The Misfit Shifters had fought against the darkest evil we'd ever known and won.

Deep down, I'd always believed we'd come out on top—because darkness never won. In the end, light always did.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:35 am

Two weeks had flown by in a blur. Moving in with Ben so soon hadn't been part of my plan, but life—and a busted water pipe—had other ideas. My landlord had been understanding enough to let me out of my lease early, given the extensive damage, and Ben hadn't hesitated for a second to offer up the idea of moving in with him.

My fox had stirred with excitement at the suggestion, and I hadn't put up a fight. Moving in with him had been easy and natural, like slipping into a life that had always been waiting for me. Ben strolled into the living room with a grin lighting up his face that immediately made me suspicious.

“What?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

He held up his hands. “Can't I smile at you without you thinking I'm up to something?”

I arched an eyebrow. “Not with a smile like that.”

“Fair,” he admitted, his grin widening. “Come on. I've got a surprise for you.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“The kind I think you'll like,” he said, grabbing his keys.

A short drive later, we arrived at a local dealer, where rows of sheds stood neatly arranged, resembling tiny houses. I turned to him, confused.

“Did you bring me here to pick out a shed for your backyard?” I asked, unimpressed.

“I sure did,” he said, excitement in his tone.

“Wait, what?”

“For your dog grooming business,” he clarified, parking the truck and looking at me like this wasn’t the most shocking, unexpected thing he could’ve surprised me with.

My heart leapt, and for a second, I couldn’t find words. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” He nodded. “Since you’re no longer filling in at The Caffeinated Fox now that Cassie finally found someone for the position, I figured it was time to make your dog grooming business happen. So, go on—find the one you want.”

I stepped out of the truck, my fox buzzing with energy as I walked toward the rows of sheds. My gaze scanned over the length of the first one, but it didn’t feel right. The next one didn’t either. But then I saw it—a wooden shed with large windows and a charming design that called to me.

“This one,” I said, turning to Ben with a grin I couldn’t suppress. “This is the one.”

“Let’s get it ordered.”

As we stood there, talking to the dealer about delivery, I realized my dream of running my own dog grooming business wasn’t just some far-off idea anymore—it was real, and it was because of this amazing man.

Ben glanced at me as we made our way back to his truck. “You look happy.”

“I am,” I gushed. “This is huge. I can’t believe you just did that for me. I can give you the money I had saved for it now and then pay you the rest of it once I get up and rolling.”

“You don’t need to pay me anything. Honestly. I wanted to do this for you.”

“Ben, that’s too much,” I insisted.

“It’s not.” He popped open the passenger door for me, but before I could slide in, he moved to grab something out of the glove box. “Here. I got you this, too.” His lips curved into a soft smile.

“What’s this?” I asked, taking the rectangular box from him cautiously.

“Open it,” he said, his tone teasing but warm.

I lifted the lid, and my breath caught. Inside were sleek, beautifully designed business cards. The logo was perfect, and the cards all said Sienna’s Foxy Grooming, followed by my name and contact details in elegant lettering below.

“These are amazing,” I whispered, a lump forming in my throat.

“You like them?” he asked, cramming his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “We can always have something else designed, if you don’t.”

“I love them. The name. The logo. It’s perfect.” Tears pricked the corners of my eyes, and I blinked rapidly, trying to keep them at bay.

He smiled, locking eyes with me. “Good. I want you to start living your dream.”

“I am,” I said, my voice steady despite the emotions coursing through me. “I already have been—with you.”

I lifted to the tips of my toes and kissed him. Right there in the parking lot. This man was more than I could have ever asked for, more than I could have dreamed up for

myself.

As we pulled apart, he flashed me a sly grin. “By the way, it’s karaoke night at Last Drop. You ready for me to cash in that raincheck?”

I laughed. “For someone who claims they don’t sing, you sure are persistent about it.”

“So, what do you say?” His grin widened. “Are we doing this?”

I rolled my eyes, laughing still. “Absolutely. Let’s go.”

We climbed into his truck and headed to Last Drop. The moment we stepped inside, I spotted everyone seated at the usual table in the back and shifted to toss Ben a look.

“You had this planned, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Maybe.” He shrugged, flashing me an adorable grin. “We couldn’t sing without having a supportive audience.”

“You’re impossible,” I teased.

Before I could say anything else, he kissed me. It wasn’t a fleeting, polite kiss. It was warm, full of passion, and oh so perfect. When we pulled apart, my fox and I both hummed with satisfaction.

“Just reminding you how great I am at kissing, because I’m horrible at singing,” Ben joked, his hand slipping into mine as we continued to the table in the back where everyone sat.

“I’m sure you’re not that bad.”

“You’ll see,” he countered.

I laughed, loving this moment. For the first time in forever, my happiness felt untouchable. There were no shadows of the past lurking, and no fears of the future causing panic to build in my chest—I was content and happy.

With my life.

With myself.

And in this moment—surrounded by my Misfit Shifter family and the man who felt like home—there was nowhere else I’d rather be.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:35 am

SIENNA'S GRAND OPENING

Everyone was here for Sienna. I knew they would be. Her crew—the Misfit Shifters—were family. I crammed my hands into the front pockets of my jeans, scanning the crowd. Laughter and chatter filled the air. It was good to see everyone like this. Finally, they were fully at ease after everything they'd been through.

Serenity darted past me, waving a glittery sign that read Sienna's Foxy Grooming: Grand Opening! She had the enthusiasm of a kid hyped up on sugar, and it was contagious.

Sienna moved to stand beside me, her fox flickering in her gaze when our eyes locked. She tried to mask her nerves with a confident smile, but I could see right through her. She adjusted the bright red ribbon stretched across the shed door. When it started to fall, I caught it just in time, fixing the fastens to keep it secure. Catching her eye, I winked.

"You're loving this way too much," she muttered, her lips twitching as if she was holding back a grin.

"Who, me?" I feigned innocence, holding up the oversized scissors I'd borrowed from the hardware store. "I'm just here to support you. Totally not here for the giant scissors or the big speech I'm about to make."

"Big speech?" Her eyes widened. "Ben, don't you dare."

"Oh, I dare," I said, turning to face the group. I set the scissors down and clapped my

hands together, gaining everyone's attention.

"Hello, hello. Thank you all for coming out to celebrate the grand opening of Sienna's Foxy Grooming. This has been a dream of Sienna's, and I've watched her pour her heart into bringing it to life. Crescent Creek's pets are about to get a whole lot snazzier, and we're all better for it."

Laughter rippled through the crowd, and Sienna gave me a playful shove. "Thank you," she said, her grin wide and genuine.

"Can I bring my eagle in for a spa day?" Waylen asked, his tone completely serious.

"I'm a dog groomer, not an eagle groomer," Sienna deadpanned, crossing her arms with a smirk.

"Ignore him, please." Lyra chuckled. "You're going to do amazing, Sienna. I can feel it."

"Thank you," Sienna said, her eyes sparkling.

I picked up the scissors and handed them to her. "All right, no more stalling. Time to make it official." I lowered my voice so only she could hear. "You've worked so hard for this, and I'm so damn proud of you."

Her gaze softened, her fox shimmering through as she whispered, "Thank you."

I kissed her quickly, and then she turned to face the ribbon, holding the scissors steady. For a moment, she paused, and I imagined she was soaking it all in—the shed, the people who loved her, her dream becoming reality.

With a snip, the ribbon fell away, and everyone erupted into cheers. Serenity waved her sign, hopping up and down, and Waylen let out a loud whistle.

“Thank you all for being here,” Sienna said, her smile the brightest I’d ever seen. “It means more than you’ll ever know.”

Rachel stepped forward and hugged her tightly. “We’re all glad to celebrate with you.”

“And you’d better pass out my business cards,” Sienna said, her tone teasing but firm. “I expect a full schedule by the end of the week.”

Dean pulled a stack from his pocket. “Already grabbed some to set out at the diner.”

Laughter and chatter resumed as everyone milled about, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Sienna. She was glowing. This was her moment, and I was glad to be here with her for it.

She caught my eye and rushed to where I stood, tossing her arms around my neck and pulling me in for a hug.

“How does it feel to be Crescent Creek’s newest business owner?” I asked, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“Amazing,” she said simply.

For a moment, the world seemed to narrow to just the two of us—her happiness cocooning around us.

“You know this is just the beginning, right?” I whispered.

She shifted in my arms to peck me on the cheek. “That’s what makes it so exciting.”

God, I loved this woman.

MARIBEL'S FAREWELL

The wind was busy tonight, whispering its usual secrets but with an edge of something different.

Change.

I could feel it curling around me. It tugged at my dress like an impatient child while I stood on the back porch of my cottage. The breeze played with the frayed hem of my shawl while I watched the Misfit Shifters gather around the firepit. The last time they'd gathered here it was to watch as I performed the ritual to rid Xander of Lucius's evil spirit. This time, they gathered for a very different reason—to say goodbye to me.

No one noticed me at first, each of them too caught up in conversations and the laughter that had been missing from their lives for far too long.

My gaze shifted to Rachel. She stood, a smile on her face, while she watched Ellis help Serenity roast a marshmallow. It was good to see her like this, lighter than she'd been in ages. All of them were—the entire Misfit Shifter crew.

I smiled to myself.

Rachel had found a place for her and Serenity within Ellis's heart and among this group. She'd found a home, and I knew from looking at her how happy she was. It was all that I ever wanted for her.

The wind tugged at me again, insistent this time.

I knew what it meant. I knew what it was telling me—that my time here was done.

I stepped off the porch and crossed the yard, the cool earth under my feet. Rachel

turned to face me. Her eyes were filled with curiosity and a touch of sadness.

She knew this was goodbye, even if I hadn't said the words yet.

"Well," I said, my gaze locked on the dancing flames of the fire as I stepped to her side. "You've done well—better than the wind thought you might. It's been known to underestimate people before." I shifted to look at her and winked.

A slight grin twisted her lips. "Thanks." She wrapped her arms around herself, as though holding pieces of herself together she thought might break away with her next words. "I can't believe you're leaving."

"This place, these woods, they've been my home for a long time," I said, letting my gaze sweep over the trees in the distance. "But the wind, you know it's been whispering for a while. It's time for me to follow it elsewhere. To the place by the ocean that's been calling my name. A place where the waves crash like a heartbeat, steady and strong, and the breeze carries stories these trees could never dream of." A smile pulled at the corners of my lips while thoughts of the place that had been filling my head and whispering to my soul came to me.

"The ocean?" Astrid asked from where she sat close by, sipping a glass of wine. "That's where you're moving to?"

I nodded, my gaze locking with hers. "I am. The ocean breeze has been calling to me for a while now."

Sienna stepped closer, her fox flickering through her eyes. "But what if we need you again?" she asked. "What if—"

I held up a hand, stopping her words before they could find footing. "The wind may take me somewhere new, but it always carries whispers back and forth. If you need me, you'll know where to find me." I wrapped my shawl around my shoulders

tighter. “Your troubles are behind you all now, though. You’ve got all you need right here.”

My heart felt full despite the tender ache of parting as I stared at them all. Rachel and Serenity would be well taken care of among this family, because that’s what they were—family. They weren’t just shifters. They weren’t just friends.

They were a family that had been forged through trial and fire.

Dean stood tall, his wolf somber and steady—a quiet protector. He might not call himself their alpha, but he carried the weight of one. Astrid swirled her wine next to him, her raven’s sharp edges softened now that Xander’s shadow no longer lingered. Nearby, Waylen skewered a marshmallow with childlike glee, earning a chuckle from Lyra as she watched him, her owl’s wisdom flickering in her thoughtful gaze.

Ellis crouched next to Serenity, his bobcat’s tenderness shining through as he guided her in roasting another marshmallow. Her giggles filled the air, light and carefree. Sienna stood with Ben, her fox’s vibrant energy pulsing through her as she laughed at something he whispered. His calm presence grounded her, even as his eyes brimmed with curiosity, still adjusting to the shifter world.

Rachel stepped closer to me, drawing my attention, and wrapped me in a warm hug.

“I’ll miss you,” she whispered.

“And I, you.” I held her tight for a moment before pulling back, my hands resting gently on her shoulders. “But you’ll be just fine without me, dear. You’ve found your home.”

“You’re my home, too,” she said.

“And I always will be, but so will they.” I gestured to the Misfit Shifters, to Serenity

and Ellis. “This might be goodbye, but it’s not for forever.”

I placed a gentle kiss on her cheek and then slipped from her embrace, walking to where Serenity stood.

“Roast me a marshmallow, sweet child,” I said.

“Here. Have this one,” Serenity said, holding her browned marshmallow out to me. “It’s perfect. Ewy and gewy.”

“That it is,” I said, sliding off the end of the stick with my fingers and popping it into my mouth. I sat there, sharing golden, warm marshmallows with those I’d come to care about most in life until the wind swirled around me, tugging at my dress like it couldn’t wait another second longer, and the ocean called me home.

This time, I was ready to answer.

I stood and looked back at the group. My heart was full, and my purpose here was complete.

“The ocean’s waiting,” I whispered, my voice almost lost in the gentle breeze, even though no one seemed to look at me.

With that, I turned and let the whispering wind guide me home.