
The Wolves of Knottingham
Mistaken Fate
Emma Kate &
Stephanie Riley

THE WOLVES OF KNOTTINGHAM

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EMMA KATE &
STEPHANIE RILEY

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language, and explicit scenes, and is intended for mature readers. For a full list of content warnings, visit: authorstephanieriley.com/content-warnings

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Acknowledgments
Books By Emma Kate
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DEDICATION

Because sometimes even our fantasies need to escape to another world.

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CHAPTER 1
MAYA

"You should stop," my best friend demands, her voice grainy through my half-broken speakerphone. "Seriously, Maya. I can hear how aggressively it's pouring."

"I can't," I reply, holding back the sob that wants to escape my throat. "You know once Quentin realizes I left the party without him, he's going to chase after me, to try to convince me to come back. And I can't. Not again. He fucking—"

I pull in a sharp breath, tossing my floppy witch's hat onto the passenger seat before allowing my gaze to leave the road long enough to see the red mark on my cheek—the imprint of Quentin's hand from where he slapped me for accidentally spilling a few drops of my Coke on his shoe. He reacted like I had made some egregious error, not committed the most common party foul in existence.

That's when I knew I had to get out.

Since aging out of the system at eighteen two years ago, I've used Quentin as a crutch to survive, allowing him to treat me like shit because he's been paying most of our rent and happens to be my boss at the restaurant where I waitress. I'm aware I should've left him before now, but I didn't have many other options. It was staying with him or living on the streets.

But hitting is my line.

I won't stay with someone who abuses me, no matter the excuses they spout off. Spending my childhood in foster care gave me countless

examples of how frequently “it was just once” turns into “it happened again.” It’s a rarity for the abuse not to continue, which is how I know I have to get out now before the situation becomes significantly worse.

None of this should come as a shock to Quentin. He spent years in the same foster care system and saw the abuse firsthand, often being on the receiving end of it. It’s why I never imagined he could actually lay a hand on me. Why I chose to ignore the flashing red warning signs when our arguments got more and more heated. He knew I’d leave if he became violent.

Although, I doubt he thought I’d have the backbone to do it, considering the gaslighting I tolerated during our two-year relationship. How I constantly made excuses for the times he locked me out of our apartment to “teach me a lesson,” forcing me to sleep in my car for the night. He knew all my money went to the measly amount of rent I paid him, groceries, and college tuition.

Unsurprisingly, his treatment always got worse whenever my checking account was the bleakest—after paying the next semester’s tuition. Turns out, there aren’t many options when you have seventy-six dollars to your name.

That’s why I’m driving through the mountains in the middle of the night during a severe thunderstorm, choosing an unknown road toward Maddie’s apartment since the route I usually drive is closed due to flooding.

“You’re doing the right thing, Maya,” Maddie says calmly in a soothing tone like she can tell I’m on edge, and she doesn’t want to do anything that will spin me up further. “You deserve better than how he’s treated you over the years. I’m really proud of you for leaving him. We’ll figure out a plan once you get here. You can stay with me as long as you need to; I hope you know that.”

“I do,” I reply earnestly, ignoring the reality that her current apartment barely fits her and her two roommates, so there is absolutely no place for me to stay very long, even if I chose to sleep on the floor every night. It’s one of reasons I haven’t ditched Quentin and moved in with her already.

I squint through my rain-covered windshield, the wipers barely able to keep up with the deluge, trying to keep my eyes glued on the white line on the road. It’s almost impossible to see more than twenty feet in front of me, thanks to the weather, but I’m sure the tears streaming down my face aren’t helping.

Almost like an omen, my gas light turns on. I send up a silent prayer that I have enough fuel to make it to Maddie's, hoping this isn't one of those times when the gas gauge in my early 2000s Oldsmobile is lying. It wouldn't be the first time I've been stranded on the side of the road, thanks to a faulty gauge and poor planning on my part.

I blow out a long breath and wipe the tears from my cheek with the back of my hand.

"What's wrong, Maya?"

"It's possible I'm going to run out of gas," I admit, calculating the difference between how many miles my GPS says I have left and the fuel supposedly in my tank. "What's the chance there's a gas station in the woods that takes sarcasm or a promise of future baked goods as a form of payment?"

"All the more reason to pull over, Maya!" She's practically shrieking at me, but it's not surprising: She's been protective of me ever since I may or may not have taken a knife to the ribs for her when we were in the same foster family.

To be fair, she was trying to break up a fight between her boyfriend and another teen. She's always stepping in to help rescue people, no matter how dire the consequences. Luckily for her, my reflexes are abnormally quick and I heal freakishly fast, so I could move her out of harm's way and take the hit without needing to miss a day of school.

Or alerting anyone to the injury.

It was better that way. If someone required medical treatment, there would've been hell to pay from our foster parents. And it would've been for all the kids living there, not just the two of us.

"You need to stop somewhere safe, drop me a pin, and I'll come get you. It's what you should've done in the first place. You're in no place emotionally to be driving. Especially not in this weather."

The constant drumming of the rain on my car roof lets up, and I breathe a sigh of relief. "It's fine. *I'm* fine. The rain is finally stopping," I tell her as an incoming call pops up on my broken screen. I touch my cheek again, reminding myself of the physical and emotional pain I've suffered before hitting ignore. "Quentin called. He must've realized I left without him. He's probably pissed, wondering how he's going to get home since I was his designated driver." It's the same role I play every time he goes out.

“The audacity of that asshole,” Maddie mutters. “He doesn’t care about anyone but himself. Never has. You need to block him, or he’ll keep calling. He’ll try to worm himself back into your life.”

She’s not wrong. He’ll act offended by my actions tonight, blaming me for everything that happened. But in a few days, he’ll switch tactics and love bomb the shit out of me. Nonstop calls and texts will flood my phone. He’ll buy my favorite foods. Do a few chores around the apartment. Make me believe for a brief period that he’s truly sorry and will change. Convince me I was the one at fault and my reaction wasn’t warranted.

And I’ll likely fall for it. Just like I have time and time again.

Clutching the steering wheel tighter, I take a sharp turn as I consider blocking his number. As much as I want to excise him from my life permanently, the reality is he’s my boss, and I desperately need a paycheck. Although I wouldn’t put it past him to reduce my hours to barely anything once I refuse to talk to him unless it’s work-related.

“You know I can’t block him,” I admit begrudgingly. “I’ll start looking for another job, but you know how few and far between they are.”

“You could always move. Take a semester or two off to get your bearings, then go back,” Maddie suggests for the millionth time. It’s her go-to response anytime another flaming pile of shit gets dumped on my lap, which unfortunately seems to happen on a biweekly basis these days.

Maybe it’s time I seriously consider it. Take a page out of Maddie’s book and save up before continuing to pursue my degree. Being an adult doesn’t mean you always get what you want. I’m walking proof of that. Hell, the fact that the downpour gave way to a thick layer of fog is proof of that.

“I don’t have much,” Maddie offers, “but we can find a cheap place to rent together. If we get a studio and share a bed, we might be able to get it for less than we’re spending now.”

I can tell from her tone she doesn’t believe the words coming out of her mouth—I don’t, either. It was almost impossible for her to find her current apartment and two roommates to split the rent with. And I’ve never found anything near campus that’s even reasonably affordable for a student working part-time. Another reason staying with Quentin made financial sense for so long.

Blowing out a long breath, I squint through the windshield as the visibility cuts in half out of nowhere. “Life shouldn’t be this hard at twenty,

you know? Don’t we deserve a break after all the shit we’ve dealt with over the years?”

“What?” Maddie’s voice comes through the speakerphone jumbled.

I cut a quick glance to my screen, groaning at the single bar of service. “Nothing!” I yell, hoping it will make it through. “I just wish my life was different.”

There are a few seconds of silence before the dreaded sound of the call dropping fills the void. A pang hits me, knowing I’m alone in the wilderness without cell service and barely any gas in the middle of the storm.

“It’s going to be fine. I’ll miraculously make it to Maddie’s tonight, and tomorrow will be a new day,” I say out loud, hoping to quell my rising anxiety.

Suddenly, the white lines on the asphalt in front of me disappear, and visibility becomes non-existent, making it impossible to see where the pavement ends and the ditch begins. My chest tightens as I try to remain focused on the road ahead of me, praying there aren’t any hairpin turns so I don’t accidentally go careening off a cliff.

Talk about a shitty way to die.

Seconds later, a weird sensation washes over me, waking up every nerve ending in my body and putting me on high alert. My hearing sharpens, allowing me to hear the wind echoing through the trees, the flapping of bird wings, and the howling of a wolf. An overwhelming wave of smells crashes into me, temporarily confusing my brain as I’m inundated with crisp pine needles, damp soil, mossy earth, and a fruitiness I can’t quite place but seems oddly familiar.

It’s almost like something is pulling me toward it. Calling me home.

“I’m losing my mind,” I mutter, shaking my head and white-knuckling the wheel. “I need to get back on a more heavily populated road.”

Out of nowhere, a tree looms in front of me, barely visible due to the fog, as the new collaboration song by Chase Elliott and Jaxon Steele starts blaring through my speakers as if turned on by magic.

“Holy shit,” I scream, trying to turn the steering wheel to the left, determined to escape the collision course I seem destined to be on tonight, but it doesn’t budge. Completely locked in place, sending me straight to my doom.

And then everything goes black.

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CHAPTER 2
FINN

"The dragons have been challenging our borders for the past three centuries. I don't see why the Council should care about the vampires' minor incursion into the sea," Bane Vanderguard states with the absolute frigidity that can only come from the immortal mouths of the fae. "Perhaps the mer people need to stop whining every time someone wants to take a swim in their precious water."

The room goes silent for a moment, everyone eyeing Kel, the merman from Wasaxar, to see how he'll respond to Bane's comments. Kel's lucky he transitioned to his legs for this meeting, or his scales might've frozen off with the icy look coming from across the large wooden table where the two fae members of the Council are seated.

The animosity between lands in Miraluna isn't new. It's existed this way for hundreds of years, a constant tugging by each land to gain more traction and power within our world. Boundaries are tested, lines crossed, and sometimes outright wars arise, depending on who's involved and the alleged grievance being aired. It's one of the primary reasons the Council was formed more than a century ago—to stop small squabbles like this one from blossoming into never-ending fights that end up decimating the world we love.

Camden mindlinks me from his seat along the wall, where he's sitting alongside the other seconds-in-command—allowed to attend only if they keep their opinions to themselves. "*I know you continue to reject it as a plan, but I still think we should stop sending meeting reminders to the fae.*"

I try to hide my smirk as my beta continues his decades-long rant about the magic-wielding creatures whose greatest gift is their ego. He may appear to be silent and broody during these gatherings, but the reality is, he's constantly sharing his thoughts with me, never giving me a moment's peace and quiet. *"Their sense of time is so fucked they'd miss at least a few of these each year. And think how glorious that—"*

Magic surges through the room, jolting each Council member and their attendees, throwing some of the smaller creatures from their seats and smacking them into the stone walls. My body ricochets with the wave of power in the room, unlocking something I can't quite explain or understand.

A snarl rises within me, my wolf instantly on high alert, wanting to take control. But now is definitely not the time for me, or any other wolf, to shift. Although Council members know how difficult it can be for us to control the strong urges driven by our inner wolves, they still view shifting as an act of aggression. And I'm not sure I can blame them for that sentiment. Our wolves often have a mind of their own and can be out for blood when threatened. Or annoyed.

And that's when it hits me—the barrier. It's been breached.

But that's impossible: No one can cross the barrier.

It's been our primary source of protection from the human world for more than three hundred years.

Gritting my teeth and clenching my fists, I fight against the primal instinct to shift that's growing stronger with every passing second and instead focus on the task at hand—securing my pack. I didn't become the Alpha of Duskmoor, the strongest pack in Miraluna, by doubting my instincts. Although I can't fathom how anyone could've crossed the barrier, my wolf can clearly sense something I can't.

"Send out the scouts to secure our portion of the perimeter in Knottingham," I order Camden via mindlink. My first priority has to be protecting the pack from whatever threat might be headed our way. Knottingham occupies a significant portion of the border with the human world, making it likely that whatever has crossed the magical barrier has entered wolf territory.

"Will do," Camden replies quickly before closing out our private connection and joining the mindlink to the pack leadership.

My senses are in overdrive as I try to ferret out this indescribable pull I have toward finding the intruder. My inner wolf is pacing, pulling on the

magic between us as if he'll combust if we don't shift soon. He's determined to locate whoever or whatever entered our lands before anyone else. My wolf is fiercely protective of the pack, but this feels like something more—stronger. More volatile. It's almost desperate.

Gripping the table tightly, I scan the room, appraising how every other Council member is behaving. The alphas from Mistwood and Nightshade are still seated, their claws digging into the wooden table as they undoubtedly try to resist the urge to shift while sending out similar orders. Across from me, the pair of fae are whispering. It wouldn't surprise me if they're already plotting how to turn whatever is happening into another power grab.

"Well, that was unexpected and entertaining." The white-haired witch, Minerva, straightens her hat, her crooked smile suggesting she hasn't gone into war mode like the rest of us. It's peculiar since witches tend to be overly aggressive when it comes to protecting their coven. And no one can blame them, given the decades of persecution their members suffered at the hands of humans before the barrier was erected.

"Explain yourself," Ryker Thornfield, Alpha of the Mistwood pack, demands. His pack is the second most dominant in Knottingham, and he's always itching for a fight. I've gone toe-to-toe with him countless times to protect my pack from his nonstop encroachment on our territory. He may be older than me by more than a decade, but I'm physically bigger and a lot fucking stronger—not that he'll ever admit it.

Minerva shrugs, completely unbothered by Ryker's request, even though he could easily tear her petite frame to shreds in seconds if he had the inclination. And with Ryker, it doesn't take much to awaken his thirst for blood. He's got the broody asshole "fuck with me and die" vibe down pat.

"The barrier," the demon representative, Lucius, chokes out as his large black leathery wings curl around his muscular body. "Was it truly crossed?"

"How can that happen? It's supposed to keep us safe!" a scared voice calls out from the ring of support staff crowded along the walls, frightened looks on their faces. If they're waiting for us to comfort them, they're in the wrong place. None of the Council members are warm and fuzzy, and we're not about to placate anyone in the middle of a godsdamn crisis.

It's situations like this that make me grateful to have the ability to communicate with my pack telepathically—a true gift from the Moon

Goddess herself. By now, my entire pack leadership is aware of the potential threat and is moving to secure our territory, while a majority of the other groups in this room are left to share news verbally, putting them at a significant disadvantage given their location.

"What a shocker," Bane states calmly. "The witches can't do their one fucking job right." He smirks at Minerva like the fae ass he is, daring her to disagree. "Honestly, I'm surprised it held up this long. The fae should've been involved in crafting it if we wanted the barrier to actually work."

"We could be wrong," comes the silken purr of the siren three seats down from me. "We've been told for centuries that no one without magic can cross the barrier."

"Or is that a lie the fae have let us believe?" Malbec, the massive black dragon den leader turns and growls at the female fae, the room heating with his fury. Out of all the dragons in Miraluna to piss off, he's at the very bottom of the list. He's a godsdamn menace when he's angry or threatened.

With their immortal lifespans, the fae are known for being the guardians of information. Unfortunately, they often choose to interpret that as the *gatekeepers* of information. It wouldn't be the first time they failed to share pertinent details about the past with the Council until it was far too late.

Veyloria's piercing blue eyes meet Malbec's and hold, a gesture that can only occur in these meetings where only the most dominant of each group is allowed a seat at the table. "In the last three hundred and thirty-four years, there has been no known crossing of the barrier. But I also recognize that what is known and what is possible are far different matters altogether."

Ryker snarls next to me. "Cut the bullshit. Can it be crossed or not? What are we dealing with here?"

"I do not know, dog. As I stated before," Veyloria replies, staring at her long black nails as if this entire conversation is boring her.

A growl rumbles deep in my chest, a threat echoed by all the other wolves in the room. The fae's disdain for us has only grown over the past five centuries as the power of the five packs has surged while theirs has dwindled. Not that they'd ever admit it.

"Teams have secured the city," Cam reports.

"Make sure they conduct a sweep of our entire territory. I don't know what we're dealing with. I can't be certain that someone with enough magic to break the barrier won't be able to transport quickly. Send a search party to the border."

I can feel his displeasure at my command through the bond. No one willingly crosses the Lilinoe mountains, the range of tall peaks between our lands and the human world, and they certainly don’t get anywhere close to the border. One wrong step over the invisible line separating our worlds will strip the magic out of you, permanently locking you in the human realm. It’s not a risk anyone in Miraluna ever wants to take.

Loud voices echo throughout the room as the Council devolves into chaos, with leaders barking orders at their subordinates before pointlessly discussing whether a barrier crossing was indeed possible with the Council member next to them.

I may not be able to explain it, but I know without a doubt there’s an intruder in Miraluna. Someone lurking in the shadows who will upend our delicate balance of And for some reason, this disturbance is calling to me. Begging me to find it.

And it’s not a command I can ignore.

I have to know who—or what—is here. No matter the cost.

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CHAPTER 3
FINN

"I don't like this," Cam grumbles as we stalk out of the meeting an hour later. After the Council spent the time whiplashing between arguing if it's possible for anyone to get through the barrier, throwing out possibilities of what else could've caused the disturbance, and suggesting it was all one big joke, played by either the witches or the fae, I finally left.

Meeting a-fucking-journed.

On a good day, I can barely tolerate the political posturing the Council meetings require. With my wolf on high alert to find this insurgent, my patience for dealing with their bullshit is nonexistent. We should've spent time formulating a plan of how to deal with this situation as a group, not pointing fingers and claiming ignorance. We're the godsdamn leaders of this world for Fate's sake.

Although I'm not surprised—no one on the Council trusts each other. Our alliance is held together by magic and the mutual desire to avoid self-destruction. Real trust between the various lands hasn't existed for centuries, if it ever did.

Minerva's attitude in the Council meeting didn't help the situation, either. At one point, she suggested we all share some popcorn and conjured some for herself, even though magic is strictly forbidden during meetings. Perhaps the rules don't apply if you're the witch who cast the magical agreement spell in the first place, allowing you to do whatever the fuck you want.

I don’t have any proof, but I’m confident Minerva knows more than she’s letting on. Her nonchalant attitude about everything, combined with the ease at which she could break through the protection to prevent magic from being used in the meeting, makes me question how much the witches are keeping from us.

From *everyone*.

“I’m not a fan of this either, Cam, but we have to find what crossed the barrier before someone else does.” I pause, clenching my fists by my side, tempering my growing urge to shift once again. “Whoever or whatever has entered our land could be more powerful than anyone else in Miraluna. The amount of magic it would take to get through the barrier…”

Cam stills, taking a long deep breath. “I know. We can’t be sure only one person slipped through. What if they bring down the entire barrier? If all of Miraluna is now at risk for invasion.”

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

A fierce snarl comes out of me, my eyes narrowing at Cam. It’s unlikely that we wouldn’t know if the whole barrier had fallen, but it’s a plausible next step, terrifying but definitely possible. Something like that would upend our entire world. Fates, I hope that’s not what we find at the end of our search.

“We’ll figure it out, Cam. We always do.”

Without another word, I walk over to the iron doorway and open it. Once I step inside, a whoosh of magic immediately transports me to Duskmoor, Cam following right behind me. When the Council was founded, it was one of the security measures the witches put into place. No one knows exactly how to get to the Council meeting room. The only way in is through the magicked doorway, designed to only work for Council members and their designated seconds-in-command. Or at least that’s how we’ve been told it works.

I’m starting to question everything and everyone now.

Standing in front of my black SUV on the outskirts of the Duskmoor city limits, I make a snap decision. “Let’s shift and see if we can find the intruder. I’ll have Jagger pick up the vehicle.”

Cam nods in agreement and, with practiced efficiency, pulls off his clothes and places them inside the vehicle before quickly transforming into his large, tawny brown wolf. I follow suit, taking slightly longer to make sure my cufflinks are in my jacket pocket before placing my pile inside. I

only have one suit, and I'll be damned if I have to show up to the next Council meeting in an outfit that makes those fucking fae assholes look down on me.

Not that it would take much, considering those fuckers are always looking for a reason to poke at me and anyone else they deem unworthy of their presence—which is pretty much everyone.

Normally, I'm a jeans guy, but I understand the power that comes from your appearance. And nothing says, *I'm the strongest motherfucker here* like a custom-fitted suit.

As I shift, a rainbow mist envelops me, my bones reforming into my wolf, my skin transitioning into black fur. It's a surge of pleasurable pain every single time—one I welcome. Shaking out my muscles, I release a long howl that promises protection and destruction.

A warning to any potential threats in Knottingham.

I will hunt you down. And there will be consequences.

Cam and I run hard, quickly reaching the base of the Lilinoe mountains. My wolf's instincts push forward, confident we should head in a specific direction, but unable to distinguish the makeup of the scent we're tracking. It's familiar, yet different.

Choosing to follow the faint smell, we sprint through rows of Douglas-fir trees, climbing the mountain. The forest floor is littered with various stages of decaying pine needles while a thick fog blankets the air, and the moon casts a soft glow over the land. It's almost eerie, being out here. Not a single sound can be heard except the thumping of our paws against the ground.

Maybe even non-magical animals can sense the wrongness of the barrier. Every step we take is a battle, the strange sensation urging me to get as far away as possible despite my wolf demanding I go on. The constant push and pull is almost maddening.

Out of nowhere, my fur stands up straight, and I come to a halt, an immediate growl releasing from my jaw.

"Griffins. At least three."

Cam stops beside me and sniffs the air, trying to locate their scent. He probably won't find it. Since birth, I have been able to pinpoint smells faster than anyone else in my pack. Probably in all of Miraluna.

It's an advantage I keep hidden from everyone, except my parents and Cam.

We begin to move again, zig-zagging through the rugged terrain as the griffins fly overhead. It's mid-fall, and most of the deciduous trees haven't lost their leaves, making it almost impossible for the griffin to see anything on the ground.

"We agreed to wait until a formal search party could be put together," Cam huffs, offended at the flying beasts breaking the Council's verbal agreement.

"And yet, here we are."

"The majority of the barrier borders our land. It'd be one thing if it were the dragons; their vulnerability is clear since a portion of the barrier touches their territory. All of Miraluna lies between the barrier and the mountain range the griffins call home."

"I have no doubt the dragons also have at least one flight of their best scouts in the air."

Cam releases a low growl. *"Why do we bother with the Council if no one is going to do what they agree to?"*

My wolf picks up his pace, chasing the invisible string pulling us forward. It's so strong even the human half of me can feel it plucking at my heart.

We need to be there first.

We need to find…

Her.

A frantic burst of speed comes out of me, leaving Cam behind as we crest a hill to a large, forested area. The hurricane of emotions in me is so chaotic I can't fully make out what Cam's trying to communicate to me via mindlink. All I know is I have to get to her. To protect.

Prowling forward, I spot an older car crashed into a tree, and a surge of energy rushes through me. Different than what we experienced when the barrier was breached earlier, but also unlike anything else I've ever felt.

As I approach the wrecked vehicle, the only thought in my head is…

Mine.

Cam crests the hill behind me, and I quickly shift into my human form, unwilling to let my wolf have the reins as a feeling of extreme

possessiveness takes hold. I've only felt like this once before—when I found my mate—the wolf I'm cementing my bond with in two weeks.

Forcing the similarity of the sensation from my mind, I stalk around the crumpled car, trying to find the best way in, given the mangled metal. There's steam coming from underneath the hood, and broken glass litters the ground. The female inside doesn't stir as I get closer and see her head resting on the inflated airbag, streaks of blood on her forehead.

"Finnegan," Cam growls my full name as he stalks up next to me. "At least fucking wait for me before you risk your life."

"I haven't even touched her."

"We don't know what she is or how she got here. We have to be careful."

Blowing out a breath, I shake my head. I ignore Cam's warning, prying open the door. A small ripple hits me once I'm only a few feet from her.

Is it power radiating off her? Is that what this sensation is?

I roll my shoulders, trying to rid myself of the unknown feeling before unbuckling her and scooping her out of the car.

"Did you need to do that?" Cam asks, his eyebrows arched like he can't believe what he's seeing.

"She's injured," I snarl, surprised by my own reaction. It's rare for me to raise my voice at Cam, but something about today has made my patience shorter than normal. I can't control myself for some reason. Every emotion in me is on the verge of exploding.

When I lay the young female on the soft pine needle flooring, I get my first good look at her. A short black dress covers her small, athletic frame, and her light brown hair is in disarray. There's a large red welt on her cheek and a gash on her forehead. An overwhelming need to comfort her roars inside me, demanding I take her back to our den and care for her immediately.

What is wrong with me? I can't possibly be thinking about bringing her into pack territory.

"Can you tell what she is?" Cam asks, and I have to fight to hold back my growing rage as he crouches to examine her.

Some creatures, like griffins and dragons, have such unique, strong smells that wolves can detect them, even from a distance. Others, like witches and sirens, are only distinguishable when they're actively using

their magic—unless you're an alpha. Then, the faint traces of magic present on each creature are enough.

I breathe in deeply, trying to make sense of the odd mixture of smells here. It's… complex and chocolatey, a smell that is both home and adventure. It's almost addicting. It's also not something I've ever encountered.

And all my wolf can think is… *Mine*.

I scrunch my brow and stand up, staring down at the beautiful female and realizing for the first time my dick is swaying in the wind. Thank the goddess she hasn't woken up yet, or she's in for an unexpected view of two naked men. Probably not the best way to introduce yourself to someone, especially if they might have enormous powers that could threaten your entire land.

Pulling on the back of my neck, I try to make sense of my wolf's reaction. It's likely just a side effect of waiting such a long time between finding our mate and the upcoming ceremony. Most wolves barely last a week before making the bond official, but we've gone almost a full year. It's been painful, to say the least.

Not that I'm complaining. It's extremely rare for fated mates to occur anymore. No one is exactly sure why, but the Fates have been exceptionally picky over the last century. It also doesn't help that there have been fewer female wolves born in the last fifty years, significantly increasing the competition for finding a life partner.

Waiting a year before committing my life to my fated mate is nothing compared to what others have to go through.

"Some kind of shifter," I report to my beta, intentionally leaving out my wolf's odd need to claim her. It would be blasphemous to utter the words aloud that my wolf wants to mark a human when we're fated to another wolf.

"What kind of shifter is that small? Can't be a wolf. Blaire is almost twice her size," Cam notes, naming my future mate.

"I don't know what she is. But I know how to make her tell us." With that in mind, I place my hand on her arm, my palm heating at the contact. A low rumble tries to escape me, but I push it back, shaking her.

"Hello!" Cam calls loudly, less than a foot from her face.

I increase the pressure on her arm, shaking more firmly, but still, she remains unconscious.

“What the fuck do we do?” Cam asks, staring down at her. “Dump cold water on her?”

I lift an eyebrow. “Do you have any cold water on you?”

He purses his lips. “I guess I left it in my other wolf. I could pee on her,” he suggests, like it’s a completely normal offer.

“Let’s get her back to the den. It’ll be safer if she doesn’t see the city as we transport her there.” I lean forward, sliding my arms under her back and legs before lifting her against my chest, preparing for a long walk home. My body heats at the contact again, and I quickly pull her away, throwing her over my shoulder, her head hanging to my lower back.

“Jagger and Max are in the SUV, on their way to meet us. They’ll get as close as they can.” Cam’s eyes lose focus as he receives another communication from the pack’s enforcers and the duo that rounds out our pack’s leadership. “Are we telling the Council what we found?”

I run through the pros and cons as we make our way down the mountain. My wolf demands the female be protected at all costs—viewing her as a small, defenseless creature. The alpha in me is apprehensive, worried she’s a deadly threat to all of Miraluna and combating her powers might require the skills and magic of the entire Council.

“No. We keep it quiet until we know what she’s doing here.”

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CHAPTER 4
MAYA

My head pounds, and a bright light burns my brain through my closed eyelids. Ugh. Such bad decisions were made last—

I sit up as a memory comes flashing back. The loud boom. The car slamming into the unbending bark of the giant tree. The sound of metal ripping and bending. The bright light.

And then…nothing.

Blinking to try to dislodge the nausea rolling through me at the sudden movement, my vision slowly becomes crisper. I'm no longer in my Halloween costume. Instead, I'm in a hospital bed, wearing one of those horrid medical gowns. But this doesn't appear to be like any hospital I've ever seen on TV. It's a barren room with dark gray walls that resembles something between concrete and cinder blocks—almost like a prison.

My heart rapidly accelerates, and my chest tightens as I try to force myself to take deep breaths to abate my growing anxiety.

Where the fuck am I? What happened to me?

I need to get out of here. Now.

Quickly, I pull at the IV in my right inner elbow, wincing when it tears out of my skin and a small spurt of blood drips down my arm.

"Bad idea," a deep voice says from behind me.

I whip my head around, locking eyes with a burly man sitting in the corner of the room. Without thinking, I stand quickly and raise my hands in front of my face, my feet moving into an staggered stance as I slightly wobble. It probably wasn't the best idea to jump out of bed, but I have to do

something to protect myself. God only knows what this man is going to do to me.

After spending eighteen years in foster care, I've seen enough brawls to know that whatever is about to happen isn't going to end well for me, but I refuse to go down without getting at least one decent punch in. I owe that much to Maddie, who spent countless hours teaching me how to defend myself when we were seventeen.

Shit. Maddie.

My stomach falls at the realization she has no idea where I am and is probably worried sick after our call abruptly ended.

Nope. Can't think of that now. I have to stay focused on the threat in front of me.

The man raises a dark eyebrow, the movement drawing attention to his ice-blue eyes and the way they almost glow against his tanned skin. "Fighting, huh? Not what I would've expected from such a tiny creature." The amusement in his voice is disarming.

I hold his gaze, which only makes the smile on his face widen.

"Appearances can be deceiving." I bounce on the balls of my feet, hoping it will help reduce my reaction time. I'm going to need every second I can get for my petite self to have a chance against this behemoth of a man. "I'm stronger and faster than I look."

He cocks his head to the side, a look I've only seen from a German shepherd. "I'm sure you are. Though, I wouldn't brag about that right now if I were you."

We stand there, staring each other down for what feels like ages before I can't take it any longer, and I let the flurry of questions running through my mind come pouring out like Niagara Falls. "Did Quentin put you up to this? Are you one of his friends or something? Did he make you kidnap me?" My arms gesture wildly as the words flow out of me. "If you let me go, I won't report you. Tell him you couldn't find me. Actually, how *did* you find me?"

My arms drop to my sides as the truth hits me in the face—this has nothing to do with Quentin. And oddly, I'm kind of wishing it did because that might be a safer situation than the one I'm in right now.

"Quentin?" the man growls. *Growls*. Like an angry dog. "Who the fuck is Quentin?"

"Who are *you*?" I demand instead.

He snorts, crossing his arms tightly across his broad chest. “I think the real question is, who are *you*? And how did you get here?”

“Don’t pretend like that’s a better question. It’s literally the same one I asked you. And for the record, I’m a nobody. You’re the guy who has a creepy prison-cell hospital room like you—oh God. You’re going to run experiments on me, aren’t you?” My gaze snags on a drain in the middle of the floor before darting back to the man. “Fuck. I was rescued by some sort of recluse who murders lost women.” I put my hands up again, slowly backing away until my shoulders hit the cold stone wall behind me. “There are so many Netflix documentaries that’ve warned me about this.”

His bright blue eyes narrow. “What the fuck is Netflix?”

“*That’s* your follow-up?!” I shriek. “I accuse you of torturing and killing women for fun, and your biggest concern is Netflix?!” I slowly slide down the wall until I’m sitting. “And you don’t know what Netflix is. Who the fuck doesn’t know what Netflix is?”

“Finnegan!” The door to the room opens, and a tall woman pushes inside. She’s dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, a stethoscope peeking out from under her long black hair. “Why is she out of bed? What are you doing?”

The man, Finnegan, I presume, moves so quickly I almost don’t see it, placing himself between me and the other woman. “What are *you* doing, Hera? I told you not to come in once she awoke,” he chastises, glancing over his shoulder at me.

Hera leans to the side so she can see me better. “She’s in distress, Finn!”

“She’s dangerous. You can’t come near her.”

“Then put her back in bed and stop antagonizing her!”

He looks over his shoulder at me again, a slight smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. “I don’t think she’d appreciate that too much.”

“*She* doesn’t appreciate being talked about like she isn’t here,” I mumble.

Hera laughs. “Oh, I like this one.”

Finn’s shirt pulls across his back as he crosses his arms again. “Out, Hera.”

“Can you get back in bed?” She meets my gaze. “You’ve been unconscious for hours. I don’t want you to overextend yourself.”

I shake my head. “Nope. I’m not making it easier for him to murder me.”

Finn does the growling thing again. “I’m not a murderer!”

“Then why don’t you leave?” I ask.

He turns to face me. “I’m not leaving you here with Hera. She needs protection.”

A snort comes from Hera that suggests she disagrees. She looks between the two of us before finally throwing up her hands. “Fine. I’ll leave, but you’re coming with me. Let the poor girl get some rest.”

He glares at her for a moment before nodding once. “But the door will be locked.”

Perfect. Still a prisoner to a man who may or may not be planning to kill me.

At least he’s an attractive murderer. There could be worse ways to die.

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CHAPTER 5
FINN

She's out for another five hours after Hera hooked her up to the IV again. My wolf refused to let me leave the premises, demanding I watch over her the entire time. Thankfully, my beta and enforcers thought I was being extra cautious, keeping the threat within striking distance. That's certainly part of it, but for some reason, I find myself drawn to her small form, watching each rise and fall of her chest as she sleeps via the camera in the security room.

Cam walks into the room and takes the empty seat next to me. "What do you think?"

"She's trying to play us. Accusing us of kidnapping her is smart. It makes me have to defend myself rather than ask her questions."

We both watch as the female stirs, looking slightly disoriented as she gingerly sits up. At least Hera disconnected her IV twenty minutes ago, so we don't have to witness her ripping out the line again.

Cam cocks his head. "Is it possible she's telling the truth and has no idea how she ended up here?"

"Doubtful. The barrier has worked perfectly for more than three hundred years. It seems highly unlikely she randomly found a way to break through it without trying. There has to be something we're missing."

Cam clicks the end of his pen, the sound echoing off the walls in the otherwise quiet room. "Maybe she's the most powerful creature ever to set foot in Miraluna, and that's how she got through. Or she's a human who

made a wrong turn and somehow ended up in our world. I know we're all terrified she's the first, but look at her. The latter seems more likely."

I press my thumb against the pulsing ache between my eyes. "Maybe. But we need to interrogate her and see what we can find out before we even consider that as an option. We'll need Gideon's help," I add at the last minute, naming the only wolf in our pack able to smell lies. He's almost five hundred and reaching his twilight, so we try to use him only when there is literally no other option available. "Can you ask him to meet us here immediately?"

Cam glares at me, shakes his head, and then gives me a solemn nod. None of us likes reaching out to Gideon directly via our pack mindlink. He can be a bit of a loose cannon at his age, and you never know what you'll get.

Slowly, the female in the holding room stands before making her way to the steel door, her eyes scanning the walls until they stop, staring directly at the camera. She shrugs once before turning back to the door and reaching for the handle.

I chuckle as she attempts to turn it. Dismay washes over her face at the realization I haven't been lying: She really is locked in. That's one thing she needs to understand about me—I never lie. My word is as strong as any bond in existence.

Anger and fear mask her expression as she clenches her fists against her legs. Oddly, the same wave of emotions hits me, tightening my chest. It's almost like I can taste her anxiety. The worry she has that we'll keep her locked in here forever. That we'll run horrible experiments on her. Murder her. That she'll never see her best friend again.

Rubbing my sternum with my knuckles, I try to force out the unwanted emotions. I'm only reacting because I've been up for almost forty-eight hours. The exhaustion is causing my mind to run wild. There's no way I can sense her emotions—that only happens with a fated mate, and I've already found mine.

As Cam and I watch in companionable silence, the female walks over to the chair I claimed last night, touching the hard plastic before scooting it to the bed. The metal legs screech across the concrete floor as she drags it. The piercing sound is right up there with nails on a chalkboard. With a sigh so dramatic I can see it through the camera, she finally takes a seat, her shoulders slumping as she buries her head in her hands.

“Can you get her some real clothes?” I ask Hera via mindlink.

“I knew you weren’t going to be mean to her all day,” she replies confidently.

I groan. *“I wasn’t being mean. She’s a threat, and I’m treating her as such.”*

My wolf may disagree with my assessment, but I can’t listen to him. It’s my duty to protect the pack. To protect all of Knottingham. Hell—all of Miraluna.

It’s not like I can expect the Council to do anything useful. They still haven’t organized an official search party for the intruder, though I’m confident every Council member has already launched their own missions. It won’t be long until the wolves in Duskmoor start asking questions about the wave of magic that went through the land yesterday, followed by the team I sent out to secure our perimeter. I can’t let them know about this female until we’ve figured out what she’s planning. Until then, her connection to what happened yesterday has to be concealed.

“Hera giving you a hard time?” Cam doesn’t take his eyes off the screen as he asks, practically reading my mind like the phenomenal beta he is.

“She thinks I was *mean* to her. Fates! I wish we at least knew her godsdamn name so I could stop calling her ‘*her*.’”

“I’ve been referring to her as ‘the curse’ in my mind,” Cam says with a smirk.

I stare at my friend. “That’s worse. Definitely worse.”

“What? You were the one who was reminding me that this female could literally be the end of Miraluna as we know it. Sounds like a curse to me.”

“And this is exactly why I don’t let you speak at pack meetings. You can’t say shit like this out loud. You’ll have the entire pack freaking the fuck out.”

Cam shrugs. “I call it like I see it.” He crosses his arms and leans back in his chair.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky, and her crossing the barrier will be a good thing for Miraluna.”

My wolf perks up, his metaphorical tail wagging rapidly.

“Apparently, my wolf wants to call her ‘Lucky.’”

Cam lets out a low chuckle. “Lucky it is then, Alpha.”

Forty minutes later, Gideon is escorted into the security room by Jagger. Our official pack headquarters is a commercial building in downtown

Duskmoor, but most of the pack prefer to live on the outskirts of town, closer to the forest.

I smile at the wolf with an incredible gift. “Thanks for making the journey, Gideon.”

“Of course, Alpha. Who will I be talking to?” He rubs his hands together in excitement.

Gideon appears to have his wits about him today, thank the Fates. His gift to scent out lies materialized when he was a pup, making him an extremely rare, highly prized member of our pack. He’s been used in interrogation for almost five centuries and is a vault of secrets. However, sometimes his age makes him more prickly than normal, and he gets offended by having to schlep from his home, deep in the woods, to our headquarters.

“A female found her way into our territory, and I’m not certain she’s being quite truthful,” I hedge.

“Wolf?” Gideon asks, cocking his eyebrow.

I pause, long enough for Gideon’s excited curiosity to change into concern. “Maybe. Her scent is…odd.” I can’t explain it, but in my gut, I know there’s something different about her.

Gideon cocks his head. “Interesting. I’m always up for a challenge. Is there anything else I need to know before we go in?”

I look at the old wolf; his dark hair streaked with the gray that only the elders in the pack ever achieve. “She might be dangerous.”

He smiles and waves his hand dismissively. “I may be old, but I can still hold my own in a fight. Especially with the Alpha on my side.”

If only a physical fight is what I’m worried about.

“Then you’re with me, old man.”

I grab a box of food I had the kitchen staff prepare for Lucky and lead the way to the holding room. Gideon and I make small talk as we take the elevator to the basement, but as soon as the shiny doors open, I’m all business. After unlocking the door, I step inside, my wolf and I taking in every scent, every movement, before stepping aside and letting Gideon in next to me.

“Oh great, it’s ‘bring your friend to the murder cell day’,” Lucky grouses from where she’s sitting cross-legged on the bed. She’s wearing the sweatpants and sweatshirt Hera gave her, and she’s practically swimming in them. All our extra items are meant for pack members to wear after they

shift and find themselves without clothes. They're designed for more muscular frames, not Lucky's petite body. No wonder she had to roll the sleeves up multiple times at her wrists.

Gideon shoots me a wry grin before moving toward her. I release a growl, but he ignores it. Why do none of these people take me fucking seriously when I say she's a threat?

"I'm much too old to murder anyone," Gideon assures her. "Maybe when I was three hundred. But almost five? My stomach is far too weak for that kind of behavior."

Her nose scrunches. "What?"

Not wanting to let her turn this into an interrogation of her own, I ignore her question. Crossing my arms, I ask, "What do you shift into?"

"What do I *what*?"

I try not to roll my eyes. This was supposed to be an easy, get-to-know-you question. "Your other form. What is it?"

She looks between Gideon and me, confusion lining her features. "I don't know what you want me to say."

Gideon's voice comes into my head: *"Truth."*

"You're a human now. When you become an animal, what animal is it?"

She lifts an eyebrow. "First of all, the tone is unnecessary. Second, I can't become an animal. No one can." She says it slowly, as if explaining to a pup why he can't bite his friends.

"Truth."

"How the fuck is that *the truth?"* Cam asks. Apparently, Gideon took it upon himself to share the results with Cam as well.

"Maybe her magic can fool him," I offer. *"Or maybe she truly did make it through the barrier with no idea of what's on the other side. Either way, we have a big fucking problem on our hands."*

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CHAPTER 6
MAYA

I stare at the small spider in the corner of my cell as it slowly makes its way along the ceiling. Obviously, I've named her Charlotte, and despite being my only friend here, she hasn't started sending me any messages in her webs. Which is kind of a dick move because I'm so bored I've started to talk to myself. Though, that's not what's really troubling. It's the responding to myself that's the *real* issue.

The door opens, and without looking up, I know it's not Finn.

"How are you feeling, Maya?" Hera asks.

I considered not telling them my name during that first, odd interrogation with Finn and the guy who claimed he was nearly five hundred years old, but it's not like knowing my name could hurt me. I'm not important enough to warrant a ransom note. The only person probably looking for me is Maddie. I'm sure Quentin gave up after two days—maybe less.

Plus, the questions Finn and his friend kept asking were so bizarre, it required all my mental energy to simply understand what they were asking. Lying at that point felt futile.

Whatever they're hoping to get out of me apparently isn't going well because they've grilled me twice more and the questions keep getting odder. This morning, they asked me about "humans" and our political motivations for "coming to their land." I avoid the news like the plague—I've got enough of my own shit to worry about; I don't need to hear about

anyone else's—so I was, once again, unable to give them anything useful. Or particularly accurate.

Also, who refers to other people as "humans"? Do they think they're robots or something? None of it makes any goddamn sense.

My current best guess is they're one of those communes where people refuse to let the government trespass on their land and have some weird obsession with magic. At this point, I can't tell if they're a run-of-the-mill cult that *fears* the mystical arts or one that welcomes it.

"Does your group like magic or hate magic?" I ask Hera instead of answering her.

"I guess it depends on who's using it and what they're using it for. The witches tend to be helpful. The fae you've got to watch out for, though. They're sneaky and completely self-centered."

I laugh at her joke before quickly realizing she isn't kidding. Well, shit. I thought Hera seemed mostly sane—turns out she's drinking whatever Kool-Aid the rest of them are.

"Anyway, sweet thing, I came in to let you know Finn finally said you could leave this room. I'm to take you to get cleaned up before you meet with the Alpha."

Choosing to ignore the term that always makes me feel like I'm in some military compound, I jump from the bed. "A shower?!"

Hera heads toward the door. "A hot one at that. Come on."

Thirty minutes later, I'm washed, dried, and wearing a green dress that Hera informed me was passed down from one of the "pups." Thankfully, the underwear was in a new package, so it wasn't also coming from a puppy. I chose not to ask too many questions, mostly because I'm terrified of what her answer might be.

Hera waits for me in the sparsely furnished apartment she brought me to on the third floor of the building I've apparently been held in for the past couple days. "Come on, Maya, let's get you to the Alpha. He's waiting for us by the front doors."

I look at her empty hands, realizing I've never seen anyone with a cell phone. How can they go for so long without checking their messages? I haven't touched mine for three days, and I'm about to crawl out of my skin with the loss of communication with the outside world. Not to mention, having access to my phone would be helpful in getting the fuck out of here.

"Where are we going? Are you coming with us?"

Hera shakes her head. “No. I’ve got to make my rounds and see some injured wolves, but Finn is going to take you on a walk. I finally convinced him to allow you to have some sunshine. I’m a firm believer that fresh air and sunlight do wonders for the healing process.”

Injured wolves. Totally. Very normal thing to go see.

Is this how Dorothy felt when she landed in Oz?

“Is he actually taking me somewhere to kill me?” I ask. It’s my running joke at this point. Sort of. There’s also something about Finn that says he could snap someone’s neck without even trying.

And I hate that I find him so damn attractive.

“No murdering today. At least, not you,” she replies with a chuckle.

There’s something inside me that perks up as we walk into the lobby, some internal piece of me aware of Finn’s presence before I even see him. It’s strong enough I’m starting to wonder whether you can develop Stockholm syndrome after only a few days with your captor. If I am, it’s almost certainly due to the fact he’s always bringing me food when he comes to interrogate me.

And there’s something about his scent. It’s enchanting and reminds me of home, which is confusing since I’ve never really had one.

Shit. I’m attracted to my captor. This is definitely turning into some made-for-television movie.

Finn’s gaze sweeps over me, taking in my new clothes as we meet him next to the wall of glass at the entrance to the building. “Thanks for bringing her, Hera. You ready for our walk, Lucky?”

“It’s Maya,” I remind him.

He runs his hand through his thick black hair. “I know.”

Hera smiles at us both before saying, “I’ve got to run. You two have fun. No murdering, Finn. I promised you wouldn’t.”

Finn releases a mock growl before he turns to me. “How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a murderer?”

“It’s not so much you saying it as you letting me go that will prove you’re not planning on killing me.”

He takes a deep breath before opening the door. “About that.”

I walk outside, into a bright city unlike any I’ve ever seen before. The buildings are all different shades of green and tan, and there is something about it that feels distinctly…forest-y.

“Where are we?”

“Duskmoor.” He holds his arm out.

“Duskmoor… Is that in… Oregon?”

“No.” Finn shakes his head as he starts walking down the sidewalk. “Duskmoor is part of Knottingham. Which is part of Miraluna.”

I have to take two steps for every one of his, so it takes me longer to respond as I try to catch up with him. “Where is that in the United States?”

Could these people please, for the love of all things holy, forget about whatever weirdness they’ve bought into and use the names of real locations?

Finn glances at me as we walk, a large lake coming into view. “Maya, I don’t really know how to tell you this, but you’re not in the human world anymore.”

Excuse me, what?

“You’re going to need to explain what the hell you’re talking about. What kind of weird fucked-up place is this?”

“I mean—” He stops and points to a wooden bench along the sidewalk that faces the lake. “Want to sit here for a minute?”

I nod and lower myself next to him, pulling my arm tight so it doesn’t brush against his. Which is difficult since his shoulders take up the space of two average men.

“I’m not sure exactly how to tell you this, so I’m just going to say it. You passed through a magical barrier. Apparently not on purpose, which is what I thought at first, and why we felt the need to keep you in a secure room until now.” He rubs his large hands on his dark jeans. “After Gideon spoke to you and couldn’t smell any lies on you, I had to accept that you’re likely here by accident. The only other option is you have some type of magical ability that far supersedes anything we’ve ever seen in Miraluna and you’re completely clueless about it, which doesn’t seem likely.”

I massage my temples. “What are you telling me?” I hate how defeated I sound, but I can’t keep doing this: Having these conversations where they tell me things that don’t make any sense.

“You crashed into a new world. One with witches and fae and werewolves.”

I snort. “Okay. Good joke. Where am I really?”

Finn rolls his shoulders twice before beginning to unbutton his shirt.

“Whoa there, tiger! What are you doing?”

“I’m proving that what I’m telling you is the truth.” He stands up and starts working on his pants button.

“By taking your clothes off?”

“By turning into a wolf.”

I lean my head back to look at the sky and laugh. “Right. Of course. Please. Show me your dick, then turn into a wolf. Seems right.” As I glance at him again, I have to stop myself from reaching out to touch the hard planes of his chest. The hills and valleys that separate each of his eight abs.

Okay, maybe I’m not protesting the view after all. But I draw the line at believing any of the nonsense he’s spouting. He’s probably getting naked to lure me into bed. Trying to confuse me with all this magic talk, hoping I’ll be so enamored with his body that I’ll let go of all my inhibitions. And if the rest of him looks like his chest, then I hate to admit he might be right.

“I forget how innocent other creatures are.”

I drag my eyes from the expanse of leg and, well, dick, that is exposed when he pulls off his jeans. “I’m not innocent! I’ve had sex. Lots of sex. Seen so many penises. I’m not even impacted by yours.”

Okay. That’s not necessarily true. He’s hung like a horse. Or, I guess wolf, since that’s what he’s claiming to be.

He places his hands on his hips, drawing my attention back to the appendage in question. “Are you ready for this?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll believe what I tell you after I do?”

“Fine. Yes! Please. Turn into a wolf. I will believe—”

A rainbow mist surrounds Finn, shielding him from view before clearing again to reveal a huge, black wolf.

I jump up from the bench, slowly backing away. “Holy fucking shit. You’re a wolf. You just turned from a person into a wolf. A wolf. You’re a wolf!”

The large head of the animal in question tilts to the side, an action I’ve seen Finn do a number of times.

We stare at each other for a few moments before I reach out and gently touch his head. “You’re a wolf,” I whisper.

He leans into my hand before nodding.

I scratch his ears once more before he steps back and the rainbow mist appears again.

“You’re a wolf,” I state again.

“I am.” His voice is low, gruffer than earlier.

My breath catches in my throat. “And I’m in…” I can’t even remember the name.

“Duskmoor is my pack’s territory.”

I sit down as I wipe the side of my nose, begging myself not to cry.

Finn sits next to me and gently places his hand on my thigh. “You’re going to be okay, Maya. You are.”

“Can I go back?”

“I don’t think so. There’s a barrier between our worlds. One that’s been there for over three hundred years to protect us. No human is supposed to be able to cross it. No one has…until you.” He pauses, gently rubbing his thumb on my leg before continuing, “If anyone in Miraluna tries to go through the barrier, it’ll strip them of what they value most. For us, that’s our magic. For you, it’s likely your life.”

I inhale sharply, my muscles tensing at the thought of dying if I tried to leave. “But you don’t know for sure, right?”

He shakes his head. “Not one hundred percent since this has never happened before, but I’m confident it would kill you.”

Don’t love the sound of that, but it also feels like he might be lying to keep me here. “Who would know?”

“Maybe the witches. They created the barrier. It’s also possible the fae might have some ideas since they pride themselves on keeping all of history documented.” He rolls his eyes and mutters, “Fucking fae assholes.”

“Can you ask them?” I ask meekly, hating how much it sounds like I’m begging because, well, I am. I can’t live in this place where magic exists. Where people turn into wolves. And witches and fae are real.

He moves his hand from my leg, and I immediately miss the warmth of his touch. “No. The Council can be ruthless. If they find out I have you here, I’m honestly not sure what they’ll do—to me or you. All I know is it would be really bad.”

I swallow hard. “So, I’m stuck here…forever. In a land I don’t understand. With no one I know, surrounded by witches and werewolves.” My shoulders slump as I stare at the pale blue sky.

“It could always be worse. One of the dragons or griffins could’ve found you,” he teases, playfully tapping the side of my leg.

“Great. They’re dragons here, too. What’s next? Are you going to tell me there are vampires running about?”

“Well—”

I groan, then close my eyes for a second before looking at Finn again. “Why don’t you tell me more about this world I’m supposedly stuck in forever? What’s it called again?”

“Miraluna is the world. The wolves’ territory is Knottingham, and there are five packs. I’m the Alpha of the Duskmoor pack.”

I nod. “Got it, packs of werewolves in Knottingham.”

“You can call us wolves.”

“Right. What else exists here? You mentioned witches, fae, and dragons. Does everyone have magic?”

“Fae and witches have strong, versatile magic. Sirens, demons, and fairies have magic they can control, but it’s typically for very specific purposes. Like lust magic. Shifters—that’s wolves, dragons, griffins, wyverns, and mermaids and mermen—all have enhanced strength and senses and magic to shift forms, but we can’t do anything else with our powers. Vampires technically have the least magic, but they have enhanced strength and senses, even more so than wolves. Not to mention they can suck your blood dry, which is enough of a reason not to fuck with them.”

Well, that sounds like about a hundred different ways to die for those of us lacking magic and alternate forms. “Is there anyone like me? Anyone without magical powers?”

Finn shakes his head. “Humans have always been wary of our kind. Centuries ago, there were supposedly some humans who peacefully cohabited with us in Miraluna, but they were sent back to your world before the barrier was put into place. There hasn’t been any way for us to interact with humans since.”

I swallow hard as the realization that I’m alone in this world hits me. It’s not like I haven’t been alone before—I’ve spent most of my life fending for myself. I just didn’t have to contend with magical creatures that could kill me easily. Or outright hated my entire kind. “And the witches put the barrier up to keep us separated? Where is it?”

Finn shrugs. “On the other side of the Lilinoe mountain range.” He points to the mountains that start on the outskirts of town. “We steer clear of that area. The barrier tends to make it painful if you get too close.” Finn pulls on the back of his neck. “From what I’ve been told, the barrier was the only solution to protect Miraluna. Humans were literally on a witch hunt,

burning them at the stake for crimes they often didn't commit. It didn't take long until we saw how quickly your world could turn against us."

"But you have magic. Couldn't that protect you?"

"It definitely helped. However, there are hundreds of thousands of humans for every magical creature in Miraluna. Choosing to allow a war to rage between our two lands would've been catastrophic for everyone."

"Is that why you don't want the Council to know about me? Because they hate people like me?"

"Yes. They're not going to take too kindly to a human living in Miraluna. It will raise questions about whether other humans can get through the barrier."

"What exactly is this mysterious Council?" I ask, trying to comprehend all the pieces of information being thrown at me. In the span of twenty minutes, this man—or, I guess, wolf—has decimated my entire reality. It's like the end of *The Truman Show* when the main character learns everything about the life he's been living is nothing more than a lie. I always hated the ending.

He lets out a groan. "Only the bane of my existence."

I can't help but chuckle because that sounds similar to what most people would say about every human politician.

"The Council is the ruling body of Miraluna. The makeup has changed a bit over time, but in general, every major type of creature gets one representative."

"That seems surprisingly fair."

"And the strongest creatures get a few more." He says the last part quickly, and I chuckle again.

"That sounds exactly like what someone who makes others refer to them as 'Alpha' would say."

He looks affronted. "What do you mean? I *am* their alpha."

"Yeah, but it'd be like someone forcing you to call them 'Boss' all the time."

Shaking his head, he says, "Shifters function differently than other groups, except the water dwellers. Biology demands we have one leader. It's how our pack link and everything else functions. It all flows through me."

"Pack link?"

He taps his temple. “Anyone in my pack can communicate with anyone else within the pack telepathically. There are some limitations on how it works, tied to proximity and ranking, but that’s probably more than you need to know.”

I bite my lip, working up the courage to ask the one question I need to know the answer to: “What are you going to do with me?”

“You’re going to stay here under the protection of my pack, where I know you’ll be safe. And I can keep an eye on you. Based on how unwilling you seem to be to show any kind of magic or strength, I’m inclined to believe you’re not some mysterious creature with unheard-of powers and a potential threat to Miraluna. So, you’ll be able to roam around pack headquarters, though we will have our security team keep an eye on you anytime you’re outside your apartment. We need to keep your presence under wraps, but you’ll be able to stay in a pack apartment at headquarters and, eventually, move somewhat freely within Duskmoor as you become more acquainted with our territory, and we become more confident that you truly are who you say you are.”

While I appreciate his words, it still feels like I’m being metaphorically caged in a place I don’t want to be by an entire world who hates my kind. “What if I want to go home?”

“Not an option.” He runs his hands through his black hair. “Our wolves tend to know things that don’t make logical sense to our human sides. Mine is certain that you wouldn’t survive passing back through.”

“What if I want to try?” I ask.

His eyes start to glow. “No. It’s not worth risking your life. I won’t allow it.”

“How is your pack going to react to a human living here.”

He glances at me, his smile uneasy. “I’ve been telling everyone you’re a witch.”

“A witch?”

“It’s the only creature the pack will believe. So far, my enforcers are buying it. We need to keep the circle as small as possible to keep you safe, so I really need you to go along with the witch story. Hera and Cam know what you really are, though.”

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CHAPTER 7
MAYA

I’m getting the hell out of here, whether Finn likes it or not. I snuck out of enough houses as a kid that getting past the so-called alpha and his pack shouldn’t be a problem, even if they’re monitoring me closely.

And it doesn’t matter that they upgraded my living arrangements from a holding cell to a two-bedroom apartment. Sure, it’s four hundred times nicer than any home I’ve ever lived in, with multiple shelves of books and a television with shows on all the magical creatures Finn told me about, but make no mistake, it’s still a place where I’m confined against my will.

I can’t stay in Miraluna, no matter how much something inside me is begging to reconsider. To embrace this new lease on life that fate has gifted me. One where I’m not huddled on the floor of Maddie’s living room after finishing an eight-hour shift at the diner, followed by two to three hours of classes and homework.

I force myself to take a deep breath when I think about how all the money I spent on school will be for nothing if I don’t get back to college soon. Maybe I can fake a sickness and get a few things extended, but if not, everything I’ve sacrificed for my degree will be wasted.

Do I love data analytics? *Obviously not*. Who does?

Is it the best way to ensure I’m not sleeping on my friend’s floor when I’m forty? *Yes*.

So, getting a four-year business degree is my only option for a better life.

I casually open the apartment door and head toward the elevator, pretending I’m just a normal girl on a stroll to get some food—not secretly planning my escape. So what if the only other time I was there, everybody stared at me until Finn barked at them to mind their own business? A girl’s got to eat.

I move through the various stations, grabbing as many meal bars and easily packed fruits as I can. Turns out, you don’t pay when you eat at the pack cafeteria, which is a wild concept.

How do they have the money to support everyone? Does money even exist in Miraluna?

I pick a spot on the far side of the room, grateful not many wolves are milling around. I hurry and scarf down a blueberry muffin, trying to make my actions seem less suspicious, then throw away my trash and leave with my sweatpants’ pockets stuffed with food.

Afterward, I make a quick stop by the laundry room for a couple of clean pairs of sweats, a neat little free-shopping hack Hera taught me yesterday. The little girl in me who never knew if she was going to have a safe place to live, food in her belly, and clothes on her back could really get used to a place like this.

Which is exactly why I have to leave. It’s far too good to be true. And I know from experience that nothing is ever truly free. Finn may not want anything from me now, but he will at some point—they all will.

When I get back to my apartment, I lay my haul out on my bed, making a little pack in the middle before twisting the long ends of the bedsheet and tying them together. A backpack would be ideal, but this will have to do.

The hardest part will be getting out of the building without raising suspicions.

Fortunately, Finn let me know he’d be at a meeting with the other Knottingham alphas this afternoon, so I don’t have to worry about running into him.

I hold the bag in my arms, take one final glance at the best apartment I’ll ever have the pleasure of calling mine, and shut the door behind me.

Time to go. No looking back.

I’m not meant to be here. *No human is.*

I make my way past the elevator, taking the stairs to the lobby on the first floor. A lone man sits at the reception desk, and I offer him a wave as I

head to the door, keeping my gait normal, my body between him and my makeshift backpack.

Once I'm out of sight of the building, I pull up my hood and walk with purpose, knowing anything faster would draw attention to myself.

It doesn't take long to get out of the city and to the foot of the mountains. As twilight hits, the sun descending below the horizon, I enter the wooded area and start the climb. Hidden by the trees, I pick up my pace, a light jog to keep me warm and hopefully get me to the barrier before the brisk fall air becomes too cold. Finn said he and Cam ran there to find me, so I can't imagine it will take me more than a few hours to find the spot where I entered Miraluna. Even if they were on four paws instead of two feet.

There's something different about the air up here, a tingle that's moving through my body. It's uncomfortable, and I can't stop itching my arms and neck. It's probably altitude sickness getting the best of me. I've heard it can be a pain to deal with at higher elevations.

When darkness falls, I know I've made a horrible mistake: I have no idea where I am, and without the sun, I can't tell whether I'm headed in the right direction. My only option is to keep moving. I can't stop and let myself freeze to death, or worse, be captured or eaten by one of the denizens of Miraluna.

Despite having slept outside more than I would've liked growing up, I'm unprepared for the chill that hits not long after the sun disappears from the sky. My breath is a white fog in front of me, and my fingers are starting to go numb. Worse, my toes are getting blisters in these borrowed shoes that are a size too large; I can barely keep from wincing with each step.

A sound echoes above me, a beating of something that can only be a large pair of wings. The last thing I want is to run into a dragon or griffin while I'm trying to escape. I have no idea if what Finn told me about them is true, but better the devil that hasn't tried to kill me and eat me than the one I don't know.

I race for cover, diving into a large bush, only to be met by large thorns that cut my sweats and ice-cold skin. As one tears through the flesh below my ribs, I hold back a scream, knowing I can't survive if I attract the attention of whatever creatures are flying above me. The pain is reminiscent of the knife wound I got years ago and almost causes me to black out

momentarily. Or maybe that's from the fear of knowing a fire-breathing dragon might be searching for—

———

When I come around, I slowly extricate myself from the bush, blood rushing down my side as the deep puncture is jostled again and again. Shit. Maybe I should've let the dragons or whatever they were take me. At least getting eaten by a giant beast would be quicker than bleeding out or freezing to death.

I pull up my sweatshirt, lightly probing the wound. When I pull my hand away, it's sticky with warm blood, and I know my attempt at fleeing is over for tonight. Unsure what else to do, I unwrap my backpack and pull on the two other pairs of sweats I brought, thankful they're all way too large for me. Once I'm wearing as much clothing as I can, I wrap myself in the sheet from my bed and scoot as far as I can under the bush to hide, moving slowly so I don't get impaled again. With this much blood, it seems unlikely any animal in the vicinity won't notice me, but I can try to make it a little harder for them to find me.

Just as I think that, a wolf lets out a loud howl in the distance, and my pain-addled brain can't decide whether it's a warning or a promise.

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CHAPTER 8
FINN

Talk about a fucking double whammy. I've spent the last few hours dealing with the tirades of the other four alphas in Knottingham and their respective betas, only to come out of that meeting and find my phone blowing up with texts from the Council group chat. If I could permanently opt out of this thread, I would've done it years ago, but someone keeps adding me back every time I attempt to leave.

Letting out a deep breath, I force my earlier frustrations from dealing with Ryker's bullshit out of my mind and focus on whatever nonsense has gotten the Council so spun up. Maybe someone has finally orchestrated a plan for all the lands to jointly search for the intruder like we discussed days ago. Highly doubtful, considering everyone has been conducting covert missions on their own. The disorganization is probably for the best. I can't let anyone know we've already found the intruder.

I have to protect Maya at all costs.

When I stare down at my phone, my eyes widen at the more than twenty unread messages starting back at me. For fuck's sake.

VEYLORIA

Any update on the location of the intruder? I would've assumed one of the wolves would have sniffed them out by now.

KEL

Has there been a search party sent out? I didn't get that text. Is there some secret group chat that I'm not included in?

BRAM

Yes, Kel. It’s called Everyone But Kel. That’s where we discuss all important matters.

KEL

Seriously? What the hell did I do to deserve that?

MALBEC

For the love…knock it off Bram. There isn’t any godsdamn secret group chat.

KEL

Thank the Fates.

So, there hasn’t been an official search party sent out either?

BRAM

Define official.

KEL

Ya know…like organized where every land has at least one member participating. Usually, we get a calendar invitation for these types of things.

MALBEC

For fuck’s sake…

KEL

What? I don’t get it.

Malbec has left the conversation.

BRAM

Way to go, Kel. You caused Malbec to leave the group chat.

Malbec was added to the conversation.

KEL

What did I do?

MALBEC

I don’t want to be here.

LUCIUS

For fuck’s sake, Bram, knock it off.

We haven’t seen any intruder in the Abyss…not that anyone would be dumb enough to come there.

BRAM

No one has entered our land either.

MALBEC

We've patrolled our land near the border and haven't seen anything suspicious. But we can still sense there's an intruder in Miraluna.

BANE

I expected one of the wolf alphas to have used their so-called superior scent tracking abilities to find the trespasser since Knottingham has the largest border with the human world.

VEYLORIA

Are you really surprised, Bane? If we want something done right, then the fae have to do it.

BANE

Isn't that the truth…

KEL

I take offense to that.

BRAM

🙄

MINERVA

🍿

MALBEC

What's the plan when we eventually find this intruder?

BANE

We interrogate them, obviously. Find out what they know and what they're planning.

BRAM

I'm happy to suck their blood and let you know how it tastes.

VEYLORIA

There will be no bloodsucking, Bram.

BRAM

Talk about a party pooper.

KEL

What if they accidentally stumbled into Miraluna? Would we send them back over the barrier?

MALBEC

Yes. If they're not a threat, and the witches can reinforce the barrier to prevent anyone else from crossing it. We probably will need to wipe their minds, too. We don't want them to remember coming here.

LUCIUS

I could also hold them in the Abyss for eternity. Just an option.

MINERVA

We can't send them back to the human world.

MALBEC

Why the fuck not?

VEYLORIA

Let me guess…another flaw in the so-called impenetrable barrier created by the witches?

BANE

Probably.

MINERVA

It'll kill anyone who tries to cross back into the human world unless they have magic. We'd be sending the intruder to their death.

BRAM

I'm fine with that.

KEL

Me, too.

MALBEC

I'm not opposed to the idea of the intruder dying.

My wolf snarls, rage boiling my blood as I think about one of them forcing Maya to cross the barrier and ending her life. I'm furious they would even consider treating another living creature so callously. I'm about ready to angrily type out a response, threatening to tear out anyone's throat who dares force someone across the barrier, when a message from Minerva pops into the group chat.

MINERVA

We will not be sending the intruder back over the barrier, assuming we find them.

BANE

Why the fuck not?

MINERVA

There will be serious consequences for whoever tries…

VEYLORIA

What the hell are you talking about, witch?

MINERVA

When we created the barrier, we knew some nefarious creatures might try to strip powers from others by forcing them into the human world. To prevent this from happening, we added a spell that curses anyone who tries to make another cross the barrier against their will. Let's just say, you'll wish you were dead.

I swallow hard, grateful to know that whatever curse the witches created should protect Maya from being forced back to the human world if someone else in Miraluna finds out about her existence.

She will be safe as long as she stays in Duskmoor and doesn't go anywhere near the border.

Maya's chocolatey scent tickles my nose as I walk past her assigned apartment. From the scent patterns, it's clear she hasn't been in the hall in a while. After telling her everything I could about Miraluna, her only question seemed to be whether she was going to have to stay in the holding room downstairs or if she was going to get her own place. Fortunately, I had Cam set up the apartment across the hall from mine as soon as I decided she was most likely a human who somehow stumbled across the barrier unintentionally.

Sure, there's maybe a two percent chance that she's the most powerful magical being in all of Miraluna who can fool our resident lie-sniffer, but if it turns out to be the case, I'd rather have her across the hall from me than somewhere else.

My need for proximity to her has nothing to do with the way my wolf keeps pushing me to check on her. Which might explain why I'm knocking on her door despite the time.

When she doesn't answer and I hear no signs of life in her room, I reach out to Jagger since he's manning the security helm tonight.

"Do you have eyes on Maya?"

"Negative. I'll see if I can find her, though."

At two in the morning, you'd think it'd be an easy task. There aren't many of us still awake. It doesn't help that I'm still irritated after dealing with Ryker's bullshit at the alpha meeting. If Ryker had growled about how terrible everyone else's trackers were one more time, I would've throat-punched the Alpha of the Mistwood pack, consequences be damned.

Not willing to wait for Jagger to sift through the video footage, I knock twice more, ear pressed to the door, before determining she definitely isn't inside. I follow Maya's scent through the building. Apparently, she not only stopped by the kitchen, but she also ended up at the laundry facilities.

What the hell could she be doing out so late?

As I reach the front door of the building, Jagger mindlinks me: *"Maya left the building almost six hours ago. Has not re-entered since."*

The hair on the back of my neck prickles. No sane human is out at this time of night; let alone the smallest female I've ever seen.

Sheer terror floods my veins as I recall Minerva's warning about what would happen if anyone without magic tried to cross the barrier. Not even taking the time to undress, I pull open the door, shifting as soon as my hands are no longer needed.

"Need backup?"

"No. I've got her."

My wolf howls his agreement, taking off into the night.

Where the hell is she going? I've been running for long enough to work up a sweat. After making it into the forest, there has been no rhyme or reason to Maya's trail. At first, I thought she was headed toward the barrier, but she's slowly veered to the west, bringing her closer to dragon territory. I sort through various scenarios as to why she might be going that way as my

heart rate increases. My wolf's agitated and pushing harder than he normally would.

Her scent continues to call to me, made even richer as it mixes with the earthy notes of the forest floor. My wolf howls again, shouting to the female he can't seem to find. It's almost like he expects her to answer back somehow.

A flight of dragons passes overhead, searching for the unknown assailant able to pass through the barrier. The same one I'm diligently tracking. I'll be the first to admit I don't know much about humans, but she shouldn't have been able to make it this far. Especially this late at night and not knowing the terrain. There's something off about her that I can't figure out.

The wind changes as I'm crossing through a thick patch of trees, and I smell blood—*hers*. My wolf fucking wails painfully. A reaction I haven't felt him have since I was a little boy and my grandfather died. I force myself to stay in control, not letting the primal need to unleash holy hell on the world to find her take over. Letting my wolf be in charge right now would be the worst situation for all of us, especially Maya.

Another waft of her blood hits my nostrils. The smell is so strong, she must not be too far away—likely bleeding heavily.

"Jagger. I need you to bring an SUV to me. Now. Throw in a medical bag, too."

I run another few paces before he responds, *"Max is on his way to you."*

Her scent is so intense, I can almost taste it. She's here. She *has* to be. My wolf releases a whine, forcing me to sprint toward a bush. I stick my snout in, only to pull it out quickly. It's a vampire-thorn bush, aptly named after the stake-like thorns that hide within.

Her blood is all over it.

It's so much that I wonder whether humans can survive this level of blood loss. Something in my chest tears apart at the idea that she might die, and my wolf whines again, sniffing each drop of blood as I continue my search for her.

Suddenly, a figure pops up from behind the bush, a large, deformed bundle of sheets that smells exactly like a dark chocolate bar.

"Finn?" she asks, the bundle swaying slightly.

Despite my wolf's reluctance, I force a shift, dropping to my knees next to Maya. "Are you okay, Lucky?"

“Got shivved by a bush.” She lets out a tired chuckle. “Never thought that’s how I’d go down, but here we are. Guess I’m not so lucky, after all.”

“Where did it get you?” I frantically search for any sign of where her injury might be, but she’s covered in too much blood to easily find it.

“Side.”

“That’s really not lucky.”

She smiles at me, though her eyes stay closed. “You’re telling me.”

I reach out and tug the sheet she has wrapped around her, only to be confronted by multiple layers of clothes underneath. “I’m going to lift your sweatshirt so I can see it, okay?”

“Three sweatshirts.”

“What?”

“You’re going to have to lift *three* sweatshirts.”

I gently slide my hand under the fabric before pulling them all up. Her soft skin immediately pebbles with goosebumps, and I have to force myself to keep looking for the injury.

Using my sleeve, I try to wipe away some of the blood.

“That’s pretty bad. How long does it normally take for something like that to heal on you?”

She squints at me. “When I was stabbed, the wound took two weeks, which is extremely fast for a human. This one doesn’t seem as bad.”

“Two weeks?! That’s… Fates!” *Unacceptable*. My wolf is almost losing it, seeing her hurt. He won’t survive seeing her in pain for two weeks.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice is soft. “I know I shouldn’t have run away. You’re probably mad at me. I just wanted to go back to a place I know. Somewhere that makes sense.”

Giving in to my wolf’s need to comfort her, I lean forward and press a soft kiss to her warm forehead. “I understand.”

She meets my gaze then. “You do?”

“I do.”

Her eyes flicker to my lips, and my wolf screams, *Kiss her!* He’s fighting to retake control, something he shouldn’t be wanting me to do with anyone but my mate.

I resist the urge to press my lips against hers, reminding myself that she’s bleeding and needs urgent medical assistance. Finally, I force my focus back to her injury, hoping my wolf will be distracted by caring for her.

After using my claws to rip a few strips off the bed sheet, I pull her sweatershirts up again and wrap the wound tightly. The pressure should stop the bleeding until we get back to Duskmoor and Hera can tend to her wound.

I pick her up, keeping her tight against my chest this time as I walk down the mountain, heading to where Max is meeting us with the SUV.

When we get to the road, I try to think of a good reason to keep her in my arms, but finally, I set her down next to me.

She lets out a moan of protest.

I push a strand of hair out of her face, trying not to grimace at all the small cuts coating her skin. “What’s wrong, Lucky? What do you need?”

“Hold me. Please?” Her eyes drift closed. “I’m so cold. And you feel so warm.”

I gather her against me as a pair of headlights come into view. Max pulls up in front of us, the large SUV a loud rumble against the stillness of the cold forest.

“Is she okay?”

“She will be.” *I’ll make damn sure of that*.

I keep her bundled in my arms as I climb into the backseat, choosing not to respond to Max’s pointed look. I keep her pulled tightly to my chest as we drive. Her breathing sounds so fragile it’s threatening to break me, too.

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CHAPTER 9
MAYA

Every single part of my body aches when I blink into consciousness. Holy hell, that was such a bad idea. What about my life as an urban dweller made me think I could cross a mountain in the dark? The part that was desperate to take back some semblance of control over my life, I suppose. It's not like there is a lot waiting for me in the human world.

"How are you feeling today, Maya?" The voice is deep and warm, making my stomach turn to butterflies.

I roll over in bed, grimacing at the throbbing in my side, and squint at the man. He's wearing dark jeans and a black Henley that's doing great things for his pecs. I mean, truly a work of art.

"Why are you being creepy and watching me sleep?" I groan, pulling the covers over my head.

"It's for your own protection. Apparently, you need to be watched at all times because, as we found out *two days ago*, you're both a flight risk *and* a fall risk."

"I was just trying to get back to my world," I whisper.

I can hear his deep inhale. "I know. If there was any chance of you surviving crossing the barrier again, I'd take you myself." He pauses, running a hand through his hair. "But the witches have confirmed it would kill you. I'm so sorry."

A hurricane of emotions roars through me, a combination of sadness at the thought of never seeing Maddie again, mixed with an odd sense of relief at knowing I'm staying in Miraluna. Tears stream from my eyes, and when I

go to wipe them away with the back of my hand, I wince slightly from the lingering pain of the bruise on my cheek and the small scratches, thanks to my lovely encounter with the thorn bush.

“God, I thought this would at least be gone by now,” I groan, probing the bruise from Quentin.

“Your accident looked bad. It’ll take time for it to heal.”

I shake my head. “I had this one before I came through the barrier.”

The sheets are pulled from my hands, and I’m looking into the ice-blue eyes that I found myself dreaming about last night. His face is tight. “How did you get it, Maya?”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Agree to disagree. It’s a very big fucking deal to me.” The growl is back, though this close, it seems like it’s coming from his chest rather than his vocal cords.

“My boyfriend—my *ex*-boyfriend—was drunk and wasn’t pleased when I accidentally spilled some of my drink on him.” I hold his gaze, daring him to pity me or judge me.

Finn leans back in the seat he’s taken ownership of next to my bed. “He hit you?” The question is icily practical. Someone recording the details for a report they’ll file and never think about again.

I force myself into a sitting position, grateful the large sweatshirt covers every part of me. “Slapped me, if you must know. That’s why I was driving that night, despite the weather. I was headed to my best friend’s apartment when I somehow ended up running off the road and crashing into a tree.”

He swallows hard. “Do you *miss* that asshole? Is he the reason you wanted to go back?” His eyes start to change, almost glowing.

I snort. “God, no. If he didn’t have control of my paycheck, I would never see him again. Honestly, boyfriend is too strong a word for what he was. He needed me. I needed him. We coexisted but together.”

He’s silent, his eyes shifting back to normal as he runs a hand over his jaw.

“Since we’re apparently the type of friends who share about our relationships, where’s your wife?”

He looks at me for a moment before responding. “Wolves don’t have wives. We have mates. And mine is…coming.”

I try to tone down the surprise that crosses my face as I rub the ache forming in my chest. I was fishing for info to see if he was available, and,

fuck, it wasn't the answer I wanted. Not that I have any claim on him. Or that he'd be interested in a five-foot-four human with part of a business degree and absolutely nothing to contribute to his pack.

"How is a mate coming?" I ask and immediately let out a giggle. "I mean, I know how *coming* works, just not so sure what you mean in the context of your mate thing."

Finn rolls his eyes, but I can tell he's amused. "I'm betrothed."

"Oh...you're engaged."

So technically there's still time. Wait. What the hell am I thinking?

"It's a similar concept," he replies curtly, not providing any additional information, with a somewhat stone-cold look on his face.

"So, it's love?" My brow furrows, trying to understand his lack of interest in this conversation. I don't think it's possible for him to sound any more displeased than he does. I feel sorry for this poor woman—wolf—if she has to spend the rest of her life with someone so unenthusiastic about it.

He raises a shoulder. "It's fated. Love comes second in these situations. Plus, I don't know her well enough to be in love with her."

"You don't know her? And you're engaged? Is this some sort of arranged marriage?"

"Sort of. For most of the creatures in Miraluna, we have fated mates and chosen mates. A majority of the relationships are chosen, where two consenting adults fall in love and bond their lives together. There are also times when it happens for political or financial reasons, but I'm sure that's the case in the human world, too." He takes a deep breath. "Then there are fated mates, which are extremely rare and selected by the Fates. That's what Blaire and I are. If we don't cement our bond, then we'll suffer uncontrollable anguish for the rest of our lives. For some fated pairs, it's impossible to stay away from their mate for a few days. Blaire and I have been blessed to have spent the past year apart after becoming aware of our pairing."

I nod silently, unsure how to respond when the gorgeous man in front of me is telling me some type of god has determined he's supposed to spend his life with someone he barely knows. It's hard to wrap my brain around why anyone would agree to that, but I also can't imagine living my life in pain every day if I chose to ignore it.

It's like he doesn't really have a choice. Neither does she.

Well, that sucks. It makes this pain in my chest feel a lot more unreasonable than before. Obviously, you can't develop feelings—even the Stockholm variety—for the super-specially engaged guy.

I mess with my sleeve. "When are you getting married, or whatever you call it?"

How long do I have to convince myself that this growing attraction is nothing?

"Our mating ceremony is in eight days."

Eight days?!

Okay. That's fine. I literally just met this man. Everyone here is a werewolf. I've seen some who might be interesting. There's likely loads of options who are super attractive, with a chiseled jaw, sculpted abs, and a smile that makes my panties wet. No need to make this into a bigger thing than it is. There is that man I dreamed about last night—*nope*. My stomach roils at the thought. Whoever that man is, he is certainly not a potential love interest.

"That's… That's great. I'm really happy for the two of you," I lie, the words tasting like venom on my tongue.

He stares at me intently before finally murmuring, "Thanks." There's an emptiness in his voice that wasn't there moments ago.

"What does the mate of an alpha do after a mating ceremony? I mean… I'm sure I know what happens immediately after, but, like, down the road." The thought of Finn getting mated in eight days makes me feel like I have indigestion after one too many pieces of pizza.

"An alpha's mate plays a very important role in leading the pack. It's also expected that we have children soon after our ceremony. Producing an heir is top priority for any alpha."

Another stab of pain hits my abdomen, and I know it has nothing to do with my wound. "You make it sound so simple. What if she doesn't want children? Or to have a leadership role?"

Finn sighs. "It's what's expected of her. Of us both. Sometimes we have to put aside our own wants and needs for the good of the pack."

"Well, I hope you both get what you want out of it," I add, forcing myself to smile.

He cocks his head to the side. "Would *you* not want that? What would *your* ideal life look like?"

Ideal life. What a joke! I've spent my whole life trying to survive. Ideal has never been a possibility.

I shrug. "Right now, I want a safe place to live and enough money to pay for food and school."

"Didn't you have a pack to help you with those things?"

"Not really. My parents died in a car crash when I was an infant. Ever since, I've been passed around from one foster family to another. None of them really wanted me. The only person I really have in my life is my best friend, Maddie."

His eyes glow again. "Then why do you want to return? You have a place to live here. You have food. There is an academy in the fae lands if you wish to continue your studies. Wouldn't what we offer in Miraluna be better than what you just described?"

I chew my bottom lip, considering. "None of this is mine. I'm not a wolf. You could easily kick me out of Duskmoor at any time. What if Blaire doesn't like me being around you?"

A low growl comes from Finn, but I stare out the window rather than meet his gaze.

"That won't happen, Lucky. I wouldn't allow it. This can be your home. No one will ever take it from you." His voice softens. "We can find you a role in the pack so you can contribute like everyone else does. In time, you'll see how great being part of the Duskmoor pack can be."

"Maybe," I murmur, turning my head in Finn's direction. I want to believe his offer is real, and that one day I could feel comfortable enough here to actually feel safe. Until that happens, I need to earn my keep. If you're useful, people keep you around longer. Taking a deep breath, I start to climb out of bed, ignoring the pain shooting up my side.

"Not now, Maya. You're injured." He lightly moves my legs back onto the bed.

"I'll be fine. It's time I start being useful to the pack. You've spent almost a week taking care of me since I came here."

Finn shakes his head. "No. You need to rest, given how slow you heal. Hera claims naps help with the healing process."

"I heal at a very normal rate, thank you very much," I huff, though taking another nap does sound surprisingly good, not that I'd tell him that. "Can I get out of bed tomorrow, oh Lord of all bossiness?"

“Just Alpha will do. And yes. Tomorrow is the monthly dinner with Blaire. I think it’s time you meet the pack, since you’ll be staying with us permanently.”

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CHAPTER 10
MAYA

A knock echoes throughout my apartment not long after I've climbed out of the shower. "Coming!" I shout, pulling my towel tighter around me. I open the door and smile, even as my annoying heart drops slightly.

"Hera!" She's stopped by a few times to see me: both to check my stitches and reapply a salve to my wounds and to bring me food. I enjoy her company, but for some reason, my stupid heart always hopes it's Finn on the other side when I open the door.

Though I'm *not* thinking about that. Because Finn is engaged. To be married. In one week.

And I'm not the type of woman who fucks around with other women's betrotheds.

Hera strides into my apartment, her long forest-green skirt swirling around her ankles. She takes her usual seat at my four-person dining table without any prompting. "I brought you something new to wear to dinner." She lays a black dress out on the table. I reach out and gently trace the silver moons embroidered on it.

"It's beautiful, Hera. Thank you."

"You can thank Wisteria. She's the one who made it for you." She sets a box on the table as well. "She also insisted I bring you some makeup. I assured her you were pretty enough without it, but she claimed you might want to look your best to meet everyone. Especially some of the young men, who are very keen to catch a glimpse of you."

I open the box, relieved to recognize most of the products inside. I've been feeling naked lately without at least a swipe of mascara.

"Will you point her out to me tonight, so I can pass on my thanks?"

Hera nods. "Of course."

I pause in my inspection of the makeup. "Why would any of the men be interested in me?"

She places her hand on her hip. "Hmmm…let's see. First, you're new to town, and it's pretty unusual for that to happen. Second, you're gorgeous and clearly in the prime of your life. Every eligible man is going to be looking at you as a potential mate."

My mind races to catch up. "So, you're saying they could mate with me? Even though I'm human."

She shrugs. "Supposedly it happened in the past, before the barrier was put into place. It's rare, but I don't see why it couldn't happen again. It wouldn't be a fated mate situation like Finn has with Blaire, but someone could still choose you to be their mate. Assuming that's something you'd want."

"But didn't Finn tell everyone I'm a witch?" I bite the corner of my lip as unease floods my veins. He's given me a little more information about the ruse since he first proposed it, but pretending I'm a witch who willingly left my homeland of Gealdor to start a new life in Duskmoor is not in my wheelhouse. I'm sure I'll be able to play the part as long as no one expects me to do magic or asks me any questions about witches since I've never met one. "Do wolves mate with witches?"

"It's not super common, but I can think of two such pairings in our pack right now. If you want to talk about really rare, then it would be a wolf mating with a dragon. Or I guess anyone mating with a dragon who isn't a dragon. They don't take kindly to other beings."

"Note to self: never try to flirt with a dragon. Actually, I'm just going to avoid them altogether."

"They're shifters like us. You could carry on a full conversation with one and not even know they're a dragon. Unless you make them mad and they start breathing fire before fully shifting. I've seen that happen a time or two, and it's never pretty." She glances at the clock on the wall. "We're going to be late. Let's get you dressed and down to dinner."

Twenty minutes later, I follow Hera into a transformed cafeteria. Long tables with white tablecloths fill the space, the light from hundreds of

candles dancing off the walls.

I wipe my sweaty palms against the soft fabric of my dress. “Wow. They sure went all out for tonight.”

“Our alpha finding his mate is an important occasion for a pack. We’re simply showing her the respect she is due.”

I nod. “Right.” As I take in the space, I catch Finn watching me and offer him a little wave. He extricates himself from his conversation and heads our way. I remind myself it’s not because he actually wants to talk to me. He has to keep up the pretense that I’m a witch seeking refuge in his territory, which puts me under his protection for as long as I remain in Duskmoor.

His eyes brighten as he draws near. “Lucky, you look…nice.”

“Hera tells me I have Wisteria to thank for that. This dress is certainly much better than the oversized sweats I’ve been living in.”

He swallows hard. “That it is.” After a quick shake of his head, he asks, “How are you feeling?”

Before I can answer, the room goes almost silent as a tall blonde walks into the room, an ivory pantsuit hugging every muscular curve of her body. From her heeled feet to the perfect curl of her hair, everything about her screams “bride.”

“Excuse me, will you?” Finn walks away before either Hera or I can answer.

When he greets the woman with a hug, my stomach churns with a mixture of devastation and jealousy I don’t understand. They look like the perfect couple. She’s a few inches shorter than him with heels on, her light hair and creamy skin in direct contrast to his dark locks and tanned skin.

I try to focus on the pack members Hera introduces me to, pulling my gaze away from the couple long enough to give Wisteria an enthusiastic hug and thank her for the dress and makeup. I already feel inferior to the women in this room, with their height and muscular bodies; I can’t imagine if I’d come with a bare face, wearing oversized sweatpants.

Hera introduces me to Jagger and Max, Duskmoor’s enforcers. I take in the slightly larger one with dark brown hair and matching eyes before realizing where I know him from.

“You”—I glance around at the wolves surrounding me, not wanting to blow my cover—“drove me home the other night, right?”

“I did. I’m glad to see you’re recovering from your…fall.” His smile is wide as if he’s teasing me.

“I still claim that bush jumped into me. Really rude, when you consider it.”

Max laughs at that. “They don’t call them vampire bushes because they’re known for their kindness.”

“Is that what they’re called?”

He nods. “Yep. The thorns are supposedly strong enough to stake a vampire’s heart.”

My jaw drops. “That’s terrible!”

“You should consider yourself lucky you made it out alive,” Jagger says.

“Oh, I do. Very lucky.”

Max nods toward Finn. “I guess it makes sense with his nickname for you.”

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore the pang of jealousy that hits as I catch a glimpse of Finn offering Blaire another drink. When he catches me watching them, I quickly look away. “I’m pretty sure he means it ironically. I’m literally the least lucky person I’ve ever met.”

Jagger nudges my shoulder. “You know, a good witch would make her own luck.”

“Well, I must be a pretty bad witch, then.”

“I don’t mind a bad witch,” Jagger teases. “Sometimes being bad can be loads of fun.”

Hera smirks, raising her eyebrows in an “I told you so” kind of way.

Unfortunately, as much fun as I’m having flirting with Finn’s enforcers, I don’t feel the same pull to them that I do to him. Sure, they’re both tall and strong, and they’d be considered handsome by anyone with eyeballs, but they’re not Finn.

My gaze flits back to the betrothed couple, and I’m surprised to see Blaire staring right at me. She turns away quickly, forcing a smile as she turns to Finn.

Max and Jagger take me from Hera, promising the healer they’ll introduce me to “all the best wolves in the pack.”

As we walk away, Max whispers, “It’s just us.”

“Yup. We’re certainly the best,” Jagger agrees.

“The most humble, too,” I agree, which causes them to laugh again.

Despite their plan to keep me to themselves, the enforcers take me around the room, introducing me to anyone and everyone.

The second wolf they introduce me to notes, “You don’t smell like any witches I know. Why do you smell like that?”

“Rude,” Jagger comments, shaking his head. “You know you can’t ask people that.”

I try to smile through the awkwardness and give the answer Finn taught me, the best we could come up with for the way I smell.

Because, unfortunately, wolves can pick up on the fact that I’m not a normal witch. Supposedly I’ve got a bit of shifter in my scent, but not enough to put me with any type of creature. Finn’s best guess is it’s the human part of shifters they’re picking up.

“I’m from a really small coven on our border. Apparently, we smell weird to shifters. It’s likely the” — *pause for dramatic effect*—“type of magic we do.”

Because nothing scares off additional questions like suggesting you’re from a coven that does dark magic. The same coven that has never been confirmed as real but is featured in a lot of wolf-pup bedtime stories warning them away from magic.

Once my scent is covered, it’s extremely comforting to see how friendly and welcoming everyone is. I’ve only been in Duskmoor for a week, and I already feel more comfortable here than I have anywhere else in my life.

A bell chimes, and I whisper to Max, “What’s that?”

“Time to take our seats. As luck would have it, you’re sitting by me tonight.” With that, he extends his elbow, offering to walk me to our seats like a gentleman from a historical romance.

“Clearly the luckiest lady in the room,” I agree.

Though once he helps me find my seat at the head table, I realize how wrong I am, considering I’ll be spending dinner sitting directly across from Finn and Blaire. A front-row view of the man I can’t stop thinking about, for unknown reasons, and the woman he’s about to cement his life to forever.

Definitely the opposite of lucky if you ask me.

As Finn whispers to Blaire, the corners of her mouth pull up, but the smile doesn’t meet her eyes. Instead, she simply nods before turning away.

That’s weird, right? It’s almost like it pains her to be near him. Shouldn’t it be the opposite? Or is she feeling the effects of waiting so long

to finalize their mating bond? I vaguely remember Finn saying something about how difficult that could be for some mated pairs.

Unable to look anywhere but ahead, I watch Finn make a couple of attempts at starting a conversation, but Blaire shuts them down with a word or two. Her eyes keep darting to the exits, as if she's worried she's going to be trapped in here.

What is her problem?

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CHAPTER 11
FINN

Curling my short nails into my palms, I force myself to think of yet another conversation starter as I try to get Blaire to open up. It's been impossible to get more than a two-word answer from her tonight. Not that our interactions in the past were much better. We act like complete strangers, even though we're slated to commit the rest of our lives to one another in a week.

And while I trust Fate, I'd like to at least try to get to know her better. Help erase any doubts she might have about becoming my mate. After talking to Maya, I'm beginning to realize how much stress is on Blaire, given the role she's about to take on. I've known from birth that I was destined to become the Alpha of Duskmoor. Blaire didn't have the same luxury. This was all thrust upon her a year ago when we both felt the threads of fate pulling us together at a pack dinner.

That's when my life changed. When I went from being solely focused on being the best alpha to rethinking my future with a luna by my side. It's not like I didn't plan on eventually finding a mate. I just thought it would happen differently. Assumed I would fall in love with someone and choose to solidify a mate bond with her. Or, if I was blessed to have a fated mate, then the attraction would be so strong I couldn't stand to be apart from her.

None of that happened when the connection between Blaire and me presented itself. It's always been more of a dull ache when I'm not around her—almost like indigestion from eating too much or having spicy food late at night. I've never experienced the roaring pain my father felt when he was

separated from my mother before their ceremony. He still refers to the time between when they experienced the zing of their connection and when their bond was made official as the most agonizing thirty-six hours of his life.

I'm sure Blaire and I are just built differently. Stronger. The Fates never make a mistake. There's a reason they've put Blaire and me together. I may not understand it now, but I will in time.

Taking a deep breath, I turn to look at my beautiful mate and smile. "How are plans for the ceremony going?"

Blaire gently puts down her fork and smiles politely at me. "Fine, I guess." She picks up her fork again and pokes at the food on her plate, moving it around but not really eating it.

"Do you not like what we're having for dinner? I can have the chef make you something else." I search Blaire's face for any hint of what she's thinking but come up empty.

"The food is fine. I have a lot on my mind, and I'm not that hungry," she replies softly, staring at her plate.

Fates, this is going oh so fucking well. How in the name of the Abyss are we going to live together for the next four hundred years if we can't even make small talk at a pack dinner?

A sweet laugh causes my ears to perk up and warmth to flood my veins. I've tried to avoid staring at Maya as much as possible tonight, no matter how delectable she looks. But it's really hard to do when she's sitting directly across from me, with Max and Jagger on either side of her. All the eligible men in Duskmoor have been falling over themselves to meet the new witch I've welcomed into our community. Although it's exactly the type of reception I'd want for any new pack member, I can't pretend their attention doesn't grate on me. There's something about watching other men flirt with her that makes me want to rip their arms off, then beat them over the head with their own appendages.

Definitely not an appropriate reaction for an alpha to have regarding his pack. Or for *any* wolf with a fated mate.

"How long are you planning to stay in Duskmoor, Maya?" Jagger crosses his arms and leans back. "Any chance we can entice you to make your visit permanent?"

"I have a feeling I'll be in Duskmoor for the foreseeable future," Maya replies, taking a sip of wine.

A pleased smile splits Jagger's face. "That's great news. We should find time for me to take you out. Show you around the real Duskmoor. Perhaps get in a little trouble together." He arches his eyebrows and wiggles them.

Maya blushes, averting her gaze for a second. "I wouldn't mind getting to know the city better. Or its people."

My wolf snarls loudly, causing heads to snap in my direction. "I don't think that's a good idea," I bark, unable to control the rage building inside me. "If Maya needs help getting settled in Duskmoor, I should do it. I'm the alpha, and her safety is my responsibility."

Jagger chuckles. "Don't you have better things to do than give a new pack member a tour of town?"

"He definitely does," Cam pipes up from beside me. "His schedule is packed for the next week."

"Well, move things around. It'll be fine," I growl, narrowing my eyes at Jagger.

"You've done more than enough for me already, Finn. Let Jagger or Max show me around. I'm sure you have plenty of things to do to get ready for the ceremony," Maya suggests earnestly.

"Great. It's settled, then." Jagger drops his arm on the back of Maya's chair. "I'll take Maya out tomorrow night."

"Why do you get to go out with her first?" Max asks, jerking his head in Jagger's direction. "There are far better wolves for her to get to know."

Jagger howls with laughter. "You can't possibly mean you. That's hilarious. No one in their right mind would choose you over me."

My jaw clenches tightly as I attempt to calm the simmering rage ready to erupt at any moment. I don't like the thought of any of them going out with Maya, and my wolf is so on edge he's practically begging me to shift. Or at the minimum, use my alpha command on the two idiots and make it clear that dating Maya is off limits.

"Are you okay?" Blaire asks, lightly touching my forearm. "You seem a bit tense."

Tilting my head slightly, I gaze into her bright blue eyes and find them full of sincerity. It's one of the most heartfelt moments we've had in the past year, and it's a little disconcerting.

What the hell is wrong with me? I'm getting jealous over another female in front of my mate. She's probably been sensing the heightened

emotions I've been projecting toward Maya all evening. No wonder she doesn't want to talk to me.

I let my shoulders relax and soften my face. "I'm good. There's just a lot going on." I place my hand on top of hers, and I swear she flinches. "Are you sure there isn't anything I can do to help with the ceremony? I want to make sure it's special for you. For *us*."

"We *are* a bit behind on the planning." She averts her gaze from my face, glancing down at her plate again before looking back at me. "My mom has been pushing me to make a bunch of decisions, but I waited until the last minute. It's going to be a mad dash to get everything done in time. I guess I thought… It doesn't matter."

"You know you can talk to me about any of it, right?" There's something she's not telling me. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but I can almost see it on the tip of her tongue. "Are you having second thoughts?"

The entire room goes quiet. Damn wolves and their incessantly perfect hearing. I should've thought of that before I put Blaire on the spot.

Her face reddens, a stark contrast to her normally creamy skin, a reaction unfortunately magnified further by her ivory attire. "I would never… I could never… The Fates have selected you as my mate. Who am I or anyone to argue with their wishes?"

My stomach clenches at her words. It's not a glowing endorsement for wanting to bond her life to me by any means, but it's pragmatic. The type of response that would befit the luna of any pack—and exactly how I feel about the situation.

A collective sigh of relief comes out of almost every dinner guest. Well, all of them except Maya. She's still holding her breath, like she can't believe Blaire's answer. I don't even have to look at her to feel the burn of her stare on the side of my face.

"I can help with planning the ceremony." Maya's voice is strained as if each word is painful to utter. "I don't have anything else to do and would love to make myself useful."

"That would be…nice." Blaire clasps her hands together on the table and smiles politely. The same exact smile I always see from her—the one that never reaches her eyes.

I turn my head and look directly at Maya. "Thanks for the offer." My chest tightens, the air suddenly much thinner than it was seconds ago, and I struggle to breathe. "I appreciate your willingness to help," I grit out. "Plus,

it’ll be a good way for you to get to know the pack. One that *doesn’t* involve you hanging out with my idiot enforcers.”

Maya nods, never breaking eye contact with me. “I want to be useful. Earn my place like we talked about it. I don’t want there to be a reason for me not to be welcome here.”

“You’ll always be welcome in my home.” My heart pounds rapidly as my wolf whines. He’s a ball of conflicting emotions and chaos, a rarity for him, considering he’s usually calm and collected, even when faced with a threat. In fact, that’s how he is around everyone except Maya. Her presence rattles him. Maybe he can sense something about her that the rest of us can’t. That oddness I can sense in her smell sometimes.

Maya swallows hard. “That means a lot to me, Finn. I know this could’ve gone a lot differently, and well, I guess I’m trying to say…I’m glad you’re the one who found me in the woods.”

“What do you mean Finn found you in the woods?” Blaire asks, confusion all over her face. “I thought you came from Gealdor.”

I cough, hitting my chest with my fists a few times as I try to prevent my alarm from showing. The last thing any of us needs is the pack asking questions about Maya’s true heritage. That secret needs to stay with Cam, Hera, and me for now. Even Max and Jagger don’t know the full story.

“I am…and he did,” Maya responds, her eyes wide.

“Maya was seeking refuge in another land and ended up lost in the forest near the mountains. She was injured and unconscious when Cam and I found her. We brought her here to heal and offered her a home within the pack once we knew her full story.”

Blaire places a hand over her heart. “Wow. Most alphas wouldn’t be as accepting of a stranger in their territory. You’re a good man.”

Maya swallows hard. “I agree, Blaire. Finn is great. You’re lucky to be his mate.”

A knot forms in my throat, preventing me from speaking, not that I know what to say in response. My head is a jumbled mess, and my wolf is on the brink of losing his shit for some reason. Perhaps being this close to Blaire’s wolf without marking her is driving him slowly insane.

Yes. That has to be it.

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CHAPTER 12
MAYA

Apparently, I'm a glutton for punishment. Why would I willingly agree to help another woman with her dress fitting for her mating ceremony to the man I'm infatuated with? Not that anyone can blame me for being attracted to Finn. He's kind and has more muscles than any man I've ever laid eyes on.

I mean…I did initially accuse him of kidnapping me, wanting to experiment on me, and potentially murdering me, but we're well past that. Finn offered me the one thing no one else has—a real home. That's reason enough to feel this pull toward him. Combine that with how attractive he is, and it's logical that my pulse races every time he's in the room. I'm sure the exact same thing happens to every other woman in Knottingham. Heck, probably even all of Miraluna.

Except, maybe Blaire.

She seems less than thrilled about their upcoming nuptials, no matter how many times she reiterates how grateful she is that the Fates chose a mate for her. There's no heart behind her words. And while I can't relate to having some greater power picking the person I have to spend the rest of my life with, I know there are significantly worse options out there than Finn. Maybe if she dated someone like Quentin, she'd realize how lucky she is to be with the pack's alpha.

"Would you like a glass of champagne?" the shop attendant asks as I sit on the couch waiting for Blaire to come out in her dress.

“No, thank you. It’s a bit too early in the day.” I cross my legs at the ankles, trying to make myself feel slightly more prim and proper, given the extremely posh nature of this store. Unfortunately, Blaire didn’t give me any heads-up about attire for this outing, and now I’m sitting on a Victorian-style couch wearing a pair of oversized sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt.

“What about looking for a dress for yourself to wear for the ceremony? We have lots of options that would look beautiful on you,” the woman offers, and I’m not sure whether she’s trying to give me something to do or to increase her commission.

I shake my head. “That’s not necessary. I’m not even sure I’m going,” I reply quietly, uncertain about my place in the pack, as a human or a witch.

Even though I met other pack members at dinner a few nights ago, I still feel pretty isolated. Since arriving in Miraluna, most of my time has been spent with Finn watching over me. Now I know our time together is coming to an end, I’m a bit worried about what that means for me long-term. Even Jagger is so busy, running around the territory, that we haven’t been able to find time to hang out. Not that I’m complaining, since the thought of dating makes me feel physically nauseous, but it would’ve been nice to have another friend here besides Hera.

“Of course you’re invited to the ceremony,” Blaire says sweetly, walking out of the dressing room in a form-fitting white gown that perfectly hugs every single one of her curves. It’s simple and modern, and she practically floats across the storeroom floor as she walks to the platform, where multiple full-length mirrors are set up. “The whole pack will be there. Plus, after all your help, I’d want you there, either way. And I’m sure Finn feels the same.”

Blaire smooths out imaginary wrinkles down the side of her dress as she stares at her reflection. Her long blonde hair cascades around her shoulders in loose curls and her skin practically glows in the lighting. If someone were to describe the epitome of an ideal bride, it’d be the image in front of me.

“You look gorgeous. Finn is going to lose it when he sees you,” I force myself to say, each word feeling like a lash against my skin.

She presses her lips into a thin line. “You think so? It’s hard to know how he’ll react on Saturday. We barely know each other. I always thought… Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“It’s just nerves getting to you,” the shop attendant says, waving dismissively as she appraises the dress on Blaire’s body. “It’s completely normal to feel that way before your mating ceremony, especially when you’re a fated mate to the most powerful alpha in Knottingham.” She tugs at the seams of Blaire’s dress, adding a few pins.

“You’re probably right,” Blaire replies, plastering a smile on her face that doesn’t reach her eyes. “Becoming Duskmoor’s luna is what I was born to do. The Fates wouldn’t have selected me otherwise.”

“Exactly, my dear! That’s the spirit. I’m going to run into the back and write down a few notes for the seamstress. Just give me a moment!” The shop attendant sashays out of the room, leaving it empty, except for Blaire and me.

We fall into an awkward silence while Blaire looks at herself in the mirror with zero emotion on her face, and I fiddle with my hands, unsure what to do or say. Or, honestly, why I agreed to come in the first place. Shouldn’t her mother be here with her? Or a friend? Someone besides me? I know I’m desperate for friends, but why doesn’t she have anyone to support her?

Unable to handle another second of quietness, I finally blurt out the first thing that pops into my head. “Do you think you’ll be happy, being Finn’s mate? I know you’re still getting to know him, but you don’t seem super thrilled about it.” Insert foot in mouth. What in the actual fuck is wrong with me? “I mean…”

Blaire turns around to face me with a fake smile plastered across her face. “Of course, I’ll be happy. Who wouldn’t be?” She blinks rapidly, making me question whether she might actually be one of those Stepford wives or a robot.

That was the weirdest answer, which unfortunately means I’m now committed to getting to the bottom of it. I adjust my position on the couch, tucking my feet underneath me, no longer caring how out of place I look. “Don’t get me wrong, Finn is fantastic. I get that, but I just don’t think I could ever do what you’re doing.”

She steps off the platform and walks toward me, then sits on the couch beside me. “What do you mean? Being a luna?”

“No. Not that. Being the pack luna sounds great.” Honestly, it’s a dream job. “I don’t know… having to tie my life to a man I barely know because some higher being declared it. The whole situation sounds crazy.”

Blaire cocks her head and furrows her brow, the lines barely noticeable on her flawless skin. “Don’t witches have fated mates? Wolves are the exact same.”

Shit. I’m supposed to be a witch who knows all of this and is totally fine with the Fates deciding everything for me. This is what happens when I’m left to my own devices. No wonder Finn has been so insistent on keeping watch over me. He probably knew something like this would happen.

“Yeah,” I reply quickly, waving dismissively. “Totally get the whole fated mate thing. I’m just saying, I’m glad it hasn’t happened to me. I’d hate to have no say in my future.”

An achy pain builds in my chest, spiraling down my extremities until every muscle in my body throbs like they’re being pushed to their limits. My lungs strain to fully fill with air, making me almost start to gasp for breath.

What the hell is going on?

“Are you okay, Maya?” Blaire asks, genuine concern on her face. “How about I get you a glass of water?”

I nod, and Blaire walks to the credenza where she pours me a tall glass of water and adds a slice of lemon to the rim. Because obviously if you’re struggling to breathe, a garnish is necessary.

“Here you go.” She hands me the water and sits next to me.

I gulp down the cold, refreshing liquid, hoping it’ll help me relax.

Is this what a panic attack feels like? I know Maddie occasionally gets them when she’s overwhelmed, and she’s said they make her feel like she can’t breathe.

That has to be what’s going on. All the emotional trauma from what happened with Quentin, combined with recovering from two accidents *and* finding out about a magical world that now has to be my forever home, is catching up with me.

“Thanks,” I mutter, wiping my mouth with the back of my rolled-up sleeve. I’ve *got* to do something about my wardrobe if I’m going to stay here. “I’m sorry if I upset you. I didn’t mean to suggest that you were being forced into a relationship with Finn.”

Blaire looks at her lap and fidgets with her hands. “It’s okay. Honestly, it’s been a lot to process since the connection formed last year. Most fated mates feel the pull toward one another as soon as they meet.” She avoids my gaze, and I swear there are tears forming in the corner of her eyes. “It

wasn’t like that for me and Finn. We both grew up in Duskmoor and had seen each other countless times. I’m not sure why the Fates waited this long to tug on the bond. I wish I’d known sooner.”

Way to go, Maya. You’re making the bride cry in her wedding dress. Pretty sure that’s the opposite of what I’m supposed to be doing.

I set my glass down on the end table and offer her what I hope is a calming smile. “I’m sure you and Finn will have a wonderful life together.” My stomach clenches, nausea rising. I press my lips together tightly, forcing down the lump in my throat. The last thing I’m going to do is throw up on Blaire while she’s wearing her dress for the ceremony. “And I know he’ll make a great dad, once you have pups. He’s helped nurse me back to health twice now.”

Blaire bites the corner of her lip. “You’re right. He does seem like a wolf every female would want. I’m sure it’s cold feet, like the shop attendant said.” She nods a few times, almost trying to convince herself. “We’re going to have a wonderful, long life together.” She looks around the room for a few moments before clapping her hands. “Let’s find a dress for you to wear to the ceremony. You’ll have so much fun. Plus, the males in this pack are going to love having a new female to pant over.” She waggles her eyebrows and gives me a real smile for the first time since I’ve met her.

I inhale sharply, my ribcage constricting at the thought of another man being interested in me. “I don’t think I’m up for dating. I need to focus on getting settled and starting my new life. Finding a way to contribute to the pack, so I can earn my keep.”

Blaire stands up and places one hand on her hip. “You might think that now, Maya, but don’t wait too long to put yourself out there. You have the wonderful opportunity to choose your own mate, and as you said, not all of us are that lucky. If I were you, I’d use this time to get to know as many of the males in Duskmoor as you can and see if you can find a spark with one of them. There’s a reason you ended up here. You just don’t know what it is yet.”

Maybe Blaire’s right: This is a new opportunity for me to reinvent my life. To choose the people in it and make a real home for myself.

Maybe the love of my life—my true mate—has been in Duskmoor this entire time.

But a part of me wishes it was Finn.

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CHAPTER 13
FINN

"What the hell is going on with you?" Cam asks, from his seat across from me at my desk in the pack headquarters. "You've been grumpy all week, but it's way worse today."

"I'm fine," I growl. "Why the fuck does everyone keep asking me that?" I swear it's happened at least five times a day since the dinner almost a week ago.

"Um… How about the fact that you basically bite off anyone's head who tries to talk to you? Or how most males are usually thrilled in the days leading up to their mating ceremony, but you're acting like it's a death sentence. Those are just a few ideas off the top of my head. I'm sure I can think of a few other reasons if we really want to get into it." He raises his eyebrows, almost daring me to probe what he thinks could be the underlying issue.

But I refuse to fall for his trap. Although Cam may be my beta and best friend, there are some things that an alpha can't share with anyone else—the current hurricane of emotions inside me about my upcoming mating ceremony being one of them.

"Ahh, I get it. You're worried about consummating your bond with Blaire. I'm happy to give you a few points," Cam adds with a smirk. He crosses his arms and leans back. "It's okay to be nervous your first time."

"I'm not a godsdamn virgin, Cam, and you know it. This has nothing to do with tomorrow's ceremony, or what happens afterward." I run a hand through my hair, desperate to do anything to reduce the growing tension in

my muscles. “The Council is getting more antsy about what happened with the barrier and no one being able to find the so-called intruder. The fucking fae are throwing around accusations every five minutes about how someone ‘has to be hiding them in their land.’”

“I hate to admit it—because you know how much I despise those sons of bitches—but they are technically correct. We *are* hiding her.” He narrows his eyes at me. “Speaking of our favorite intruder, you do realize that things will need to change with Maya after tomorrow, right? You can’t spend nearly as much time alone with her once you’re mated to Blaire. It’s not a good look for anyone, especially not the alpha.”

I swallow hard. “I know. I’m sure once my bond with Blaire is official, my wolf will calm down. He’s been on edge ever since the barrier was broken. It’s almost like he can sense something else headed our way. Another problem I don’t see coming.”

“I get it. My wolf isn’t loving the possibility that humans might be able to come into Miraluna whenever they want, either. But I also don’t follow Maya around like a lost little pup.”

My chest rumbles. “If you have something to say, come out and say it. There is nothing going on between Maya and me, as you are aware. She is both new here and someone who has been injured and is still an unknown. It is my job to follow her around.”

Cam pulls on the back of his neck. “I know you’re loyal to Blaire, but I wouldn’t be doing my job as your beta if I didn’t say something.” He pauses, eyeing me cautiously like he knows what he’s about to say is going to cause me to go ballistic. “I get your initial concern for making sure Maya wasn’t a threat to anyone in the pack. I even understand your need to protect her after realizing she’s a human with no plans to start a war with Miraluna. And I know she’s been hurt, and she’s not had the easiest upbringing, from what you’ve shared with me.”

I raise an eyebrow. “That’s putting it mildly.”

Cam swallows hard. “But you need to create some space between the two of you. Allow the rest of the pack to look out for her. Jagger and Max are interested in getting to know her better. They’re your enforcers, for Fate’s sake. They can keep her safe from anyone in Miraluna.”

I scoff. “I’m not sure Jagger’s reputation is one Maya should be associating with.” Jagger might be an incredible enforcer and a loyal member of my leadership, but he’s had more females in his bed than should

be allowed for someone in their mid-twenties. It'll be a cold day in the Abyss before Jagger considers settling down with anyone.

"Isn't that for Maya to decide? She's a grown female and capable of making her own decisions."

Technically, Cam isn't wrong. Maya should be allowed to determine who she wants in her life, but I also have an unexplainable urge to keep all other males away from her. It has to be some type of weird protector instinct from having to care for her after her injuries.

I sigh and lean my head back against the top of my chair. "You're right."

"Wait a second. We need to document the date and time for this momentous occasion." Cam looks down at his watch. "November 13th at 4 p.m."

"Haha," I reply, rolling my eyes. "It's not my fault you're never right, but I'm sure it's happened at least once before."

Cam chuckles. "Yes, it has, and I have that day documented, too. Never want to forget something I can hold over your head."

I rub the space between my eyebrows. "Can we get back to discussing the real problem on our hands? How the hell are we going to get the Council to calm the fuck down about the intruder? We need to find a way to convince them that no one actually crossed the barrier. Or it was a test on the other side. Otherwise, it won't take long until they find Maya. Someone will eventually blab about the new witch in our territory, and either the witches or fae will put two and two together."

"It's almost like I suggested keeping her extremely well hidden for the foreseeable future, but you kinda screwed us over on that by inviting her to the pack dinner last weekend."

I wince. "Yeah, I wanted her to feel comfortable with Duskmoor becoming her home. I didn't consider the long-term repercussions of more wolves knowing about her presence or starting to ask questions about her past."

"We're going to need to give her a deep dive on Gealdor and the witches ASAP if you want to keep up this charade. She's already made a few missteps, but luckily, she recovered quickly enough that I don't think anyone noticed… At least, not yet."

Shit. I should've done that already. I should've made sure she was prepared to go out into her new home. I rub my temples, my fingers digging

into my skin as I try to relieve the tension headache that has intensified every day since Maya set foot in Miraluna.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I think you need to see this, Finn,” Max says, standing in the open doorway to my office. “A note was found on the outskirts of our perimeter during one of our patrols this afternoon.”

“What does it say?” I ask, holding out my hand.

Max walks into the office and delivers a white envelope with my name written in all caps on the outside. “I haven’t opened it. And before you ask, the team checked the cameras as I was on my way back. None of them caught a glimpse of whoever left the envelope.

“So, they either have been watching us for a while and know how our perimeter cameras operate, or they have magic,” I state our two bleak options.

“I don’t like the sound of either of those.” Cam crosses his leg over his knee. “I swear if the fucking fae set foot on our land without our permission, I’m going to let my wolf out to hunt for some retribution.”

“For fuck’s sake, Cam. Are you always looking to start a war with the fae?” I ask, staring at the envelope, unease coursing through my veins.

He shrugs. “They annoy me.”

Max jerks his head in Cam’s direction. “Who doesn’t annoy you?”

“That’s fair,” Cam replies. “But the fae are permanently at the top of my shit list.”

While no wolves are fond of the fae, Cam’s family actively *hates* them. Despite how close we are, he’s always refused to say much about it. My dad also won’t broach the subject when I’ve asked before. All I know is something happened decades ago, and it wasn’t good. It’s why Cam is always poking at the fae, ready to unleash holy hell on them anytime they’re mentioned. Sometimes, I wonder if one of my biggest roles as alpha is keeping Cam’s personal vendetta against the fae under control.

I take a deep breath, not picking up any scents on the letter, then finally open the thick envelope, curious to find out why someone would send me a letter. Usually, we get outside communications from other packs or other groups in Miraluna via call or text. My cell phone is the bane of my existence, given how many fucking messages are sent in the Council group chat—one I and others have tried unsuccessfully many times to remove ourselves from.

My eyes widen when I read the scrawled handwriting on the card.

Alpha,

You claim to be the strongest wolf in Miraluna, but clearly your powers are waning. We have something of yours that we know you'll be eager to get back.

I don't recommend waiting too long. You never know what we'll do.

My wolf growls loudly as my fingers wrap tightly around the notecard. "We need to put all of Duskmoor on lockdown immediately," I order, clenching my jaw.

"What's going on?" Cam asks, quickly standing up and looking on alert. "What does the note say?"

"Something or someone has been taken from us," I bite out, each word difficult to utter. Protecting the pack is my number one priority, and somehow, I've failed them. I've allowed myself to get distracted, to spend too much time worrying about Maya—

And that's when it hits me: *What if they've taken Maya?*

Is it possible someone could've found out we were hiding her in Duskmoor and kidnapped her?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Without warning, my wolf takes control and shifts. I race in the direction of Maya's apartment; all thoughts are pushed from my mind except that I have to get to her. I have to make sure she's okay.

I can't let anything happen to her.

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CHAPTER 14
MAYA

Another day of boredom in Duskmoor. I blow out a breath and tuck my feet underneath me as I sit on the couch in my apartment. Besides helping Blaire with a few wedding-related tasks this week and the occasional visit from Hera, I've been pretty much stuck in the confines of these four walls. Sure, Finn stops by every day and eats his meals with me in the cafeteria, but it's been pretty lonely otherwise. I'm eager to find a way to contribute to the pack and find a purpose in life that isn't staring at a wall all day or watching TV. Or getting those weird daydreams about some man I've never met before.

Granted, I've learned a lot about Miraluna over the past few days as I've binge-watched all twelve seasons of *The Academy*, Miraluna's most popular show, about what happens when all the different creatures are housed together at the fae academy. But I can't rot on the couch forever. It's not in my nature to lounge around. I'm used to being on the move constantly, never having enough time to accomplish everything on my to-do list.

Now, I'm begging to have something—*anything*—to do. Well, anything besides helping with more wedding activities. The more time I spend working on preparations for Blaire's mating ceremony with Finn, the more sick to my stomach I feel. Each day, my appetite has decreased, and I'm at a point where it's difficult to get any food down. Even after a few bites, I end up extremely nauseated. And now Finn has started commenting on how

little I’ve been eating. If I keep this up, then he’ll likely send me to the clinic and put me under Hera’s supervision until I’ve put on some weight.

Though that might all change tomorrow. Even though he’s the alpha of the pack, I’ve been told that all his attention will likely shift to Blaire after their ceremony. Despite Finn’s reassurance he’ll still be working, the rest of his leadership team is preparing for him to take at least a full week off. Apparently, the bond makes your hormones go crazy. After what I’ve been told, I’m honestly surprised he’s been able to keep himself in check for this long.

A loud pounding on my door startles me from my thoughts.

“Lucky, are you in there?” Finn shouts from outside. “Lucky?” he yells again before I can answer.

“Coming!” I call, getting up off the couch, curious what’s going on. Usually, he works until much later, and we meet for dinner at the cafeteria around 7 p.m. Or at least that’s been the trend. Maybe things will be different tonight since it’s the night before the ceremony.

“What’s up?” I ask when I open the door. He crushes me against him as soon as I walk out, and my mouth falls open when I feel Finn’s naked skin beneath my fingers. “Why don’t you have any clothes on?”

He steps back and looks at himself like he’s surprised he’s nude. “Just shifted. Are you okay? Has anyone tried to get close to you today?”

“No, why?” I force myself to keep my eyes locked on his, rather than trailing down his chiseled abdomen to his girthy cock that is apparently at full attention for unknown reasons. “Do you want to come in? Perhaps put some clothes on.”

“Yeah.” He runs a hand through his thick black hair, tousling it in a way that manages to make him even more attractive.

I move out of his way, allowing him to enter, then close the door behind him. “I’ll grab you some sweats from the closet. I think there is something that should fit you.”

“You know being naked is a natural, right? There’s nothing wrong with the human form, just like there’s nothing wrong with being in our fur.” He stands in the middle of my living room, his arms crossed over his chest. “It’s normal for everyone in Knottingham to wander around without clothes on, especially after they’ve shifted. It’s something you’re going to have to get used to.”

“Not sure I’ll ever get used to seeing *you* naked,” I mutter, averting my eyes from his body to the carpet. It’s already hard enough to be around him when he’s dressed—it’s nearly impossible not to want to climb him like a tree when he’s naked. My thighs clench at the thought of wrapping my legs around his waist as he pushes me against a wall. Running my hands along his tan skin, peppering his neck with kisses, and—

“Why *me*?” his lip pulls into a smirk. “I’ve been told by countless females that I’m the male they’d *prefer* to see naked.”

Refusing to look at him, I clasp my hands together and take a deep breath. “I’m not sure it’s appropriate for me to be alone with you like *this* when you’re mated to someone else. Maybe it’s not a big deal here, but in my world, it would be.”

“Oh,” he says softly, letting out a deep breath. “I didn’t think about it that way. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

I shake my head dismissively, trying to downplay the impact he’s having on me. “It’s fine. I understand things are different here. Let me grab you some clothes so you can change, then we can talk about whatever had you freaking out when you got here.”

I quickly exit the room, walking as fast as my short legs will carry me to the bedroom, where I find an extra-large pair of sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt for him. It’s the largest in the closet, so hopefully it’ll work. I can’t imagine having to stare at him naked for one second longer.

No man should look that good without clothes. If I had the power, I’d make it illegal.

“Here you go.” I hold out the pile of clothes as I keep my eyes focused on the ground.

“Thanks,” Finn mutters, taking them from me. After a moment he says, “I’m dressed now. You can look.”

I slowly lift my gaze from the floor to his face, and I’ll be damned if the heat between my legs doesn’t intensify when his piercing blue eyes meet mine. Why am I getting so turned on by a man who’s committed to another woman? This isn’t me: I don’t lust after unavailable men.

Finn sniffs the air, his nose scrunching as a wicked smile splits his face. It’s almost like he knows a secret I don’t and he’s unwilling to share it. But as quickly as it appeared, the smile disappears, a look of forced neutrality on his face.

“Are you going to tell me why you showed up here in a panic? Swinging your dick around like it was a weapon, no less.” I cross my arms.

“I got a note about something being taken from Duskmoor. I thought it meant someone had found out about you and took you to the Council.”

I gulp, a flood of anxiety rushing over me. “Do you think it’s possible someone outside of the pack knows I’m here?”

He stretches his neck. “Anything is possible. The Council thinks someone got into Miraluna. Whether or not they know it’s you and where you are is a different story. I was so worried…”

“About me?” I squeak, my chest tightening at what his comment might mean. That someone might actually care about me after only a couple of weeks. I’ve never had anyone like that in my life, except for Maddie.

“Yeah.” His face softens as he cups my cheek. “I don’t want anything to happen to you, Lucky. You’re important to me—to the pack.”

I inhale sharply, desperately wanting to tell him I feel the same way. Mention the pull I have toward him. How I can’t stop thinking about him.

But I keep quiet. Burying it all inside. There’s no use falling for a man who already belongs to someone else. All that comes of that is a broken heart, and I’ve already had enough heartache to last a lifetime.

Finn’s face becomes strained as his eyes widen in terror. He holds his breath, clenching his fists against his pants.

“What’s going on, Finn? What’s wrong?” An impending sense of dread overtakes me. If it doesn’t sound crazy, I would swear I can sense his emotions.

“Cam just mindlinked. It’s Blaire. She’s missing. He’s pretty sure *she’s* been taken.”

I gasp, my hand flying to cover my mouth. “Who would… Why would someone take her? She’s your mate.”

He growls, his shoulders hunching as his eyes softly glow. “Kidnapping a member of my pack is an act of war. Taking my mate?” He shakes his head. “I’ll fucking destroy everything they hold dear. I need to go. I have to find her and get her back.”

“I could come with you,” I blurt out.

He shakes his head, the tendons in his neck tight. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Maya. It’ll be faster for me to travel in wolf form. I have no idea what kind of danger I might be walking into.”

“Okay.” I nod. “Sure. But if you need anything I can help with…” I reach out and touch his arm; a spark travels from my fingertips straight to my heart, jumpstarting it and sending it racing. A vision of the forest flashes before my eyes, disappearing so quickly that I question whether I really saw it or if my imagination is playing tricks on me.

A puzzled look washes over Finn’s face, his brow crumpling like he’s trying to solve a complex problem without all the necessary information. “Did you feel that?”

“What?” I lie, not wanting to admit that every time I’m around him, my body reacts in the most bizarre ways. It’s desperate, and I should know better.

I *do* know better. At least my mind does. My hormones are a different story.

“It’s nothing. Probably…nothing.” He blows out a breath, staring up at the ceiling for a few seconds before meeting my gaze again.

“Good luck,” I offer, not wanting him to leave, but knowing he has to go rescue his mate.

“I just… You’ll be safer if you’re here. Stay locked in your apartment until I’m sure whatever threat we’re facing has been eliminated.”

“I understand. I’m just a helpless human who will slow you down.”

“Right. I just…” he growls before stalking toward the door. His hand lands on it before he is encompassed in a mist of rainbow lights. Shit. He’s shifting, he’s—

A black wolf turns from the door and trots back to me. I scratch behind his ears. “Good luck finding Blaire. She needs you.”

I know she needs help, but the statement makes my stomach roll.

He noses at my legs, whining.

“Okay. I’ll get the door for you.” I walk over and open it, but the large black wolf shakes his head, still sitting in my apartment. “You’ve got to go, Finn.”

The wolf whines again before tapping its nose against my leg and then pointing its snout at the door. “Oh. You want me to come with you?” I ask.

The wolf nods.

“I can’t. You said I’ll slow you down. I don’t have four legs.”

The wolf releases a rumbling growl of dissent.

“Okay, okay!” I throw up my hands, not knowing what else to do. Finn has to get going. “I’ll go, too, just—”

Another swirl of colors and human Finn is back, naked once again.

“Fates,” he growls. “I guess you’re coming with me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Every time I think about leaving you, my wolf loses his shit. He’s been on edge ever since you broke through the barrier. I don’t know if he knows something I don’t about what you really are, or if he’s worried about what might happen if someone finds you while I’m gone.”

“What does that mean for me?” I chew on the corner of my lip. “Am I really coming with you?”

“Yes, Maya. It looks like you’re stuck with me.”

“Then we’d better get you another pair of sweats.”

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CHAPTER 15
FINN

As soon as I'm clothed again, we head straight to my SUV. Travel between the packs' territories in Knottingham is almost impossible by vehicle, let alone the other lands of Miraluna, but driving will help us get to the far outskirts of my territory faster.

"What's the plan?" Maya asks, sitting in the passenger seat, one foot tucked under her.

Gripping the steering wheel, I back out of the parking space and head straight down the main road leading out of town. "We'll start with the pack closest to us. Infiltrate their territory and see whether they're holding Blaire hostage. If not, we move on to the next one."

"Are you sending anyone else out to look for her? Is it possible another type of creature might have her?"

I contemplate her question for a few seconds, guilt gnawing at my conscience. Maybe if I spent more time thinking about my mate, she wouldn't be in this situation the night before our ceremony.

"I sent Cam and Max to talk to a few Council members they have good relationships with. Jagger is staying home to protect the pack while we're gone."

"Do you think it's a Council member?" Maya asks.

"Anything is possible when it comes to Council members making stupid decisions, but to make a move like this…they would have to have a very clear agenda, and I don't see that happening from anyone else except another pack." I grind my teeth, my jaw muscles flexing. "There's been

animosity among the five packs for a long time. Way before my father was alpha. It's gotten more contentious in recent years with the new alphas taking over."

"What do you mean?"

"When the Council was formed more than a hundred years ago, all the alphas at the time had been in power for decades, and there was a pretty well-established hierarchy among the packs. So, when only three seats on the Council were given to Knottingham, it became obvious the top three alphas in our land would get them. According to my father, everyone accepted the decision without much pushback." I pause, taking a sharp right turn down a winding road that will eventually put us on the outskirts of the Pinecrest pack's territory. "When it became time for the next generation of alphas to take over, not everyone thought it was fair to simply pass along the Council seats as well."

"Oh. I get it. You think Blaire was taken by a pack without a seat, and they're going to use her as a bargaining chip to get your seat in return."

"Potentially. It's the most logical explanation based on history and the shit that went down at the last alpha meeting. The alphas from Pinecrest and Ravenwood are pissed about the Council's inability to find the intruder—to find you."

Maya fidgets in her seat. "Does that mean this could be *my* fault? Someone might've taken Blaire because of me?"

I shake my head. "You did nothing wrong. If anyone is to blame, it's me. I should've had more security on Blaire, leading up to our ceremony." I drag my fingers through my hair, wondering where I went wrong. "There's an unwritten rule in Miraluna, especially among the five packs: bonded mates are off limits. Children, too. I assumed fated mates would fall into that category, but until the bond is cemented, I suppose anything is possible. There have been situations in the past where other packs have enticed a female shifter to leave her chosen mate before the ceremony and become a member of their pack instead. It's rare, but it does happen."

"Geez. There is more drama in this world than a telenovela."

"A what?"

"It's a Spanish soap opera. Quite addicting. Be glad you don't have them on TV here. I could spend an entire day watching telenovelas and never be bored."

“I guess I’ll have to take your word for it.” I keep my eyes locked on the road. I’ve been speeding more than is likely safe, and now we’re only a couple minutes away from the edge of the Pinecrest territory.

“Has anyone ever tried to steal another alpha’s mate?”

“Never,” I reply tersely, white-knuckling the wheel. “And Blaire’s not just any mate— she’s my fated mate. I didn’t think anyone in Miraluna was stupid enough to anger the Fates. Apparently, I was wrong.”

That’s what feels so wrong about this. Sure, using someone’s mate to bargain a seat on the Council or more land might be a desperation play that works out, but it’s hard for me to wrap my head around someone willingly going against the Fates. Especially when fated pairings are so rare. What they’ve done by taking Blaire, especially on the eve of our mating ceremony, is essentially giving the Fates a big “fuck you.” I can’t imagine it will go well for whoever did this.

Assuming there’s anything left after I’m done with them.

Inside me is a burning rage, ready to defend both Blaire and Maya—to the death if needed. It’ll be impossible for me to put off shifting once I find the culprit. My wolf won’t be able to hold back from seeking retribution for taking what belongs to us.

Once we approach the wooden fence marking Pinecrest’s territory, I throw the car into park and glance over at Maya. She’s still clad in her oversized sweatshirt and pants, a matching pair to mine that would be quite comical if the situation were different. If we had worn them intentionally to be one of those cute couples who love to “twin” in the same outfit.

My wolf wags his tail at the thought. What in the actual hell is wrong with me? I’ve never been a fan of couply couples. Shit, I’ve gone a year without completing the mate bond. I do *not* care about matching outfits.

“We have to go the rest of the way on foot.” I open my door and stretch my back, hoping to relieve some of the tension in my muscles. “I know it’s not great for you, but packs have intentionally made it impossible to travel between our lands by vehicle, so it’s our only option.”

She climbs out and nods once. “I’ll be fine.”

Maya follows my lead, traipsing through the grass as the sun begins to slowly set behind the mountains. It won’t be long until it’s pitch black, and we’ll have to rely on my hearing and navigational skills to guide us through Knottingham. We’re about a half mile past the gate when I smell them—the Pinecrest pack.

“It took them long enough,” I mutter, shaking my head. No wonder Pinecrest has the least power of any pack in Knottingham. They can’t even watch their own perimeter properly. And yet, they were giving me crap in the last pack meeting about not being able to find the intruder. Fucking idiots.

I stop and turn to face Maya. “In about a minute or so, a few members of the Pinecrest pack are going to show up and threaten us for being on their property. It’s best if you let me do the talking.”

Actually, it’d be best if she were back in the pack headquarters where she is safe, not traipsing through Knottingham with me. But that’s on me. Or my wolf, at least.

“Okay. Is there anything I should be worried about?” She bites the corner of her lip, crossing her arms tightly against her chest.

I shake my head. “I highly doubt anyone in this pack was smart enough to kidnap Blaire. But I have to at least pretend it’s possible they were involved, or they’ll throw a huge fit whenever they find out what happened.”

“Wait…*they’ll* get mad that *you* didn’t assume they kidnapped your mate?” She crinkles her brow like it might be the dumbest thing she’s ever heard.

“Yeah.” I navigate over a fallen log before turning to help Maya over. “If I don’t consider them, it’s an indication they don’t have enough power to pull off something like this, which they don’t. But we have to go through their land to get to Mistwood, so we can’t just pass through undetected like I want. And this is why I hate pack politics.” I rub my temples, digging my fingers deep into my skin. “There are parts about being the alpha that I love and other parts that drive me insane.”

“Definitely sounds like politics in the human world, too,” Maya says with a chuckle.

Right on time, three medium-sized wolves appear in the distance, racing toward us like we’re a prize they’re desperate to capture. They’re in for a world of hurt if they even get close to Maya.

Crossing my arms, I stare down the approaching wolves. “Just a heads-up, they’re all going to be naked.” Despite the seriousness of the situation, I can’t help but tease, “You’re going to be seeing more swinging dicks, which I know isn’t your favorite.”

She steps up to my side and whispers, “I never said I didn’t *like* a swinging dick. There is just an appropriate time and place for it. And being startled by it in a public hallway is neither the time nor the place.”

“Fair point, witch,” I reply, eyeing her and sending a silent reminder that she needs to play along with the “witch from Gealdor” story if they question her presence.

When the three mid-sized wolves are about twenty feet away, they shift into their human form, fully nude with their tiny dicks pulled so far against their bodies you’d be hard-pressed to call them swinging.

“Not swinging,” I whisper, and a small smile glides across Maya’s face.

“Why are you trespassing on our land, Finnegan?” the tallest of the enforcers asks, stopping a few feet away from me. “Did you get lost or something? Thought you were tracking down the intruder and ended up here?” He chuckles loudly, along with his two packmates.

I ignore his taunting. “Someone took something that belongs to me, and I want it back. Didn’t figure this was a conversation I could have on the phone.” I glare at the enforcers, daring them to get any closer.

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” another enforcer pipes up. “Maybe that intruder you can’t find took it.” He crosses his arms and smirks.

What a dumbass.

Time to escalate this, so I can get the hell out of here.

I stalk across the space until I’m almost chest-to-chest with their biggest enforcer. “Are you telling me you don’t know where my mate is?” I bark out, staring down at him with a look that could kill.

The acidic smell of fear reaches my nose. “Shit, Finn. Someone took Blaire?” the male in front of me asks, his eyes wide.

I don’t blink. Don’t break our eye contact. “Yes. And whoever did it is as good as dead. So, tell me…are you hiding my mate in your territory?”

The three men glance back and forth at each other, likely communicating via mindlink how best to handle this.

Meanwhile, Maya stands a few feet behind me. I’m not even sure they’ve realized she’s there, let alone noticed how she smells different than any creature in Miraluna. If I were in their shoes, I would’ve asked countless questions about her and why she smells like that. I’m a fucking threat, but she’s the unknown danger.

After what seems like an eternity, but was really just a moment or two, the enforcer in front of me finally decides to speak. “We don’t have Blaire. She may not be officially bonded to you yet, Finn, but we would never disgrace the Fates by separating you from your fated mate. That’s a bridge too far, no matter the potential reward.” He pauses for a second. “You’re welcome to search our lands, but I promise you won’t find her here.”

“I’ll take your word for it. For now.” I take eliminate the empty space between us until our chests are touching and I’m towering over him by at least six inches. “But if I find out you’re lying, there will be hell to pay.” I tap his chest. “And my wolf will rip out *your* throat first.”

He gulps. “Noted.”

I step back. “I expect you to keep this quiet. I assume your alpha already knows, but that’s it. If word gets around that I’m searching for my mate, I will hold you three personally responsible. Do you understand?”

All three men nod in agreement, not daring to say another word. I may not be their alpha, but they can sense how serious I am. Whoever took Blaire left me a note, so there’s no way in the Abyss they don’t know I’m coming, but I don’t need it getting out that someone stole my mate until I have her back.

“We’ll be on our way,” I reply, turning to head toward the next pack’s territory.

Maya and I walk in silence for a couple of minutes until I’m confident we’re out of earshot of the other wolves. “So, that’s the Pinecrest pack. I’m sure you can tell why they’re not at the top of the food chain.”

Maya chuckles, causing a warmth to spread through my blood. Her laugh is one of the most enticing sounds I’ve ever heard. Maybe there’s something special about it because she’s human. I wonder if that’s how they all sound. How they all smell. If so, I’m shocked the wolves ever agreed to close the barrier—war and the eradication of magical creatures be damned.

“Honestly, they reminded me of Quentin and his friends. Completely clueless and mean until they meet someone bigger than them.”

My wolf snarls at the mention of his name, still furious that Quentin hit her the day she ended up here. If I ever happen to find myself in the vicinity of that asshole, there’s a good chance he’s going to be torn to shreds. In seconds. My wolf nods his agreement, eager to make it happen.

A strong gnawing sensation hits my chest, and I rub my sternum with my knuckles, trying to ease the discomfort while we walk. It’s been almost

two weeks of this recurrent indigestion. At some point, I should probably see Hera about it, but I also don't want to deal with another lecture about the importance of taking care of myself. She's notorious about reminding me how I can't protect the pack if I'm not healthy.

I get it, but it's hard to make time for yourself when everyone else depends on you. When the weight of Duskmoor and sometimes all of Knottingham sits on your shoulders. It's a lonely existence, no matter how many friends I have. One of the many reasons it'll be good to finally bond with Blaire.

We keep hiking, and it's not long before the sun sets completely, draping us in darkness as we make our way through the forest blanketing Knottingham. Maya stays close as I guide us around the various trees and bushes, carefully avoiding anything that could harm her. I'm so lost in my own thoughts I don't notice how cold it's gotten until I hear her teeth chattering.

I stop in my tracks, guilt hitting me like a freight train. Even if my wolf didn't give me a choice about bringing Maya, I should've considered how cold it gets out here at night. How Maya is a human, not a wolf; her blood doesn't run as hot as mine. I didn't even question whether she'd need more layers or a coat before we took off from Duskmoor.

I've failed to protect her once again. A whine almost escapes at the thought.

"Why are we stopping? Are we close to the next pack?" she asks, rubbing her hands against her arms.

"No. We've still got a long way to go." I sigh, taking a step closer. "I didn't realize how much longer it would take to reach Mistwood on two feet."

She starts walking. "Let's keep going then."

There's a part of me that wants to take her up on it. To find Ryker and his Mistwood assholes and demand they tell me where Blaire is. But a larger part of me is worried about Maya and the slight blue tinge to her lips. "You're freezing," I call out.

"I'm fine," she argues, turning to glare at me with a fierceness I truly appreciate. "We can keep going."

I shake my head. "We need to stop for the night. Find a way to keep you warm." I run a hand through my hair, wrestling with possibilities of what to do. Building a fire is out of the question because it'll alert everyone to our

presence if they haven’t tracked us already. I’m not as familiar with this portion of the forest, so I don’t know any good caves that might shield us from the wind. That only leaves one option, and it’s one that’s both terrifying and enticing—I’m going to have to hold her all night.

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CHAPTER 16
MAYA

Trying to downplay the coldness deep in my bones, I stop rubbing my arms and stare at Finn. “I said I’m fine. We can keep walking. I’m not going to be the reason Blaire has to spend the night as a hostage. Plus, we’ve got to get her back before your ceremony.”

“There’s a zero percent chance we’ll find her tonight,” Finn replies, taking another step toward me until our chests are practically touching. “It’ll take us a few hours to reach Mistwood territory, and showing up in the middle of the night isn’t the best idea. Plus, I need to make sure you’re safe. I can’t have you freezing to death.”

“I shouldn’t have come. I should’ve told your wolf no. You could’ve searched faster if I wasn’t slowing you down.” My shoulders slump, hating that I’m forever going to be the weakest member of the pack—of all of Miraluna.

Finn’s hands clasp my arms. “I don’t think I would’ve been able to leave you behind. My wolf is… He’s become very protective of you, and he tends to get what he wants.”

I chuckle, trying to imagine how the fluffy black wolf could be as dominant as Finn describes him. Logically, I know it’s possible, since Finn is the alpha, but the wolf I’ve seen is incredibly kind and loving. Feeling his fur against my skin was like utter perfection.

“There’s some trees over there.” Finn nods to the right, and I see the copse about fifty yards away. “They have fairly low branches, and likely a pile of soft pine needles on the ground.”

“We can keep going, Finn,” I plead.

He shakes his head. “This is our best option for finding a somewhat comfortable night’s sleep.” He rubs his hands up and down my arms, sending a jolt of warmth soaring through my veins. “Probably not what you’re used to, though. I doubt you’ve ever slept on the ground outside overnight.”

“You’d be surprised,” I mutter, looking at my toes, not wanting to make eye contact with him even though it’s almost impossible to see in the darkness. “I’ve slept in worse places than this.”

He takes me by the hand and leads me to the collection of evergreens. We duck under the low branches and scoot around a bit until we find the perfect canopy. The circle of trees blocks out the piercing cold wind and, as he predicted, there’s a small area in the middle covered in soft pine needles, providing us with space to sit up or lie down without being hit by branches. I’m not sure we could’ve found a more perfect place to sleep, even if we looked in daylight.

Finn takes a seat. I stand hunched over for a few seconds, contemplating what to do. There’s not much space in this area, so we’re going to be in close proximity all night, but I also want to be respectful of his relationship with Blaire. I highly doubt she’ll be thrilled to know I was sleeping this close to her mate the night before their ceremony.

Assuming we find her and the ceremony still happens.

Hope blooms in my chest, sending me tumbling back a few steps. I clutch my sweatshirt in the middle of my abdomen, trying to make sense of the conflicting emotions running through me.

“Come on, Lucky. We need to get you warm,” Finn commands. His voice is firm with a hint of softness to it.

I take a seat, pulling my knees to my chest and sticking them under my oversized sweatshirt. My new attire might not make me look the most attractive, but at least it’ll help keep me a tiny bit warmer. Freezing to death in the middle of a forest is definitely not on the list of things I wanted to accomplish this year.

Finn scoots closer to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. I inhale sharply, unsure how to respond to his proximity. Part of me feels at home in his arms, like this is exactly where I’m meant to be, but the other part hates that I’m enjoying the touch of another woman’s man.

“I know it’s awkward to be this close, but the only way you’re going to survive the night is if I share my body heat with you. It’s going to get substantially colder, and wolves are basically infernos.”

“Okay.” I sit there stiffly, trying not to give in and lean into him. This is about warmth only. Though my body is pointing out how much *warmer* I’d be if I eliminated all the space between us.

After a few moments of silence, Finn clears his throat. “It might be easier if we talk. Get to know each other a little better.”

I nod, though after all the time we’ve spent together, I feel like I know him fairly well by now. “What do you want to know?”

“You mentioned about sleeping in worse places than this. Tell me about it.”

I consider telling him no. Or making up a story about some camping trip gone wrong. But the thought of lying to Finn is like a knife to my chest. So, instead, I tell him my truth. “I was orphaned as a baby, as you know. Growing up, I was passed around from one foster family to another every couple of months. The longest I lasted in a single place was almost a year before they decided I wasn’t worth the effort. Some families were okay to me. They’d make sure I had clothes and food, not always enough to feel safe, but enough that I wasn’t hungry all the time. Others weren’t as kind.” I swallow hard, fighting back tears as the memories come flooding back. “The family I lived with when I was in middle school was the worst. They would lock me out of the house if I did something to make them mad.”

Finn pulls me tighter to him, my body welcoming the heat radiating off him. Without thinking, I rest my head on his shoulder, breathing in his deep woodsy scent. It has the same effect on me as aromatherapy—instantly calming me.

“I quickly got used to finding good hiding spots to sleep in the wooded area behind their house. Or at the park inside the covered slide. I spent more than a few nights curled up inside cars at the junkyard. Basically, anywhere I could find some protection from the weather. So, next to a wolf under a covering of evergreen trees is definitely not the worst place I’ve slept.”

Finn strokes my hair softly. “I’m so sorry. No one should have to go through that. I can’t imagine how hard that must’ve been on you. How alone you had to feel for so very long.”

I nod, letting the tears fall freely .

“You don’t have to be alone any longer, Lucky. I’ve got you,” he whispers, pressing a kiss to my temple. Shockwaves soar through every nerve ending in my body, electrifying me in a way I’ve never experienced before. He holds me like that for a long time, our breaths syncing, before he finally says, “We should probably lie down. I’m about to fall asleep. We’re going to need to be much closer if you’re going to stay warm all night.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. “I’ll probably be fine if we just doze like this.”

“No. You won’t be. And I definitely won’t be at the top of my game when we meet with Ryker tomorrow. We need real sleep.”

As if he can feel my hesitation, he offers, “I can shift into my wolf form if you’d like. But you’ll have to deal with naked me in the morning.”

I chuckle. “No. This is fine. It’s just for warmth.” I lie on my side, curling my knees toward my chest, and Finn spoons me, his arms wrapping tightly around me.

“Good night, Lucky,” he murmurs.

“Night, Finn,” I reply. I don’t know whether it’s his heat or his protective presence, but for some reason, it feels like I’m about to have the best sleep of my life in the middle of a cold forest with a man committed to another woman.

The vision of the man I keep seeing flits away as I come to consciousness. All the coldness that seeped deep into my bones is gone, replaced by an incredible warmth radiating off Finn’s hard body cuddled around me. And his…

Holy shit.

“Fates, you smell incredible,” Finn murmurs, grinding his erection into my ass. “I want to eat you up. Lick you from top to bottom.”

Oh my God. What is happening?

He rocks his hips against me again. “Do you see what you do to me? How much I want you?”

Heat pools in my core, desire flooding every cell in my body in a matter of seconds. I don’t think I’ve ever been this turned on in my life.

“Uh-huh.” My heart races frantically as my chest begins to heave. I can’t believe what I’m hearing come out of his mouth. He can’t possibly

mean what he’s saying. There has to be—

A soft snore vibrates from his throat.

He’s asleep. Fuck. He doesn’t know what he’s saying, and he likely thinks I’m Blaire. Plus, his body’s reaction is completely normal. That’s why they call it morning wood. It happens to every guy. And wolf, too, I guess. In the morning. Like it is now.

It can’t possibly mean anything else.

Unsure what else to do, I close my eyes, forcing myself to stay as still as possible.

I’ll pretend it never happened. Ignore the throbbing between my legs and focus on the task at hand—finding Finn’s fated mate.

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CHAPTER 17
FINN

The scent of arousal stirs me awake, overpowering my senses and consuming my thoughts. My cock throbs incessantly as my wolf begs to be unleashed. To claim what he believes is his.

My muscles tense as I realize my erection is poking into Maya's ass, and the musk floating through the air is a mix of mine and hers. Her body is reacting to me. To my desires. My wants. My needs.

This can't be happening. I'm mated to Blaire. She's the female the Fates want me to spend the rest of my life with. The predestined luna for my pack.

I blow out a deep breath, releasing my hold on Maya as I sit up. She stirs awake almost immediately, so quickly I wonder if she really was sleeping.

I drag a hand down my face, attempting to erase the memories of having her pressed against me. How right it felt. How much I'd love to do it again.

Get a hold of yourself, Finn. You're supposed to be cementing your bond to Blaire today. Not fantasizing about another female in the godsdamn woods.

"We should probably get moving." I stand, stretching my back and neck. "It's at least another three hours' walk until we hit Mistwood's territory."

"Okay," Maya murmurs, getting up and not looking directly at me. "I'm going to head over there to take care of my business. I should be back in a few minutes." She crouches under the branches and walks away. Each

sound of her footsteps makes my wolf antsy, like he can't believe I'm letting her go off by herself to pee.

I wait a few minutes before exiting the same way as Maya and find her leaning against a tree, waiting for me. "Ready to go?"

She nods, shoving her hands into the pockets of her sweatpants. Her long brown hair is a ratted mess, strewn with rogue pine needles, and her face has the imprint of the ground on it, but for some reason, I don't think she's ever looked more beautiful. More radiant.

I clear my throat and pick up the pace. My priority has to be finding Blaire. Bringing her back to Duskmoor and having our mating ceremony. At this point, I don't care about the actual ceremony itself or the party afterward. I just want to start my life with my fated mate and curtail all these extra hormones that seem to be taking over my body.

We walk in silence for almost two hours until I hear the faint sounds of wolves approaching from the distance. A sly smile slides across my face when the wind brings the scent of the Alpha of Mistwood. I thought their pack would come to us long before we got close to their territory. Ryker is notorious for having cameras and patrols encroaching on the lands of the packs that border his. He's constantly pushing boundaries, demanding more power at every meeting, unwilling to be happy with what he already has.

No wonder everyone calls him the Bad Wolf of Knottingham. He's the type of male you want to keep your sisters, daughters, and friends far away from. The one known for getting into near-death fights with anyone who dares to look at him the wrong way. We've been in our fair share of scuffles over the years, but nothing compared to the one we're about to have if my intuition is right and he has Blaire.

It's the only logical explanation for why he would bother coming to meet me himself. Otherwise, he would've sent his enforcers like Pinecrest did. Pretend I'm not worth the effort.

I'm going to fucking tear him apart.

"Prepare yourself for more dicks," I say, glancing in Maya's direction as I stop. "The Mistwood alpha and a few of his men will be here any minute." My jaw clenches tightly. "This conversation is going to be different than the last one. I'm likely going to shift. Their alpha is strong, so it will be a long fight before I'm finally able to tear his throat out."

"Umm…okay. What should I do?" she asks, confusion with a mix of anxiety spreading across her face.

“Nothing. Just try to blend into the background. Pretend you’re a witch if they ask. They won’t hurt you. I won’t allow it. But I’m pretty sure they have Blaire. And there will be hell to pay for touching what belongs to me,” I growl, my claws itching to come out.

As soon as the five wolves crest the small hill, they shift into their human form and head directly toward us with a swagger that annoys the ever-loving shit out of me. Fucking cocky bastards.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?” Ryker says, strolling up to me and stopping only a few feet away from Maya and me. “Looks like the Duskmoor alpha has gotten lost. Or perhaps has he lost something that *used* to belong to him?” He crosses his arms and smirks.

“Where is she?” I growl, glaring at him as I fight the urge to shift and attack.

Ryker scoffs. “Not sure what you’re talking about, Finn. You’re going to have to be more specific.” He glances at his nails like this conversation is boring him. “Maybe you should be more careful with your things.”

“Blaire is not a thing. She’s my mate. My fated mate. And I want her back. Now.”

Ryker sighs and shakes his head. “No can do, Finn. She’s part of the Mistwood pack now. And I’m keeping her.”

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” I roar, lunging toward him and wrapping a hand around his neck. “Let her go.”

“No.” He doesn’t flinch, staring back at me with intense hatred.

I cock my head to the side. “You’d seriously risk angering the Fates? You know how rare a fated mate is in our world. The wrath they’ll unleash upon you for separating us will destroy you, and most likely your pack, too.”

Ryker laughs like that’s the most ridiculous thing he’s ever heard. “That’s where you’re wrong, Finn. I didn’t take Blaire. Though, I may have switched my letter out for hers just so I could see your face when I told you this: She came here willingly.”

My hand falls from his throat as my breath becomes ragged. “What do you mean? Did you drug her? Magic her mind to make her go against the Fates?” My head races with hundreds of possibilities of how Ryker could’ve convinced Blaire to enter their territory unknowingly.

“Nope. She sought me out yesterday morning. Asked for asylum. Begged me to join the Mistwood pack, so she wouldn’t have to go through

the mating ceremony *with you*."

"Shit," Maya whispers, followed by the sound of her clasping her hand over her mouth.

"I'll let her know she can break the bond now." Ryker's eyes go unfocused as he mindlinks someone. "She wanted to make sure you were in a safe place before she did it. I promised I'd help." He laughs at the ridiculousness of the statement.

The world starts spinning out of control, the thin bond that's been connecting me and Blaire together for the past year frays. And that's when I know he's telling the truth. *She's* rejecting our bond. Rejecting me.

Unbearable pain shoots through me, causing me to brace my hands on a tree to support myself. Every breath is harder to pull in than the last, and my heart is pounding erratically from my chest, into my ears. I've heard a rejected bond was excruciating, but this torment is the debilitating agony that I would've expected to feel after a broken mate bond. Legend has it that breaking a fated bond can kill the rejected side of the pair.

"Now that we have that out of the way… Who is this?" Ryker moves out of my line of sight. "Brought your side piece on your mission to rescue your mate? Bold. But understandable. She does seem like a fine piece of ass."

"Excuse me?" Maya demands.

I force myself to focus on Maya's anger.

"You can't possibly be talking to me that way. Oh. Shit. Is this your first time having a conversation with a woman? Honestly, that makes sense."

Ryker tilts his head, possibly at her use of the term woman, but seems to dismiss it. He chuckles. "Definitely not, sweetheart. I know how to keep the females in my pack satisfied. Unlike a certain alpha I know. Happy to give you a ride anytime. Just know, it's a one-night thing. I don't do clingy females."

"And I don't fuck assholes, so I guess we have nothing to worry about."

Panting heavily, I turn my head in Maya's direction as Ryker walks closer to her. My wolf growls in anger, wanting me to move, but I can't. The ache from the broken bond is lessening, but it still has my muscles locked in pain, the kind that could make shifting or moving dangerous. And I won't leave Lucky alone without someone to protect her.

"Where are you from?" Ryker asks, circling Maya as if she's a piece of meat that he's ready to take a bite out of. "You look very familiar."

“I’m a witch from Gealdor.” She stands up straight, eyeing him with intense disgust. “I recently joined the Duskmoor pack. Heard it was the best in Knottingham. Turns out that rumor is true.”

Ryker’s jaw clenches tightly. “You’ve heard wrong. Duskmoor is on the downhill. Mistwood is where the real wolves live. Where the real power resides.” He drags a finger up her arm, her skin protected by her sweatshirt, but it she shudders and recoils from his touch. “There’s still time to make a switch. A pretty thing like you would be eagerly welcomed into our pack, by the males particularly.”

“Gonna be a hard pass for me. Thanks for offering, but like I said, I don’t fuck assholes.”

“No one said you had to take in the ass, baby. At least not right away.” He inches closer to her face. “Your eyes. I’ve seen them before.”

Maya scoffs. “Fortunately, I’ve never had the displeasure of meeting you. I’d remember such a flea-ridden encounter.”

I release a snort of amusement that causes me to double over in pain again.

Ryker lowers his face to her level. “There’s something familiar about you. Though it’s definitely not your weird-ass scent. I can’t put my finger on it, but I’ll figure it out, witch. Are you half-shifter? Didn’t know any of the packs had stooped low enough to fuck a witch.” He growls, eyeing Maya with a mix of lust and frustration. “Don’t worry, I’ll learn all your secrets eventually. In the meantime, you and that pathetic excuse of an alpha need to get the fuck away from my territory.” He stares at Maya for a few seconds before turning and walking toward me.

I pant heavily, forcing myself upright as I look at Ryker. The pain from the broken bond has eased somewhat, but it still feels like a part of my soul is missing—a small piece I’ll never get back.

Ryker stops in front of me. “Blaire is mine now, Finn. She belongs to *my* pack, and I’ll defend her to the death. Just like I would any other member. Come for her again, and you won’t leave in one piece.” He glances at Maya for a few seconds before looking at me with a wicked grin. “Set a single paw on my territory uninvited again, and I’ll personally claim your little witch over there. Won’t it be fun to see how well your wolf tolerates me taking *two* females from you?”

My wolf snarls, anger boiling through my veins with a desperation to shift and attack Ryker. As much as I might want the fight it would bring, I

force down the urge. *Blaire* made her choice. I refuse to force her to bond with me if it's not what she wants. Even if it might mean horrendous consequences from the Fates for discarding their rare gift.

Ryker and his packmates shift into their wolf forms and take off running toward the Mistwood territory line. Their howls echo through the wind, a celebratory sound of being able to one-up me.

Catching my breath, I move slowly toward Maya, rubbing my sternum with my knuckles, the dull ache of the broken bond remaining ever present. "We should go." I start trudging along slowly, my gaze locked on my feet.

After a few minutes walking in silence, Maya asks, "Do you want to talk about it? I'm a good listener."

I shake my head. "There's no point. Blaire doesn't want me. It's over." A shudder ripples through my chest. "Fuck, I have to figure out a way to explain this to the rest of the pack once we're back. They're expecting a ceremony."

"I'm sure they'll understand," Maya consoles, easily keeping pace with me now that I can't move as quickly.

I scoff. "It's the first time in Knottingham history for a fated mate bond to be rejected."

Maya gasps softly. "I'm so sorry, Finn. But this isn't on you. You're a great man. You deserve so much better than this." She reaches out and touches my arm, calming my wolf and my rising anxiety. "I'm sure, in time, I'm sure you'll find someone else. Someone better."

"Maybe," I murmur, not believing her. She doesn't understand how our world works. You don't get more than one chance at a fated mate. And I'd be hard-pressed to find any other wolf shifter who would choose me as their mate after knowing Blaire rejected the bond. The rumors will be rampant for years. Decades.

And I'll be the first alpha in Knottingham history to not have a luna by his side or an heir to carry on his lineage.

Fuck.

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CHAPTER 18
FINN

It's been two days since my canceled mating ceremony, and word about the rejected mate bond has spread like wildfire across all of Miraluna. I blame Ryker for fanning the fucking flames. It's the only explanation for how members of my pack knew about Blaire's choices before Maya and I even made it back to Duskmoor.

Though that might've been a blessing in disguise, since Cam canceled everything as soon as I confirmed the rumor. Now I'm emotionally bouncing between depressed and angry.

I groan, draping my arm over my face as I lie, sprawled out on my couch in the living room of my house—not my apartment in the pack building. *My den.* The place I expected to bring my new mate home and eventually raise a family.

I may not have been in love with Blaire, but she was supposed to be mine—the female I was destined to spend my life with. Now my hope of having anyone by my side is disappearing, along with the family I'd wanted to create. And my dreams are only one part of this. It's going to be a tough few years for my pack. Wolves will start questioning my ability to lead. The challenges will begin. Not that I would blame them.

My cell pings with another flurry of incoming texts. It's been nonstop since the news broke. Even my own pack members have taken to texting, knowing that I've thrown down an impenetrable steel door to my mindlink, only allowing Cam access to me in the rare event of a true emergency.

Another round of messages ping on my phone, followed by an incoming call, one right after another. I know it's my parents, and I have zero interest in talking to them. Or in seeing their faces as they try to tell me it will be okay while knowing, deep down, it won't.

"Are you going to get that?" Hera asks.

I blink my eyes open. "What in the Abyss, Hera? When did you get here?"

"I'm on the way to check on Trida. Her pup is due any day, but when I passed not one but two pairs of wolves having sex on my way, I realized I needed to come and have a little talk with you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your pheromones are impacting the pack, Finn."

I drop my head back onto the couch. "Explain it to me like I'm five or leave."

I hear her stand in front of me. "Fine. But we're doing this quick and dirty. I still have to see five more wolves, and I don't have time to finesse this conversation the way I should."

"Great. I don't want to be coddled anyway."

"As the alpha, you need more physical contact than anyone else in the pack. With your broken bond, your need for contact is higher than ever. Most wolves fight it because it makes them nauseous to think of touching someone else, but it's crucial for you to have sex. Your pheromones have gotten the pack so wound up we can barely function."

I glare at my healer. "It's been two days. It can't be that bad."

"I couldn't stop myself from having sex with Jagger *again* last night, which I swore I'd never do." She shakes her head and closes her eyes, a look of disgust on her face. "You may not want any female company right now, but you need to find someone and fast. We can't have the entire pack running around horny as shit all the time."

"For Fate's sake, Hera. Who exactly do you suggest I ask to take one for the team?"

She chews on the corner of her lower lip. "Someone who won't be panting at your door for a mate bond. A certain fake witch comes to mind."

My heart races at the thought of touching Maya and having her hands on my body. It's almost like the layer of darkness resting over me since the mating bond broke has disappeared, and I feel alive again for the first time in days. Maybe the first time in years.

And that’s reason enough to find literally *anyone else* to help with this problem.

“You’re sure I have to do this?” I ask my healer.

She nods. “I’m sorry, Finn. You know I wouldn’t ask this if it wasn’t important to the health of the pack members.”

I sit up and crack my neck, loud pops breaking the silence in the room. “Okay. I’ll find… someone.”

“Why not Maya—”

“Not your business, Hera.”

“Fine. Then I have things to do.”

I watch her leave, a mixture of dread and interest swirling in my gut. After blowing out a breath, I finally pick up my phone and stare at the hundreds of unread messages and missed calls. It’s going to take hours to get through them all.

I quickly scroll past the fifteen or so messages from my parents, asking me to call them. I can’t deal with their questions and disappointment. Might as well start with whatever nonsense is happening in the Council group chat. There are at least three dozen messages in that thread alone. I can only imagine the field day the fucking fae are having. Probably mocking me while plotting how to take over my seat on the Council.

I tap on the thread and start reading.

RYKER

Rumor has it Finn had a rough weekend.

BANE

Spit out whatever bullshit you know, Ryker. No one has time for your stupid games.

MINERVA

I’d think there was a witch in your lineage with how much you like to stir the pot, Ryker.

RYKER

Purebred wolf only. But I’d be happy to put some wolf in your witches anytime.

LUCIUS

For fuck’s sake, Ryker. Can you stop hitting on everyone with a vagina? It’s getting really old, and that’s saying something because I’m immortal.

RYKER

Finn’s mate broke their bond. She’s part of my pack now.

BANE

…

MALBEC

That’s not fucking funny to joke about, Ryker. The dragons take bonds seriously, especially fated ones.

RYKER

Not a joke.

BRAM

Are you trying to start another godsdamned war?

RYKER

She came to me. If Finn can’t keep his pack members happy, then perhaps he’s not fit to lead. But I’ve been saying that for a few years now.

VEYLORIA

I’m not sure why you feel the need to share any of your dog-related drama with the group, but some of us have more important matters to deal with…like finding the person responsible for breaking through the barrier.

BANE

I second Veyloria’s comment. We need a Council meeting. Today.

MALBEC

Agreed.

LUCIUS

As much as I hate to agree with anything Bane says, I also believe a meeting is necessary.

MINERVA

Fine. I’ll open the portal to the meeting room. I expect everyone to be there at 2 p.m. sharp. If you don’t show up, you’re locked out and don’t get a vote.

BRAM

Damn, Minerva. You’re being brutal today. I like it.

MALBEC

Can you please be professional for once? I feel like I'm stuck with a group of younglings going through puberty. Some of us are too old to deal with this shit.

I glance at the clock and groan loudly. Only twenty minutes until 2 p.m. And I have not showered in…a while. I groan as I race to the primary bathroom.

I'm not sure if I'm ready to see any of my family or friends, but I'd be a fool to go to this meeting without backup. Especially with my current state of mind. Everything is a jumbled mess, and I need to be on top of my shit if I'm going to lie my ass off to the most powerful creatures in Miraluna.

"*Unexpected Council meeting in twenty. Meet me at the portal?*" I ask Cam via our mindlink as I quickly rinse off.

"*He lives. I wondered how long it would be before you reached out.*"

"*I'm fine.*"

"*Sure. I'm on a patrol along our border, so I'll probably beat you to the portal. Any idea what the Council wants to discuss so urgently?*"

"*They're still in a panic about the intruder. Plus, I'm sure they'll bust my balls about Blaire. Ryker took it upon himself to tell everyone.*"

"*That fucker. Let me know if I need to beat the shit out of him. My wolf has been itching for a fight. I'm also happy to take a bite out of some fae. They've been irritating the crap out of me lately, too.*"

"*When are you talking to the fae?*" I ask instead of letting my mind wander to Hera's suggestion of sleeping with Maya—a task my wolf is apparently eager to do for the pack. "*You don't see them except at Council meetings, and you have to be quiet there.*"

"*Not important. Just know they're on my shit list. Permanently. And the reasons why grow on a daily basis.*"

I quickly move through my bedroom and put on my custom suit. My life may be in shambles, but I refuse to let anyone see me as anything other than the most powerful alpha in Knottingham. The slightest chink in my armor will be all it takes to put a massive target on Duskmoor's back. Checking my reflection in the mirror, I cringe slightly when I realize I was supposed to wear this very same outfit to my ceremony with Blaire. An ache spreads in my chest, working its way to my extremities.

According to Hera, it'll take months or longer for the deep ache to subside. Then, it should only be a dull pain that lives with me forever. Or at

least that's what she's assumed, based on the recollections of breaking chosen bonds in the past. Though we don't know, since there's no known history of someone breaking a fated bond. I should really stop talking to Hera. All she does is bring me shitty news about my future.

"It'll be fine," I mutter to myself, taking a deep breath and leaving my house. I head straight for my SUV and drive toward the outskirts of our territory, where the portal entrance to the Council meeting room lies. The last thing I need is to run into anyone—especially not the human who put me at ease as we made the long trek back from the Mistwood territory. The one who my wolf is apparently eager to claim since his godsdamn tail wags incessantly whenever I think about her.

Exactly as Cam promised, he's waiting for me next to a tree stump, looking like he has an axe to grind with someone. Potentially anyone, if the grimace on his face is anything to go by. He might've been serious about being itching for a fight.

Just what I need. Another hotheaded wolf to try and control during what I can only anticipate will be a shitshow of a meeting.

After getting out of my car, I slam the door and stroll over to Cam. "Ready to get this clusterfuck over with?"

He nods and follows me as we quickly walk to the hidden doorway in the woods. I touch the iron handle and open it before a whoosh of magic instantly transports me to the hallway outside the meeting room. A few seconds later, Cam appears behind me, slightly out of breath and looking even more deadly than he did a few minutes ago.

We enter the stone meeting room and take our respective seats. Within a couple of minutes, the round wooden table fills with Council members, their emissaries flanking the seats along the walls.

"Looks like the gang's all here," Bram calls out, his pale face standing out against his all-black attire and cape. "Can we get started with the bitching I'm sure is about to happen? I'm not a fan of having to be out in the daylight."

"Fucking vampires," Ryker mutters, shaking his head.

I release a rumbling growl, making it real clear I won't agree with him on *anything* today. Even if Bram is being a dick. Sure, we usually have our meetings in the evenings, due to their sensitivity to the sun, but it's mainly because of the vamps' overall shitty attitude about doing anything during the day.

“It’s been over two weeks since we felt the breach in the barrier, and not a single scrap of evidence has turned up for the potential culprit,” Bane says in a low, menacing voice. “I’m inclined to believe one of you is harboring a fugitive. Keeping it quiet for your own personal gain.”

“Seriously, Bane? Based on what evidence?” Kel, the merman, spits out.

“Let me clarify…I believe one of you who isn’t part fish and has more than half a brain is hiding the intruder.”

“Fates, Bane. Do you always have to be such an asshole?” Mavis, the siren asks, shaking her head and rolling her eyes dramatically.

“Bane’s right. There’s someone new in Miraluna. I can feel it,” Veyloria spews, narrowing her eyes and staring each of us down.

I cross my arms and lean back in my chair, preparing myself for what will likely be a few hours of trading barbs before the meeting finally ends with nothing accomplished. I’m beginning to wonder if there’s any point to having a Council at all.

“There does seem to still be a disturbance in the air,” Malbec adds, his eyes darkening. “My den can feel it when we fly over the forest near the barrier.”

Ryker smirks and rests his elbows on the table, leaning forward and turning to look at me. “Perhaps we should ask Finn about the newest addition to his pack.”

I clench my fists tightly as my jaw muscles flex. My wolf paces angrily, wanting to be released. It doesn’t take much for Ryker to antagonize my wolf anymore.

“Supposedly, she’s a witch,” Ryker adds, turning his gaze toward Minerva. “Are you missing any witches?”

Minerva shrugs. “Witches are always running amok. It’s one of the things we do best.”

“That doesn’t answer the question, Minerva,” Ryker growls, narrowing his eyes on the white-haired witch sitting across from him.

“How do you want to handle this if Minerva doesn’t vouch for you?” Cam asks, quietly stewing in a chair along the wall. *“I’m happy to take one for the team and rip Ryker a new asshole.”*

“I doubt Minerva will come out and deny there could be a missing witch in her land. There’s no way she has knowledge about the locations of every witch. But if for some reason they suspect Maya is the intruder, we have to

protect her. You'll need to get back to Duskmoor and get her to safety while I deal with everyone here."

"Understood. Although I'm surprised you wouldn't want to be the one to protect her and let me deal with these idiots. You know how much I'm looking to fuck up some fae."

"That's exactly why you would need to be the one to leave. I can't risk starting another war. Not when my position is already weakened because of Blaire leaving." I don't mention I'm also avoiding Maya. There's nothing I want more than to see her, but that's exactly the reason I can't.

"You're still our alpha, Finn. Don't let the bullshit get to you. Everyone will come to terms with Blaire's decision in time. No one blames you for it."

"You don't have to lie to me, Cam. I know they do. Hell, I blame myself."

Deciding to put a stop to this insanity, I bang my fists on the table, and all eyes shift to me. "I'm done with Ryker making thinly veiled accusations about me and my pack. Yes, we have a new member. She came to us weeks ago and asked to join the Duskmoor pack. Based on the agreement binding the Council, there's nothing wrong with anyone choosing to live in another land as long as they weren't kidnapped or coerced, which she wasn't."

"Or so you say," Ryker snarls. "You can't even keep your fated mate happy. Why the fuck should any of us believe other people would want to be under your leadership?"

"Damn," Bram whistles.

"Stop trying to use what happened in my personal life as a power play, Ryker. Everyone can see through your childish bullshit. And, for the record, you were inches away from her face. Did she seem like the type of creature who could force their way through the portal?" I pause for a second, taking a deep breath and exhaling. "But let me make this clear…if anyone comes to Duskmoor and threatens *any* of my pack, there will be hell to pay. Blood will be spilled, and I won't feel an ounce of guilt for protecting what's mine."

The room goes silent, everyone holding their breath as they watch the standoff between me and Ryker. It's been brewing for years and seems to be finally coming to a head. At some point there will be a world-changing fight between us. I don't know when or what the cause will be, but I know deep in my bones it's coming.

“I guess that’s settled,” Minerva adds with an eerily cheery voice. “Finn’s newest member is a witch, not the intruder. We still have no idea what broke the barrier, and apparently all shifters suck at tracking.”

Malbec growls, his nails starting to turn into talons. “I take offense to that, Minerva. Maybe if your magic wasn’t complete shit, we wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place.”

“Yeah. Why aren’t we interrogating the witches more about why someone was able to break through the border in the first place?” Bram adds, crossing his arms.

Over the next several minutes, the Council members argue louder and louder over who’s at fault for our current situation, while Minerva sits quietly in her chair with a smirk, her gaze never leaving mine.

She knows something. Likely the truth about Maya.

But she’s not going to rat me out. At least, not yet.

The real question is: why?

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CHAPTER 19
MAYA

I’m trying not to take it personally, but Finn’s blatant avoidance of me is starting to get under my skin. He’s been a ghost ever since we got back from searching for Blaire; supposedly, he’s continuing to run things as the alpha, but disappearing into thin air whenever I get nearby.

Normally, this would be one of those times where Maddie would tell me, “he’s just not that into you,” or some other similar speech when I start spiraling about a man. And I’d usually agree. The only challenge is that I already knew Finn wasn’t into me. He was fated to someone else. So now it’s just pathetic.

I wouldn’t blame him if he thought my presence might’ve contributed to Blaire’s decision. I know he’ll never admit it to my face, but the timing looks questionable. I can’t imagine she enjoyed seeing her mate being so attentive to another woman, even if there weren’t any feelings involved.

At least, not on his part.

Pacing in my apartment, I contemplate what I should do next. I’m tired of being holed up here, waiting for someone to break me out of my cage. Granted, I’m not technically imprisoned, but I’m not sure I’m fully comfortable wandering the streets of Duskmoor without a friendly face beside me. I can’t risk someone asking too many questions about my backstory and getting suspicious about my role in the barrier issue.

Maybe I should call or text Max. He’s been the person shepherding me to meals every day since I got back. It’s gotten to the point where I’m starting to wonder whether Finn assigned him to watch over me.

At least I finally have a phone and can communicate with the few people I know in Knottingham. I'm pretty sure I have Hera to thank for that gift. She was fairly perturbed when she learned I was being left alone in my apartment all day without any way to reach anyone.

I stop pacing and collapse on the couch, sinking deep into the cushions as I muster up the strength to do what I know I've needed to do for days now—confront Finn.

MAYA
We should talk. Where are you?

FINN
Busy. Maybe later.

MAYA
Are you avoiding me?

FINN
No.

MAYA
Definitely feels like it.

FINN
There's a lot going on.

MAYA
I get it. Can we at least talk at dinner?

FINN
Can't. Probably will eat in my office as I work to get caught up on paperwork.

Seriously? Paperwork? Of course he's blowing me off for *paperwork*. I'm the woman who complicated his life, and now he doesn't know what to say to me. Well, fine. If he doesn't want me around, I can find someone else to spend my time with. Someone who's actually interested in spending time with me.

Fuming, I angrily punch the keyboard on my phone and type another message, deciding to take advantage of Jagger's interest. If Finn doesn't want to spend time with me, I'll find someone who does.

MAYA

Hey, Jagger. Any chance you're up for having dinner tonight? I'd love for you to show me around town.

JAGGER

It'd be my pleasure. Yours too, if you're lucky, Maya.

MAYA

Sounds like fun. Can't wait to see you.

JAGGER

Looking forward to it.

MAYA

Oh…are you at the office?

JAGGER

Yep. Working on a bunch of bullshit paperwork Finn insisted is a priority for some reason.

MAYA

Would you mind telling him I won't need an escort to dinner since we're going out?

JAGGER

Will do. Happy to let him know I'm taking care of you now.

A sly grin spreads across my face, knowing Finn isn't going to appreciate me spending time with Jagger. Between him and Hera, I swear I could write a novel on Jagger's womanizing.

I'm not using Jagger solely to get a response out of Finn; that's just an added bonus. He comes across like a good time, and I could use some of that in my life after everything that's happened. Especially since I've started spiraling about the ramifications of losing Finn's friendship and how it might impact my place in the pack. Though, for an unknown reason, my heart is more tormented by the possibility of losing Finn than the potential of being ostracized by the pack and not having anywhere to live in this unfamiliar world.

The minutes tick by slowly as I stare at my screen, waiting for a message that never appears. My face falls after ten minutes pass, and I accept the fact that Finn must not care about who I spend time with anymore. Any protectiveness he felt for me is gone. I pull my knees to my chest and rest my head on them, blinking back tears as I try to make sense

of what went wrong. How I screwed up my life so badly once again. Why am I always the girl on the outside wishing I could come in?

Closing my eyes tightly, I try to calm my rapid breathing and not let my anxiety get the best of me. Maybe Finn isn't going to be my friend any longer, but that doesn't mean he'll make me leave. Hera, Jagger, and Max all seem to enjoy spending time with me. I'm sure they'll vouch for me. And if I have to, I can try and find a mate to solidify my role in the pack. To ensure Finn won't send me packing at a moment's notice.

A pounding on my door startles me, pulling me from my most recent Finn-spiral. "Open the door, Lucky. I know you're in there," Finn shouts, a hint of frustration in his voice. "You have thirty seconds before I'm breaking it down."

I try to hide the smirk pulling at my face as I jump off the couch and saunter across the room. I open the door to a flustered Finn. "Hey, Finn. What's up?" I ask casually, like this wasn't the best possible outcome to the text I sent Jagger.

"Let me in," he barks. "You don't want me to have this conversation in the hallway."

"Fine," I mutter, getting out of his way as he stalks into my apartment. I shut the door behind him and take a seat on my couch. "Care to tell me why you're acting all growly?"

He paces in front of me, pulling at his hair. "You're going on a godsdamn date *with Jagger*? Are you for real?"

I shrug. "Why not? He's interested, and I'm bored out of my mind. My one friend in this entire world decided he didn't want to hang out with me anymore."

He growls. "You know I've been busy."

"Sure." I cross my arms. "Or you're avoiding me and no longer want me around. I didn't take you for a man who breaks his promises so quickly."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You told me Duskmoor would be my home. That you would always protect me, but now you have no problem casting me aside at the first sign of trouble. You're just like everyone else in my life. Lots of pretty words but no follow-through. I should've known this would be a foster home situation where they promise you can stay as long as you want and then run the first time you get sick or in trouble at school."

He stops in the middle of the room and stares at his feet, running his fingers through his dark strands. “That’s not what I’m doing, Lucky. I can’t… I don’t know how to be around you right now.”

My chest tightens. “What do you mean?”

“Losing Blaire was devastating. I can still feel the remnants of the bond within me, pulsing angrily. But there’s also this…” He keeps his gaze on the floor, refusing to look at me. “You unnerve me, and it’s too much for me to handle.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, unsure what else to say to make the situation better. I hate to see him hurting, but I hate it even more knowing that I’m contributing to his pain.

He raises his head, locking eyes with me. “I don’t want you dating Jagger.”

“That’s not your decision, Finn. I’m a free woman. I can choose to be with whomever I want. Isn’t that what you said? That you’d never force a woman to be with someone she doesn’t want?”

He clenches his fists against his jeans. “*Is* Jagger who you want?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, but I can’t sit in this apartment every day for the rest of my life. If I’m stuck in Miraluna, I want to at least enjoy my time here.”

He swallows hard. “So, you’re going out with him? Are you going to… Will you…” He pulls at the back of his neck, angst evident on his face. “Are you going to fuck him?”

Annoyance and hurt roar through me, begging to be unleashed on Finn. How dare he act like he has any control over my sex life? Or that who and what I choose to do in the privacy of my bedroom is any of his goddamn business.

Getting off the couch, I stalk across the room until I’m almost chest to chest with him. “Who I do or don’t sleep with is none of your fucking business, Finn. You don’t own me.” I poke him in the chest hard. “You don’t get a say in who I spend time with. You’re not my boyfriend. I’m not sure you’re even a friend anymore with the way you’ve been acting the past few days.”

He towers over me, his eyes peering deep into mine. “You know that’s not true, Lucky. We are friends.” His hand cups my cheek softly. “We’re something more, even. I know you feel it.”

“Feel what?” I answer in a breathy tone.

“This pull between us. This…attraction.” He grimaces.

I shake my head, lying to him and myself as heat floods my core.

“I’ve stayed away from you the past few days because Hera told me I need to fuck someone. To work off all this pent-up sexual energy that is apparently making the pack go wild with lust. And all I could think about was picking you. Being with you. Kissing you. And I knew I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

His thumb runs along my bottom lip. “It wouldn’t be fair to you. To anyone, really. I’m still reeling over my broken mate bond. There’s no way I’m remotely ready for anything more than friends-with-benefits, and honestly, I probably wouldn’t even want that right now if it wasn’t for the good of the pack.” He takes a deep breath, his eyes darkening with an intensity I haven’t seen before from him. “But I lost it when I heard about another man taking you out on a date. My wolf wanted to burst through my skin and lunge at Jagger. It took everything I had to stop myself from shifting and attacking one of my best friends.”

I inhale sharply, keeping my eyes locked on his.

“I won’t let anyone have you, Lucky. You’re mine. If I’m going to have sex with someone, I want it to be you.”

My heart practically leaps out of my chest as warmth spreads through me. All the frustration I felt toward him has disappeared, replaced with an unquenchable desire. He’s offering me the one thing I never thought I’d get a chance to have—*him*.

The back of his hand skims my jawline. “I don’t want you to feel any pressure. We don’t have to do anything. I just… I wanted you to know that if I’m going to be intimate you’re the female I’d pick.” He swallows hard and squeezes his eyes shut before dropping his hand from my face and stepping back. “I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. I thought you… It doesn’t matter. I can go.”

I quickly eliminate the distance between us and place my hand on his chest. “Don’t go, Finn. I want you to stay.” I let out a ragged breath. “I want you, too.”

Finn’s lips crash against mine and time stands still. The room disappears around us, and it feels like I’m floating on a cloud as his mouth consumes mine. Our tongues engage in a perfectly choreographed tango. Nothing about this kiss is soft. It’s a claiming—one I’m not sure I’ll ever recover from.

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CHAPTER 20
FINN

It's been three days since I made out with Lucky in her apartment like a godsdamn teenager. It took everything in my power to remove myself from her arms and go back to work when Cam mindlinked about a problem rather than listen to my wolf, who was ready to fuck and bite her right there on the spot.

Which would've been fine. We're two consenting adults. There's nothing wrong with helping to quench each other's needs for a short time period as long as we both understand nothing more can come from it. It would at least hopefully calm my wolf enough so he stops pacing every fucking minute of the day, infecting the pack with more pheromones. Even letting him run for hours every night hasn't lessened his pent-up sexual frustration.

This is exactly why alphas need a mate. It's a biological need. Our wolves crave intimacy, and the more our power grows, the stronger the desire becomes.

Shoving my hands in the pockets of my jeans, I stroll into the cafeteria and search the room for Maya. We've been meeting up for meals ever since the kiss, a silent agreement she'll spend time with me and no one else. I've been itching to kiss her again, but the timing hasn't been right. There are always other people around us, or something for work comes up, making it impossible to find a private moment. And as much as I know this is something I need to do for the pack, there's a huge part of me that *wants* to

be with her. It's why I refuse to make a spectacle of what's brewing between us. She deserves to be wooed, even if it's only temporary.

Plus, everyone is desperate to uncover why Blaire would walk away from a fated bond so easily, and I don't want anyone accusing Maya of being the reason. I don't blame my pack for having questions about Blaire's decision. It's been hard enough for me to wrap my head around it, and I have the insider knowledge of how tenuous our interactions were for the past year. The only answer I can come up with that actually holds any merit is that Blaire wanted free will—the ability to choose who she spent her life with, not to have some unknown force decide her future. Maybe if I spent more time getting to know her, the situation would've turned out differently. But there's no use in rehashing the past. Nothing will change Blaire's decision, and the bond is too frayed to be repaired, anyway.

And if I'm honest with myself…I'm not sure I want it back. No matter how much I know the pack would benefit from it.

"Fancy seeing you here," Maya says with a grin, carrying out a serving dish of vegetables. After insisting she wanted a permanent role in Duskmoor, I hooked her up with our chef to help out in the kitchen, and he immediately took a liking to her. She's been spending her days making food for the pack and enjoying every second of it. It's the happiest I've seen her since she arrived in Miraluna. "I have another thirty minutes before I'm done," she adds. "We're a bit backed up tonight."

"No problem. I can wait to eat dinner with you." I rock back on my heels. "I'll go sit with the guys until then."

She blushes, her smile growing wider. "Sounds good. I'll make us a couple of plates. I might've created a special dessert for you to try. The chef said if you like it, we can add it to the menu next week."

"I'm sure it'll taste great, Lucky," I reply with complete sincerity. I have no idea how talented she is at making desserts, but I do know this female can accomplish anything she puts her mind to. In only a few weeks, she's acclimated to not only our pack but living in an entirely new world. It's really fucking impressive.

As she walks away, I can't help but focus on her round ass and the curves of her hips. There's something about her that drives me insane with want and need, stronger than anything I've experienced in the past.

"There's our fearless leader," Jagger jokes, leaning back in his chair with his arms behind his head. "Care to join us for dinner? Or are you

planning to make the rounds and cockblock everyone you see?”

Guess he’s not over me throwing him into the wall when he told me about his date with Maya—a tidbit I’ve yet to share with her. It’s not important that she knows anything about the extent of the rage that overtook me when I first heard about another male potentially going out with her.

“The only wolf I truly enjoy cockblocking is you, Jagger. Perhaps it’s time for you to become *very* familiar with your hand.” I sit at the long table next to Cam.

Max laughs. “Pretty sure Jagger and his right hand are good friends already.”

Jagger growls in Max’s direction. “Are we about to start sharing secrets, Maxwell?”

Panic flashes across Max’s face as he closes his mouth and stares at the food on his tray.

“Have any of you heard anything else about the intruder recently? Any backchannel gossip from our contacts in other lands?” I ask, crossing my arms. “It’s been oddly quiet since our meeting a few days ago. It’s making me suspicious.”

“You’re not the only one. The dragons have ramped up their flight patrols near the border. They’re getting closer to it than normal, which has to be painful.” Cam takes a drink of his water. “And there have been some rumblings about the fae poking around in Knottingham. I haven’t spotted any of the fuckers on our territory yet, but the Abyss better get ready to welcome a few new members if I do.”

“I’ve talked to a couple of my witch contacts; they haven’t heard much. It’s almost like they don’t care much about the intruder at all, but you also never know with that group. They’re notorious for misleading everyone,” Max adds.

Jagger grunts his agreement. “Ryker’s been talking shit, as usual. Trying to get alphas from Nightshade and Pinecrest to support replacing you on the Council with the alpha from Ravenwood. So far, no one is budging. They know you’re the strongest, so there’s not really much Ryker can do other than be a twat.”

“He’ll never give up,” I mutter, wondering whether Ryker will ever be happy with what he has. I’m beginning to doubt that he would be content if

he became the sole alpha over Knottingham, or he would still carve out more power to make up for whatever loss he feels inside.

Cam eyes Jagger and Max for a second, both of them shaking their heads at whatever he's communicating with them via mindlink that they clearly don't want me to know.

"Just spit it out," I command, prepared to use my alpha tone if they refuse.

Cam grabs the back of his neck, digging his fingers into the muscles. "There have been some conversations in our pack about what it means for you not to have a luna. How that will impact the stability of the pack."

I tense, digging my nails into my palms. "I see."

"I've tried to assuage their concerns for now, but we're going to need a plan, Finn." Cam pauses briefly, making eye contact with me. "You know you need to get laid, but it's more than that. You need a line of succession. Which means you need to come to terms with having a chosen mate."

A wave of nausea rolls through me at the thought of being with another wolf—anyone but Lucky. The abysmal relationship I had with Blaire also makes me question whether I'm destined to have a mate and a luna by my side. I know it's part of my responsibilities as the alpha, but I can't help shake this feeling that there's no one in Knottingham my wolf will allow into his heart except for the one female I can't have long-term.

"If anyone will still have him," Jagger mutters.

Cam kicks him hard under the table.

"Ouch! Fuck, Asshole!" Jagger shouts, bending to rub his shin.

Cam shrugs. "Grow a pair, Jagger."

Jagger glares at Cam, who meets his angry gaze. The two of them are on the verge of a fistfight. It wouldn't be the first time it's happened; they always seem to do more damage to the furniture than each other.

"Knock it off, you two. I don't have the energy to break up another one of your bullshit fights." I relax my shoulders, blowing out a deep breath. "I'll figure out a succession plan in the coming weeks. I'll need to talk to the elders about it. See what they recommend in this situation since it's so unorthodox."

"We got your back, Finn. No matter what you decide," Cam says reassuringly.

I nod in appreciation, unable to express in words how much his support means to me. How much all their support means. What's happening isn't

the future that any of us planned when we were growing up. While it may seem to impact me most on the surface, Cam, Jagger, and Max will also suffer the consequences, too. Most alphas elevate their closest friends to leadership roles when they take over, so if I'm ousted, they're gone, too. As much as I'd like to pretend there are likely years before that might happen, I'm not naive. A pack can't operate without a luna forever. Some might argue that Duskmoor has been without one for too long already.

The guys eat in silence as the cafeteria begins to slowly empty. It isn't long until I'm sitting at the table alone, waiting for Maya to finish her shift. The quietness is both a blessing and a curse, allowing my thoughts to run rampant with possibilities of what could happen in the coming weeks and months. I have no idea how the elders will react. I've purposefully avoided all of them for days now, especially my father. I'm honestly surprised he hasn't shown up and dragged me by the ear to his house to have a long chat about how I managed to fuck this up so much.

Dropping my head in my hands, I let out a long exhale, hoping it will alleviate some of the building tension in my muscles, the churning in my gut. The discomfort I've been feeling has been growing for weeks and intensified after the bond was broken. No amount of stretching or stomach tonic relieves the strain. I'm beginning to wonder if this is my new reality without a mate. Destined to be in a state of perpetual discomfort for the rest of my life.

"Hey there," Maya says softly, her chocolatey scent wafting through the air, mixed with a hint of vanilla likely from whatever dessert she made. "Any chance you want to join me in the kitchen? I have a few more things to clean up before I can go."

"That sounds great." I stand up and follow her behind the metal doors into the empty commercial-grade kitchen. Every surface is perfectly polished, and all the dishes are put away except for one stack. It's astonishing how quickly the team was able to clean up from cooking and serving dinner to a few hundred pack members.

Maya points to two plates wrapped in foil as she starts putting the final dishes away. "I made sure to get you a heavy scoop of everything we served. I know how much you enjoy carbs," she teases, playfully hitting my chest.

A surge of desire rushes through me at the brief contact, igniting a fire that won't be easily put out—one I'm not sure I want to douse. My wolf

whimpers, pleading with me to touch her.

Her breath hitches as the sweet smell of her arousal fills the air. “Why are you staring at me like that, Finn?”

“Like what?”

She bites the corner of her bottom lip as her cheeks flush. “Like you want to eat me.”

I take two steps forward, caging her in with my arms. “Maybe I do.”

She swallows hard as her chest heaves. Her nipples pebble against her thin shirt, and I’ve never been more grateful that we finally found her clothes that fit her body properly.

“You tempt me, Lucky. More than anyone ever has.” I place a hand on her waist. “You make me want to do things to you…”

She holds my gaze for a few seconds, staring into the depths of my soul, like she knows exactly what I’m thinking. How I’m feeling. What I’m wanting. It’s the most connected I’ve felt to a female in my entire life.

I war with myself on what to do next. The logical part of my brain urges me to take my time. To kiss her slowly. Tease her. Ease her into it. My hard cock has drastically different ideas, strongly suggesting I bury myself inside her. Needless to say, my wolf agrees with my cock.

Before I can decide, Maya reaches for the hem of her shirt, pulling it over her head and tossing it on the floor. With the most beautiful grin I’ve ever seen, she whispers, “It looks like I’m on the menu, Finn. Care for a taste?”

I stare at her for a moment, my body frozen.

“Finn?”

I shake myself. “Fuck yes, I do,” I growl, my mouth descending immediately on her hard nipple. The feel of her bare skin against my lips sends a jolt of electricity coursing through my veins, waking every cell in my body and pouring gasoline on the fire already inside of me. I suck her breast like my life depends on it while I circle her other nipple with my thumb.

She arches into my touch, and a soft moan escapes her mouth. “More, Finn. I need more.”

I drag my tongue up her chest and neck until my face hovers over hers. “Tell me I can taste you. Say yes, and I’ll be on my knees for you, Lucky. Lapping you up like you’re the best godsdamn dessert I’ve ever had.”

Her eyes flare with desire, and the scent of her arousal intensifies. I know her answer without her saying a word, but I still wait. I want her verbal consent. I need it. I have to know she wants me at this moment as bad as I want her.

“Please, Finn,” she begs, bracing her arms on the metal counter and lifting her hips.

A growl tumbles out of me, vibrating my entire chest. I yank down her leggings and underwear in one swift motion, then toss them on the floor, along with her shoes. Taking a step back, I stare at the gorgeous naked female spread out on the counter for me. Her hair is pulled up in a ponytail from working, her boobs are heavy, begging to be touched again, and her pussy is dripping wet.

Because she wants this. Wants me.

I’ll be damned if that’s not the hottest thing in the entire world. After everything that’s happened, to know another female craves me. Chooses me. Even if it’s only for now and can’t blossom into anything more.

I drop to my knees and spread her legs farther apart before pulling her ass to the edge of the table. She yelps, a mix of excitement and surprise followed by the most glorious giggle that warms my heart. There’s something magical about this female that I don’t understand.

Running my nose up through her wet folds, I inhale deeply, breathing in the sweetness of her arousal mixed with the chocolate scent that is so uniquely her. “Fates, Lucky. You smell incredible. I could bury myself in your pussy and be the happiest man alive.”

She runs her fingers through my hair, wrapping her fingers around my strands. “Then why don’t you?”

A wicked grin splits my face as I devour her. Licking one long stroke from bottom to tip with a flick at the end on her clit that elicits another moan from her. I repeat the motion over and over until her body begins to tremble. I take that as my sign to ratchet up my efforts and slide two fingers inside her tight core, her walls gripping me like a godsdamned vise. I pump in and out of her slowly as I alternate between licking and sucking on her clit.

“Oh my God, Finn,” she whimpers, pulling tightly on my hair. “This feels so good.”

I growl into her warm, wet pussy, not stopping my fingers or my tongue. I need her to fall over the edge with me. I need to hear my name on

her lips when she comes.

Closing my lips tightly around her clit, I suck deeply as I curl my fingers into her G-spot. Her hips buck against my face, chasing more friction than I'm giving her, as if that's even possible.

"I'm so close, Finn. Don't. Stop. Please."

"Come for me, Lucky," I demand. "Let go for me."

As if I gave her a command with my alpha tone, she instantly shatters for me. Her body thrashes against my face as she drenches me with her sweet juices. I don't stop licking, sucking, and pumping until she becomes limp.

She pants heavily, unable to catch her breath. "That was… I've never… No one has ever made me feel that way."

A wave of pride washes over me, knowing I'm the first man to elicit that level of pleasure from her. I'll wear it as a godsdamn badge of honor for the rest of my life.

I remove my fingers from her pussy and stand up. "Best dessert ever. Wouldn't mind going for another whenever you're up for it." I stick my two fingers in my mouth and lick them clean as Maya watches me intently.

"Do you want me to…" She nods toward the bulge in my pants.

I shake my head. "Tonight was all about you, Maya. Being able to watch you come was more than enough."

"But don't you need more to help the pack?"

My chest tightens with her words. She's not even been here a month, and she's already putting the needs of the pack first. Willing to help out in whatever way she can. She would make such a great… It doesn't matter. Thoughts like that are pointless when it could never happen.

My hand cups her face as I stare deeply into her brown eyes, silently trying to communicate how much gratitude I have for her. How much want and need thrums through every fiber of my being for her.

"Trust me, if that didn't ease some of the sexual frustration, nothing will."

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CHAPTER 21
MAYA

"Spill the tea, girl," Hera demands, sitting cross-legged across from me on the couch in my apartment. "You've been walking around town for the past three days with this freshly fucked glow on your face, and I've been dying to know who put it there."

I hold the piping hot cup of coffee to my lips, inhaling the hazelnut aroma, a small reminder of my life in the human world. "A girl doesn't kiss and tell."

"Fine. Be that way." Hera takes a sip of her tea, appraising me with her eyes. "I'll guess. My money's on Gideon. He might be almost five hundred, but I've seen him naked. His dick resembles a thick log, and he's unattached."

I burst out laughing. "You can't be serious. Wait. Have *you* fucked Gideon? You seem very knowledgeable."

Hera shrugs. "Who knows? Duskmoor has turned into a twenty-four-seven fuck fest, and none of us are making the wisest decisions about whose beds we end up in these days." She taps her fingers against her pink lip. "What about Jagger? He flirts with you a lot and has made his intentions *very* well known. And I can vouch that a night or two in bed with him will definitely give you a nice post-orgasm glow for a few days." She grins widely, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"What?! You've slept with Jagger?" My mouth drops open, shocked as hell that the prim-and-proper woman I've always envisioned Hera to be would walk on the wild side with the pack's most notorious playboy.

“A few times.” Her eyebrows arch high and wiggle. “That man knows what to do with his tongue. I’m not sure anyone else could top him, honestly.”

“I’m not sure how to respond. You and Jagger. Never would’ve guessed. It’s honestly more shocking than the possibility of you and Gideon fucking.”

She lifts a shoulder before dropping it. “It was only a fling. He’s not the type to settle down, and I’m looking for something permanent. I want a mate and a family one day.” She stares off into the distance wistfully, then sighs. “Eventually I’ll find the wolf for me. But in the meantime, back to you. What exactly happened with you and Finn?”

“How do you know it was Finn?” I ask, bringing the cup to my lips again, attempting to hide the smile on my face.

“Please. It’s obvious to literally everyone who sees you together, except maybe the two of you. Also, my uncontrollable need to mess around with fuckboys has diminished drastically since your glow first made its appearance. I can’t say I’m surprised. There has always been a connection between the two of you from the moment you stepped into Miraluna, even if the two of you are both fighting it.”

I shake my head, unable to believe Finn could have had any feelings for me when he was committed to Blaire. “You’re reading too much into the animosity between us in the beginning. I thought he was going to murder me, not fuck me.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t change the fact that the tension between you has been simmering for a long time. So, spill!”

I groan, tossing my head against the couch cushion. “Fine. But you can’t breathe a word of this to anyone. I’m not sure how Finn will feel if other people know.”

“My lips are sealed,” Hera replies, mimicking zipping her lips and throwing away the key. “Though for the record, the pack knows he’s getting attention from someone. The overwhelming horniness was real, and everyone’s noticed it’s simmered down a bit. It’s led to a huge decrease in the number of wolves fucking outside. Everyone seems to be able to control their urges enough to at least make it inside now, which is a huge win for the entire pack.”

“Oh God,” I groan. Then I proceed to fill her in on our first kiss and what happened a few nights ago in the kitchen. Hera asks countless

questions and wants *way* more details than I'm normally open to giving, but for some reason, I trust her.

"So, where do things go from here with the two of you?" she asks, biting the corner of her bottom lip.

"I don't know. It's all so new. He's been through a lot recently. I'm trying to take it one day at a time." I intentionally leave out how I'm secretly hoping what's happening between Finn and me will grow into something more, once he's healed from the trauma of the broken mate bond. I know he isn't ready for anything serious right now, and I'm not sure I am, either, but I like knowing there's a possibility of a future for us, no matter how far off in the distance it might be.

"Uh-huh." There's a hint of discomfort on her face, almost like she has something she wants to tell me but isn't sure exactly how to say it.

"Do you want to tell me—"

My phone rings, and Finn's name flashes on the screen. I hold a finger and answer the call. "Hey there."

"Hey. Do you have plans for dinner?"

"Just meeting you at the cafeteria in thirty minutes. Why?"

"What if we did something different? Perhaps went to a restaurant instead."

My heart leaps. He's asking me on a date. It's been years since anyone has done that.

Actually, I'm not sure Quentin technically ever did. When we started seeing each other, it was always hanging out at his place or with a group of mutual friends. I'm not sure he ever took me to an actual sit-down restaurant in the two years we were together. A fast-food drive-thru was his best effort.

"That sounds great. What time?"

"Can you be ready in ten minutes? I'm done with work and can head your way."

"Yep. See you then," I reply before ending the call.

"What's that all about?" Hera asks with a knowing smile.

"I think Finn just asked me out on a date. He's going to be here in ten minutes. I have to get ready." I jump off the couch and head toward my bedroom, Hera following behind me.

In the next few minutes, we quickly go through my limited clothing options and pick out a pair of dark jeans and an off-the-shoulder sweater.

She helps curl my hair while I throw on the tiniest bit of makeup, not wanting to look like I tried too hard.

I finish getting ready at the same time as there's a loud knock on my door. "He's here! Why am I so nervous?"

Hera smiles softly at me, taking my hands. "Because something good is happening, Maya. Enjoy your night out with Finn. Bask in the fun while you can. You never know—"

Finn knocks again.

"I should probably answer the door," I reply, heading out of my bedroom into the living room with Hera on my heels.

When I open the door, Finn is standing in the hallway wearing a pair of dark jeans that hug his muscular thighs and a perfectly tailored black button-down shirt. His piercing ice-blue eyes are mesmerizing against his tan skin. It's almost impossible not to get lost in them.

"Have a good time, you two. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Hera teases, squeezing past us and leaving.

"You look… You look beautiful, Lucky." He swallows hard, his eyes not leaving mine. "Are you ready to go?"

I nod and slip my phone into my back pocket, then walk out the door, closing it behind me.

The journey to the restaurant in Finn's SUV only takes about five minutes, and we sit in silence the entire time. I can't tell whether we're both too nervous to start up a conversation or trying to process the implications of what we're doing. What it might mean for our future.

For the first time in my life, I'm hopeful. Allowing myself to envision a world where I could be happy. A place I could call home. Potentially a man by my side who would love and protect me. I know it's probably too early to admit those feelings to anyone, let alone Finn, but I know they're simmering under the surface. I've had this pull toward him since we met, even when I thought he might murder me. There was something drawing me to him. Maybe a part of me always knew we could end up here, even if I didn't understand it in the beginning.

Once we arrive at the restaurant, a waiter shows us to a table in the back corner. The smell of fresh pasta wafts in the air as Finn holds out my chair for me. I take a seat, and he gently pushes me toward the table. It's the most heart-tugging gesture—the kind you see on television and never expect to happen in real life.

“Thanks for coming out with me tonight, Lucky,” he says, looking at me while holding his menu open. “I thought it would be nice for us to get away from the pack headquarters for once. I know it all can be a lot to handle sometimes.”

I chuckle. “That might be the understatement of the century. I’m glad I had the night off so I could join you.”

“Me, too. Do you want to keep working in the kitchen long-term? Or have you given any thought to going back to school?”

I take a drink of my water, contemplating how to answer his question when I’m not one hundred percent sure of the answer myself. “Well, I definitely don’t want to pursue data analytics anymore. I know that much.”

Finn scrunches his forehead. “I have no idea exactly what that is, but it sounds boring as hell.”

“You have no idea. It’s what I was pursuing my degree in before… this. I chose it because it offered the most long-term job security.”

“And if you could do anything you wanted, what would you pick?” The soft overhead lighting illuminates his face, making his blue eyes sparkle and draw me in.

My mouth goes dry at the way he looks at me, like no one ever has before. “I don’t know. I really enjoy cooking and baking.”

“I’m a big fan of your dessert,” he teases, a smirk sliding across his face.

“Finn!” I blush and cover my face with both hands.

“What? It’s the truth. Best one I’ve ever had.”

Warmth spreads throughout my body, cocooning me in a blanket of safety and encouraging me to let him into my heart. It’s the exact opposite of how I felt with Quentin when I operated in constant fight-or-flight mode.

Finn spends the next hour telling me about his childhood in Duskmoor. How he and Cam were born at almost the same time and have been inseparable ever since. What it was like growing up having his dad as the alpha. The countless times he got into trouble, thanks to Max and Jagger’s shenanigans.

By the end of the night, I’m more confident that Duskmoor will be the perfect place for me to start this new phase of my life. That maybe it was always meant to be my permanent home. I may not understand how or why I was brought here, but I know this is where I’m meant to be.

And the man sitting across from me is a big part of that.

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CHAPTER 22
MAYA

Outside my apartment, I fumble with the key and open the door. I'm not sure why, but I'm nervous about what will happen next. I know we've been building up to this since he canceled my date with Jagger. We're going to have sex. Which I'm very excited about. But I'm also nervous. What if wolves are…different somehow? What if a little petite human is not near as fun as a wolf in bed?

"I had a wonderful time with you, Lucky," Finn says earnestly, gazing at me with a mix of adoration and lust in his eyes. "Thanks for spending your evening with me." He presses a chaste kiss to my forehead before taking a step back.

"Do you… Do you want to come inside?" I ask with a tremble in my voice.

"Only if you want me to."

"I do. A lot." I head inside my apartment, and Finn follows behind me, closing the door after him.

I drop my phone on the coffee table in the living room and turn to face him. "So…"

He offers me a kind smile. "Nothing has to happen. I'd be more than happy to spend the next hour curled up with you on the couch, watching whatever you can find on TV."

Deep down, I know he's telling the truth. He's not the type of man that would ever pressure me to do something I didn't want to do. And I'll be damned if that doesn't make me want him even more. But from my

conversation with Hera, I also know he needs this, and I desperately want to be the one who helps him. The thought of anyone else touching him makes me irrationally angry.

I may not be sure exactly what the future might hold for us, but I want to give in to my desire for him and let myself enjoy the ride we're on for as long as possible.

I deserve to have good things in my life. I should allow myself to be happy. And tonight, that means letting Finn into my bed and potentially my heart. Even if I know it's too soon after Blaire, and he's not ready to return those feelings.

"I don't want to watch TV, Finn," I reply, lifting onto my tippy toes and softly kissing him. "I'd much rather have your wicked mouth on me again and experience what it's like to have your cock inside me."

He swallows hard. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

I nod, leading him to my bedroom by the hand. Although the lights are off, there is a moonlight glow illuminating the room from the open curtains, creating the most perfect romantic mood lighting.

Finn's hand grips my waist. "I should take my time with you. Worship every inch of your body, like you deserve, but I'm not sure I'm going to be able to control myself enough to do that. I've been on edge for days since I first tasted you. My body craves yours in a way I can't explain. I'm desperate for more of you. For all of you."

"Me too, Finn. I don't want you to be gentle with me. I want to experience everything with you. Show me what it's like to have my body owned by the Alpha of Duskmoor."

He inhales sharply, and his eyes glow silver. "Music to my fucking ears, Lucky." He crashes his lips to mine, kissing me with reckless abandon that makes it impossible to catch my breath. Each stroke of his tongue inside my mouth pours gasoline on the fire burning between my legs. His hands wander along my curves, caressing and squeezing every inch of me and leaving me wanting more.

"Too many clothes," he growls, breaking our kiss and pulling my shirt over my head. He quickly removes his shirt after, and I stare at his sculpted abs, questioning whether the man spends hours of his day in the gym without me noticing or if this is some weird genetic blessing all shifters have.

His hands palm my breasts, making them heavier with each swipe of his thumbs on my nipples. I'm not sure how it's possible, but it feels like his fingers are everywhere on me at once, even though they're physically not. It's like his touch is sending shockwaves through my nervous system, propelling me higher and higher into a dreamlike state I'm not sure I ever want to come out of.

I work to unbutton his jeans, then tug them down to his knees before he kicks off his shoes and completely removes them. His cock strains against the fabric of his boxers, begging to be unleashed. I can already tell that its mere girth is going to wreck me in the best way possible.

"On the bed, Lucky," he commands. "I need my mouth on that delicious pussy of yours."

My breath hitches as a shiver runs down my spine. I strip off my jeans and remove my lace underwear, allowing both of them to pool on the floor. He never takes his gaze off me, eyeing me like I'm the best meal he's ever had and he's desperate for seconds. Talk about a way to stroke a gal's ego.

As soon as I sit on the bed and lean back on my elbows, Finn runs his fingers up my wet slit. "Fucking drenched for me like I knew you'd be. I could smell your arousal at dinner. Do you know how intoxicating it is to know that you want me?"

I shake my head, my chest heaving.

"It's the biggest fucking turn-on of my life. Now, lie back and let me enjoy my dessert."

He takes a fast lick up my center, and I practically fly off the bed. His hands grip my hips, pinning me down as he fucks me with his tongue at a pace I didn't think was humanly possible. And maybe it's not. He's a shifter, after all. Perhaps they're blessed with magical tongue capabilities that are solely designed to make women lose their minds. If so, they could make a shit ton of money teaching men in the human world their techniques, because I've never had anyone eat me out anywhere close to as good as the way Finn does.

"Holy shit, Finn," I moan, gripping the sheets.

"That's my girl." My heart soars with his words. No man has ever referred to me as his girl before, and it does something to my soul that I can't quite explain. "You're going to come on my tongue, then my cock."

My mind goes completely blank, consumed by my building desire. The coil inside me is tightening more and more until I'm seconds away from

exploding. Right when I think I can't take it any longer, Finn blows a hot breath directly on my clit, and I fucking shatter into a million pieces. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck, Finn!" I scream, writhing against the bed and his mouth.

He doesn't relent. Continuing to lick and suck like it's his life depends on it.

As my body relaxes, he tears himself away from my core, his face covered with my arousal and wearing a wicked smirk. "Fates, Lucky. I could listen to you scream my name every day for the rest of my life, and I'd still want to hear more of it."

I can't speak, overcome with a combination of the massive orgasm and his words. I know it's not uncommon for men to make a lot of promises during sex that they don't always mean, but there's part of me that hopes he was telling the truth. That he can see a future with me. Because there's no doubt in my mind that I can see one with him.

Finn palms his bulge through his boxers before pushing them down. His cock springs forward, a drip of precum at the tip, and I know for certain I may not be able to walk after he fucks me.

"Are you sure you want this, Lucky? That you want me?" he asks, standing between my legs at the edge of the bed.

"Yes, Finn. I want you to fuck me. Please."

The hottest growl I've ever heard comes out of him, a mix of man and wolf, sending a jolt of passion straight to my already wet core. He notches his cock at my entrance, then slowly sinks into me. "Fuck, Lucky. You feel so fucking amazing."

His thick cock stretches me, my walls fluttering around him even though he's not moving yet. My body is a powder keg, on the verge of exploding from the mere sensation of him inside me. I don't know how I'll survive once he actually starts fucking me.

"I can't wait much longer. I need to move. Are you ready for me?"

"Yes," I pant, clenching the sheets in my fists.

He begins thrusting in and out of me at a breakneck pace, each rigid thrust of his cock hitting every inch of my pussy. It's the most pleasure I've ever experienced, and we're barely a minute in. It doesn't take long until I feel an orgasm building in me, climbing higher and higher with every move of his hips until I'm hanging on the edge of a cliff, begging to fall over.

"Oh my God, Finn!" I scream, arching off the bed as the most intense climax of my life tears through me.

He continues to piston into me, not stopping as my walls clench around his cock. “Fates! I love it when you come on my cock. The way you grip me. Nothing like it in the whole godsdamn world.”

A litany of moans, whimpers, and groans comes out of me, and probably some rambling that doesn’t make any sense. My brain is unable to hold anything other than indescribable pleasure at the moment.

As he picks up the pace once again, thrusting into me harder than ever, a flash of wariness dashes across his face as his cock swells inside me. It’s gone so quickly that I question if I really saw it. Whatever it was causes him to dig his hands into my hips and pound me until the point of almost breaking me in half, and I fucking love every minute of it.

“I’m going to come, Lucky. Holy fuck!” he groans, his cock throbbing inside me, coating my pussy walls with his cum. His hips continue to move as he slowly rides the wave of his orgasm until his muscles relax and a blissful smile slides across his face. “That was… You are amazing.”

“Right back at ya,” I reply, my heart beating ferociously.

He rests his forehead against mine. “I’m never going to forget tonight, Lucky.”

“Me neither,” I whisper, as I wish this night would never end. That it would become the first of many together. The start of something more.

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CHAPTER 23
FINN

The only thing worse than having to climb out of Maya's embrace the next morning is having to leave to meet with the elders. Fortunately, Cam is an excellent beta and shouted loud enough at me via mindlink to wake me up from what might've been the best sleep of my life. The only thing that would've made the night with Maya better was if I had truly knotted her, but I couldn't let that happen. She has no idea about knotting, nor is it something my wolf should want to do with a human—with anyone other than our mate.

I slip out of her bed and throw on the previous day's clothes before heading to the meeting on the first floor. I walk in with a minute to spare, running a hand through my hair to hopefully make it less obvious that I just got out of bed.

"Finn." My dad moves from next to the wall, his body still strong despite his age and the fact he stepped down as alpha three years ago. I let him pull me into a hug, my wolf relishing the scents of family. "I need to speak to you."

I pull away and offer him a smile. "Dinner with you and Mom soon?"

Gideon pokes his head out from the meeting room. "Ready, you two? I promised my grandpup I'd meet her for breakfast after this."

I look at Dad, giving him the chance to say we need another minute. He likely wants to question me after everything that happened with Blaire, but if it's something more, I want to make sure I give him the opportunity. As

the past alpha and the man who taught me everything, I respect him more than anyone else in my life.

Dad nods. “Let’s head in. I know your mother would love to have you over for dinner.”

I follow him into the meeting space and sit at the head of the table. “Thank you all for coming in today,” I start, knowing it’s best to be as polite as possible with the elders. They can easily get their fur in a bunch if they sense an ounce of annoyance. “I was hoping to speak about—”

“The witch,” Angelica cuts me off, her voice grainy.

I shake my head, looking around the table. No one else seems surprised by the topic. “No.” I have no plans to talk to this group about Maya *ever*. In my mind, her presence in Duskmoor is a done deal. Not up for discussion with anyone.

And since when do the elders involve themselves in who I allow into the pack?

Dad arches his eyebrows at me, suggesting I should’ve seen this coming from a mile away. Maybe I would’ve if they brought up her presence almost a month ago, when she first showed up. But now?

Angelica gives me a frosty smile. “I wasn’t asking, Alpha. While we don’t necessarily blame you for what happened with Blaire”—she shoots a look I can’t decipher at my dad— “we have a number of concerns about the witch you brought into our midst.”

“What do you mean? She came to us in need of a new home, and we already have witches in the pack,” I reply sternly, crossing my arms. Although I’m not being completely forthcoming with the elders, I’m not technically lying. Learning how to walk the fine line between the two is one of the many benefits of meeting with Gideon regularly. He’s helped hone my ability to skate around the truth without alerting anyone to it.

I don’t think he’d be pleased to know that’s what I’m taking away from our time together, though.

My dad scratches his nose as if trying to signal me. He’s likely avoiding speaking to me via mindlink since we’ve been chastised one too many times for having private conversations in these meetings. Turns out, the other elders get pretty pissy when they’re not included.

And the first one with something to say is always Angelica.

“We are not worried about her presence in the pack.” Remus’s voice is thick with age. As the oldest member of the pack, he’s often unable to make

these meetings, but when he speaks, I know to listen.

I glance around the table before leaning back in my chair. “What are you worried about, then?”

“How much time you’re spending with her,” Angelica cuts in. Clearly, she’s the one leading whatever this shitshow is. Not that I’m surprised. It doesn’t take much for Angelica to stir up imaginary problems. I swear she gets off on it.

“While I appreciate your concern, it’s none of your business who I choose to spend my time with. Now, I’d like to discuss succession planning for the pack. With my broken mating—”

Angelica glares at my dad before turning her gaze back to me. “We can talk about succession planning later.”

I furrow my brow. “I believe it’s imperative for us to discuss it now.”

She slams her palm down on the table, making everyone jump. “We know you’re spending all your free time with the witch. Her smell is all over you this morning, making it obvious to anyone with a nose that you’re sleeping with her. Now we have to figure out how to do damage control thanks to your shitty decisions.”

“Damage control?” I ask, confused about why what I’m doing with Maya would be such a concern. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so brazen to come waltzing in without taking a shower and letting everyone smell her on me, but that seems like a drop in the bucket compared to a broken fated mate bond.

My dad sighs heavily. “You know alphas can’t mate with witches, right?”

I nod slowly. “Yes. I’m very aware of the rules governing my life and role.”

It’s not a requirement I’ve thought about extensively over the years since I’ve never felt any strong attraction to any other creature in Miraluna. Plus, Maya isn’t actually a witch—

She’s a human.

Which is also not a wolf.

Fuck.

She’s not a wolf.

My wolf snarls, not liking it one bit and threatening to burst from my skin.

“Then you can understand how moving from Blaire to a witch is terrible optics to the pack?” Angelica asks in a tone that suggests she doesn’t believe I actually know that. “You’re moving on quickly from a broken mate bond to sleeping with someone who could never become your luna.”

Fates. I fucking hate it when Angelica is right.

“Well, come now, Angelica,” Joselyn, Max’s grandma, cuts in from her seat at the end of the table. “Most of the wolves are happy Finn isn’t howling in pain every night and stirring up everyone’s hormones. I can’t stomach finding another pair of wolves fucking in the grocery aisle without wanting to poke out my eyeballs.”

I grimace slightly. While I appreciate Joselyn’s support, it’s about time she let it go. It was one time when I was a teen. I don’t need to be constantly reminded of my poor decisions. Trust me—I’m just as scarred from her seeing me buck naked, balls deep in a female, as she was finding us. And from what I’ve heard, that’s tame compared to what was going on in the pack before I started hooking up with Maya.

Angelica turns her ire toward Joselyn. “You know it’s so much more than that. He’s not a beta or even an enforcer like your grandson. What he does impacts the entire pack. How many of our wolves insisted on being out with him, howling at the moon? I don’t care if he wants to dip his willy in another female, but for Fate’s sake, it needs to be with another wolf! What does it say to have our alpha rebounding with a witch?!”

“That it’s a rebound—” Joselyn retorts.

“It tells the pack he’s not serious about finding a luna. That *we* aren’t his priority. It’s causing stress in the pack, all so he can get his dick wet—”

“Enough,” I cut her off, my tone fully alpha. I respect my elders and will listen, but I refuse to let her speak negatively about Maya. “What has supposedly happened that has you so concerned about the pack? I’ve done what was needed to help with the hormone problem.”

She sticks her chin in the air, her long white hair falling behind her. “That was the tip of the iceberg. The males are fighting. Three females went into heat early.”

“Alpha,” my dad starts, formally addressing me to show my wolf he’s no longer a threat as a previous alpha. “When alphas go unmated for too long, it not only impacts the alpha, physically and mentally, but also the pack. The females recognize the need for an heir, and being near you, even for only a few minutes, can cause them to go into heat. The males see the

alpha's claim to the throne weakening and start challenging their way to the top. It speaks to your pack's belief in your strength that they haven't started challenging *you* yet."

"Why was I not told about this earlier?" I demand.

"It usually doesn't happen until an alpha is fifty or sixty and still unmated. We believe it's happening sooner because of your strength. Everything is happening…earlier for you."

Remus shrugs. "My best guess is your tie to Blaire held it off temporarily. Then, when she rejected the bond, the impacts are hitting all at once, rather than slowly coming in, like we've seen in the past."

I let out a deep breath, willing myself not to think about how much I fucked up with Blaire. To remind myself that *she* was the one who walked away, not me. I never hurt her. I tried to get to know her. She was the one who constantly shut me down. I may not have gone out of my way to make her fall in love with me, but she didn't put in any effort, either.

This isn't all on me. At least, not entirely.

But it's my pack, so I'm responsible for fixing it.

I run my fingers through my hair. "And the only way to make it stop is for me to choose a mate?"

"A mate who isn't a witch," Angelica confirms. "Or step down as alpha."

My heart sinks as my wolf urges me to shift, but I force him down, holding myself together long enough to let the rest of the elders say their piece.

Once it's over, I walk out in a daze, uncertain what anyone said in the last half hour or what I'm going to do about any of it.

Ten minutes later, I'm sneaking down the hall to my apartment, not wanting to tell Maya about any of this until I know what I'm going to do next. I can't stomach the idea of finding another mate this quickly—or potentially ever—but I also can't fathom relinquishing my role as alpha. It's my family's legacy. I was destined to become Duskmoor's alpha. My firstborn is meant to be the next. But all of that is at risk now because of me. I'm outside my door, unlocking it when Max yells down the hall, "Finn!"

I try to ignore my enforcer, grabbing the handle of the door.

He quickly closes the distance between us, and before I can tell him to wait until he's inside, he grouses, "Gran mindlinked me. I can't believe

those assholes told you to break things off with Maya!”

Fucking mindlink gossip. I’m sure Max’s grandmother talked to him about what happened before I was out of the room, even though it’s supposed to remain confidential.

“What?” A soft voice comes from behind me, and my muscles tense.

I consider throttling Max for not keeping his mouth fucking shut. *That* would’ve been a great thing to mindlink. Why have the ability to speak into someone’s head if you’re going to go around announcing shit out loud?

Max’s wide eyes meet mine, clearly realizing what he let slip. We both turn.

“It’s not Finn’s fault. Alphas can’t *mate* with anyone who’s not a wolf,” Max explains, and Maya raises her eyebrows, her gaze flicking between me and Max.

Oh, Fates. This is not how I wanted to break the news to her. I would’ve preferred to tell her how much she means to me. How I’ll never forget our night together. How I wish I could spend more time with her. And then I’d explain my role in the pack and how important it is that I find a mate. How I have to always do what’s best for the pack.

And share how if it were up to me, and I wasn’t the alpha, I’d pick her.

But I’m not.

So, I can’t.

“Not that you were planning on mating or anything. But everyone has been able to smell you on Finn for the past few days. We all know you’re hooking up,” Max adds, apparently unable to stop running his fucking mouth. “Most of the pack is happy Finn isn’t hurting and making us all extremely horny anymore… Well, all of us except Jagger. He seems pretty pissed that Hera isn’t climbing him like a tree. But that’s a him problem. Anyway, the elders are pretty pissed about Finn sleeping with you since alphas can’t mate with non-wolves—”

“Max,” I growl. “Shut the fuck up.”

“Right.” My enforcer nods. “I should probably get going. I’ve got to be…somewhere.”

I rub my eyes, praying to the Moon Goddess that this has all been a bad dream, and I’m going to wake back up in Lucky’s bed. But it turns out, I’m not lucky either.

She’s leaning against the doorframe to her apartment, watching me. “Sounds like we need to talk.”

Unfortunately, we do.

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CHAPTER 24
MAYA

"Did you know?" I demand, attempting to keep my temper under control while it feels like claws are ripping through my chest from the inside. I know I shouldn't feel this way. We never made any promises of a future. But it felt like there *could* be one. And I was willing to take things slow to get there.

Despite the anger surging through my body, I take in the man before me, the one who changed the very marrow of my being last night. His handsome face is lined with worry, his piercing blue eyes full of sadness. "Before you fucked me, did you know alphas couldn't mate with anyone except other wolves?"

My heart is on the verge of cracking as I wait for his answer, hoping this is news to him, too. Praying he didn't know we couldn't have any type of future together before he took me to bed. Or if he did, he planned all along to ignore whatever bullshit rules the elders have in place and be with me regardless. Blaire wanted free will, and maybe Finn does, too.

Finn takes a breath and drags a hand down his face, silently confirming my greatest fear—he knew all along and didn't bother to tell me.

He used me, just like everyone else in my life has.

"You knew," I whisper, unable to speak any louder as the future I was planning in my head comes crumbling down. A future he never promised, but I wanted anyway. Like a complete and utter fool.

Sitting down heavily, Finn watches me for a moment. "I've always known about the rules governing my life as alpha, but it's not like they're in

the forefront of my mind all the time. I didn't mean to mislead you, Maya." He closes his eyes briefly before opening them and meeting my gaze. "The elders are concerned about what's happening in the pack. The consequences of me not having a luna are escalating faster than anticipated. It's starting to destabilize everything."

My shoulders drop. "I thought us being together would help the pack. I thought… It doesn't matter."

"It did for a couple of days." He sighs loudly, then runs a hand through his hair. "But the situation has changed. The only way I can fix what's happening within the pack is to find a mate. And she has to be a wolf."

Clenching my fists against my leg, I fight back the tears brimming in my eyes. The last thing I want is Finn to see me cry. To know the impact he's having on me. To learn how much I've fallen for him in such a short period of time. To find out that I let him into my heart.

I blow out a deep breath. "I don't understand why you're being forced to choose another wolf as your mate. There are other wolves in the pack who have witches as mates right now. How do you know you couldn't do the same? Has another alpha ever tried to mate with someone who wasn't a wolf?" My voice trembles as the words come out. I don't like how vulnerable I sound, but I have to know whether he's giving up on us because of some bullshit archaic rule that no one has ever dared to test, or if he has cold, hard facts that prove it won't work.

"It couldn't work even if you were a witch, Maya." There's a hint of sadness in his voice and on his face. He shakes his head slightly. "Not that it matters."

Because I'm not a witch. I'm just a human. That's the part he's not saying out loud.

"I see," I reply, anger rising in me again and overtaking the hurt coursing through my veins. "I'm the poor human who brings nothing to the table besides being an easy fuck when you needed one. I'm glad I was of service to you…and the pack." A deep crack forms in my heart, piercing a part of my soul and almost taking my breath away.

Obviously, what I thought we shared was all in my head, and I refuse to lie to myself any longer. If this isn't the definition of unrequited love, I don't know what is.

Finn's elbows are on the table, his head in his hands. "That's not what you are. Don't say that, Lucky."

I freeze, my steps faltering as my anger intensifies. “Don’t call me that, Finnegan. Friends and lovers have nicknames. Men who use women call them by their first names. Or nothing at all.”

“I wasn’t using you, *Lucky*.” Despite the anguish in his tone, he can’t even bother to look at me.

My stomach churns, the acid threatening to come up as I wrap my arms around myself to quell the feeling. This wasn’t all in my head. His actions, his words, they made me believe he actually wanted me. Desired me. Might even consider a future with me.

If he had told me there was no chance of us ever being together long-term, I don’t know if I would’ve let him into my bed last night. And I definitely would’ve kept him out of my heart. Built an impenetrable stone wall around it to keep him out.

“You were using me, Finn,” I clarify, trying to keep my voice calm. “I guess you thought it was fine since I owed you for taking me in—”

He’s up and in my face, preventing me from getting another word out. His hands grip my upper arms lightly. Maybe I should be scared of the livid look on his face, except I know he wouldn’t hurt me. “You owe me nothing. You’re part of this pack. You’re mine. And I take care of what is mine.”

I shake my head slowly, catching the sob in my chest before it can escape. “I’m not yours, Finn. I’m just another orphan in another foster home. Accurately aware of the burden I am on others. On you. On the pack.”

“You are not a burden,” he growls. “And even if you were, I’d never ask for…”

“Sex?” I offer when it appears he can’t find the right word. “You wouldn’t be the first man in my life to expect it from me for providing a warm place to sleep and food on the table.”

A low rumble comes from him. “I would never ask that of you or any other member of my pack as a way to *pay me back* for looking out for them.” He practically spits the words, his expression a mask of disgust.

I tip my head back and offer him a forced smile. “Okay.”

“That’s all you have to say? Okay?”

I throw my hands up. “What do you want me to say, Finn? You spent the night in my bed, and barely twelve hours later I’m learning that there’s no potential future between us. That the elders have issues with you spending time with me.” I shake my head and look at the ceiling for a

minute. “You’re the alpha, and you can’t even decide who you spend your life with. I might not understand your gods or Fates or whatever they are, but I struggle to believe they’d force the strongest wolf in Miraluna to be with someone he doesn’t care for.”

“Then again, I guess that’s what they tried to do with you and Blaire.” I shake my head as a realization hits me. “You know what? This is on me for assuming that you wanted to be with me for more than a few nights of sex and fun. Your actions made me think otherwise, but you never said the words. And to be fair, other wolves are fucking people they don’t care about. Look at Hera and Jagger.”

He reaches out as if to grab me again before thinking better of it. “Of course I want to be with you! Last night was the best night of my life. I want to wake up wrapped around you, like I did this morning, every day until I fade. But my life is not my own. I have to do what’s best for the pack!”

I jut my chin out. “I don’t understand how what’s best for you isn’t what’s best for the pack. If you wanted to be with me, you would find a way to make it happen.”

He shakes his head. “I *can’t*, Maya. I want it so bad. But I can’t. I have to find a mate soon, and it can’t be you.”

I rub the side of my nose, begging the tears not to fall while he’s still here. “Can’t or won’t, Finn?”

“Can’t. I *can’t*.”

I cross my arms. “You won’t even try?”

He shakes his head, his eyes glowing brighter than I’ve ever seen them. “I can’t,” he forces out between gasps. “I’ve got to go.”

Stepping past me, making sure we don’t touch, he pulls open the door and literally runs down the hall. Like he can’t get away from me fast enough.

And, for once, I’m glad to see him go.

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CHAPTER 25
MAYA

"I heard someone might need some sweets!" Hera calls out, letting herself into my apartment.

I peek out from under the hoodie pulled tight around my face as I lie on my couch watching a show about vampire nurses. "Why do you have a key to my home?"

"I'm the pack healer."

"That's not a valid reason," I grumble.

She plops down on the couch, not waiting for me to move my feet out of her way. "What if you were sick and I needed to get to you?"

I drop my head onto the armrest, trying not to think about the fact there is an indent formed in the shape of my skull. Maybe twenty-four hours is too long to wallow on a couch. "In that case, let me die."

"And have the witches come after me?!" she asks in mock horror.

I glare at her. "You know I'm not a witch."

A smile widens across her face. "I sure do." She opens a bag of candy she brought with her, and a tart smell, reminiscent of cherries, hits me immediately. After taking a bite of one of the red gummies, she points the rest of it at me. "I'm very aware of what you *aren't*. What I don't know is what you *are*."

I stare at her, unsure if I'm willing to put up with this nonsense just to get a few of those sour cherries. They smell delicious, and my stomach has decided now is the time to remember I haven't eaten all day.

Or yesterday.

“I’m a human.”

She tilts her head to the side in a gesture I’m beginning to understand is common with wolves. “Are you?”

I gesture at my petite body currently swimming in the pack sweats. “Obviously.”

“Okay.” She pops another gummy into her mouth, still not offering me one. “Let’s pretend that’s true. In that case, did Finn explain what it means to be a wolf?”

“We weren’t doing a ton of talking,” I deadpan.

She winks at me. “Oh, I know. His scent was *all* over you. Not to mention how easy it was to smell your arousal every time the two of you were around each other.”

“Oh my God! Could *everyone* smell it?!”

A slow nod. “Everyone.”

Covering my eyes, I demand, “It sounds like you’d better tell me everything.”

And so, she does. She tells me about wolves’ heightened senses, which includes being able to tell who is fucking whom—thanks for the heads-up, Finn—and about pack hierarchy. She explains how, as the pack healer, she isn’t in the leadership structure with the alpha, beta, and enforcers, but she can overrule even the alpha when it comes to matters of pack health. She talks about how the pack is linked in more ways than just mentally. That pack members are super sensitive to changes in the alpha, especially one as strong as Finn. About the role of the luna in a pack and how important she is in establishing stability, care, and bonds between pack members. And how this is the first time in history that all five alphas in Knottingham are without lunas.

“It also impacts us physically,” she continues. “Finn being unmated—*truly* unmated—has thrown the wolves into turmoil. The males are fighting more. Nasty challenges have almost killed two of our younger males. The females are going into heat sooner than they should.”

I nod, recognizing that what she’s saying doesn’t sound great, but also doesn’t seem like big enough issues to force Finn to find a mate immediately. To completely strip away his choice of who he shares his life with.

“Since Finn is the alpha, he’s the only one who can stabilize the pack. To do that, he has to have a luna who is a wolf so the pack bonds can flow

through her as well."

"So, even if he wanted it to be me…" I trail off, not sure how to put my question into words.

"Unless you've been hiding a wolf under your skin, he can't pick you. He has to have a wolf luna or the pack will destroy itself from the inside out."

I bite my lip. "What if he wasn't alpha?" I don't meet her eyes, unwilling to see the judgment there. I know I shouldn't ask. After everything she explained. I could never take him from the pack. And I'm pretty sure it's not something he'd even consider. There's no way he would ever choose me over being the alpha.

Not that I blame him. My whole life has been filled with people easily casting me aside.

"Oh, friend," she replies, patting my hand. "I don't think he can. There isn't anyone in the pack who would succeed in a challenge against him. And it's almost unheard of for an alpha to step aside, like Finn's dad did. Maybe Finn could technically resign, but I'm not sure how it would turn out for him or the rest of the pack. The only reason we believe it worked for Finn and his dad was that Finn was the alpha's own heir, and his wolf's strength far outweighed his father's. And it was tremendously harder on Finn's dad than anyone knows. I worked with him every day for almost a year to help his wolf find peace with the transition."

A tear makes its way down my cheek, and I let it run, too tired to wipe it away. "I understand."

"I'm sorry, Maya. I thought you knew he couldn't pick you as his mate. I never would've encouraged the two of you to hook up if—"

"It's not your fault. Finn should've told me in the beginning and let me decide what I wanted with all the information in front of me." I swallow hard. "I don't know why I'm letting this get to me. It's not like it would've ever worked out between him and me anyway. I'm a human. The weakest creature here, and he's the strongest. Maybe I'm better off to find another place in Miraluna to call home. Or risk crossing the barrier, even if…"

"Absolutely not," Hera replies quickly, a serious look on her face. "I won't let you risk your life trying to get back to the human world. The witches are confident attempting to cross the barrier would kill you. None of us wants that to happen."

I nod solemnly. “It’s not like I have anything back there waiting for me, except my best friend, Maddie. But at least I could be me. Now I have to pretend to be a witch and lie to everyone I meet because no one in all of Miraluna wants a human in their midst.”

With a sigh, Hera *finally* holds her bag of gummies out to me. “I wish I could tell you you’re wrong, but we’ve been taught to fear humans for generations. It’s why the witches went to such great lengths to erect the barrier to protect us.” She pops another gummy into her mouth and chews it while I do the same. “I don’t know if we could ever unravel hundreds of years of animosity. It’s hard enough for the various creatures in Miraluna to coexist peacefully.”

I sit up, crossing my legs under me and pulling off my hood before grabbing a few more gummies from Hera’s bag. “So, I’m stuck in a land that hates people like me, with an alpha who doesn’t want anything to do with me. Not sure it could get much worse.”

Hera gently touches my arm. “Perhaps once all the hubbub about the barrier being crossed settles down, in a year or three, we could go on an adventure around Miraluna together. I could introduce you to the other creatures. Help you find a place where you might feel like you fit in better than you do in Duskmoor.” She makes the offer like it’s a sacrifice. “I want you here, Maya, but if you’re truly not happy, I’ll help you find somewhere you can be.”

There’s something inside me that cries out at the thought of leaving this group of wolves.

A part of me that can’t bear the thought of leaving my pack.

But I nod in agreement anyway.

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CHAPTER 26
FINN

I knock on the door to my parents' house, forcing a smile so they don't pick up on how distraught I feel after everything that happened with Maya yesterday. Though, distraught may not be the right word. My wolf has been *deranged*. My headaches are ten times worse than they have been all week. I'm constantly on the verge of shifting, which I know I can't do: my wolf will run straight back to Maya—consequences be damned.

I think he feels guilty for leaving her, and now, every minute I'm apart from her, I feel a pull to return to her apartment. To drop to my knees and apologize. To beg her to be my luna.

But I can't.

The pack needs me. And their needs have to come before everything—including my own.

"Finn!" My mother's smiling face greets me when she opens the door. There's something about seeing her rounded cheeks and apron with flour handprints on it that immediately soothes my wolf. I'm not sure if all wolves experience the same thing with their mothers or if it's stronger with mine since she was luna and still carries many of the responsibilities since I haven't found my own.

"Come in, love. I made your favorite."

"Meat with more meat?" Dad asks as he walks up behind her. I hug my mom before shaking hands with my dad.

"No." Mom rolls her eyes good-naturedly. "Steak with mashed potatoes and homemade bread. And if he eats it all, I might even have some dessert

hidden away.”

My heart clenches at the mention of dessert, thinking about Maya and—

I shake my head, forcing all thoughts of her from my mind. I can’t torture myself by thinking about Maya anymore today.

My parents’ home is large and welcoming, the exact house you’d imagine for an alpha and his mate. The kind I’ve built for me and my future mate—the place where I thought I’d eventually be living with Blaire.

Surprisingly, the pain of our broken bond is almost gone, overtaken by the scorching shame of how Maya found out that we can’t have a future together. I’m sure the remnants of being rejected by Blaire will come roaring back once my wolf calms down about Maya. As crazy as it sounds, I’m hoping it does. I’d gladly welcome the previous pain over what I’m experiencing now. This new feeling is gut-wrenching, tearing me apart from the inside, and making my wolf almost inconsolable.

I help my parents carry dishes to the table before we all sit in our usual seats. It’s weird to think about my parents having dinner without me, but since I’ve become alpha, our meals together have become few and far between. It was hard at first because my wolf and Dad’s wolf struggled to be in the same room when I became alpha, and then I became too busy with running the pack.

“How are you doing?” Mom asks, spearing a large steak and placing it on my plate.

I offer her a wry smile. “Could be better.”

Mom takes a deep breath. “About Blaire—”

“I’m so sorry.” I run my hands down my face. “I don’t know what I did that made her break our bond. To go against the Fates.”

“Finn,” my dad starts.

“I admit, I could’ve tried harder to get to know her, but I was so busy, and she never pushed for more time together. I assumed we were on the same page about having the rest of our lives to get to know each other. And she was the one who wanted us to wait longer to complete the mate bond.”

“Finnegan.” Dad’s voice is low this time, commanding. My wolf bristles, and I have to choke down a growl.

I rub a hand down my face. “I want you to know I’m sorry. I hope you’re not getting too much backlash.”

Mom grimaces. “That’s what your father and I needed to talk to you about.”

My stomach ties itself into a knot. Shit. I should've known the pack wouldn't say anything to me. And likely not to my dad. But my mom? People feel comfortable telling her their every thought, which can be a great asset, but it also means she gets their unfiltered opinions about everything, including her son's broken mate bond.

Dad takes over from Mom, "When you were born, we knew you were going to be different. It became more evident as you grew up. You're powerful. Not just strong physically, but your connection to the pack and your ability to wield the alpha command."

"Okay." I glance between my parents, unsure where this is headed.

"When you became alpha three years ago, your mother, with her luna connection still somewhat functioning, felt changes in the pack immediately."

"What changes?"

"The ones the elders brought to your attention yesterday."

I raise my eyebrows. "You knew it was going to happen?"

My parents nod, and my mom drops her gaze to her plate.

"Okay, I wish you would've told me, but it doesn't really change—"

My mom cuts me off, "We knew you needed to do something soon, not only for the pack, but to ensure you continue the line of alphas within our family. To pass on your birthright." She takes a shuddering breath. "So, we did something about it."

"You…did? What?"

Mom twists the napkin in her lap until my father reaches over and takes one of her hands. "We fated you to Blaire," she replies with a hint of sorrow in her voice.

Everything goes silent, a slight buzzing forming in my ears. My wolf is terrifyingly calm.

"You… But… That's not possible."

My Dad clears his throat. "It's not possible to *truly* fate you to another. But it is possible to use magic to create a fake bond that mimics a fated one." He takes a deep breath. "We had a witch bind you. One night we invited a number of young, eligible females to dinner, and the witch's magic picked who would be the best mate for you. We didn't necessarily choose Blaire, but we're the reason you two felt a connection."

"You magically mated me? And didn't bother to tell me?" My voice is as cold as the ice in my drink.

“We thought it would be better for the pack if you didn’t know. If you believed it was fate. It’s been so long since a fated match that no one looked too closely at it. Instead, everyone’s spirits were boosted.” My dad stops for a second, his shoulders slumping slightly. “What we didn’t anticipate was the two of you subconsciously fighting it every day. It didn’t connect you the way we thought it would. The way the witch explained it should. It never pulled you two together like a real bond. It barely connected your emotions.”

“We hoped it would still work,” Mom adds. “You’d be mated. As soon as you bit Blaire, it would put a chosen bond into place, and we hoped that, with the addition of the magic, it might turn into a fated bond.”

“So, my fate connection with Blaire was never real?”

“Correct,” my father agrees at the same time my mother says, “No.”

Mom shuts her eyes and breathes slowly, as if they’ve had this argument a hundred times. “Magic picked Blaire. Sure, it may not have been the Fates themselves, but the witch was very clear that if no wolves were capable of being a luna, it wouldn’t work at all. No one would be bound to you.”

“And her magic picked Blaire,” I reply, my mind racing with the implications of what my parents have done. What they’ve kept from me for a year.

Mom shrugs. “She would’ve made a great luna. And I believed you could be happy with her long-term.”

“But she is not *my* luna!” I bellow. “You let me believe I was fated to a female I had no interest in. You let me believe I was broken—a bad wolf—for not feeling the pull as strong as others have. For being able to wait to cement my bond with her.”

Mom’s eyes are wide. “I… We didn’t know you felt that way.”

“Of course not! How was I going to tell you something like that when I was supposedly *blessed by the Fates*?”

“Don’t speak to your mother like that, Finnegan.”

My wolf growls at my father, and this time, I do nothing to stop the display of his dominance. “I could’ve spent the last year trying to find my mate!” My thoughts drift to Maya. “I could’ve overlooked my *true* mate because of you! She might be out there, right now, waiting for me, but I walked away because I thought I was already taken. That *fate* had decided. But it didn’t. *You did*.”

Shaking his head, Dad says, “No, Finn. With the decline in fated mates, it’s very unlikely you have one. Plus, you had no interest in finding a chosen mate in your first two years of being the alpha.” He sighs loudly. “And it’s not like you could ever mate with your witch. Not as the alpha. And I know you’d never willingly give up the role for your own wants, even if you could somehow convince your wolf to do it. You were raised to put the pack before yourself. Just like I was, and every other alpha in our family before me.”

“We’re so sorry, Finn.” Tears are running down Mom’s face. “We thought we were doing the right thing for you and the pack. If Blaire had stayed…”

“If she had stayed, we’d both be miserable,” I growl.

Mom nods. “But the pack would be safe. Isn’t that what matters most?”

As I walk home that night, the anger inside me has turned into an inferno of pain. My headache is so bad I’m about to throw up, and I feel like someone is repeatedly stabbing a vampire bush thorn into my heart. Even though my parents and I finished dinner on more friendly terms, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to fully forgive them.

Although I do understand how they came to their decision, I don’t think I would make the same one. Something has shifted within me in the last few weeks. I still consider the pack to be important. I would die to defend it, and I would give my life in service of it, but I’m not sure if it outranks my own heart anymore.

And that thought alone is enough to give me pause. An alpha always puts the pack first. *Always*. So, what does it mean that I’m considering risking it all for a petite brunette with mischievous eyes and a love for baking?

The question is ripped from my thoughts when a mindlink comes from Cam: *“Maya has been taken. By a vampire.”*

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CHAPTER 27
MAYA

"Tell us how you made it through the barrier." It's the fourth time I've been asked the same goddamn question since I was carried off the streets of Duskmoor by what I have now learned was a vampire. Though I should've picked up on it based on how quickly he ran me through the forest to meet with an idling SUV. Once inside the car, the assholes shoved a black bag over my head and tied my hands.

When we finally stopped and they carried me out, I tried to fight them as hard as possible, but it was of no use. They were infinitely stronger and urged me to do what they said if I wanted to live.

Now I'm in a stone-walled interrogation room. I'd think it was a cave except for the bright lighting and the metal table in the middle. If I were the type of girl to worry about being murdered and experimented on—which obviously I'm not—the metal table would not be reassuring.

During this round of questions, a large man with dark skin and hair addresses me rather than the pale, white-haired woman from the previous round. I've only had the luxury of meeting wolves during my time in Miraluna, so I'm terrible at determining what type of creature each one might be. If I had to wager a guess, the man staring at me is most likely a dragon, given the little puffs of smoke that escape from his nose when he's annoyed with my so-called shitty answers.

Under normal circumstances, I might be intimidated or in awe of being in front of a *real* dragon. Unfortunately for these assholes, my life hasn't

been normal in a long time, so I'm neither. Which means they're only getting a healthy dose of sarcasm and snark from me.

"Do your ears not work? Is that why you're asking me again? I've told you. Three times. I was driving, and I—"

"Crashed," the man finishes for me.

I tried to keep up the lie about being a witch, but then they demanded I "do something with my magic." Unsurprisingly, I couldn't, even though I focused really hard on trying to move a cup on the table with my mind. I tried to claim it was because my wand was broken, but it turns out wands aren't a thing here.

Definitely an oversight on Finn and Cam's part to proclaim me a witch but give me absolutely no education on witches here, besides the lie about the ones practicing dark magic. Even my dramatic pause didn't work on these assholes.

So, I had no choice but to switch to the truth. At first, it felt like the right decision until they asked me to prove I'm a human, which I don't know how to do, either. I thought the whole thing about humans is that we *can't* do anything.

I offer the large man a fake smile. "So, you can listen."

More smoke puffs out of his nose. "My ears are perfectly fine. I just don't believe you. Or trust you."

I shrug. "That seems like a *you* problem."

"If you want to keep your legs in one piece, I'd recommend it becomes a *you* problem," he huffs.

"I don't know. If the speedy one is willing to carry me around for the rest of my life, I'm not sure I need my legs in one piece."

Yep. All of my fucks are gone. I'm blatantly antagonizing a vampire and a dragon. Maybe I do have a death wish.

The dragon blinks. "Did you call the strongest vampire in Miraluna 'the speedy one'?"

"I can't say for sure. He rudely didn't introduce himself as he was kidnapping me off the street. He owes me a new dress, by the way. That was the only one I had, and it ripped when he was sprinting through the fucking forest."

He closes his eyes as if praying for patience. "You'll be lucky to leave here with your life. I would be less worried about your clothes if I were you."

“Finn would—”

“Finn,” the dragon roars, “is likely to lose his life as well once the Council gets to the bottom of his deceit. Harboring the fugitive who broke into our lands is grounds for execution.”

My stomach sinks, but I force myself to keep up my mask of indifference. I can’t let them know how Finn’s death would impact me. After everything that happened between us, I’d never want anything bad to happen to him. I care too much for him.

I snort. “He wasn’t harboring me. He was *using* me. Like you all plan to do. You’re only mad he beat you to it. From what I hear, there were all sorts of *flying creatures* out scouting, yet none of you found me. Perhaps some of you need to get your eyes checked.”

The calm female from earlier walks back into the room, her black nails glinting under the strong lights. “Using you? So, he knows what your power is.”

I glare at her. “It’s rude to listen in on other people’s conversations, you know?”

The dragon stifles a laugh at the indignation on the woman’s face. I’m going to guess she’s fae from everything I’ve been told about them, but a siren also seems possible. What’s the difference between a mermaid and a siren?

“Are you breaking her legs, or am I, Malbec?” the woman asks, looking bored by the conversation and not seeming to care either way. “Or should we give Ryker the honor? He was the one who told us about her existence.”

Of fucking course he did. That guy seems like a real asshole.

“Unfortunately, Veyloria, she seems like the type to pass out if we break any bones,” the dragon, Malbec, remarks.

I nod. “That would be correct. It’s this weird thing with humans where we don’t actually have super strength, so we go into shock when you start snapping us.”

Veyloria’s eyebrow lifts. “Sounds like a perfect way to confirm you’re a human. If we break a bunch of your bones and you die, then you’ve proven to us you’re a human. If you live, you’re a creature.”

Fuuuck. I really hope dragons can’t smell fear. “Ah, the old: if she floats, she’s a witch test. It never goes well for the accused.”

Malbec growls. “We need her alive. Even if she is a human, we have to know how she got through. What if she’s a scout sent out to canvas our

lands before an invasion? Plus, she's still bleeding from the wounds she got in the forest with Bram. She could die from those if we let them fester long enough."

Bram. I mentally write the vampire's name on my shit list, next to Malbec and Veyloria. I gesture with my head to the large man. "The big guy here has a point. I'm definitely at risk of dying. Now, can we get back to what I've been trying to tell you multiple times? I'm a human who is apparently really shitty at driving in the fog and—"

Quick as a viper, Veyloria slaps me across the face, the blow whipping my head to the side. My neck cracks, and my eyes water. I gasp, willing air into my lungs. Shit. That should not have hurt as bad as it did. I feel like she took a hammer to my cheek.

I blink as I look up at her, disgust and fear swirling in my stomach. Her expression is calm, like she's about to prattle on about the weather.

"Interesting. You'd think her automatic response would've been to shift or use magic when faced with an unexpected attack." She quickly turns toward Malbec, her right hand moving toward *his* face at a blinding speed. Before I can understand what's happening, her path is halted by his half-shifted hand. His eyes are pitch black like his dragon.

"See?" She reaches up and efficiently disentangles her wrist from his talons. "Though a lesser witch might not have the same reaction time."

My cheek throbs as Veyloria sits there, studying me like I'm a science experiment. "Where are the witches? They could brew a truth serum." She pauses. "Do any of the wolves have truth smellers?"

I bite my tongue, not willing to sell out Gideon. Finn never told me why he brought the older man to our earlier meetings, but I pieced it together eventually.

"Don't know," Malbec grunts, still fighting the beast within. I'm both curious and very worried as to what would happen if he fully shifted.

Unable to contain my curiosity, I blurt out, "How big is your dragon?"

Veyloria's lip curls into a slight smile—the only emotion I've seen from her all day. "Big enough to crush us both if he shifted in here. Well, you. I have the power to stop it." She glances between the big dragon and me. "Actually, maybe that's the solution. We'll just have—"

"No," Malbec declares, straightening his shoulders as if he's finally gotten himself back together.

"Tell us about your time in Duskmoor."

This is where the interrogation has gotten a little bit rocky. I don't want to lie, but I also don't want to sell out the wolves who tried to protect me. The ones who have become my friends over the past few weeks.

I push my tongue into my cheek, trying to ease the throbbing pain. "Remind me what Duskmoor is again. Everything is a little murkier, thanks to the concussion I probably have from the blow to my face."

Steam fills the air as Malbec huffs again.

"The wolf land under the jurisdiction of Alpha Finnegan Moonstone." Veyloria's answer is monotone.

"Oh! Right. That's the one they call Finn. Nice guy."

Malbec's fists tighten, and I wonder whether I'm about to be punched by a dragon. Maybe he could just flame-broil me and end my suffering.

"Alpha Ryker may be dealing with issues within his own pack, but he gave us everything he had on you, *Maya*."

A shiver runs down my spine when my name leaves his lips. Malbec's use of it was intentional. Finn and I never told Ryker my name, which means he got the information from someone in the Duskmoor pack. Or from fucking Blaire. I grab onto the possibility that she shared it with Ryker. Please let it be Blaire. I already want to tear her apart for what she did to Finn.

I also want to send her a thank-you note for ending things with him, but it's best to overlook that part.

I cough, forcing myself to put on my mask of cocky arrogance once again. "I'm so glad we're on a first-name basis, *Malbec*."

"Oh, I do like this one!" The door shuts as an older woman walks in, a wide smile and her hands clasped together.

"Minerva," Malbec growls, his eyes still locked on mine.

The fae crosses her arms. "Kind of you to finally join us."

Minerva's jovial eyes dim as she shoots a glare toward the fae. "You know, Veyloria, there are many things I must look after as the leader of my coven. You can't just summon me at a moment's notice and expect a prompt arrival. I need at least two business days."

Veyloria's right eyebrow lifts a microscopic amount. "You show up to Council meetings on a moment's notice regularly."

"Do I? Well, good for me!" Minerva claps her hands. "Now, this is the interloper who has your undergarments in a twist? Hmm. Not much to look

at, is she? I thought she'd be bigger. More intimidating. Less likely to have half her face covered in a red welt." She offers the fae woman another glare.

"Veyloria slipped and caught herself on my face. Real clumsy that one." I smile at the witch like we're in on the same joke.

A cackle reverberates in the stone room. "That she is, my dear!"

"I am *not* clumsy."

Minerva turns to me and lifts her shoulders as if to say, "well, we all lie to ourselves sometimes."

"We're in the middle of an interrogation, Minerva." Malbec sounds almost as put out as Veyloria.

"And clearly, it's going well since you had to summon me. I suggest we put her in a holding cell for the night. It'll give me time to brew some truth serum so we can get to the bottom of this whole thing. Much easier than whatever nonsense the two of you were planning to do to her—and likely far less bloody."

Malbec gapes at Minerva before turning his attention back to Veyloria. "I do want to see her use the truth serum."

Veyloria stares at her dark nails. "It would be useful to see how well it works."

The witch gives me a quick wink, as if we're both in on the same secret, then nods enthusiastically. "Great! It's decided. I'll work on the truth serum while you two go take a break. Maybe get Bram some blood. He seemed testy earlier."

"The prisoner called him 'the speedy one.'"

Minerva cackles, bracing her hands on her knees for a few seconds, while Malbec and Veyloria gape at her in disbelief. "The speedy one. I can't…"

Veyloria narrows her eyes as she looks between Minerva and me. "I'll walk with you and the prisoner. She needs to be in one of the holding cells for the witches."

"Yes, yes," Minerva agrees. "But then I need complete privacy with her while I make the serum."

I'm surprisingly excited at the prospect of hanging out with this witch for the next few hours. She seems fun. Which is not a word I'd use to describe how my day was previously going. Or the past few days, actually. Lately, life has kind of sucked.

The fae crosses her slender arms. "Why?"

“It requires extreme concentration. I can’t do that if you’re standing there all judgy.”

“No, why do *you* need to be with the prisoner?”

The witch gives her a wink this time. “That’s for me to know and you to continue to wonder about for the rest of your immortal life.”

Yeah. I think I’m going to enjoy hanging out with Minerva a lot.

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CHAPTER 28
FINN

Racing through the forest, I force myself west, doing everything in my power to stay in the no man's land between the Nightshade and the Ravenwood packs' borders. It physically hurts to not cut straight through to the witch lands, but I can't risk getting stopped by some dumb pups on patrol. We've been traveling almost nonstop in our wolf form since Maya was taken by Bram fucking Sangresa yesterday. Hera was positive it was Bram, and even if she could do nothing to stop the vampire, that knowledge was priceless. Bram would never do anything like this without the Council's approval.

"Can smell a stream," Cam mindlinks me. *"I need to rest."*

"We need to keep going."

"Let me get a quick drink, then we can keep making our way to godsdamned Gealdor."

Turning slightly east, I find a clearing by a small river and stop. I lap up the cold water, forcing myself to drink when all I want to do is keep running.

"I'm going to *kill* the old bat when I see her," Cam complains as soon as he's shifted into human form next to the stream. Minerva happened to send a magical messenger butterfly to me moments after Cam's mindlink about Maya came through to let me know her coven's door to the Council room might've been *accidentally* left unlocked, and suggested a wolf check it out.

"She's helping us," I remind him.

He chokes on the water he's slurping from his palms. "No. If she was helping us, she would've opened up the door in our packland."

"This way she can deny it. It's not like she sent a text to tell me the Council had Maya. She's clearly covering herself in the event this goes poorly."

"I doubt it. That woman is a loose cannon. I'm just grateful we don't have to go through the fucking fae lands." He whacks at the butterfly as it flies against his ear for what has to be the fiftieth time today. "For Fate's sake! Aren't these things supposed to disappear after their message is delivered?"

I shrug. They always have in the past, but I wouldn't put it past Minerva to have told this one to stick around and fuck with Cam for a little bit. It hasn't touched me at all, only pestering my beta.

"I don't know why it doesn't bother you."

"It knows I'm far too pissed off to be annoyed by something small. Not when they've taken Maya. How dare they touch what's *mine*?" The last word rips from my throat in a growl. My wolf is agitated, driving me harder than ever.

Cam shoots me a hard look. "You going to tell me what's going on with that?"

"What's going on with *what*?" I snarl.

"The whole possessive thing."

"She was on my land. She was in my care. They can't trespass and kidnap a member of my pack. I won't stand for it."

He sits next to the stream, leaning his weight on his arms. "Yeah, we definitely have some security measures that need to be overhauled once we get back. The fact they were able to get past our borders does not bode well for us."

"Let's go," I say, ready to pick up our sprint again.

"You've got to give me at least five minutes," my beta pleads. "I won't be any good to you when we get to the Council if you've already killed me on the way."

I squeeze my eyes shut against the urge to leave him. To sprint for Maya with no care for anyone else in the world.

Cam studies me. "Your head still bothering you?"

I nod once.

“How bad? Shouldn’t it be getting better? It was a fake bond that broke.”

I clench my jaw. “Well, it isn’t. It’s getting worse every day. And my fucking chest feels like there’s a hole inside it.”

“Does it feel like it’s still leading you back to Blaire?”

I’m about to nod when I stop. It *doesn’t*. The frayed magic between Blaire and me has practically disappeared. This is something else. Something that feels like a bullet hole through my ribcage.

“It’s not the broken bond.”

“You want to know what I think?” Cam’s face is tilted toward the sun.

“No.”

He sends me a glare out of the corner of his eye. “Too bad. Because here’s what I’ve been thinking. Your parents had a witch magically mate you to Blaire.”

“For the love of the Moon Goddess, Camden, are you just going to reiterate everything we already know?”

He pushes to a standing position, almost matching me in height. “No, you jackass. If you’d let me talk, I’d tell you something you don’t know. Something I don’t know either but I’m beginning to believe might actually be true.”

I stare at him.

“Shall I continue?”

I want to punch him in the face. Anyone but my best friend and beta would already be sporting at least one black eye and a bloody nose. Honestly, I might hit him anyway. He’ll forgive me. And it could make this blasted pain go away for a few minutes.

“Don’t punch me.” He crosses his arms, daring me to tell him I wasn’t considering it.

“Tell me,” I grit out.

“I will. Thanks for asking so nicely.” He paces in front of me. “So, we know the magic relied on some sort of pre-existing connection or compatibility, and it functioned *almost* like a mate bond.”

“It felt like a fucking fated mate bond.” I rub my chest. “Or at least I thought it did at the time.”

“Did you? The two of you stayed apart for *a whole year*. You barely saw each other. I’ve heard stories about wolves realizing they were fated and literally having sex with each other on the spot. You’re supposed to be

insanely attracted to the other person. Have an overwhelming desire to be with them all the time." He glances at me.

"I felt a pull toward her."

"Okay." He rolls his eyes dramatically. "But I didn't see any physical attraction between you. In fact, you *never* had sex with her. *For an entire year, Finn*."

I throw up my hands. "I'm fucking gentleman! We both wanted to wait until we were officially mated."

Cam nods. "I know. But now that we know it wasn't real, it makes more sense why you never jumped each other's bones."

I press the ache between my eyes. "What's your point?"

"My point is it wasn't a real bond, but it kind of mimicked one. What if it was also blocking a *true* bond?"

My eyebrows furrow. "What?"

The butterfly starts throwing itself against Cam's ear, and I can't help but be cheer it on. Whatever Cam's trying to tell me, I'm not sure I want to hear it.

"Maya, Finn. I'm talking about *Maya*!"

My chest rumbles. I don't like other people talking about Lucky.

"Think about it," he continues. "You've barely left her side since she was magically *pulled* through the barrier into our lands."

"She literally drove a car through it. You can't tell me you think that was anything other than an accident."

"I think it *could be*."

I tug at my hair. "Can you get to the point?"

He's pacing again, really on a roll now. "Your wolf led us directly to Maya after her crash when none of the other wolves or creatures could find her. Then, you wouldn't leave her side. You wouldn't even leave her to go look for Blaire, the female you thought you were mated to."

"I told you, my wolf is protective of her. She's weaker than everyone else in Miraluna. It's my duty to protect her."

"Or is it because she's your fated mate?"

I shake my head even as I feel like prancing around in glee. "No. That's not possible. I can't mate with a human."

"Not even if she's your fated mate?" Cam asks. He must see the hesitation in my face because he pushes on, "When did your headaches start?"

“After the bond broke with Blaire.”

“See?” His eyes are wide like he’s proving a point.

I push at the invisible hole in my chest again. “I don’t.”

“After the fake bond was out of the way.”

“The headache and this pain are *from* the bond getting out of the way.” I sigh. “We need to keep moving.”

“This!” He points at me. “Even now! You can’t stay away from her.”

“She was kidnapped, Cam. I told her I would protect her. I’d be doing this for any member of my pack.”

“Okay, but where did you go as soon as your bond with Blaire broke?”

“To my house. Where I wallowed until Hera told me I needed to get it together for my pack.”

“Sure, but then you went right into Maya’s arms—and bed.”

“Again, because Hera told me—”

He shakes his head. “Don’t give me that shit. We both know you’ve wanted Maya since the moment you laid your eyes on her. But there was something standing in the way—your fake bond with Blaire. As soon as it was out of the way, you’ve had all the symptoms of a wolf who hasn’t sealed their *real* mate bond.”

Something *right* settles inside me, even as my brain fights against his logic. I can’t be fated to a human. I can’t. I don’t know what it would do to the pack. To me.

“Cam, I can’t be mated to a human.” Maybe if I say it enough times, it’ll finally make sense.

He clasps my shoulder, squeezing gently. “Maybe not, but I’m pretty damn sure you’re fated *to Maya*. The woman who doesn’t smell right. Who has a distinctly *shifter* smell to her. Do whatever you want with that information.”

And with that, he turns into a rainbow mist before landing on all fours as a tawny brown wolf.

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CHAPTER 29
MAYA

"It's nice they put you in the witch holding cell," Minerva jabbers as she walks around the space, waving her arms. "I always do a good purification ceremony here after a witch has been held, so everything is nice and clean for my spell." She winks at me.

Does this woman have an eye twitch or something?

I look around the cage I'm being held in, a small area that is very reminiscent of a jail cell I bailed Quentin out of one night last year. "It's… lovely."

Minerva is still throughout the area, holding her hands out as if she's soaking in the heat from a fire. "It's really a good thing you aren't a shifter. These holding cells are made to protect against magic, not strength. Though, if you really were a witch…"

I internally groan. Is she going to use this time to lecture me on not impersonating a coven member? "I'm sorry about that."

She brushes off my apology. "You would've made a great witch. Unfortunately, I don't think that's the path for you."

"Because I'm a human?"

Her back is to me, her hands dancing above her head as if conducting an orchestra. "Ah, is that what you are?"

I roll my eyes. "Obviously."

An easy silence falls between us as she continues her rounds, her hands now twisting in little circles and whirls. I lie back on the cot, pleased when light notes of sage and honeysuckle drift up from the thick fabric pillow.

I stare at the ceiling, tracing a vein of some mineral that runs through the rock. After a lifetime of constantly working to stay alive and fed, you'd think I'd enjoy how much time I've had to simply do nothing.

But I feel itchy.

And I can't breathe properly, as if a giant black dragon is sitting on my chest.

"How is that alpha of yours doing after his magical bond was broken?" she asks casually minutes later.

I groan. "He's *not* my alpha."

She stops outside the bars, looking in at me. "He most certainly is!"

"Well, he doesn't want to be."

Snorting, she reaches a finger out and gently pokes the bar, pulling away quickly with a look of nausea on her face. "Hate when it does that to my magic."

"Do you have to touch it to feel anything?" I'm curious. Hera's comments have stayed with me, and I've had to force myself to consider whether maybe I do have a bit of something in me. I wouldn't guess witch, but I also believed werewolves were only stories a couple months ago. Size-wise, witch or fae seem most likely, but I still haven't met a number of the creatures.

Minerva shakes her head, her long gray hair swishing back and forth. "No. I can feel it everywhere in the room. It only stifles the magic of those inside the cage or anyone who touches it."

She stares quizzically at the bar in front of her for a few moments before starting to meander around the room again.

Finally, I ask, "What are you doing? Are you preparing the truth serum or something?"

She strolls toward me again, crooking her index finger to call me closer. I consider it for a moment before heaving a sigh and pushing off the cot.

"There is no truth serum," she whispers.

I glance up, meeting her gray eyes as they dance with mischief. "What?" I make sure to keep my voice low.

"It's one of our best-kept secrets. And threats. Turns out, you just have to make creatures *believe* you can make them tell the truth, and they'll do it. I think they're worried people will start asking them embarrassing questions about when they last peed their pants or something. Luckily, when you get

to be my age and have as many kids as I do, you're no longer embarrassed about a little pee in the ol' undergarments."

I scratch my cheek, trying not to laugh. "What's your plan for the morning then?"

She steps away from the bars and keeps moving around the room. "I don't think you'll still be here in the morning."

I drop down to sit on my cot. "Because I'll be dead?"

"Why must the youth be so dramatic? Really." She sighs. "Do you think I'd go through all this trouble just to let you die?"

Besides getting me out of the never-ending interrogation with the dullest fae and dragon I've ever met, I'm not entirely sure what she's done for me, but it seems smart not to upset my one friend in this place. I give it my next best guess. "You think someone from Duskmoor will come rescue me?"

She snorts loudly. "*Someone*? That's worse than you dying. You and I both know your alpha is going to be here soon."

I rub my chest, the ache there increasing as I think about Finn coming to find me. Or worse, *not* trying to. But I know that's not true. There's a part of me that knows he's on his way. I can almost feel each step he takes.

"Indigestion?" Minerva asks, her tone almost mocking.

I drop my head into my hands. "I think I'm going crazy."

Lowering to the ground, Minerva crosses her legs before placing her hands neatly in her lap. "Why don't you tell me about it? I'll tell you whether you're crazy. I'm the resident expert on such matters."

I peek at her from between my fingers. "I didn't say I was all-the-way crazy."

She simply sits there, waiting for me to continue. So, I do.

"Ever since I woke up in Miraluna, something about me has changed. It's like…"

"You're in a magical world?"

I laugh. "I mean, yes. But also no."

She nods sagely. "The change is inside you, then?"

I rub small circles over my temples, fighting off the headache this causes me. "Yes. I feel like I'm not in control of my emotions half the time."

"I hear sexual frustration can do that to a girl. Not that I would know. I'm a hot commodity." Her face is still serene, no hint of jest in her tone or expression.

Not touching that one with a ten-foot pole.

“I’m… Well… That’s not, I mean.”

“Ah, so you *have* slept with the alpha. How nice.”

Nice is certainly not how I would explain the mind-blowing experience that was sex with Finn. And even less appropriate for the complete and utter contentment that washed over me as I lay in his arms afterward.

It was like I had come home. It felt…right.

Staring at a small hole in the ground, I admit, “It *was* nice. But it doesn’t matter. He can’t mate with a human.”

“Ah. There’s that human problem again.”

I give her an exasperated look.

“Look, Maya,” Minerva says. “You didn’t grow up in Miraluna, so let me tell you something about magic. When your body—your soul—is telling you something is right, when you’re being pulled toward someone or something, when you can’t seem to stay away, *that is a sign*. You don’t necessarily get to know what the sign is trying to tell you, but you sure as the Abyss better try to figure it out.”

“All I feel is an ache in my chest and stomach. How can I possibly figure anything out from that?”

Minerva lets out a groan as she lowers to her back. “Lie down on that cot.”

I do as I’m told.

“Now, close your eyes. Take a deep breath and move past the pain. Sure, it’s there still there, but ignore it. Look at the layer underneath. What does it feel like?”

I try to do as she says, pushing aside the ache. There, almost like a water pipe with a weak current, is a connection. I can’t see where it goes, but the water keeps flowing back and forth, to me and then away. Mentally, I run a finger through the stream, and my stomach clenches, the smell and feel of Finn almost overwhelming me. It must be the pack link. Or as much of one as a human can have.

“Water. Water and Finn.”

“And what about beneath that? At the very center of who you are?”

As much as it pains me to do, I slide past the connection to Finn and keep diving deeper, until I reach the core.

“It’s blocked,” I say as I tap against the opaque wall in my mind.

“It’s in your head, Maya. If it’s blocked, it’s because you made it that way.”

I pop open an eye and glare at the witch. “Well, how do I get through it, then?”

“You’ll figure it out when you’re ready. Until then, can you touch the walls? What does it feel like?”

It’s protectiveness. A need to comfort. To hold. To lead. To love. It feels like me and yet someone I’ve never been. It’s the wildness of a forest and the tranquility of a pond. For some reason, it makes me think of the man who has appeared in my dreams a few times since I’ve been here.

“I don’t know what these feelings mean,” I hedge. There are so many things it could be, but at the same time, none of them truly make sense. I’m an orphan from the human world. I was adopted into a pack. Whatever causes those bonds has connected me to them in some way. I’ve spent too long with the wolves, and now I’ve started to imagine the wildness of one living within me.

“Yes. You do. You’re just too scared to accept what they mean.”

As much as I want that to be true, I don’t know if I should trust my instincts when it comes to magic: I thought witches used wands.

Minerva stands up and walks toward the door, calling over her shoulder, “You know who you are, Maya. Trust yourself.”

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CHAPTER 30
FINN

I throw open the door to the Council room and bare my teeth at the first creature I see. “Where is she?”

“How dare you come in here acting like we are the ones in the wrong?” Veyloria hisses from where she sits on top of the Council table.

“Tell me where she is, or I’ll rip your head off and burn your remaining flesh so there is no hope of you surviving.”

Cam growls beside me, “That seems a little excessive, Finn.”

Veyloria grins wickedly at Cam. “Listen to your dog.”

“It doesn’t take that much to kill a fae. Just break her neck, and she won’t come back. Immortality is not the same as unkillable, is it Lor?”

The room shakes slightly as a flash of light fizzles around Veyloria’s hand.

Cam tsks. “Ah, ah, ah. No magic in the Council room.”

Veyloria stalks toward Cam, her normally placid eyes alight with a burning flame. “I will strangle you with my bare hand, you flea-ridden—”

“I saw a doctor about those last week,” Cam deadpans, crossing his arms across his wide chest. He’s an immovable wall at this point, and there’s no chance of Veyloria doing anything but leaving a scratch.

“Children,” Bram calls from his place against the wall. The vampire almost blends into the shadows in his all-black attire, but he doesn’t look quite as pale as usual, a sure sign he’s fed recently. “Must we?”

“Take me to Maya, and I’ll happily be on my way.” I’ve never particularly cared about the rules the witches set to open doors and portals

to the Council chambers—I rarely want to be here anyway, but today, I'm pissed that I can't get there by myself. That I need the witch, or at least three other Council members, to willingly give their blood to the door to get me in.

Realizing they need one more Council member in on this, I look around harder. "Who else is here?"

Malbec glares at me while Veyloria studies her nails. Bram has faded back against the wall, like he isn't even paying attention. I take a deep breath and sort through the smells, trying to find which is the most recent.

"Ryker," I growl. "And Minerva."

For Fate's sake, what is that witch up to? I'm not surprised by Ryker's scent. If anything, I'm surprised he isn't here to gloat in having fulfilled his threat of taking not one but two females from me. Even if Blaire left willingly.

"We're calling a full Council meeting," Veyloria announces. "The rest will be here soon to determine the fate of you and the female you've been hiding from us. You're *not* invited."

"Unfortunately, I'm here."

"Yes, and I'd love to know how that happened—"

I talk over her. "I'd love to see you try to kick me out, Veyloria. I'm itching for a fight; I'd like nothing more than to break your porcelain face."

"Get out, Finnegan," Malbec demands, his voice a low rumble. He's the only one who'd have a chance against me, but even that would only work if they all ganged up on me.

I cross my arms. "I don't think I will. I'm on the Council. If there is a meeting being held, I'll be here."

Cam shakes his head at me. *"You just walked right into their trap, you idiot. They want you to sit here and fuck around through a Council meeting rather than rampaging through the interrogation rooms."*

I take in the Council members around me again. *"They must have her in a holding cell."*

"Unless it's just Ryker interrogating her."

A tidal wave of anger and possessiveness rips through me, causing me to shudder against a shift. *"His scent isn't fresh."*

I stalk to my seat at the Council table and sit, crossing my feet on top like anyone has the right to tell me anything different.

In a painfully slow trickle, the rest of the Council members come in, each registering my presence with a look of confusion mixed with fear.

Except for Ryker, who sits next to me with a growl.

“How did *you* get here?” he asks, as we all wait for Minerva to show up. “I was told your door wasn’t going to be unlocked for this meeting.”

I shrug. “Didn’t come through *my* door.”

He eyes me wearily. “Impossible. How else would you get here?”

The rest of the room is hushed, everyone listening in to our conversation. “That’s for me to know and you to die wondering. Preferably sooner rather than later.”

His eyes flash in warning, but before he can decide whether he wants to hit me or not, Minerva barges through the door.

She claps once when she sees everyone else assembled, like a small child pleased by the cake options for dinner. “Oh good! We’re ready to start, then. I do think this will be fun.”

As with all the emergency Council meetings, there are far fewer creatures sitting around the outside of the room, so she easily maneuvers to her seat.

“Thank you for all joining today,” Malbec starts, indicating he was the one who called the meeting in the first place. Like Knottingham, the dragons’ land, Incendium, also borders the barrier, so I’m sure the incursion has been a major concern for him and his people. “As you know, there was a breach in the barrier that divides Miraluna from the human world twenty-seven days ago. Since that time, the Miraluna Council has had search parties in the area to find the creature able to break through after all these centuries.”

I want to point out they all also sent out their own search parties and question what exactly they would’ve done if one of their individual groups had found an unconscious human at the border.

He continues, “After weeks of searching, we received a report from Alpha Ryker Thornfield of Mistwood that Duskmoor was harboring a witch, whose timing into the area corresponded with that of the barrier breach.”

“Now, I know I’m getting old, but I do think we discussed that last week,” Minerva says, a sunny smile on her face.

Malbec shoots her a look. “After much discussion, a small task force was formed, and we retrieved the witch from Duskmoor.”

Oh. That’s too good to let pass. Who are they kidding?

“Retrieved is an interesting word,” I bark. “Kidnapped from her home by a *rogue* subset of the Council is more accurate.”

“Since that retrieval,” Malbec continues as if I haven’t spoken, “the creature in question has been interrogated four times by members of the task force.”

My stomach twists into knots at the thought of Maya being interrogated. The members of the Council are known for being unbelievably ruthless. What would they do to extract the secrets from a female who truly has nothing to hide? Especially when they’ll never believe her.

“Did you hurt her?” I growl.

He shoots a quick glance at Veyloria before stating, “She remains *relatively* unharmed.”

My chest tightens as my heart rate increases, blood whooshing through my ears is all I can hear. “I will—”

Malbec starts talking over me again, outlining what they’ve learned and their belief that she isn’t simply a human like she claims. I believe Maya, but something about her scent tells me she must be wrong. But that doesn’t mean she’s lying.

“When will you have the truth serum ready, Minerva?” The dragon turns his attention to the witch, who appears to be having a conversation with the messenger butterfly that followed us in.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. The truth serum. Tricky magic, that. I can’t say for sure, but sometime in the next day or so.”

“My proposal is that we leave her in the witch holding cell until we have a means to extract the truth from her. Then we reconvene. In the meantime, I recommend Alpha Finnegan Moonstone be stripped of his title as Council member and returned to Duskmoor under protection of non-wolf enforcers until a decision has been made as to the fate of the interloper.” Malbec’s voice is clear as he motions for my removal.

“Denied,” I roar.

“You don’t get to deny motions,” Veyloria points out.

“I’ll do what I damn well please. And you can’t strip me of my spot on the Council. I am the strongest alpha in Knottingham, and I will sit in my rightful place here.” I glare around the room.

The room erupts into arguments. *“I told you so,”* Cam says in my mind. *“They’re just killing time and keeping you occupied. We should’ve stormed*

the door before everyone got here.”

I jump back into the fray, arguing for what feels like hours as the room discusses what’s to be done with me—literally nothing, and they know it—and a female they don’t know. A creature who is precious and funny and nothing like the threat they believe her to be.

Finally, after far too long of playing their game, I switch tactics. “Let her go, or I will force my way down there. You all want me locked up anyway. Lock me up with her.”

The room grows quiet as my suggestion is considered. Being in a holding cell is one of the most uncomfortable places for a shifter to be, which they all know. And it seems to be having an impact on them.

“Why would you do that?” Malbec questions.

“She needs my protection. She is weak and defenseless. She needs me.”

Malbec’s eyes are black, a thin puff of smoke rising toward the ceiling. “If she truly is a human, she’s the greatest risk Miraluna has encountered in over three hundred years.”

I shrug. “But she’s not.”

“Then what is she?” the siren asks, leaning forward in her seat to look at me.

“She’s *mine*.” It’s a possessive bark that releases a burst of energy in my chest.

“You sure do seem to claim a lot of females,” Ryker drawls.

I whip toward him and growl in his face. He holds my glare, barely. He knows I’m stronger. Even if he’s older. “This time, I haven’t been fucked with by witch magic.”

His eyes widen in shock, like he’s only just learning why I thought I was bound to Blaire. I guess I probably should’ve sent her a text, letting her know what my parents told me, but you know what? She left me when she thought we were fated. I’m not sure I owe her a godsdamn thing.

Unable to control the rage swirling inside me, I stand up and stare in the face of each Council member before I say softly, “If you try to keep me from her, I will kill each and every one of you before you can leave this room.”

A few of the lesser creatures push away from the table, preparing to flee.

“Why do you care so much anyway?” Ryker demands. “At worst she’s a spy; at best, she’s a human who will die decades before you do. You’d be

better off tearing her head from her body and leaving her at the barrier as a warning to all those who come after her."

At the thought of someone ripping Maya's head off, there's an explosive shift inside my chest, and suddenly, I can feel her. Her fear and her curiosity. She's inside me. And as her soul touches mine, everything about her suddenly makes complete sense.

My heart fills, my soul recalibrating to be occupied with nothing but her —my new North Star.

"Because she's my *mate*."

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CHAPTER 31
MAYA

Pacing back and forth in my cell, I replay my conversation with Minerva in my head, trying to figure out what the hell she could mean about trusting myself. None of it makes any goddamn sense.

That's just my luck. I finally meet a real witch, and all she does is talk in circles. Spouting off nonsense about how I know who I am. Of course, I do. I'm a human. An outsider in Miraluna—one never destined to truly fit in, no matter how much I want to.

The enormity of that statement hits me in the chest, adding to the already throbbing discomfort that has lived within me since Finn confessed we can't possibly have a long-term relationship. How he could never choose me as his mate due to some bullshit rules and his inability to buck tradition.

I stop and brace my hand against the stone wall. All these feelings are too much. The pain of watching him walk away so easily is soul-destroying.

He walked out on me.

Just like everyone else has before, except Maddie. And I don't even have my best friend in my life anymore. I'm alone. Utterly alone and trapped in a fucking cell.

I groan, resting my head against the cold wall and wishing I hadn't taken that road the night of the Halloween party. Then maybe I wouldn't have crashed my car and crossed the magical barrier that's currently ruining my life. And that's saying a lot, because my old life was pretty shitty.

If only Finn would've chosen me. Pick me. Wanted me.

If only I had mattered enough to him.

Tears stream down my face as I think about the future I'll have, stuck in Miraluna, forced to watch the man I care about commit his life to another woman. Helping Blaire with her ceremony preparation was difficult enough, but I have a feeling that seeing him with someone he chose to mate with will be a hundred times worse.

I slide down the wall, my legs straight out in front of me as I cry.

I let him into my bed.

Into my heart. And he *crushed* it.

A sob breaks free as my shoulders shake. I pull my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them, wishing I was nestled under a mountain of blankets on the couch in my apartment in Duskmoor. Or better yet, on the couch next to Maddie, eating my weight in candy.

Out of nowhere, a massive power surge hits me square in the chest, unleashing a scream from my throat. Pure, utter agony consumes me, making my skin feel like it's literally on fire. Countless emotions crash into me at once, overwhelming all my senses.

Am I going to die?

Did the Council force Minerva to cast a spell on me?

The pain ricochets across every nerve ending, causing another bloodcurdling scream to escape my mouth. I writhe on the cold, dirty floor as a current of electricity rushes from my head down to my toes.

Then it stops.

All the discomfort disappears like it never existed.

I'd think it had all been in my head if my back wasn't drenched with sweat and my clothes weren't covered in dust from contorting my body into odd positions while the pain tore through me.

And that's when I feel him—Finn.

Somehow, there's a connection to him inside me, deeper than the current I felt when Minerva was with me. It's almost like I can see a cord tying the two of us together, and it's begging me to pull on it.

To release what's on the other side.

To step into my destiny.

I sit up and place my hand over my heart as a flood of memories appears in my mind. Only they're not my memories; they belong to someone else—the man in my dreams. *My father*. I can feel the answer in my chest.

The film of his life unfolds before my eyes as I watch him roam the woods in a familiar-looking territory while he plays with another young boy.

“We should probably go home,” the younger version of my father says exasperatedly. “You know our moms don’t like it when we’re late to dinner.”

“Are you always going to be this much of a pain in the ass, cousin?” the other boy calls, picking up sticks and throwing them. “When I’m in charge, no one will be able to tell me what to do.”

My father sighs and shakes his head. “You’re going to make the worst alpha, Ryker.” Then his body turns into a rainbow mist.

The memory reel freezes as if I hit pause. I use the break to come to terms with what I just witnessed. What it means.

I scan the frozen image, digesting every inch, and the realization sinks in further. *My dad grew up here. In Miraluna.*

He lived in Mistwood. Was cousins with Ryker.

Was a shifter.

I gasp, clutching at my chest as the wall I felt inside me swings open, creating a new doorway.

“I’m… I’m part wolf.”

Another memory takes the place of the other one. My dad appears to be older, probably in his late teens, and he’s scurrying off into the woods. As he walks by a vampire bush, an odd feeling of déjà vu hits me, and I instinctually touch my side, the exact spot where the vampire bush injured me a few weeks ago when I tried to escape Miraluna.

I watch my dad climb the mountain, nearing what I can only assume is the barrier. His discomfort grows with each step, but he never stops. He continues on, even as the pain is evident on his face and his breathing becomes labored.

“I have to keep going,” he says, trudging up the hill. “I refuse to let my life be controlled by Ryker. He shouldn’t be the next alpha, but none of the elders will listen to me. They don’t know what he’s done. The wolves he’s hurt. I won’t stand by and let myself be next.”

His legs give out as he stares off into the distance toward the human world. “I’d rather sacrifice my powers than be ruled by him.” He takes a deep breath, then uses his arms to pull himself forward, roaring in agony as

a small ripple in the wind blows through the grass around him, making his hair flutter. Then, he collapses and blacks out.

Quickly, image after image flashes through my mind: my father meeting my mother and falling in love with her. How they were married in a small ceremony in her hometown. How excited they were to find out they were pregnant with me. And how some type of protective bubble was cast over my car seat when our vehicle was hit by an oncoming SUV, instantly killing my parents yet leaving me unscathed.

The vivid pictures go black, and I'm left with the truth that's been inside me for my whole life.

"I'm part wolf," I whisper, hoping that saying it out loud will make it seem less crazy and more real. "My mother was human, and my father was a shifter."

I gasp as something inside me comes to life—a part of me that's been in a deep slumber for twenty years. As it wakes up, a tingle creeps down my spine, heightening all my senses. My eyesight becomes clearer, picking up every dust mote in the air. I can hear the chirping of birds outside, even though the walls are at least a few inches thick. I can smell the blood from past prisoners held in this room.

Then, delight courses through my veins, almost like it's wagging its tail.

Because she is.

My wolf is awake.

And she wants to play.

"I don't know how to do this," I murmur to myself, hoping my wolf can also hear it. "I think you want me to shift, but I'm not sure how to make it happen."

A wet sensation touches the center of my palm. There's nothing physically there, but I swear I could feel it. It happens again. And again.

"That's you. You're touching your nose against me somehow." I stare at my empty hand, relishing in the idea that I haven't been alone this entire time. The other part of me has merely been hidden, shut away to keep me safe.

And it's time I let her out.

I take a deep breath and will myself to shift.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Nothing happens.

I try again and still nothing.

My wolf's whine gets louder each time I attempt but fail to let her out. Who's to blame her? She's been locked up for more than twenty years without anyone acknowledging her existence.

I decide to switch positions and stand up straight, then focus on what I might look like in wolf form. My brow furrows as I imagine the color of my fur, how soft it feels, and what it would be like to run free in the woods with other wolves.

And still, nada.

"Ugh!" I yell, balling my fists at my side and staring at the stone ceiling. "This is infuriating."

"It's always difficult the first time for any shifter, no matter what bullshit some of them might tell you," a familiar female voice calls out.

I snap my head in that direction and find Minerva standing outside my cell, one hand on her hip and a grin across her face.

"Looks like you finally figured out what's been chained up inside of you."

"Did you know?" I ask, my chest heaving with frustration and exhaustion. "Did you know this entire time I was a wolf?"

She shrugs. "Wasn't one hundred and ten percent sure, but I had a feeling. Sensed it the moment you got near the barrier." She steps forward and waves me closer. I walk up to the bars and grip them tightly. "I'm going to tell you a secret that few others know."

My brow furrows. "Why me?"

"Because it will explain why you're here. And after everything, I believe you're owed at least that."

I nod in agreement. Probably owed way more than an explanation, but I'll take what I can get.

"When the barrier was enacted by the witches, we left a loophole."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Why would you do that? Weren't you the ones being persecuted?"

"Yes," she replies solemnly, bowing her head for a few seconds before raising it to meet my gaze again. "We wanted to protect Miraluna, but we didn't want to trap anyone from Miraluna in the human world forever.

That's why we created the loophole." She pauses, staring intently into my eyes. "Whenever someone with a Miraluna bloodline gets close to the barrier, it will pull them in. Bring them home."

"I didn't crash my car that night."

She shakes her head. "None of it was your fault. The magic did it. *It* wanted to bring you *home*."

Everything clicks into place at once. Why I never felt comfortable anywhere growing up.

How I've always been cast aside in my life by everyone, except Maddie. Why the wolves of Duskmoor felt more like my family after a couple of weeks than anyone else ever did.

Because this is my home.

Minerva gently pats my hand where it still grips the bar. "Now that you know the truth, there is only one thing left for you to do."

"What's that?" I ask, nervous about how there could possibly be any more this witch expects me to do or process tonight.

"Go home," she replies confidently, letting go of my hand. "Shift into a wolf and go where you belong."

I swallow hard. "I don't know whether I can. I believe you. I know there's a wolf inside me begging to come out, but I don't know how to make it happen."

"Yes, you do, my dear. Close your eyes and think of home. The place where you feel the safest. Imagine running free there in your wolf form."

"You make it sound so easy," I reply, my hands trembling.

"Trust yourself, Lucky. Find your way home"

"Wait. How did you know my nickname?"

She winks, then disappears in a cloud of smoke, making me question for a second whether I imagined the entire conversation and might actually be losing my mind.

Either way, I'd rather be a crazy person outside of this cell than in it.

Okay, I can do this. I *can* do this.

I close my eyes and think of Duskmoor, imagining myself running through the forest on the outskirts of the pack territory, chasing after Hera in her wolf form.

And nothing happens.

"Fuck," I groan, tossing my head back.

I force myself to take a deep breath and try again. This time, I focus on each of the people I've come to know in Duskmoor.

Hera. Jagger. Max.

Finn.

A rainbow-colored fog consumes me as my body twists and contorts. My bones crack, molding into a different shape as claws shoot out of my fingers. It's painful. I *love* it.

Less than a minute later, the fog disappears, and my field of vision is lower to the ground than before. I'm no longer on two legs, but on four.

Holy fucking shit! It's happened. I've shifted.

My tail thumps excitedly, pleading with me to start running around and let out decades of pent-up energy. I take two steps toward the cell doors and nose at the gate. It swings open.

Minerva.

She must've unlocked it somehow without anyone knowing. I'll have a lot of questions for that witch the next time I see her, but those will have to wait.

I need to find him.

I need to find Finn.

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CHAPTER 32
FINN

The room goes completely silent for a moment as everyone tries to process my admission—my mate is a human.

"About damn time you admitted the truth," Cam teases, sitting in his chair against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and a wicked grin. *"Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to finally go get your mate? The real one."*

"She can't be your mate," Ryker insists, staring at me intently. "Wolves don't mate with humans. And alphas sure as fuck don't mate with anyone besides another wolf. You know the rules, Finn. Just another example of why you're unfit to be an alpha and a member of this Council."

"Hold on a second," Malbec adds, narrowing his eyes at me. "How do you know she's your mate? How can you trust the witches haven't hoodwinked you *again*?"

He's got a point. But I know this is different.

She's different. She was born to be mine. I know it with every fiber of my being.

Clenching my fists, I take a deep breath to try to calm myself down rather than shift and unleash the Abyss on the Council. Nothing good will happen if I kill all of them. It'll be a fucking bureaucratic mess that would most likely lead to another long war between the lands, with innocent creatures dying.

"I've felt a connection to Maya since she came to Miraluna. I didn't understand it at first, due to the alleged fated mate bond I thought I had with

Blaire. Once Blaire rejected the bond—”

Ryker snickers. “You mean when she left your ass and came running to me. Happy to offer the same to Maya when she gets tired of your sorry excuse of a mutt.”

I sneer at him as my wolf itches to be let out and go for Ryker’s throat. “If you even think about touching a hair on Maya’s head, Mistwood will need a *completely* new leadership team.”

“Is that a threat?” Ryker stands up, placing his hands on the table, his fingernails digging into the wood.

“No, Ryker. It’s a fucking promise. Try me.” I glare at him, fighting back the urge to shift.

“Can you just kill him already?” Cam asks in an annoyed tone. *“Or at least let your wolf out and give him a few life-threatening wounds to put him in his godsdamn place. His attitude is really getting on my nerves. He’s almost as bad as the fucking fae.”*

“I’m not killing another alpha unless they give me reason to do so.”

“Pretty sure Ryker has given a few years’ worth of reasons, but you’re the boss.” He pauses for a second and scans the room.

“Are the dogs done fighting? We have more pressing matters to deal with than a pissing match between a bunch of animals,” Veyloria reminds the room with a frosty glare. “It doesn’t matter if Finn believes Maya is his mate. If she’s a human, we can’t let her roam free in Miraluna. If she isn’t, we have to find out what she is. We need to find out the truth about how she got in and how to prevent it from happening again.”

I growl. “You will not keep Maya locked up. I won’t allow it.”

“The Council decides what happens to her, Finn. Not you,” Bane adds with a stern look. “Best you remember who’s in charge when you step into this room. The wolves may have three votes on this Council, but none of you lead Miraluna.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Ryker clenches his jaw as his face reddens. “You think the fucking fae do?”

“We’re immortal,” Veyloria replies with a smirk. “Unlike some of you.”

Ryker snarls. “Immortal. Not untouchable, Veyloria. You can still be killed.”

A string of rapid-fire insults comes out of every Council member’s mouth as the conversation becomes heated in a matter of seconds.

“Everyone’s distracted, Finn. Might be time to make a break for it to try to rescue Maya,” Cam says, standing up and appraising the room. *“I’ll stay here in case the fae need an ass-kicking.”*

I take a couple of steps back from the table slowly, trying not to draw attention to my actions. *“Don’t start a godsdamn war while I’m gone, Cam.”*

“I make no promises.”

I shake my head and quietly exit the Council meeting room, hoping no one will notice my absence until I’ve gotten Maya out of her cell and safely back to Knottingham.

Racing through the corridors, I follow her scent toward the dungeons, where the prisoner holding cells are located. The chocolatey aroma that is so uniquely her is less pronounced than before, almost like it’s mixed with fresh pine.

That can’t be possible. There has to be some type of magic messing with my mind.

My wolf paws at me, urging me to shift and go in a different direction than the dungeons. I push back on his insistence, determined to find the cell where the Council is holding Maya. But he won’t relent, continuing to fight me until his strength overtakes mine and a rainbow mist envelops me.

The moment I’m in my wolf form, everything clicks into place. I take off running out of the building and into the woods as fast as my four legs can carry me.

I zigzag through the trees, my heart pounding as I search for her. Every step intensifies the connection I feel toward her and floods me with more of her emotions. My wolf howls with excitement, knowing exactly what he’ll find when we get to her—his fated mate.

Suddenly, I come to a screeching halt, the chocolate-pine aroma stronger than ever as I slowly pad around the forest, sniffing out her location. My tail starts thumping rapidly as I spot the collection of evergreens off to my right, and I know that’s where I’ll find her. In a similar spot to where we spent our first night in each other’s arms out in the woods.

My wolf wants to run at full speed into the trees, but I force myself to take slow steps, not wanting to scare her. As I nose under the branches, I see the most beautiful sable-colored wolf pacing frantically near the base of the largest evergreen.

She’s a wolf.

She's my mate.

She's <u>mine</u>.

My wolf whines, begging to move faster toward her, but I take my time. Each step deliberate, while she watches me intently. The string between us pulls tighter and tighter as an almost unbearable urge to claim her roars through me.

She stops pacing and whimpers softly, her eyes locked on mine.

When I'm in front of her, I gently nuzzle my snout against her fur, and a ripple of overwhelming love hits me, followed by indescribable pain. With a yelp, Maya collapses on the ground.

Fuck. There's only one thing that would make a female wolf feel that way: She's in heat.

It sometimes happens when the mate bond snaps into place, and the fact that Maya has never gone through one before is likely exacerbating it.

"You need to shift back into your human form, Maya," I say calmly, using our vibrant mindlink connection for the first time. *"You're in pain because you're going into heat. You need to shift so I can help you."*

She whines again, curling into herself as she begins to tremble. The sight and sounds shatter my heart. While I never wanted to see Maya in any type of pain, my earlier discomfort pales in comparison to the devastation I'm experiencing now.

"Listen to my voice. You can do this. Shift with me. Come home to me, Lucky."

A rainbow mist surrounds me as I shift into my human form to find her still curled up and shivering as a wolf. I crouch down and place my hand on her, gently petting her back and basking in the warmth radiating from my fingertips up my arm and into my heart.

"You're in heat. The connection between likely caused it to hit. The only way you'll feel better is if you shift and let me take care of you. Your body wants me—needs me to help you."

She whimpers, lifting her head and looking at me. *"I'm scared. I don't understand what's happening."*

A soft smile splits my face, hearing her voice inside my head for the first time. *"You're my fated mate, Lucky. We're destined to be together."*

The string connecting us goes taut as another rainbow mist blankets both of us for a minute, lights swirling around us until it fades away.

“Finn,” she whispers, sitting on the ground, completely naked and looking breathtaking. “Is it true?”

“Yes, Lucky. You’re mine. You were always meant to be mine.”

“What about Blaire?” she asks, her voice pained.

“It wasn’t real. My parents…It’s a long story but you need to know it was never fate. *You* were always supposed to be mine.”

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CHAPTER 33
MAYA

Finn's piercing ice-blue eyes stare at me, with indescribable warmth and passion behind them. Although I may not understand what happened, I know what he's saying is true—*he's my mate*.

He cups my cheek, and I lean into his touch; a sense of home floods my veins, followed by incredible happiness, despite the fire that's raging through my body. "I always hoped it was you. I wanted it to be you," he murmurs, resting his forehead against mine.

I open my mouth, and a sharp cry comes out. My vision becomes spotty as the world seems to spin out of control. It wasn't long after I shifted that a fire started to spread through my blood, my bones feeling like they were about to break. It's a deep-seated pain like I've never experienced.

And yet, I'm somehow still horny. More needy than I've ever been.

"Listen to my voice, Maya. You're in heat. I'm going to help you feel better now, then take you home so I can really take care of you. Is that okay?"

I nod and grimace at the same time, clutching my stomach. It's like period cramps but worse. So much worse. All I want to do is die. Or fuck Finn's brains out. Which sounds promising, but until then, this whole heat thing is terrible.

Finn inhales sharply, and his eyes darken. "Fuck, Lucky." He helps me lie on the bed of soft pine needles and gently spreads my legs. "I'm going to touch you. It'll make you feel better. I've dreamed of touching you again. Tasting you. Fucking you. It took everything I had to walk away from you

last time, but I'll never do that again. You're mine. Forever. And I am going to help you through this. It can feel good. I'll make it feel good."

Lust floods my veins as intense throbbing pools in my core, begging for relief.

Finn lowers his head between my legs and breathes me in. "You smell incredible, Lucky. The best godsdamn scent in the entire world." He dips two fingers through my wetness, and I arch into his touch, chasing more friction than he's giving me. "I'm going to fingerfuck you now to get you off. It won't be enough to lessen all the pain you're experiencing, but the Council might be coming. So hopefully this will be enough to allow us to travel home, where I know you'll be safe, and then I'll spend the next two days with my head and cock between your legs."

"Please, Finn," I beg, desperate for him to do less talking and more touching.

He growls. "You never have to ask me twice. You're my mate, and I'll always give you what you need." He slides two fingers inside my tight channel and curls them until they hit the spot that only he has ever truly touched. He pumps his fingers in and out of me at a relentless pace, each thrust increasing my hunger for him.

The pleasure he's giving me now is unlike what I felt when we were together before. Everything is heightened. More intense. Making me feel like I might actually explode if he doesn't make me orgasm. It's almost like my body has to have him or I'll die.

"Yes, Finn," I moan, arching my back as pine needles stick to my ass. "More. Please. I need more."

He grins wickedly, then brings his other hand between my thighs. His thumb rubs soft circles over my clit as he continues at an unrelenting pace. The combination of the two sends me soaring, higher and higher up the mountain until I'm teetering on the edge, about to explode.

"Yes. That's it. My beautiful mate. Come for me," he demands in a low, gravelly voice that sends a jolt of electricity straight to my pussy.

"Holy fuck, Finn!" I scream, shattering into a million pieces as the most intense orgasm of my life rips through me. Every nerve ending is on fire. Every inch of my skin carves his touch.

And then everything goes black.

“Good evening, Lucky,” Finn murmurs, running his fingers through my hair.

“What happened?” I ask, glancing around the unfamiliar room. “Where are we?”

“We’re at my house.” He pauses and caresses my cheek. “*Our* home. The one I had built for my mate years ago.”

I tense. “For Blaire?” There’s a hint of unease in my voice.

He shakes his head. “No. She’s never set foot inside here. I bought the land for this house and had it built when I became the alpha, long before anything happened with Blaire. I always…” He takes a deep breath and gazes into my eyes with intense longing. “It might sound crazy, but I think a part of me knew this house was for you. It would explain why I built such a big kitchen with double ovens when I don’t even like to cook.”

A blush creeps up my face. “You really think so?”

“Yeah, Lucky. I do. Deep down, I know the Fates meant for me to find you, and I’m so grateful I did.” He brushes a stray piece of hair out of my face. “You collapsed in the forest after you had an orgasm. They tend to be much more intense when you’re with your fated mate. Even more so when it’s your first time in heat.”

My face reddens further. “So, it’s not your skills that caused it?”

He grins widely. “Oh, my skills *definitely* played a part. Happy to remind you again if you’d like.”

An inferno erupts between my legs, flames jumping higher and higher with each passing second.

Finn inhales deeply. “Smells like your body is craving what only I can give you. What only I’ll give you for the rest of our lives.” He leans in and kisses me softly. “Do you want me to make you feel better?”

My heart skips a beat.

I’m his mate.

And he’s mine.

I finally have a place and a person to call home.

Forever.

“Yes, Finn. Please? Please fuck me,” I reply, tossing back the plush covers.

He growls. “I hope you’re prepared. You’re about to spend the next two days in bed with me until neither one of us can walk.”

I giggle. “Sounds like a great time.”

His eyes flash silver, then he quickly rolls on top of me, caging me between his arms. “Looks like I should start off with my favorite meal of the day—your pussy.” He slides down my body, peppering my skin with kisses as he skims over my breasts, stomach, and hips.

Once his head is near my thighs, he pushes my knees apart and spreads them wider, giving him access to all of me. He takes a long lick up my wet center, causing an uncontrollable moan to escape my mouth. “You’re fucking soaked for me. Exactly the way I like it.”

Then he increases the intensity. Licking. Flicking. Sucking. Every stroke of his tongue builds my desire for him. He’s not using any pattern, making my mind unable to know what he’s going to do next and my body beg for more.

I’ll gladly take whatever he’ll give me, but I don’t think it will ever be enough.

“Oh God, Finn. This feels so good,” I whimper, lifting my hips to get closer to his mouth.

“You taste fucking delicious. My amazing mate with her tasty cunt,” he murmurs into my pussy, the vibrations make my eyes roll back in my head.

Lick. Flick. Suck.

Repeat.

A string of unrecognizable words and sounds comes out of me when he slides two fingers into my core and starts moving them in and out rapidly. The sensations are almost too much, rendering me completely incoherent.

Lick. Flick. Suck.

In. Out.

Repeat.

My toes start to curl as a wave of pleasure crashes into me. “I’m coming, Finn,” I pant, letting the fierceness of his mouth send me over the edge. “Oh my God! Finn!”

He pins my hips in place as I thrash around on the bed, riding out my climax while he continues to pump his fingers inside me and suck like a goddamn vacuum on my clit.

Black spots cloud my vision again as I collapse on the bed, unable to think or move.

Finn chuckles. “Enjoy that one?” he teases, my arousal gleaming on his face. “I sure know I did.” He moves up my body, bracing his weight on his

elbows as he meets my gaze. “Ready for me to fuck you yet? Or do you need a few minutes to collect yourself?”

“Uh-huh.”

He drags his finger along my collarbone, eliciting a mix of goosebumps and heat to pop up wherever he touches. “Not sure what that means, Lucky. Do you want my cock or not?”

I grind my core against his girthy shaft, using my body to communicate what I want. What I *need.*

“That’s my girl,” he groans. He lines his cock up with my entrance and stills for a second. “I’m so glad it’s you, Lucky. I’m so glad you’re mine.” Then, he slides into me, taking me to the hilt with a single thrust. “Fuck, you feel like home.”

I moan in agreement as I grip the sheets tightly.

His ice-blue eyes gaze at me with an enormous amount of love behind them. We might not have said those three words yet, but I know it’s what we feel. What I’ve felt for him for probably longer than I’ve realized.

He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he moves in and out, hitting spots I didn’t know existed. This is more than just sex. We’re making love. Cementing ourselves to each other for a lifetime.

Yes, there might be a magical fated bond that pulled us together, but this is also our choice.

We are both fated mates and chosen mates.

And we get to spend a lifetime together.

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CHAPTER 34
FINN

Two days later, Maya and I stroll into the pack headquarters on our way to dinner. There's a slight hitch to our strides after spending hours in bed together, but the pleasure was definitely worth any discomfort.

"How do you think everyone is going to take the news that we're mates?" Maya asks, chewing on the corner of her lip. "Do you think Cam told anyone?"

I chuckle. "Cam probably told *everyone*. That man loves gossip."

Right on cue, we walk through the cafeteria doors hand-in-hand, and the room goes silent. I inhale sharply, ready to defend my relationship with Maya to whoever has a problem with it. I may love this pack more than almost anything in this world, but I will tear it to shreds if it has a problem with me being mated to a half-shifter.

My love for Lucky will always come first.

"It's about damn time the two of you stopped fucking," Jagger calls out from across the room. "We've been waiting to celebrate for days."

The entire room bursts into a round of applause and my heart soars. They're accepting our relationship. Our bond. My pack—my family—is choosing to love my mate just as much as I do. They're giving her the home she's always wanted.

My father walks forward, smiling, my mother by his side. "Are you going to introduce us to your mate, son? Your mother and I have been anxiously waiting to meet her: the new luna of our pack."

Maya gasps, her hand flying to her chest. In between our marathon sex sessions, she shared how nervous she was about not being accepted by everyone since her mother was a human, and her father was a member of another pack. I told her multiple times it didn't matter to me, but I know my words didn't fully ease her concerns.

But my father's words did. And I'll be damned if that doesn't make a lump lodge in my throat.

"Yeah, Finn. You can't keep her locked up in the bedroom forever. There is so much I need to share with her. So many plans we need to make," my mom adds, taking a step forward and standing in front of Maya. "You can't keep me from my new daughter forever."

Tears stream down Maya's face. This is the moment she's always dreamed of—having a family.

"Dad, Mom, this is Maya. My mate," I say proudly, loud enough for everyone to hear.

My mom embraces Maya in a tight hug while my father does the same to me.

"I'm so proud of you, son. I'm sorry I didn't trust your judgment before, about Maya. Please forgive me," he whispers, ensuring only I can hear him.

I nod silently. While I may not agree with how the elders reacted when they found out I slept with Maya the first time, I understand their desire to protect the pack. It's their role as elders, after all. But now that they know she can shift, that she can carry the bonds of the luna, they'd better get on board real fucking fast.

"So, have you picked out a date for the ceremony yet?" my mom asks, arching her eyebrows as her gaze bounces between us.

"Well, I don't—"

Maya gently places her hand on my arm. "I've got this one."

I smile at her, curious to hear what she might say. Although I shared how the bond ceremony works and what is involved, we never talked about timing.

She takes a deep breath and grins. "I'd like to say tomorrow, but I assume that's a bit fast."

My parents chuckle, along with some of the wolves near us who clearly overheard the conversation. Actually, I'd be surprised if most of the room didn't hear it due to their keen hearing ability and overall nosiness.

“I’d like to make things official as soon as possible. I don’t want to wait another minute to commit to Finn for the rest of my life.” Maya tilts her head and smiles at me, adoration in her eyes. “So, how long does it take to plan one of these things?”

“We can probably have everything ready in a couple of days. How about we grab some dinner and talk about what you’d like?” my mom suggests.

“I’d love that,” Maya replies, giving me a kiss on the cheek before heading off with my mom toward the buffet.

“All right, now that family time is over,” Cam says, strolling up to where my dad and I are standing. “We need to talk about what the fuck we’re going to do about the Council. They can’t get away with kidnapping your mate and our luna without serious repercussions.”

“I agree with Cam,” Jagger adds, coming up behind him, with Max in tow, too. “I know they thought Miraluna’s safety was at stake, but we can’t let this stand.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll deal with the Council and make sure there’s a suitable punishment befitting Ryker’s bullshit,” I reply with a hint of venom in my tone. “No one touches what’s mine and doesn’t pay the price for it.”

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EPILOGUE

MAYA

Standing in front of the mirror, I stare at my reflection, mesmerized by the gorgeous white flowing gown Finn's mother helped me pick out at the boutique in town. My light brown hair is half up, with the rest in soft curls, and there's a hint of makeup on me that Hera helped with earlier.

It's hard to believe that in a few minutes I'll be walking down the aisle to Finn. Committing my life to him.

A few months ago, I never would've thought this was possible. I was barely surviving a horrible situationship. And now, I'm about to bond my life to my fated mate, and officially become the luna of a pack that has welcomed me so warmly in the past few days since finding out about my mate bond with Finn.

It's the first time in my life that I feel at home. Happy. Relaxed. Cherished.

"Are you ready, my dear?" Finn's mom asks, standing behind me with a brilliant smile on her face. She's been an absolute godsend at organizing the ceremony for us. I wouldn't have been able to pull this off without the help of her and her friends.

I nod, tears brimming in my eyes.

"Actually, do you mind if I interrupt for a second? I'd like to talk to Maya about something before the ceremony," Finn's dad says, appearing in the doorway.

His wife smiles at him. "I'll wait outside and let the two of you have a moment."

I tense slightly, unsure what he could possibly want to talk to me about. I know he wasn't on board with the idea of Finn and me when they thought I was a witch, but Finn assured me his dad had changed his tune after finding out I was part wolf.

He walks across the room until he's in front of me, clad in a dark gray suit with a white flower in the pocket. His gray hair is styled back with gel, and he's every bit the dashing gentleman you'd expect of a former alpha. It's also obvious where Finn's good looks come from.

"I know we're still getting to know each other," he says calmly with his hands in his pockets. "But I'd like to offer to walk you down the aisle since your dad isn't here to do it. And if you'd like, please feel free to call me Dad."

All the air leaves my lungs as tears start to fall from my eyes. I never imagined a day where I'd get married, let alone have someone who wanted to walk me down the aisle. "I'd really like that."

He smiles back at me. "Then, let's get you officially bonded to my son and make you the luna of our pack." He holds out his arm, and I loop mine around it as he ushers us out of the room.

We walk quietly for a few minutes until we reach the breathtaking ceremony, set up at the edge of the woods. The entire pack is seated in rows of white chairs, while Finn waits for me at the end of the aisle with Cam by his side, as well as Gideon, who will perform the ceremony. Soft music begins playing, causing everyone to stand as Finn's dad and I start walking down the aisle toward my future—my mate.

Once we reach the end of the aisle, Finn's dad turns to me and says, "Welcome to the family, Maya. We're really glad to have you as a daughter."

I blink back tears, desperately not wanting to cry through the ceremony. "Thanks, Dad."

He pulls me into a big hug, then lets go and shakes Finn's hand before taking his seat in the front row next to his mate.

"You look beautiful, Lucky," Finn whispers, taking my hand. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I reply, intertwining our fingers.

"I'm not getting any younger, so let's get the two of you bonded," Gideon says loudly, eliciting a laugh from the attendees. "The process for bonding in Duskmoor requires two hearts to commit to one another and

speak that commitment in front of the pack. So, Maya, would you like to go first?”

I nod and take a deep breath, ignoring the hundreds of eyes watching me. “I didn’t grow up with a home. Or a family. I spent most of my life feeling unbelievably alone. Until one night, I was pulled into Miraluna by a force I didn’t understand. By a bond I didn’t know existed.” I smile softly at him. “Right away, you welcomed me into your world and life. It didn’t take long until this place became my home. Until *you* felt like my home. And while I know part of that is the blessing of the Fates, I also strongly believe it’s because the love we share transcends our bond. I *choose* to bond my life to you, Finnegan Moonstone. From now until my dying breath.”

Finn grins and squeezes my hand. “Maya, you came into my life without warning. Upending everything I thought I knew. You were a breath of fresh air I didn’t know I needed. From the very beginning, I felt this undeniable pull toward you I couldn’t explain. And no matter how hard I tried to stay away from you, I couldn’t.” He leans forward and brushes a stray hair out of my face. “I could never stay away from you. You’re my beginning and my end. The other half of my heart and soul. And it’s an added bonus that you’re my fated mate. But know this, I would choose you every time. No matter what. I choose to bond my life to you, Maya James. From now until my dying breath.”

A rainbow mist surrounds us as a charge of electricity flows through my veins. Finn prepared me for this part of the ceremony, when our bond is officially accepted, and magic ties us together forever. The connection between us thrums louder, more intense than it was a few seconds ago as a wave of heat pulses in my core.

Finn smirks and wiggles his eyebrows.

A mix of my arousal and his wafts in the air, and I hope for a moment that the mist is protecting everyone else from smelling our desires. Apparently, cementing the bond will make our need to have each other ten times stronger than it has previously been, which is hard to imagine. Until right now. I might be standing in front of hundreds of people, but I’m prepared to climb this man and fuck him out in the open if I have to wait much longer.

The mist slowly fades, bringing our guests back into view, along with Gideon and Cam.

“Someone’s excited about later,” Cam teases me.

My cheeks flush, but I don't bother responding. He's not wrong, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I want my mate.

Gideon clears his throat. "Duskmoor pack, please welcome our new luna, Maya."

Finn and I grin at each other while the rest of the pack hoots and hollers. Today is a big day for all of us. Not only have I committed my life to Finn, but I've also committed to leading this pack with him.

Finn narrows his eyes and looks at Gideon, silently communicating whatever is currently displeasing him via mindlink. I'm going to have to talk to Finn about that at some point. I definitely don't want to be left out of any conversation.

Gideon sighs. "Fine, Finn. You can kiss your mate." He throws his hands up.

Finn wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me into a sweltering kiss that leaves my entire body tingling and wanting more.

"Don't worry, Lucky. I'll have you spread out for me on a table in no time."

I'm about to reply when a huge wave of power hits me square in the chest, causing me to almost tumble backward if it wasn't for Finn's strong hold on me.

"What was that?" I ask, trying to slow my racing heart and erratic breathing.

"The border," Finn replies, concern etched on his face. "It's been crossed again."

Someone new has entered Miraluna.

The Series Continues…

Find out who entered Miraluna and the impact it will have on everyone in **Hidden Fate**.

Coming January 2027

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Acknowledgments

The idea for this series was sparked on one of our weekly video calls. We talked about writing a shifter romance for a while and then finally asked ourselves…“But what if we did?” The result is the book you see before you and the subsequent ones that are to follow in this series and beyond. It’s been a true joy co-developing this world and characters, and we hope you enjoyed reading it as much as we did writing it.

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And to our husbands, thank you for not telling us we were crazy when we decided to add another book to our publishing schedule for the year (and a surprise release no less!). Please also consider this a thank you in advance —we’re planning to release a lot more of them next year.

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