



TJ KLUNE

BROTHERSONG

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About Brothersong

In the ruins of Caswell, Maine, Carter Bennett learned the truth of what had been right in front of him the entire time. And then it—he—was gone.

Desperate for answers, Carter takes to the road, leaving family and the safety of his pack behind, all in the name of a man he only knows as a feral wolf. But therein lies the danger: wolves are pack animals, and the longer Carter is on his own, the more his mind slips toward the endless void of Omega insanity.

But he pushes on, following the trail left by Gavin.

Gavin, the son of Robert Livingstone. The half-brother of Gordo Livingstone.

What Carter finds will change the course of the wolves forever. Because Gavin's history with the Bennett pack goes back further than anyone knows, a secret kept hidden by Carter's father, Thomas Bennett.

And with this knowledge comes a price: the sins of the fathers now rest upon the shoulders of their sons.

Brothersong

By
TJ Klune

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Brothersong

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Dedication

For my packpackpack.

*i hear your heart
a thunderous sound
my brother and my friend
howl your song and lead me home
together 'til the end*

gone

“A wolf,” my father told me once, “is only as strong as his tether. Without a tether, without something to remind him of his humanity, he’ll be lost.”

I stared up at him with wide eyes. I thought no one could ever be as big as my father. He was all I could see. “Really?”

He nodded, taking my hand. We were walking through the woods. Kelly had wanted to come with us, but Dad said he couldn’t.

Kelly cried, only stopping when I told him I’d come back and we’d play hide-and-seek. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

I was eight years old. Kelly was six. Our promises were important.

My father’s hand engulfed my own, and I wondered if I would be like him when I grew up. I knew I wasn’t going to be an Alpha. That was Joe, though I didn’t understand how my two-year-old brother would be the Alpha of *anything*. I’d been jealous when my parents told us Joe would be something I could never be, but it’d faded when Kelly said it was okay, Carter, because that means you and me will always be the same.

I never worried about it after that.

“Soon,” my father said, “you’ll be ready for your first shift. It’ll be scary and confusing, but so long as you have your tether, all will be well. You’ll be able to run with your mother and me and the rest of our pack.”

“I already do that,” I reminded him.

He laughed. “You do, don’t you? But you’ll be faster. I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep up with you.”

I was shocked. “But... you’re the *Alpha*. Of *everyone*.”

“I am,” he agreed. “But that’s not what’s important.” He stopped under a large oak tree. “It’s about the heart that beats in your chest. And you’ve got a great heart, Carter, one that beats so strongly that I think you might be the fastest

wolf who ever lived.”

“Whoa,” I breathed. He dropped my hand before sitting on the ground, his back to the tree. He crossed his legs, motioning for me to do the same. I did so, and quickly, not wanting him to change his mind about how fast I would be. My knees bumped his as I mirrored his pose.

He smiled at me as he said, “A tether to a wolf is precious, something guarded fiercely. It can be a thought or an idea. The feeling of pack. Of home.” His smile faded slightly. “Or of where home should be. Take us, for example. We’re here in Maine, but I don’t know if that’s our home. We’re here because of what’s asked of us. Because of what I must do. But when I think of home, I think of a little town in the west, and I miss it terribly.”

“We can go back,” I told my dad. “You’re the boss. We can go wherever we want.”

He shook his head. “I have a responsibility, one I’m grateful for. Being an Alpha isn’t about doing whatever I want. It’s about weighing the needs of the many. Your grandfather taught me that. An Alpha means putting others above yourself.”

“And that’s going to be Joe,” I said dubiously. When I’d seen him last, he’d been in a high chair in the kitchen, Mom scolding him for putting Cheerios up his nose.

He laughed. “One day. But not for a long time. But today is about you. You’re just as important as your brother, as is Kelly. Even though Joe’s going to be the Alpha, he’ll look to you for guidance. An Alpha needs someone like the two of you who he can trust, who he can look to when he’s uncertain. And you’ll need to be strong for him. Which is why we’re here. You don’t need to know what your tether is today, but I’ll ask you to start thinking about it and what it could be to you—”

“Can it be a person?”

He paused. Then, “Why do you ask?”

“Can it?”

He stared at me for a long time. “It can. But having a person as your tether can be... difficult.”

“Why?”

“Because people change. We don’t stay the same. We learn and grow and, from new experiences, are shaped into something more. Sometimes, people aren’t... well. They aren’t who they’re supposed to be or how we think of them.

They change in ways we don't expect, and while we want them to remember the good times, they can only focus on the bad. And it colors their world in shadows."

There was a look on his face I'd never seen before, and it made me uneasy. But it was gone before I could ask after it. "Is a tether a secret?"

He nodded. "It can be. Having a tether is... it's a treasure. One that is unlike anything else in the world. Some even say it's more important than having a mate."

I grimaced. "I don't care about that. Girls are weird. I don't want a mate. That's stupid."

He chuckled. "I'll remind you of that when the day comes. And I can't wait to see the look on your face."

"What's yours? You can tell me. I won't say anything to anyone."

He tilted his head back against the tree. "You promise?"

I nodded eagerly. "Yeah."

When my father smiled for real, you could see it in his eyes. It was like a light shining from within. "It's all of you. My pack."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

I shrugged. "I'm not. It's just... you always talk about pack and pack and pack." I scrunched up my face. "I guess it makes sense."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Is it the same for Mom?"

"Yes. Or at least it was. Tethers can change over time. Like people, they evolve. Where it once might have been the idea of pack, it's become more pointed. More focused. For her, it's her sons. You and Kelly and Joe. It started with you and grew because of Kelly and Joe. She would do anything for you."

Fire burned in my chest, safe and warm. "Mine won't ever change."

My father looked at me curiously. "Why?"

"Because I won't let it."

"You sound as if you already know what it is."

"'Cause I do."

He leaned forward, taking my hands in his. "Will you tell me?"

I looked up at him, too young to understand the depths of my love for him. All I knew was that my father was here and asking me something that felt

important, something just between us. A secret. “You can’t tell anyone.”

His lips twitched. “Not even Mom?”

I frowned. “Well, she’s okay, I guess. But not anyone else!”

“I swear,” he said, and since he was an Alpha, I knew he meant it.

I said, “Kelly. It’s Kelly.”

He closed his eyes. His throat clicked as he swallowed. “Why?”

“Because he needs me.”

“That’s not—”

“And I need him.”

He opened his eyes. I thought I saw a flash of red. “Tell me.”

“He’s not like Joe. Joe’s gonna be Alpha, and he’ll be big and strong like you, and everyone will listen to him because he’ll know what to do. You’ll tell him. But Kelly is always going to be a Beta like me. We’re the same.”

“I’ve noticed.”

I needed him to understand. “When I have bad dreams, he doesn’t make fun of me and tells me everything is going to be okay. When he hurt his knee and it took a long time to heal, I cleaned it up for him and told him it was okay to cry, even though we’re boys. Boys can cry too.”

“They can,” my father whispered.

“And I think about him all the time,” I told him. “When I feel sad or mad, I think about him and I feel better. That’s what tethers do, right? They make you happy. Kelly makes me happy.”

“He’s your brother.”

“It’s more than that.”

“How?”

I was frustrated. I didn’t know how to put the thoughts in my head into words. Words that would show him just how far it went. Finally, I said, “It’s... he’s everything.”

For a moment I thought I’d said the wrong thing. My father was staring at me strangely, and I squirmed. But instead of a rebuke, he pulled me toward him, and it was like I was a cub again as I turned around, settling between his legs, my back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me, his chin on the top of my head. I breathed him in, and in the back of my mind, a voice that had once been weak whispered as strong as I’d ever heard it.

packpackpack

“You surprise me,” my father said. “Every day you surprise me. I’m so lucky to have someone such as you as mine. Never, ever forget that. And if you say your tether is Kelly, then so it shall be. You’ll be a good wolf, Carter. And I can’t wait to see the man you’ll become. No matter where I am, no matter what has happened, I’ll remember this gift you’ve given me. Thank you for sharing your secret. I’ll keep it safe.”

“But you’re not going anywhere, right?”

He laughed again, and even though I couldn’t see him, I knew he was smiling all the way up to his eyes. “No. I’m not going anywhere. Not for a very long time.”

We stayed there, under a tree in the refuge outside of Caswell, Maine, for what felt like hours.

Just the two of us.

And when we finally went home, Kelly was waiting for us on the porch, gnawing on his bottom lip. He lit up when he saw me and almost tripped as he ran down the stairs. He managed to stay upright, and he tackled me into the grass as our father watched. He threw his hands up over his head as he howled in triumph, a cracked thing that didn’t sound anything like the other wolves.

I grinned up at him. “Wow. You’re so strong!”

He poked my nose. “You were gone forever. I got bored. Why did it take so long?”

“I’m here now,” I told him. “And I won’t leave you again.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

And as I hugged my tether close, listening to him talk excitedly in my ear about how Joe had stuck *two* Cheerios up his nose and how Mom had gotten mad when Uncle Mark had laughed, I told myself it was a promise I’d always keep.

“JESUS FUCKING CHRIST,” I snapped. “Do you have to follow me everywhere? Dude. Seriously. Back off.”

The timber wolf glared at me.

I tilted my head, listening.

Everyone was in the house. I could hear Mom and Jessie laughing about

something in the kitchen.

I jerked my head toward the woods.

The timber wolf huffed out a breath.

I ran.

He followed.

I laughed when he nipped at my heels, urging me on, and in my head, I pretended I could hear his wolf voice saying *faster faster faster must run faster so i can chase so i can catch you so i can eat you.*

We went deep into the forest, bypassing the clearing, heading for the furthest reaches of our territory. The wolf never ran ahead, always staying at my side, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

We ran for miles, the scent of spring so green I could taste it.

Eventually I stopped, chest heaving, muscles burning from exertion.

I collapsed on the ground spread-eagled as the wolf paced around me, head raised, sniffing the air, ears twitching. When he decided there was no threat, he lay down beside me, head on my chest, tail curled over my legs. He huffed out an annoyed breath in my face.

I rolled my eyes. “Have to keep up appearances. I’ve got a reputation to maintain. You know how much shit I would get if anyone found out?” I flicked his forehead.

He growled, baring his teeth.

“Yeah, yeah. And I wasn’t exactly lying. You do follow me everywhere. A man has got to be able to shit in peace without an overgrown dog scratching at the door. You don’t see me staring at you when you’re squatting in the backyard.”

He closed his eyes.

I flicked him again. “Don’t ignore me.”

He opened one eye. For something that wasn’t exactly human, he certainly could get his exasperation across.

“Whatever, man. I’m just saying.”

He sneezed on me.

“Fucking asshole,” I muttered, wiping my face. “Just you wait. You’ll get yours. Kibble. I’m going to make sure you only get kibble from here on out.”

Thick clouds passed by overhead. I laughed when a dragonfly landed between his ears, causing them to flatten. The translucent wings fluttered before

it flew away.

He was a heavy weight upon me.

Once I thought it crushing.

Now it felt like an anchor holding me in place.

It should have bothered me more than it did.

He grunted, a question without words, his breath hot on my chest through my thin shirt.

“Same old, same old. Who, how, why. You know how it is.”

Who are you?

How did you come to be this way?

Why can't you shift back?

Questions I'd asked over and over again.

He grumbled, lips pulling back over his teeth.

“I know, dude. It's whatever, you know? You'll figure it out when you're ready. Just... maybe that could be sooner rather than later? I mean, would it be so bad if you—stop growling at me, you dick! Oh, fuck you, man. Don't take that tone with me.”

He moved his head, nosing at my arm.

I ignored him.

He pressed harder, more insistent.

I sighed. “You're spoiled. That's what's wrong here. You think you've got it good. And you do. Maybe too good.” But I did what he wanted, resting my hand on top of his head, scratching the backs of his ears.

He closed his eyes again as he settled.

We were drifting, just the two of us. The world around us turned hazy, the edges like a dream. Hours passed by, and sometimes we dozed, and sometimes we just... were.

I said, “You can, you know?”

I said, “If you want to.”

I said, “I don't know what happened to you.”

I said, “I don't know where you came from or what you had to deal with.”

I said, “But you're safe here.”

I said, “You're safe with us. With me. We can help you. Ox... he's a good Alpha. Joe too. They could be yours, if you wanted.”

I said, “And then maybe I could hear your voice. I mean, totally no homo, but I think it’d be... nice.”

He was shaking.

I looked at him, thinking something was wrong.

It wasn’t.

The motherfucker was *laughing* at me.

I shoved him off me. “Asshole.”

He rolled over on his back, legs in the air, body wiggling as he scratched himself on the ground. Then he fell to his side, mouth open in a ferocious yawn.

“Would it be so bad?” I whispered. “Shifting back? You can’t stay this way forever. You can’t lose yourself to your wolf. You’ll forget how to find your way home.”

He turned his head away from me.

I’d pushed enough for the day. I could always try again tomorrow. We had time.

I sat up, stretching my arms above my head.

His tail thumped on the ground.

“Okay, so where did we leave off last time? Oh. Right. So, Ox and Joe decided it was time for them to mate. Which, honestly, I try not to think about because that’s my little brother, you know? And if I *do* think about it, it makes me want to punch Ox in the mouth because *that’s my little brother*. But what the fuck do I know, right? So, Ox and Joe... well. You know. Bone. And it was weird and oh so gross, because I could *feel* it. Oh, shut up, I didn’t mean like that. I meant I could *feel* it when their mate bond formed. We all could. It was like this... this light. Burning in all of us. Mom said she’s never heard of a pack having two Alphas before, but it made sense that it happened with us because of how crazy we already are. Ox is... well. He’s Ox, right? Werewolf Jesus. And then he and Joe came out of the house, and I *never* want to smell that on my little brother ever again. It was like he’d *rolled* in spunk, and Kelly and I were gagging because what the *fuck*? We gave him so much shit for it. That... that was a good day.”

I glanced down at him.

He was watching me with violet eyes.

“And that’s how it ended. At least the first part. There’s still Mark and Gordo to—”

His tail twitched dangerously. His body tensed.

My hand stilled. “Why do you get like that every time I bring up Gordo? I know you’re an Omega and all and you’ve probably got evil Livingstone magic in you, but it’s not his fault. You really need to get over whatever the hell is wrong with you. Gordo’s good people. I mean, yeah, he’s a dick, but so are you. You guys have more in common than you think. Sometimes you even make the same facial expressions.”

He snapped at me.

I laughed and fell back against the grass, hands behind my head. “Fine. Be that way. We don’t have to talk about it today. There’s always tomorrow.”

We stayed there, just the two of us, until the sky began to streak with red and orange.

AS I SAT BEHIND my dead father’s desk for the last time on a cold winter morning, I wondered what he would think of me.

He told me once that difficult decisions must be made with a level head. It was the only way to make sure they were right.

The house was quiet. Everyone was gone.

My father was a proud man. A strong man. There was a time when I thought he could do no wrong, that he was absolute in his power, all knowing.

But he wasn’t.

For someone such as him, an Alpha wolf from a long line of wolves, he was terribly human in the mistakes he made, the people he’d hurt, the enemies he’d trusted.

Ox.

Joe.

Gordo.

Mark.

Richard Collins.

Osmond.

Michelle Hughes.

Robert Livingstone.

He was wrong about all of them. The things he’d done.

And yet... he was still my father.

I loved him.

If I tried hard enough, if I really tried, I could almost smell him embedded in the bones of this house, in the earth of this territory that had seen so much death.

I loved him.

But I hated him too.

I thought that was what it meant to be a son: to believe in someone so much that it caused blindness to all their faults until it didn't. Thomas Bennett wasn't infallible. He wasn't perfect. I could see that now.

Days ago, I was on a ledge.

Below me was a void.

I hesitated. But I thought I'd already been falling for a long time. I just hadn't realized it.

That final step came easier than I expected it to. I'd already prepared. Drained my bank accounts. Packed my bags. Prepared to do what I thought I had to.

Which led me to this. Now.

This moment when I knew nothing would ever be the same.

I looked at the computer monitor on the desk.

I saw a version of myself staring back, one I didn't recognize. *This* Carter had dead eyes and black circles underneath them. *This* Carter had lost weight, his cheekbones more pronounced. *This* Carter had bloodless skin. *This* Carter knew what it meant to lose something so precious and yet was about to make things worse. *This* Carter had taken hit after hit after hit, and for what?

This Carter was a stranger.

And yet he was me.

My hand shook as I settled it on the mouse, knowing if I didn't do this now, I would never do it.

And that's the point, my father whispered. *You are a wolf, but you're still human. You give all you can, and yet you still bleed. Why would you make it worse? Why would you do this to yourself? To your pack? To him?*

Him.

Because it always came back to him.

I thought it always would.

Which is why when I hit the little icon on the screen to start recording, his name was the first thing from my lips.

“Kelly, I....”

And oh, the things I could say. The sheer *magnitude* of everything he was to me. My mother told me when I was young that I would never forget my first love. That even when all seemed dark, when all was lost, there would be the little pulsing light of memory stored deeply away.

She'd been talking about a faceless girl.

Or boy.

She hadn't known that I'd already met my first love.

My throat was raw.

I was so very tired.

“I love you more than anything in this world. Please remember that. I know this is going to hurt, and I'm sorry. But I have to do this.”

I looked away, unable to watch this broken man speak any more than I had to.

“You see, there was this boy. And he's the best thing that ever happened to me. He gave me the courage to stand for what I believe in, to fight for those I care about. He taught me the strength of love and brotherhood. He made me a better person.”

I tried to smile to let him know I was okay. It stretched wide on my face, foreign and harsh, before it cracked and broke.

“You, Kelly,” I said hoarsely. “Always you. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me.”

I looked out the window. There was frost on the glass. Snow was beginning to fall. “You're my first memory. Mom was holding you, and I wanted to take you for myself, hide you away so no one would hurt you.” It was fuzzy, the edges frayed like it'd been nothing but a dream. My mother was wearing sweats, her face free of makeup. Her skin looked soft and glowing. She was speaking quietly, but her words were lost to me, a quiet murmur that disappeared at the sight of who she held.

A tiny hand reached up, the fingers opening and closing.

And there, in the recesses of my mind, I heard her speak four words that changed everything about who I was.

She said, “Look. He knows you.”

I didn't understand then the earthquake this caused within me.

I poked his fat little cheek, marveling at the way his skin dimpled.

He blinked up at me, eyes bright and blue, blue, blue.

He made a noise. A little squawk.

And I was reborn.

“You’re my first love,” I said in this empty room, lost in the memory of how his hand had wrapped so carefully around my finger. “I knew that when you would always smile when you saw me, and it was like staring into the sun.”

I swallowed thickly, looking away from the window.

“You’re my heart,” I told him, knowing there was a chance he’d never forgive me. “You are my soul. I love Mom. She taught me kindness. I love Dad. He taught me how to be a good wolf. I love Joe. He taught me that strength comes from within.”

My breath hitched in my chest, but I pushed through it. He needed to hear this from me. He needed to know why. “But you were my greatest teacher. Because with you I understood life. What it meant to love someone so blindly and without reservation. To have a purpose. To have hope. I have been a big brother for most of my life, and it’s the best thing I ever could be. Without you, I would be nothing.”

It hurt to breathe. “I know you’re going to be angry. But I hope you understand, at least a little bit.” I looked back at the screen. “Because I have this hole in my chest. This void. And I know why. It’s because of him.”

Leave. With you. I’ll. Go. With you. Don’t. Don’t touch. Them.

“I have to find him, Kelly. I have to find him because I think without him, there’s always going to be part of me that feels like I’m incomplete. I should have listened to you more when Robbie was gone. I should have fought harder. I didn’t understand then. I do now, and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Maybe he’ll want nothing to do with me. Maybe he’ll....”

No. Stay. Back. Don’t want. This. Don’t want. Pack. Don’t want. Brother. Don’t want. You. Child. You are. A child. I am not. Like you. I am not. Pack.

“I have to try,” I pleaded in this empty room. “And I know Ox and Joe and all the others are looking for him, for the both of them, but it’s not enough. Kelly, he saved us. I see that now. He saved us all. And I have to do the same for him. I have to.”

Blood rushed in my ears. My vision was narrowing. There was a heavy weight on my chest, and I couldn’t catch my breath.

I said, “I made you a promise once. I told you that I would always come back for you. I meant it then and I mean it now. I will *always* come back for you.

No matter where I am, no matter what I'm doing, I'll be thinking of you and imagining the day I get to see you again. I don't know when that's going to be, but after you kick my ass, after you scream and yell at me, please hug me like you're never going to let me go because I won't ever want you to."

I tried to say more, tried to continue, but the weight was crushing me, and I bowed my head, claws digging into the surface of the desk. "Fuck. I can't breathe. I can't—"

My shoulders shook.

I gave in to it. My eyes burned as I choked on a sob.

I had to finish this while I still could.

It already felt like it was too late. For me. For him.

For all of us.

"Remember something for me, okay? When the moon is full and bright and you're singing for all the world to hear, I'll be looking up at the same moon, and I'll be singing right back to you. *For you. Always you.*"

I wiped my eyes. The screen was blurry, and the stranger staring back at me looked haunted and lost. "I love you, little brother, even more than I can put down in words. You've got to be brave for me. Keep Joe honest. Give Ox shit. Teach Rico how to be a wolf. Show Chris and Tanner the depths of your heart. Hug Mom and Mark. Tell Gordo to lighten up. Have Jessie kick anyone's ass who steps out of line. And love Robbie like it's the last thing you'll ever do."

And ah, god, there was still so much I had to say, so much I'd never told him, so much he needed to hear from me. That the only reason I was a good person was because of him. That our father would be proud of who he'd become. That when I'd been lost to the Omega, feeling it clawing at me, threatening to pull me down into an ocean of violet, I'd held on with all my might to the ragged remains of my tether, refusing to let it go, refusing to let it be taken from me.

I am alive because of you, I wanted to say.

But I didn't.

I said, "I *will* come back for you, and nothing will hurt us ever again."

I said, "I'll be seeing you, okay?"

And that was it.

That was all.

A lifetime broken down into a few minutes of begging my pack to understand the terrible choice I was about to make.

I stopped the recording.

I thought about deleting it.

Just... deleting it and forgetting about all of this.

It would be so easy.

I'd delete it, and then I'd stand up. I'd leave the office. I'd sit on the steps on the porch until someone came home, and I'd tell them what I'd done and what I was about to do. Maybe it'd be Mom. She'd be smiling at the sight of me, but that smile would fade when she saw the look on my face. She'd rush forward, and I would tell her everything. That I thought I was losing my mind, that I didn't know what Gavin was, not until it was too late. That I should have fought harder for him, that I should have told him that he couldn't leave with Robert Livingstone, he couldn't leave with his father, he couldn't leave *me*. Not when I understood. Not when I knew now what I should have known a long time ago.

Or maybe it'd be Kelly. Maybe he'd know something was wrong.

Dust would be kicking up from the tires of his cruiser, the light bar across the top flashing, the siren wailing. He'd throw open the door, the look on his face a mixture of worry and anger.

"What are you doing?" he'd demand.

"I don't know," I'd reply. "I'm lost, Kelly. I don't know what's happening, I don't know what's going on, please, please, please save me. Please tie me down so I can never leave you. Please don't let me do this. Please don't let me leave. Scream at me. Hit me. Destroy me. I love you, I love you, I love you."

I saved the video instead.

I stood up.

It was now or never.

Before I left the office, I looked back once.

For a moment I thought I saw my father standing behind his desk, hand stretched toward me.

I blinked.

There was nothing there.

A trick of the light.

I closed the door for the last time.

AND YET....

I hesitated on the porch, duffel bag at my feet.

I told myself it was because I was taking it in. This place. Our territory. A last few breaths of home for whatever lay ahead.

But I was a liar.

I looked down the dirt road, snow falling in flurries and clinging to the trees. No one came.

And still I waited.

One minute turned into two, turned into three, into seven.

When ten minutes had passed, I knew it was now or never. I had stalled long enough.

I picked up my bag.

Stepped off the porch.

And went to my truck.

I climbed inside and closed the door behind me.

I stared up at the house.

I imagined Kelly was with me, sitting in the passenger seat.

He said, "Hold on to me."

He said, "As tightly as you can."

He said, "I know it hurts."

He said, "I know what it feels like."

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I know you do."

I sighed and reached over to my bag. I unzipped a small pocket on the side and pulled out a photograph. I touched the frozen, smiling faces of my brothers before putting it on the dashboard behind the steering wheel.

And then I left.

AS SOON AS I'D GOTTEN FAR ENOUGH AWAY, I stopped.

I gathered the last of my strength.

I found the bonds within me, bright and alive and strong.

Could I do this?

I found out I could.

It was easier than I expected, slicing through them. At least at first. It wasn't

until the end that I opened the door of the truck and vomited onto the ground, my face slick with sweat.

I gagged as the bonds faded.

My mouth was sour. I spit onto the ground.

“Kelly,” I muttered. “Kelly, Kelly, Kelly.”

It was enough.

The tether.

It was enough.

I pulled myself back up and looked into the rearview mirror. The stranger stared back. I flashed my eyes.

Orange.

Still orange.

I closed the door.

Took a breath.

I looked at the road ahead.

There wasn't another car for as far as I could see.

I pulled back onto the road.

A few minutes later I passed a sign telling me I was leaving Green Creek, Oregon, and to come back soon!

I would.

That was a promise.

like this/got you

It went like this:

I was born.

I didn't remember.

I was one.

I didn't remember.

I was two.

I didn't remember.

And then I did.

Because my mother was there, and she was sitting in a chair. She was tired but smiling. Her hair was pulled back in a messy bun, and her skin looked soft.

She said, "Carter, would you like to meet your brother?"

He had been in her stomach. And now he was here.

My father stood in the doorway, watching us.

I didn't remember anything else. How I'd gotten into the room. Where I'd been before. What I'd been doing. It didn't matter. This was big.

Big big.

My father said, "Be careful."

There was a wrinkled pink thing in my mother's arms. It had a nose and a mouth and squinty eyes. It yawned.

"Mine?" I asked.

"Yes," my mother said. "Yours. Ours."

"Mine," I said again, and I tried to take the pink thing from her. I wanted to take it away, to hide it so no one else could touch what was mine.

My father said, "No, Carter, no. You're too little. You could hurt him."

"No hurt," I said. "No hurt."

“Yes,” my mother said. “That’s right. No hurt. We don’t hurt him. We don’t hurt Kelly.”

“Kelly,” I said for the first time.

“Your brother,” my father said.

“Kelly, Kelly, Kelly.”

He looked up at me.

He reached for me.

“Mine,” I whispered.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

There was yelling.

Gordo was yelling.

My father was yelling.

My mother was crying.

Kelly was in his crib, and his arms were waving.

“Kelly,” I said. I pushed a chair toward the crib. It was hard. I was little. I climbed on top of the chair as Kelly began to wail. I climbed over the bars of the crib. My father said I was a good climber.

I was careful.

I wouldn’t hurt my brother.

I climbed into the crib and lowered myself next to him.

I lay down beside him and put my hands over his ears because I was a wolf, and he was a wolf, and we heard things others could not. It was very loud.

Gordo was screaming.

My father was begging.

My mother sounded like she was choking.

“Kelly,” I said, and he punched me in the head. It was an accident. It didn’t hurt.

I remembered what my mother did when he was like this. “There, there,” I said, petting his cheek. “There, there.”

He stopped crying.

He looked at me with wet eyes.

I kissed his nose.

He smiled.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Boxes.

So many boxes.

Everything packed up.

“We’re leaving,” my father said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because we have to.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it’s what we must do.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Why?” I asked.

That was the day I learned even my father could cry.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

“Gordo?”

He looked at me. He wasn’t like he was before. He didn’t talk. He didn’t smile. I stuck my tongue out at him because it always made him laugh.

He didn’t.

He said, “You can’t forget me.”

I said, “Forget?”

He said, “You can’t.”

I didn’t understand.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

I was watching through the window.

Uncle Mark and Gordo were on the porch.

“Please,” Mark said.

“Fuck you,” Gordo said.

“I don’t want this.”

“Yet here you are.”

“I’ll come back for you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

That was the day I learned I could taste what I smelled.

It was like the entire forest was on fire.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

There were skips and jumps. Holes in memory, the edges frayed and ragged. I was two and three and then I was six, six, six, and Kelly said, “Carter!”

We were sitting in the grass in front of a house. There was a lake behind us. Mom said we couldn’t go to the lake without her because we could drown. She was on the porch, her hand on her stomach. Mom and Dad told me there was another baby in there. I didn’t know why. They already had me and Kelly.

Mark was gone, hiding in the woods. He was always in the woods. Dad said he was brooding. Mom said they made Mark that way. My father never said he was brooding again after that.

I didn’t know what brooding meant, but it didn’t sound good.

“Carter,” Kelly said again, and I looked up at him.

He was wearing shorts. It was summer. His face was sticky, and his hair was messy, and he was grinning at me. There was a hole in the dirt in front of him where he’d been digging. I told him it was the biggest hole I’d ever seen.

He looked down at it, then back up at me. “Biggest?”

“Yes. You’re a good digger.”

“Good digger,” he agreed.

Boys came. Other wolves. Cubs.

One said, “Carter, come play with us.”

I said “Okay” and “Sure” and “Can Kelly come too?”

And the boy said, “No. He’s just a baby. Babies are stupid.”

Kelly cried.

I tackled the boy for making my brother cry.

Mom pulled me off him.

His nose was bleeding.

“Carter,” Mom said, “what on *earth* do you think you’re doing?”

“Kelly isn’t stupid,” I snarled at the boy as he pushed himself up from the ground. I tried to go after him again, but Mom held me back.

“I’m telling!” the boy shouted before he ran away, the other cubs chasing after him.

Mom turned me around, her face near mine. She was frowning. “We don’t hit other people.”

“He said Kelly was stupid.”

“Be that as it may, we don’t hit. It’s not nice.”

She was wrong. I didn’t say that out loud, but I thought it. I thought it hard. She was wrong, because if anyone called Kelly stupid, I would definitely hit them. I would hit them as hard as I could. I would hit them until they couldn’t say those words anymore.

I said, “Oh.”

“Yes. *Oh*. You have to think before you act. You can’t use your fists to solve all your problems.” Then she grimaced, her hand going to her stomach as she stood upright. “Someone woke up. Oof.”

The baby in her belly.

I didn’t care about that baby.

It wasn’t real yet.

“Carter,” Kelly sniffled, and I went to him.

I picked him up. I was very strong.

He laid his head on my shoulder, and since I didn’t want to get in trouble again, I promised in my head that no one would call him stupid again.

“Dig with me?” he asked. “Biggest hole?”

I said, “Okay,” and that’s what we did. It was better than playing with other cubs.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Dad said our brother was coming soon. That we needed to be good and quiet so Mom could focus.

“She’ll need all her strength,” he said, kneeling down before me and Kelly. Kelly reached up and touched his face, and Dad snapped his teeth at Kelly’s

fingers, causing him to laugh. “She’s being very brave. Can you be brave too?”

“Brave,” Kelly agreed.

“Stay here with Uncle Mark. When it’s over, I’ll come back and take you to meet him.”

And then he was gone.

Mark said, “It’ll take a long time.”

“Long time,” Kelly said, because he repeated everything everyone said all the time. It was annoying except when he did it to me.

Mark said, “But she’ll be okay.”

“Okay,” Kelly said.

Mark smiled, but he looked like a ghost.

It took a very long time.

We got tired of waiting, and when Mark put us to bed, I had forgotten all about it. Mark said Kelly and I could sleep in the same bed, and Kelly had toothpaste in the corner of his mouth.

We lay facing each other, our heads on the same pillow.

Mark kissed my cheek.

Mark kissed Kelly’s cheek.

“Good night, little cubs,” he said.

Kelly yawned.

Mark left the door open and the light in the hall on.

The sky outside was dark.

“Carter?” Kelly said.

“What?”

“Do we have to have a little brother?”

I didn’t know. I said, “I think so.”

“Oh. Can I hold him?”

“Maybe. You might have to wait.”

“Why?”

“Because babies are fragile,” I said, remembering the words of my father. “They’re little and fragile.”

“What’s fragile?”

I had no idea. “It means gross.”

His nose wrinkled. "Like farts."

I laughed. I'd taught him that word. Mom and Dad hadn't been happy with me. "Yeah, he's a fart."

"Fart, fart, fart," Kelly said. And then he closed his eyes. "I don't know if I like little brothers."

"I do," I told him. "I like little brothers a lot."

But he was already asleep.

I kept my eyes open for as long as I could because Dad was with Mom and Kelly needed me to protect him. I wasn't an Alpha, but I could pretend.

"I have red eyes," I whispered in the dark. "And I'm big and strong."

I didn't remember falling asleep.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

"His name is Joe," my mother said.

"Joseph Bennett," my father said. "Your little brother."

"Joe," Kelly whispered in awe.

I wasn't happy about it.

Then I saw him.

And I knew him for what he was.

What he would be.

I said, "Alpha."

My mother was startled.

My father took a step forward. "What was that, Carter?"

"Alpha," I said again, and my voice was filled with so much wonder, I thought I would float away.

"How do you know?" my father asked.

I shrugged.

Mom and Dad looked at each other for a long time. Then, "Yes," my father said. "Yes. Joe will be an Alpha. Can I tell you a secret about Alphas?"

Kelly and I turned to him. This was important. I knew what that word meant now. Alphas had many secrets, and when they shared one, it was important.

Dad crouched down before us. He took our hands in his. He said, "An Alpha is a leader. But we cannot lead alone. He will look to you, to both of you, for

guidance. He can be nothing without his brothers. You will be his pack, and you'll make him strong. You matter just as much as he does. There will come a time when weight will be placed upon the color of his eyes, but you mean just as much. You cannot make red without orange. Do you understand?"

We both nodded, though we had no idea what he was talking about.

Joe cried.

We went to him.

Kelly touched his cheek.

I kissed his hand.

"There is no one like him," our mother whispered. "But there is also no one like each of you. You are all special in your own way. I believe in you." She looked down at Joe, a tired smile on her face. "I believe in all of you."

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Joe grew.

I found my tether.

I shifted.

The pain was exquisite, and I

am wolf

smell

smell everything

run fast run fast run run run

hunt i want to hunt and

father wolf

mother wolf

joe laughs he's laughing he says you're so pretty carter you're so pretty

i'm not pretty

i'm amazing

kelly says

wow

kelly says

look at you

kelly says

you're so big

kelly says stop licking me carter stop licking me stop licking

i don't stop

i never stop and

The day came when Dad took Kelly away.

“You don’t have to worry,” Mom said. She sounded like she was trying not to laugh. I glared at her, but she kissed my forehead and ruffled my hair.

“Why is Carter worried?” Joe asked when she went back inside, leaving me on the porch. “Kelly’s with Dad.”

“Because it’s a big day,” Mom said as I paced back and forth.

They were gone for hours. By the time they came back, I was about to crawl out of my skin.

Kelly was grinning.

I ran down the porch and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Did you do it?” I demanded. “Did you figure it out?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah. But it’s a secret.”

I scowled at him. “I told you mine!”

He laughed at me.

Dad was watching the two of us. He looked like he was going to say something but shook his head instead. “Who’s hungry?”

But before he could follow us into the house, a man appeared. I didn’t like him. He made my skin itch.

“Osmond,” Dad said.

Osmond glanced dismissively at us before looking back at Dad. “We need to speak.”

“Can it wait until tomorrow? We’re about to have dinner.”

“It needs to be now.”

Dad sighed. “All right.” He looked at us. “Go inside. I’ll be back shortly.”

I watched them walk away.

“Let’s go!” Kelly said from the porch.

That night there was a knock at my door. It opened slightly, and Kelly stuck his head in. “Stop jerking off.”

“Fuck you,” I whispered, loud enough so he could hear but not so loud that Mom or Dad could.

He snickered and stepped into my room, then closed the door behind him. He came to the bed, motioning for me to scoot over.

“You have your own bed,” I grumbled.

“Yeah, yeah, move your fat ass.”

I hit him in the face with a pillow.

He laughed before lying down next to me, stretching out his arms and legs. I heard his back pop before he relaxed, leg over mine.

I waited.

He said, “It’s you.”

I could barely breathe. “What is?”

“You know what.”

I did, and I wanted to howl and shake the house to its foundations. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, dude. I’m sure.”

“Oh.” Then, “Why?”

He turned his head to look at me. His eyes glittered in the dark. He said, “Why am I your tether?”

“Because you’re my brother.”

“So is Joe.”

“You were here first.”

He huffed out a breath. “I’ve known. For a long time.”

“But you never said anything.”

He shrugged. “I thought it was obvious.”

It made me nervous. Nothing so monumental had ever made me feel so small. “Tethers can change.”

“It won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

He said, “I do. It doesn’t matter what happens. If I get a mate—”

“Ew.”

“Shut up. You know what I mean.”

“That’s pretty gay, dude.”

He thumped me on the chest. “Don’t say that. It’s not nice.”

“Right. Sorry. I…” I was at a loss for words.

“Is that okay?” he asked quietly. He sounded unsure.

I couldn't have that. “Yeah. It's okay.”

We were quiet for a little while, just breathing in and out.

Then he said, “Tether bros. That's what we are. Couple of tether bros.”

And it was like we were little again, only the two of us, and we were laughing, laughing, laughing, trying to keep our voices down but failing miserably. Dad walked by the door and paused, and we covered each other's mouths with our hands. His breath was hot against my palm and it was *gross*, but I didn't pull away.

Dad moved on.

Eventually we got ourselves under control.

I was drifting off to sleep when Kelly said, “It was always going to be you.”

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

“Joe!” I screamed into the woods. It was raining and dark, and lightning flashed overhead. “Joe!”

I couldn't find him.

“Carter?” Kelly asked. He was wet and miserable, and his grip on my hand was so strong I thought my bones would turn to dust. “We have to go back.”

“No,” I snapped at him, feeling guilty when his face crumpled. “We can't. We have to find him.”

I was fifteen years old, and a monster had taken our little brother away.

“Joe!” I shouted again.

Nothing.

“Joe!” Kelly yelled. “Where are you, Joe!”

I wanted to shift so I could smell him, but Mom and Dad said I couldn't shift without them there. I had my tether, and he had me, but it still wasn't safe. There were all sorts of things in the woods.

But Joe was gone, and no one knew where he was. It'd only been three days, but I had failed him. Mom and Dad said I had to protect him, and I failed.

We went deeper into the woods.

Dad found us eventually.

“What are you *doing*?” he roared at us. His eyes were red.

We cowered. I shoved Kelly behind me as he whimpered.

Our father fell to his knees. He held out his arms.

We ran to him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, holding us tightly. “I’m so sorry. I couldn’t find you, and I was frightened. I didn’t mean to be so loud. I didn’t mean to scare you. What are you doing out here? You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“We gotta find Joe,” Kelly said.

“Oh,” my father said. “Oh, oh, oh.”

That was the second time I ever saw my father cry.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Joe came back.

But he wasn’t the same.

He *looked* like the same Joe. He had all his fingers and toes. He had all his teeth. His nose was still there, and his knees were still knobby.

But there was nothing behind his eyes.

They were dark, as if a light had gone out.

I took him everywhere.

I carried him in the house.

I carried him in the woods.

I carried him around the lake.

Dad said, “Here, Carter, let me have him.”

He reared back when I snarled at him, eyes flashing, fangs dropping.

“Don’t,” I snapped at him. “Don’t, don’t, don’t.”

My father stepped back slowly.

I carried him away.

I said, “Hey, Joe. Look at the birds.”

I said, “Hey, Joe. Look at that bug.”

I said, “Hey, Joe. Are you hungry?”

I said, “Hey, Joe. Wanna hear a joke?”

I said, “Hey, Joe. Can you please say my name?”

But Joe never spoke.

“He’s been scooped out,” Kelly told me as Joe lay between us. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing deeply.

“Shut up,” I hissed at him, and I felt a twist of remorse when he flinched. “It’s not—he could *hear* you.”

“Sorry,” Kelly muttered, but before he could turn away, I grabbed his hand over Joe, laying it on Joe’s chest above his heart. I pressed down. I could feel the beat through Kelly’s hand. It was slow and steady.

“What do we do?” Kelly whispered.

“I don’t know,” I whispered back. “But we stay together. The three of us. No matter what.”

Kelly nodded.

He fell asleep before I did, his hand still on Joe’s chest.

I was about to follow when Joe’s heartbeat started tripping and stuttering. He made a wounded noise that sounded broken. I pressed Kelly’s hand down harder against his chest and put my mouth near his ear.

I said, “You’re here. We’re with you. You’re safe. You’re home. We won’t let anything happen to you again. We’re your big brothers. We’ll protect you. We’ll always be here for you. I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Joe’s heart slowed.

The lines on his forehead disappeared.

His mouth untwisted.

He sighed and turned his face toward me.

I watched him for a long time.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Boxes.

All these boxes.

As I stood among them, I heard voices coming from up the stairs.

And it was then I learned the sins of my father.

“Are you sure?” Mark asked Dad.

“Yes.”

“Have you.... Did you call Gordo?”

Dad sighed. “No.”

“He won’t like it that we’re coming back.”

“It’s not his territory,” Dad growled. Then, “Shit. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have —”

“It’s too late for what you should or shouldn’t have done,” Mark said, sounding angrier than I’d ever heard him. “You really think that he’s going to welcome us back with open arms? That you won’t have to face him? Green Creek is small, Thomas. You’re going to run into him sooner rather than later.”

“What do you want me to do?” Dad said, and sweat trickled down the back of my neck. “Tell me. Please. Just tell me what to do. Tell me what’s right. What should I have done? What should I do now? Should I have done more to save Dad? Should I have been able to stop the hunters from destroying our pack? Or perhaps I should have been able to keep Robert Livingstone from murdering all those people. I’m sorry, Mark. I’m sorry for everything I’ve done. All the mistakes I’ve made. Please. Tell me how to fix this. Tell me what I should do so that my *child* doesn’t scream himself awake because a man I once trusted shattered him into pieces before I could find him. You should have been my second. Not Richard. I should’ve never listened to Dad when he said that—”

“Fuck you,” Mark said coldly. “I never gave a shit about that, and you know it. We’re broken, Thomas. We’re broken, and I don’t know how to fix us. I followed you even when every part of me was screaming to let you go without me. I left my heart behind because you said it was for the greater good. And for *what*? What has it gotten us? What kind of Alpha are you that you can’t—”

“*Enough.*”

It rattled the walls.

I couldn’t move.

I couldn’t breathe.

But Mark wasn’t finished. “What are you doing? Do you even know? You’re spiraling, Thomas. People are talking. They think that you’re not going to come back.”

“We will.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you’ll be coming alone.”

“Fine. Then *I* will. Michelle is more than adequate. She’ll do well in my stead until I can figure things out again.” He sighed. “I need to put my children first. I need to put *Joe* first.”

Mark laughed bitterly. “Oh, if only Dad could hear you now. What was it he always said? For an Alpha, the needs of many outweigh the needs of a few. Pack

and pack and *pack*.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“And what about Richard? It’s not over.”

“I know that too.”

“Do you? What happens if he comes again?”

“I’ll tear his head from his shoulders,” my father snarled, Alpha filling his voice. “Let him come. It’ll be the last thing he ever does.”

“We can’t keep doing this,” Mark said, and he was *pleading* with my father. He was *begging* him. “We can’t go on this way. We’re destroying ourselves, and I don’t know how to stop it. I love you, but I hate you too for all that you’ve done.”

My father didn’t respond.

They were silent. I could imagine them on the other side of the wall, facing each other, arms crossed, never meeting each other’s gazes. Two stone statues, carved and unmoving.

I was surprised when my father spoke first. “The family. In the blue house.”

“What about them?”

“The boy.”

And Mark said, “Ox.”

“Yes. You said... you met him. And his mother.”

“In the diner. It was his birthday. He was... I don’t know. There’s something different about him. I don’t know how to explain it. It was like being struck by lightning. I’ve never felt anything like it before.”

“Magic, maybe. A witch?”

“No. I’ve never heard of Matheson witches.”

“We’ll have to be careful. Having them so close.... It could be dangerous.”

“Then you shouldn’t have sold the house.”

I heard my father move.

Mark said, “Don’t. Don’t touch me.”

Dad said, “When you were little, I used to carry you on my shoulders. Do you remember?”

“No.”

“Lie. You would put your hands in my hair and tug until it hurt, but I never stopped you.”

“Get off me, get off me, get off—”

“I never wanted this to happen,” my father whispered, voice muffled. “Any of this. I wasn’t ready. For all that it would entail. Being an Alpha, it’s....”

“Hard,” Mark said begrudgingly.

“Yeah. It is. And I’m not a very good one. It should have been you.”

Mark sounded like he was choking. “Stop. Please. Stop.”

“I know you hate me,” Dad said. “And you have every right. But I did what I thought was good for all of us. I thought Gordo would—”

“Don’t. You don’t get to say his name.”

“I thought he would be better off without us. That he would get to live a life free of—”

“You *abandoned* him!” Mark cried. “You didn’t give him a choice! Get the fuck off me, you bastard. How dare you. I know what you did. I know you thought Livingstone did something to him, I know you thought it was in his tattoos, so don’t you *dare* try and spin this away.”

“How did you—did Lizzie say something to you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mark retorted. “This isn’t about her or anyone else. This is about *you*. This is all on you. You always say we’re pack, but I don’t think you have a goddamn clue what that actually means. Fuck you. Fuck the Alpha of all.” He sucked in a sharp breath. Then, “Maybe it’s time for the reign of the Bennetts to end.”

“You can’t mean that—”

“I do. I mean every word. Let Michelle stay in charge. Let Osmond be her lapdog. You say you want to put Joe and Kelly and Carter first, then this is how you do it. Joe’s broken, Thomas. He’s *broken*. And believe me, I know what that feels like. You didn’t lift a fucking finger to help me. Don’t do the same to him.”

Mark stormed out of the office. His footsteps were loud as he stalked down the steps. He didn’t even notice me as he left the house, slamming the front door behind him.

Above me, my father stood still.

And all I felt from him was blue.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Mom was setting up her studio.

Dad was putting books on the shelves.

Mark was upstairs, locked in his room.

Kelly and I were on the porch, his feet in my lap. He was reading. I closed my eyes, taking in the scents and sounds of the old-growth forest around us. In the driveway in front of us were three cars. Two trucks. An SUV. Two thirty-foot moving trucks. We were supposed to be moving more stuff in, but there was plenty of time for that later.

And then a voice came, one I hadn't heard in a very long time.

He said, "Do you have your own room?"

My chest hitched.

Kelly sat up, eyes wet. "Is that—"

"Shut up. Listen."

A deeper voice said, "Yes. It's just me and my mom now."

"I'm sorry," Joe said, and his voice was rough and gravelly.

"For?"

"For whatever just made you sad."

"I dream. Sometimes it feels like I'm awake. And then I'm not."

Mom and Dad burst out onto the porch just as Joe said, "You're awake now. Ox, Ox, Ox. Don't you see?"

"See what?"

"*We live so close to each other.*"

My father put his face in his hands. Deep within us all, crashing and colliding, came three words.

packpackpack

The shadows stretched as the afternoon waned.

Mark came out onto the porch, demanding to know if that was Joe, was that Joe, was that—

They appeared around the blue house.

There, on the back of a large boy, was Joe, eyes alight.

My father dropped his hands and took in a shuddering breath.

We never looked away from Joe.

From this stranger who watched us with wide, dark eyes.

They stopped before us.

"Mark?" the boy said.

Mark smiled. “Ox. How lovely to see you again. I see you’ve made a new friend.”

Joe dropped from Ox’s back, stepped to his side and took his hand, dragging him toward us. Something was shifting, and I didn’t know what. It was massive, and I was overwhelmed. It felt like the day Kelly was born. The day Joe came back to us.

And Joe.

Joe, Joe, Joe.

He said, “Mom! *Mom*. You have to *smell* him! It’s like... *like*... I don’t even know what it’s like! I was walking in the woods to scope out our territory so I could be like Dad and then it was like... *whoa*. And then he was all standing there and he didn’t see me at first because I’m getting so good at hunting. I was all like *rawr* and *grr* but then I *smelled* it again and it was *him* and it was all *kaboom!* I don’t even know! I don’t even know! You gotta *smell* him and then tell me why it’s all candy canes and pinecones and epic and *awesome*.”

We were all stunned into silence.

We didn’t know then what he would become.

Had I known, I would have done everything I could to push him away. To tell him that the Bennetts were cursed, that he should stay as far away from us as possible. He was misunderstood. His daddy said he was going to get shit all his life. His mother, a woman underestimated in her own right, might have survived the coming of Richard Collins.

What would he have become without the wolves?

I thought about that a lot.

Once, long after my father had returned to the moon, it was just Kelly and me. We were too old to be sleeping in the same bed, but here we were all the same.

He lay facing me, his knees bumping into mine.

He said, “It’s all inevitable, isn’t it? Everything.”

I wanted to tell him no. I wanted to tell him that there was no such thing as fate, that we could carve our own paths, that a name was nothing but a name.

He knew what I was thinking. He knew what was in my head and heart. He said, “A rose by any other name....”

I closed my eyes and dreamed of wolves running under the light of a full moon.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

I was seven and Kelly said, “I want to be big like you.”

I was three and my father picked me up in his arms, holding me close.

I was ten and I chose my tether.

I was twelve and Joe sat on my shoulders wearing a wolf costume our mother had made for him because he wanted to be a wolf like me. We were walking through the woods, Kelly’s hand in mine, Joe tugging on my hair, saying, “Faster, Carter, go *faster*.”

I was four and Kelly took his first steps, reaching for me, always reaching.

I was eleven and the moon was calling me, it was singing, singing, singing, and my mother said, “Here, my son, here, let it wash over you, feel it calling. I won’t let it hurt you. I won’t let it take you away.”

I was sixteen and close to murdering boys in a bathroom at school who dared put their hands on Ox.

I was thirteen and Kelly shifted into a wolf for the first time, and we ran together as fast as we could, the earth beneath our paws, the wind in our fur.

I was twenty-three when a monster came to town and tore a hole in our heads and hearts. My father died before I could get to him. The last thing he ever said to me was “Protect your brothers with everything you have.”

I was twenty-seven, bursting out of a bar filled with humans, claws popping and fangs gnashing, and there was a *wolf* there, a timber wolf bigger than any I’d ever seen, and it came for me, it came for me, and the moment before we collided, the moment before its body struck mine, I smelled something unlike anything I’d ever known before.

And I burned.

waiting for you/say my name

It was dark.

I was cold and stiff. My neck had a crick in it, and my head was pounding. I groaned and rubbed a hand over my face, trying to clear my head. I pushed open the door to the truck and stumbled out. My knees were weak, and I almost fell. I caught myself on the door.

Before me was farmland. In the distance, set on a hill, was a house. The porch light was on, but the windows were dark. I walked away from the truck, my boots crunching against gravel. I unzipped my pants so I could empty my bladder. I sighed as I looked up at the sky, the stars like chips of ice.

Once I finished I went back to the truck, pulling my coat tighter around me. It was getting colder again. I didn't know exactly where I was. I thought I'd crossed into North Dakota before finally pulling over to get some sleep. I'd gotten used to spending the night in the truck.

I shut the door behind me.

I was tired, but I knew I wouldn't get any more sleep. The sun would rise soon, and I didn't want to get caught here.

I glanced at the picture on the dashboard. The edges had started to curl. I left it alone.

I pulled my duffel bag across the seat. In the side pocket was a cheap phone, a burner I'd picked up before I left Green Creek. It was something Gordo had taught me when we'd been on the road after Richard Collins. I doubted he'd ever thought I'd have use for one again after we'd come back.

I hit the Power button, stretching my neck as I waited for it to turn on. I winced against the bright light in the dark. It was just after five in the morning.

I tried to ignore the date in the upper right corner, but it was almost impossible.

Saturday, November 6, 2021.

It'd been eleven months since I'd recorded a video in a house at the end of a lane.

And I had nothing to show for it.

I dropped the phone back in my bag before I crushed it in my hand.

After a moment's hesitation, I reached over to the glove compartment and popped it open. I told myself I was being stupid, that I'd just looked at the contents the day before. They wouldn't tell me anything new, and it was pointless to dwell on them.

But they were all I had.

I pulled out four pieces of paper, each featuring blocky words I'd long since memorized.

The top page—the last one I'd gotten a couple of weeks before in a nothing town in Kentucky—read:

STOP FOLLOWING ME. GO HOME ASSHOLE.

"Fuck you," I muttered. "You goddamn dick."

The other three notes were similar, each of them blunt and scathing, threatening me with bodily harm, telling me he wanted nothing to do with me. I closed my eyes, remembering the way he'd looked when he snarled at me, telling me I was nothing but a child, that he didn't want anything to do with me, that he wasn't *pack*.

His heart had held steady and true, but I still thought him a liar.

Because I'd felt it when he'd stood before his father, a witch turned impossibly into an Alpha beast, one eye socket empty, the other red and blazing. I'd felt it when the bond that had stretched between us—a bond I'd been blind to—snapped in two.

He *had* been one of us.

He *had* been pack.

And he'd given himself up to Robert Livingstone.

To save us all.

I couldn't let that go.

I couldn't let *him* go.

I owed it to him.

To find him.

To do whatever the hell it took to bring him back.

I should have seen it for what it was. In the couple of years he was by my side, all the times I'd scowled at him and snapped at him to leave me the fuck alone, I should have seen it. From the moment I'd faced him outside the Lighthouse when the hunters had come to Green Creek, I should have known.

The third note read:

LEAVE ME ALONE. GO HOME OR I'LL HURT YOU.

The second note read:

I DON'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU.

The first note read:

ARE YOU TRYING TO GET YOURSELF KILLED?

Though I fought against it, I smiled. I'd only heard him speak a few words, and they'd been grunted more than anything, but somehow, it fit with who I thought he was. I wasn't allowing myself to think of what he could be to me. When I tried, my chest felt tight. We weren't Ox and Joe. Or Kelly and Robbie. Or even Gordo and Mark, though the *fuck you* vibe was apparently a family trait.

Gavin.

The brother of Gordo Livingstone.

The son of Robert Livingstone.

I put the notes back in the glove compartment, unable to look at them anymore.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

Kelly was there in the dark. He smiled at me and held out his hand.

Though it wasn't real, I was grateful for it. I took his hand in mine, and for a little while at least, I could pretend he was with me. That he didn't hate me for leaving him behind. Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt.

He said, "Hey."

I said, "Hey" and "Hi" and "I'm so happy to see you." And I meant every word.

"All right?"

I tried to be strong for him, this Not-Kelly. But he was a figment of my imagination, and I was alone. I said, "No."

He squeezed my hand. "It'll be okay. I promise."

It was enough.

By the time I opened my eyes, the sun was rising over the horizon and

another day had begun.

Kelly was gone.

WHEN THE PACK BROKE APART after the death of our father, I followed my brothers into the great unknown, Gordo trailing after us. Our blood boiled, and we had rage in our heads and hearts. It burned far longer than I thought it would, the years passing by until it felt like we were ghosts haunting the secret highways known only to those who drifted. These were roads forgotten, roads that led to nothing towns that had died long ago. We told ourselves we were still filled with righteous fury even as we were silent, days passing with only a couple of words spoken aloud.

But we'd been together, the four of us, feeding off each other's pain, our heads shaved and our hearts hardened.

It was different now that I was alone.

I thought it would be easier.

It wasn't.

The secret highways were lonelier. Some days I never spoke at all. I was lost more often than I wasn't, especially toward the beginning. I didn't know where I was going, at first chasing the rising sun, hoping for something, *anything* that would point me in the right direction.

It wasn't until a dead-eyed motel clerk in Utah wished me a merry Christmas that the weight of what I'd done crushed me.

That'd been a bad night.

I thought it'd get easier.

It didn't, but I got better at ignoring it.

I stayed away from the major cities, knowing Livingstone would most likely do the same. I had conversations in my head with my father, with my mother, with Joe and Ox, with Kelly, justifying why I'd left, telling them that I owed it to him, that Gavin would do the same for me, trying to make myself believe that was true.

We're looking for him, Ox told me.

No. You're looking for Livingstone.

We want to help you find him, Joe told me.

Like you wanted to find Robbie?

You can't do this alone, my father told me.

You're dead.

You should have trusted us, my mother told me.

I don't even know if I trust myself.

But it was Kelly I talked to most. Kelly who was sometimes so angry I could almost see the spittle on his lips as he shouted at me. Kelly who would be there waiting for me as I closed my eyes. Kelly who would sing along with me when an old rock song came on the radio.

He wasn't there.

But I could pretend he was.

I said, "I'm sorry."

I said, "I know you don't understand."

I said, "You might never forgive me."

I said, "I wish I could see you."

I know, he'd say. And, Turn up the radio. I like this song.

I did, because I would do anything he asked me.

It was getting easier to imagine Kelly was there.

Sometimes I could actually see him sitting next to me.

It should have scared me more than it did.

THE FIRST NOTE I FOUND was after I'd seen a ghost. I'd left Green Creek behind five months prior, and it was one of the bad days.

It was my birthday.

I turned thirty-one years old.

I was talking to Kelly, telling him that if I was home, there would be food and presents and everyone would be smiling. Kelly and Joe would make breakfast. I'd wake up, and they'd bring it into my room. We'd sit on the bed, just the three of us, and Joe would eat my bacon, and Kelly would slap him on the back of his hand, telling him to leave some for me. Joe would flash his Alpha eyes, and we'd make fun of him for it. We'd stop talking after a while, listening to Mom in the kitchen, singing about Johnny and his guitar.

And then we'd run with the pack. All of us together.

"It'd be good," I said, staring straight ahead but lost in the dream. "We'd run

as fast as we could.”

I'm faster than you.

I snorted. “You keep telling yourself that. We all know that’s never been true.”

Is Gavin there?

That felt dangerous. “I... don’t know.”

It's okay not to know. Do you want him to be?

“I don’t even know him.”

And yet here you are, chasing after him like he's the most important thing in the world.

“I...”

What would happen then? After we ran.

“When we were done, we’d all come back to the house. There’d be no Omegas. There’d be no Alpha of all. We would just... be. All of us, together. The furniture would be pushed back, and there’d be blankets and pillows and everything would be soft. Everything would be warm. I’d get to be in the middle.”

Not-Kelly was quiet. Then, *It sounds nice.*

And then I said, “Do you think about it? What it would be like?”

What?

“If we weren’t us. If we weren’t... Bennetts.”

Who would we be?

“Unimportant.”

And since he wasn’t real, I expected him to agree with me. He was part of me, this figment. He was my creation, and he should have said *yes, yes, I wish that all the time, I wish we weren’t anyone at all.*

Instead he said, “Here. Here. Here.”

It was so real.

Like he was *right there.*

I jerked the steering wheel as I snapped my head over. For a moment I almost convinced myself he was sitting next to me. There was a flash of blond hair and blue eyes and white teeth behind a small smile, but then it was gone.

The truck began to bounce as it left the road, dust kicking up behind me.

I lifted my foot off the gas, forcing myself to stop from slamming on the

brakes in case the truck fishtailed. The truck slowed as I pulled it back onto the road. I glanced in the rearview mirror. There was no one behind me. There was no one in front of me.

My hands were sweating as I brought the truck to a stop. I put it in Park before letting out the breath I'd been holding. "Fuck."

There was a sign up ahead for a town called Creemore.

Creemore *what?* I didn't know what state I was in.

That scared me more than I expected it to. I tried to remember the past few days, but they were shattered into bits and pieces.

I didn't know what to do.

I didn't know where to go.

I laid my forehead on the steering wheel, sucking in air.

"I'm tired," I whispered.

Kelly didn't reply.

Eventually I drove on.

THERE WERE NO WOLVES IN CREEMORE. It was small, more of a village than anything else.

It reminded me of Green Creek, with its one main road.

It wasn't until I saw the license plates on the cars parked near the sidewalk that I realized I was in Canada. I couldn't remember crossing the border.

I found an empty parking lot and pulled in, turned off the truck.

I sat back in the seat, leaning my head against the back window. "All right," I said. "I'll just..."

Do something.

I got out of the truck. My back hurt.

People walked by the parking lot. They glanced at me and waved.

I nodded, and they continued on.

I turned toward the main road, looking at the renovated buildings, the shops with lights on inside.

There was a garage, the doors open, loud music playing.

I gave it a wide berth, my throat constricting.

I didn't know where I was going.

People stared at me curiously, and I reached up to scratch at the beard on my face. It was unkempt, and I hadn't showered in a couple of days. I probably looked awful. I kept my head down.

I was walking past an open doorway that smelled cloyingly of burning candles when a hand shot out and grabbed me by the wrist, squeezing tightly.

I barely kept my eyes from flashing as I jerked my arm back.

A young woman stood in a doorway, her skin pale, her eyes a strange shade of green. She had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her hair was styled in a thick black Mohawk that bisected her skull, and she had feathers hanging from chains in her ears.

Black feathers.

"From a raven," she said, answering a question I hadn't asked.

I turned to walk away.

"You're looking for something."

I stopped and glanced back at her.

Her head was cocked. She looked me up and down before nodding. "Yes, definitely looking for something. Why?"

"Lady, I don't know what you're talking about."

"American," she said. "West Coast? Yes. But not California. You don't look like a Californian."

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I see things," she said. "Part of my job." She pointed toward a neon sign in the window. A large hand with an eye in the middle. Above it were the words **MADAM PENELOPE PSYCHIC**.

I snorted.

She rolled her eyes. "So dismissive. You would think one such as you would know better."

That caught me off guard. "One such as me."

She squinted at me. "Yes. You do know who you are, don't you?"

"Do you?" I snapped, tired of her game already. I had no use for whatever scam she was running.

"I think so," she said, leaning against the door. "I've been waiting for you."

"I doubt that." I turned again.

"I can help you find him."

I froze before slowly looking back at her. “Who?”

She waved her hand at me. “Whoever it is you’re looking for.”

“And how do you know it’s a *he*?”

She tapped the side of her head. “Psychic. Like it says on the sign. You can read, can’t you?”

“Fuck off.”

“So rude.” She sniffed. “Though I suppose that’s to be expected. You’re lost. You have been for a long time. There’s... blue.” She frowned. “Why are you blue?” Her nose wrinkled. “And there’s violet at the edges. It’s pulling at you. Tearing.” Her eyes widened. “Ah. I see. Come. Come. Hurry. I have something for you.”

And then she turned and walked back through the doorway, leaving me gaping after her. Against my better judgment, I followed.

The shop was small, and the smell inside made my eyes water. Candles burned on a shelf against one wall, and the room was stuffy and hot. She stood near the window, reaching over to turn off the neon sign. She flipped a sign on the window from OPEN to CLOSED. “Close the door behind you. We can’t be interrupted.”

“I’m not paying you for—”

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said again. “You’re not a king, but you’re close. Not many of those left. Isn’t that strange? Once upon a time, you couldn’t go outside without tripping over one, and now?” She shook her head as she pushed by me. “It’s a rarity. I wonder if we’re worse off because of it.”

“I’m not a king.”

“I know that,” she snapped as she rounded the counter. “I just *said* that. You need to listen.”

“Lady, I don’t know what the hell you—”

“Ohm,” she hummed. “Ohm. Ohmmmmm.” She coughed. “Yikes. That’s not the way to go about this.” She disappeared behind the counter as she bent over. I heard her opening and closing cabinet doors as she muttered to herself about blue, blue, blue. She laughed at one point as she set a crystal ball on the counter. “That’s just for show. Stop sneering.”

“I’m not.” I was.

“Yeah, yeah. Keep telling yourself that. Have you ever been shot?”

“*What?*”

“Not yet. It’ll hurt when it happens. Believe me, I know. You’d do well to remember that.” She peeked her head above the counter, staring at me with those strange eyes. “You won’t die. Which is good.” Then she disappeared again.

“Are you going to shoot me?”

“Of course not. Don’t be silly. Even if I was, I have a feeling none of my bullets would do the trick. Fresh out of silver, wouldn’t you know.”

“Witch,” I snarled.

“Well, yes,” she said. “But also a psychic. It’s on the sign. *Aha.*” She stood upright.

And there, in her hands, was an old wooden cup.

She shook it.

It rattled.

Like bones.

Like memory.

I’m doing what I have to.

Are you? Or are you doing what your anger has demanded of you? When you give in to it, when you let your wolf become mired in fury, you no longer have control.

The old witch by the sea.

The one Gordo had brought us to when we were after Richard Collins.

He’d spilled bones on the table.

“Theirs was a story of fathers and sons,” the woman said, and I felt like I was floating. “Yours, though. Yours is one of brothers. And yet you’ve paid for the sins of the fathers time and time again. When does it end?” She overturned the cup onto the counter. Bleach-white bones spilled out, scattering across the surface. “Death, though not for you. But someone who....”

“How did you—”

She smiled sadly. “You have lost much. Even if I didn’t know what I did, I could see that plain on your face. You carry the weight of the world upon you, and for what? What has it brought you? You’re very far from home.”

“If you know what I am, then you know what I can do.”

“Your threats don’t work on me, wolf. Keep that in mind before you open your mouth again.” She scooped up the bones in the cup and stared down at them. She cleared her throat and then spat into the cup, a large wad of green.

I grimaced.

She laughed. “Yes. It’s... unsanitary. But it does the job.” She placed her hand over the top of the cup and shook it again. She spilled the bones once more. They were wet with her saliva. “Huh. That’s unexpected.” She turned away from the counter and went to a shelf behind her. She grabbed a jar and unscrewed the lid, then poured a black powder into her palm. She turned back around, holding her hand out to me. “Snort this.”

“The hell you say.”

“It’ll help.”

“I’m *not* snorting that.”

She looked down at the powder, then back at me. “Why not?”

“I’m leaving.” I turned toward the door, wanting to get the hell out of this place.

She said, “He didn’t know. When he found you. He didn’t know what you were, what any of you were. Especially you, though. And the man with the roses and raven. But something in him, something deep and hidden, called through all that violet. It told him he was safe with you, that he no longer needed to run. He was tired of running. The silver chain around his neck was a noose. He was trapped. The false prophet had held him and tortured him. She broke him down until he was nothing but a pet. But then she made a mistake. She brought him to you, not knowing what he was to you. And those bonds were stronger than any hold she had over him.”

My claws dug into my palms. A drop of blood fell to the floor.

“Ah,” she said. “Now I have your attention.”

I turned back around.

She held out her hand. “Snort this.”

“No.”

She shrugged. “Okay.” She used her free hand and scooped up the bones again into the cup. She dumped the powder inside. “You really didn’t need to. I just wanted to see if you would. That probably would have been a bad idea. Might have even killed you.” She chuckled.

“Do you know him?”

Her smile faded. “No. But I don’t need to. I know him through you. You wear your heart on your sleeve, Carter. You think you carry armor to hide it, but those who know you can see right through it.”

My skin thrummed. “I never told you my name.”

She spilled the bones again. They were coated with the black powder.

Against my better judgment, I took a step toward her as she stared down at them. “Huh. That’s weird.”

“What?”

“Don’t touch him,” she whispered. “Don’t touch him. *Don’t. Touch. Him.*” Her spine arched as her head snapped back. Her eyes were wide, the slim cords of her neck jutting out in sharp relief. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. I thought she was having a seizure, but before I could reach for her, she collapsed, her hands flat on the counter, holding her up. She breathed heavily through her nose. “Shit.”

I felt cold, even though the room was overly warm. “Why did you say that?”

“Oh,” she whispered. “Oh, it hurts. It hurt him. He was.... He had no other choice. He didn’t know what else to do. He... broke... through? He couldn’t stand the thought of....” She wiped her eyes. “You must be someone very special to have garnered such faith. How can you not see everything you are?”

I swallowed thickly. “I’m not—it’s not like that.”

“It is,” she said. She gestured toward the bones. “I’ve seen it. There are paths ahead for you, wolf. Roads that diverge. Which one will you take, I wonder? You’re slipping. It’s already begun. A wolf without a pack cannot survive. It will pull at you until you’re drowning. And yet you persist. Do you even know why?”

I looked away, unable to take her knowing gaze. “I’ve done it once before. I can do it again.”

“But *why*? Why have you chosen what you have? They believe in you. They know you. Why would you take this chance? You know better than that.”

Her words, though spoken softly, were barbed and cutting. I didn’t understand how she knew what she knew. It was impossible. My knees were weak, and I stumbled against the counter. The bones shifted, spilling black powder. My claws dug in, leaving long scratch marks on the counter. She made a startled noise and put her hands on top of mine. My gums itched, and I had to fight back a shift.

“You’re exhausted,” she said quietly. “Come. Rest your weary head. You’ll need it. The days ahead will be long, and you’ll find little relief.” She smiled quietly. “Not a king, though you act like one. I don’t know how you manage. You must be very brave. I’ve known men like you. My loves, my boys.”

“I don’t need—”

“You don’t know what you need,” she said, sounding irritated. “That much is

obvious. Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

I didn't fight her as she pulled me toward the back of the store. It seemed like too much work. And she was right. I was exhausted, and it'd been a long time since I'd seen a friendly face. There was a voice at the back of my head warning me that this could be a trap, that I couldn't trust her, but it was negligible.

She led me to a small office. There was a cot against one wall. She pushed me down onto it and crouched before me to slide off my boots. I didn't stop her. I could barely keep my eyes open. "What have you done to me?" I muttered, my words slow and thick like molasses.

"Nothing you can't handle. Sleep, wolf. Nothing can harm you here."

I wanted to believe her.

In the end I didn't have a choice.

My eyes closed and didn't open for two days.

KELLY SAID, "HEY."

I grinned at him. "Hi."

Kelly said, "This isn't real."

I ached. "I know."

Kelly said, "Is it worth it?"

I leaned my head back against a tree. "I don't know."

Kelly said, "Do you remember when Robbie was taken?"

I nodded tightly. "I... should have done more. For him. For you."

Kelly said, "Maybe. It's weird, isn't it? Looking back. The choices we've made. Where they've led us."

The grass swayed in a cool breeze. "I'm lost."

Kelly looked away. "I know you think so. But you know where I am. You know I'm waiting for you."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Everything."

He shook his head but didn't speak.

"I thought it was for the best. To keep you safe. That I could find them on

my own.”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know.”

“So you just ran away, half-cocked, with barely an idea of what to do.”

I said, “That sounds about right” and “Can you say my name?” and “I know this isn’t real, I know it’s just a dream, but please just say my name.”

And there, in the warm sunlight, he said, “Carter. Carter. Carter.”

I reached for him.

He wasn’t there.

I OPENED MY EYES.

A ceiling fan spun lazily.

I sat up with a groan, my head foggy.

A piece of paper fluttered in my lap.

I picked it up. There, in sharp script, were the words:

Your wolfsong will always be heard xx

THE SHOP LOOKED AS IF it’d been empty for a long time. A thick layer of dust covered the counter. The shelves were bare. The bones were gone.

There was a placard in the window where the neon sign had been.

FOR RENT, it said, followed by the name of a realty company and a phone number.

THE TRUCK WAS WHERE I’D LEFT IT in the parking lot.

A slip of paper lay underneath the windshield wiper. I thought it was a ticket.

It wasn’t.

As I got closer, I knew.

It was wild, the scent. Like an old forest untouched by man, overgrown and thick.

I recognized it.

Don’t. Touch. Him.

I rushed forward and grabbed the paper, almost tearing it as I opened it.

ARE YOU TRYING TO GET YOURSELF KILLED?

“Fuck you too,” I said in a choked whisper.

But I was smiling.

And for a moment, it felt like it was enough.

better candy/need to stop

Five months later I was barely holding on.

It was the Sunday before the full moon.

I was driving down a road to nowhere, lost in my head. I was thinking about tradition, about how everyone was together and there'd be food on the table, so much food that even a wolf pack wouldn't be able to eat it all. Mom would be in the kitchen, her radio playing old music. She'd be singing, I knew, singing in a way that felt like heartbreak.

Ox and Joe would be outside manning the grill. The air would be cool, the leaves of October gold and red and green. They'd be standing side by side, their shoulders brushing.

Rico and Tanner and Chris were setting up the table and chairs in the grass. They were stronger now, the three of them, Rico having taken to the wolf as if he had always been that way. They were laughing over some little thing, and Rico was trying to be subtle about getting his scent on his friends but failing miserably. Tanner and Chris gave him crap for it, but they hugged him, their cheeks rubbing together.

Jessie was putting Mark and Gordo to work, handing them dishes to carry outside. Gordo was scowling, but he didn't mean it. It'd been a long time since he had. There was a light in his eyes, something bright and fierce, a fire that had been rekindled after a cold darkness. He stopped just outside of the back door and looked at all the others. His stump itched, but it always did, and he'd learned to ignore it. Phantom limb syndrome was a bitch, and there were days when he'd almost forget that he didn't have a hand. He'd adapted. And when he thought no one was watching, he'd allow himself to smile.

"Good, right?" Mark whispered in his ear.

"Yeah," he said roughly. "It's good."

Robbie and Kelly came around the side of the house, their hands joined.

My breath caught in my throat.

“Hey,” Kelly said.

I couldn’t speak.

“Carter?” He sounded concerned. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head.

He glanced at Robbie before nodding toward the table. Robbie kissed him on the cheek and left us alone.

“What’s wrong?” Kelly said in a low voice, even though it didn’t matter. Everyone would be able to hear us. Even Jessie.

“I don’t know,” I said. My throat felt raw, my eyes burning.

“That’s okay. You don’t always have to know.” He shook his head. “Sometimes we can be sad without having a reason. It’s part of being human.”

“We’re not human,” I reminded him.

He rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

And then I said, “I’m not really here.”

“Of course you are,” he said. “Where else would you be?”

“Far away.”

“Why?”

Mom came out of the kitchen. She glanced at us curiously, and when she smiled, it felt like the sun. She left us alone.

“Hey,” Kelly said, and I looked back at him. “Come on.” He grabbed me by the hand and began pulling me toward the woods.

The sounds of the others faded behind us. I looked up through the canopy of the trees to see blue, blue, blue, and though it was faint, I could see the moon, not quite full, but close.

“Do you remember when we were kids?” Kelly asked, looking back at me over his shoulder. “Halloween. You were... seven. I think. Seven or eight. And for some reason you’d gotten it in your head that we needed to go trick-or-treating outside of Caswell. One of the other kids had told you that there was better candy at human houses.”

I was startled into laughter. “I forgot about that.”

He smiled. “You were so convinced. You demanded that Dad take us to these houses. You said he’d been holding out on us.”

“He tried to tell me once that we couldn’t eat chocolate. That it was bad for us. Like dogs.”

“Yeah. But you didn’t believe him.”

“I did at first.”

“Did you?”

I closed my eyes. “I believed anything he said. He was our dad.”

“You were a pirate,” Kelly said, and there were birds in the trees. They called for us. “You had an eye patch and a plastic sword. I thought it was the coolest thing in the world.”

“You were a ninja.”

“I was. But only because Mom said it was too late for me to be a pirate too.”

“You cried.”

I opened my eyes in time to see him shrug. “I always wanted to be like you.” Then, “Dad took us. He didn’t have a costume, but as soon as we were outside of Caswell, he looked at us in the rearview mirror and said that he was going to do something and that we *absolutely* could not tell Mom about it.”

My body was heavy. I could barely move my legs. “He half-shifted.”

“Yeah. Said it was his costume. His eyes were bright red, and his face was longer, and there was white hair on it. And *everyone* was in awe of him. Every time a door opened, they would say, ‘Oh, a little pirate, and *oh*, look at the ninja.’ And then they’d see him and laugh and laugh and laugh, asking him how he’d done it, how his costume looked so real. ‘Is that makeup? Is it a mask? How did you *do* that?’”

I hung my head. “It was the same candy. It wasn’t any different.”

“Well, yeah. But it *tasted* different. Better, somehow. Because it was the three of us. Together. The others, they saw him for what he was. An Alpha. Powerful. Strong. A leader unlike anyone they’d ever seen before. But to us, he was just... Dad.”

“I’m not here,” I whispered. “This isn’t real.”

Kelly stopped. His grip on my hand tightened.

He said, “I forgave him. It was hard. But I did. I was angry for so long. For leaving us like he did. For not seeing Richard Collins for what he was. For not doing more to stop him. For letting Joe get taken. For what he did to Gordo and Mark. He was a good man, but he made bad decisions. And for a son to realize that about his father, to understand he wasn’t perfect, it was—”

“Devastating. Kelly, I...”

Kelly turned to look at me. I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck,

pulling him forward. I pressed my forehead against his. “Yeah,” he whispered. “It was. But sometimes we do what we think is right, even if others can’t see it. Before he died, he told me something that has always stuck with me.”

“What?” I asked, suddenly needing to know. “What did he tell you?” I pulled back, and Kelly was gone. The forest was gone. Tradition was gone.

I was in the truck. The road stretched out before me.

I looked over to the passenger side.

Not-Kelly was there, feet propped up on the dash, head back against the seat. He looked over at me, and I swore he was really there, and it was us, just the two of us, on a secret highway.

“Dad said that we must fight for the world we want. That it’s up to us to make it how we want it to be. I never forgot that.”

“I’m trying.”

He smiled quietly. “I know you are.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Fighting,” Kelly said. “You’re fighting. For me. For your pack. For him. Gavin.”

“He doesn’t want me.”

“Then why do you keep going?”

I said, “I don’t know what else to do. You and Joe, you’ve got...”

“Mates,” he said. “We do. But we’ve never forgotten you. We would have never left you behind. That’s the funny thing about love, I think. Just because I’ve got Robbie and Joe’s got Ox doesn’t mean we love you any less. How could we?”

“I’m slipping,” I whispered.

“I know.”

“I left you.”

“You did,” he agreed. “And I’ll probably be mad for a long time.”

“Will you yell at me?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Do you want me to?”

“I think so.”

“What a weird thing to want.”

“It means you still love me,” I said as a tear trickled down my cheek. “If you’re angry, you still give a shit.”

“Ah. Then I’ll probably yell at you forever.”

“Say it, please. Say my name again.”

He didn’t.

The seat next to me was empty.

I drove on.

THE FULL MOON came in the middle of the week.

It was my tenth since leaving Green Creek.

And I did what I’d promised him, as I’d done nine times before.

I howled.

I sang.

In the middle of nowhere, far from human eyes, I cried at the moon as loud as I could, a song of brothers that I chose to believe could be heard across the distance. The stars were bright, the moon fat, and I sang for him.

It echoed throughout the valley, and I waited, my wolf brain thinking *he’ll hear he’ll hear and come and sing and we’ll run run run.*

He didn’t.

I FOUND THE SECOND NOTE IN JUNE, nailed to the door of an abandoned cabin.

I DON’T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU.

“Yeah, buddy,” I muttered. “Should have said that before you started growling at anyone who got within ten feet of me.”

I pushed inside the cabin. That scent was there, wild woods, though it was faded. A cot sat up against one wall, a blanket hanging off onto the floor. The remains of what had once been a rabbit lay near the old fireplace. I grimaced at the stench of it. It looked as if it’d been weeks since anyone had been here.

I was about to turn and leave when something caught my eye in the shadows on the far wall.

I walked toward it slowly, the floor creaking beneath my feet.

Gouge marks.

On the wall. Into the wood.

Claws.

But the spread of them was bigger than any wolf should have been able to do. Like they had come from a beast of great size.

I thought this place haunted.

I left as quickly as I'd come.

That night I slept in the truck with the note curled in my hand.

I WAS IN A BAR IN NOWHERE, KANSAS, sitting in a corner booth, a half-empty beer on the table in front of me.

"This place is a dive," Kelly said. He was coming easier now. There'd be stretches of days when I wouldn't see him at all, and then he'd be right there next to me as if he'd always been there. This Not-Kelly. "I've never been in a dive bar before."

"You've been to the Lighthouse," I said.

He laughed. "Oh, man, please let me be there the day you tell Bambi she owns a dive bar. Please. I'll record it and everything."

I pulled at the label on the bottle, tearing it into strips. "I'd rather keep my balls, if it's all the same to you."

"Probably for the best." Then, "She'll have had her baby by now. You ever think about that? Rico as a father." He shook his head. "Will wonders never cease."

No, I hadn't thought about that. But here it was now, a terrible gift from Not-Kelly. Across the country, in a tiny mountain town, there was a little human in the world that was tied to me that I'd never met before. I let the bottle go before I broke it. "Do you think it's a boy or a girl?"

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter either way. But it's the first. For us."

"And will probably be the only unless they have another. We've got the gayest pack in the entire world."

He chuckled, folding his hands on the table. He grimaced because the surface was sticky. "Speaking of."

"Don't."

"Who are you talking to?"

I looked up.

A woman stood in front of the table. Her head was cocked as she looked down at me. Her fingernails were painted red. Her hair was black and curled

around her shoulders. Her cleavage was on full display, and her eyes were wide and lovely. She looked like she was around my age and on the prowl.

“No one,” I muttered.

“Because it looks like you were talking to someone.”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. Did you need something?”

Her smile was coy. “You look lonesome here all by yourself. Haven’t seen you around before.”

“Because I’m not from here.”

“Just passing through?” She leaned forward, putting her hands on the table. Oh, she was hunting and had decided I was prey. If only she knew.

“Something like that.” I kept my words clipped, my voice flat. I wasn’t interested in whatever she wanted. There were days when I’d have played along, days when I’d have welcomed her with open arms. I’d grin, flashing the barest hint of teeth, and she’d melt a little, her scent spiking with arousal.

But those days were long gone. I didn’t think I could ever be that person again.

“You look like you could use some company.”

“Go away.”

Her expression faltered slightly before smoothing out. “What’s your name? I’m Sarah.”

“I don’t care.”

She sighed. “Fine. Be that way. Just trying to be friendly.” She turned and left.

A jukebox in the corner played some country shit, a man wailing over a guitar about how he’d lost the love of his life and he was just so sad about it. A group of men stood next to it, near a pool table.

She went to them.

I stared down at the table.

“That didn’t go well,” Kelly said.

“Shut up.”

“How the hell did you ever get laid?”

“I swear to god, if you don’t—”

“Hey, friend.”

I looked up again. Four men stood at my table. Sarah was near the jukebox,

looking upset. She called to the men, "It's not a big deal. Leave it alone."

They ignored her. "It seems like we have a problem," one of the men said. He was stocky, the lines on his face deep. His head was shaved, and I saw a tattoo of a cross on his neck.

"I'm just having a beer."

"Is that right?" the man said. "Because my sister over there said you were rude to her."

"She wouldn't leave me alone."

"You too good for her?"

I sat back in the booth, stretching my arms over the back of the seat. "Are you seriously asking me why I won't fuck your sister? Because if you are, I gotta say, dude. You are far too invested in the sex life of your sibling. Probably should set some boundaries."

He leaned forward, hands flat against the table. "What was that?"

"You heard me."

He nodded slowly. "I think we have a problem."

"That sounds like a *you* thing. You should walk away."

The men behind him laughed. "That right?"

"Yeah. That's right."

He knocked my beer bottle into my lap. My jeans were instantly soaked.

"Get up," he said.

I picked up the bottle and set it back on the table. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Get. *Up*."

I got up.

"Take it outside," the bartender called. "I mean it, Mikey. You start shit in here again and I'll call the cops."

"Mikey," I said. "That's cute."

They surrounded me. I could smell their anger, the blood boiling just underneath their skin. They were spoiling for a fight, not giving a shit that it was four against one. They moved like a pack, like they'd done this before. For all I knew they had. Perhaps the girl was bait and they'd thought I was an easy mark.

They led me toward the door.

I let them.

They were cocky. Sure. They stank of sweat and cigarettes. It reminded me of how Gordo had once been, sitting behind the garage in the ratty lawn chair, a cigarette dangling from his lips, oil under his fingernails. He didn't smoke anymore.

The night air was cool. I was amused when I tried to remember where I was, what town, what state, and I couldn't. It was just another place.

One of the men shoved me from behind.

I stumbled forward into the parking lot, the gravel crunching under my boots.

"Smug fucker," the one with the tattoo said. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

I grinned at him. I felt feral, like I used to be. I wanted to tear into them, make them bleed. Hear them scream until they begged for me to stop.

Maybe it'd make me feel something other than hollowed out.

"You don't have to do this," Not-Kelly said, leaning against the side of a truck, arms folded. "You could walk away."

"Nah," I said. "I've earned this."

He shook his head.

"Earned what?" the man demanded. "What's wrong with you?"

"A great man once asked a question," I told him, ignoring the crowd gathering outside the bar. They wanted a show. I'd give them one. "He stood, his head held high. He wasn't afraid. He knew what he was capable of, and though he would do anything to protect what was his, he still believed in mercy. I'm going to ask you the same question."

The men looked at each other before turning back to me.

I said, "What are your names?"

Not-Kelly sighed.

The tattooed man didn't feel like talking. He swung at me, his fist big and blocky.

I caught his hand before it could connect.

He tried to pull away.

I didn't let him.

I said, "I asked you a question. What are your names?"

I squeezed his fist. I felt his bones creak.

His eyes widened.

I let him go.

They came, all of them at once. They got a few hits in. One of them sucker punched me in the kidneys, causing a sharp flare of pain, bright and glassy. I welcomed it.

They tried. I wondered, briefly, how many people they'd done this to. How many times they'd taken what they'd wanted without caring about the repercussions. I told myself I was doing a good thing, teaching them a lesson so they'd never fuck with anyone else.

And maybe part of that was true.

A small part.

Because the rest of me wanted to hurt them. So I did.

I saved the man with the tattoo for last.

Arms wrapped around me, pulling me back against a strong chest as another one came in swinging. I kicked my feet off the ground, slamming them against his stomach. He bent over, eyes bulging, arms crossed. His mouth opened soundlessly, a thin line of spit hanging from his bottom lip.

I tilted my head forward before bringing it back sharply, hitting the man who held me square in the face. Bone and cartilage broke. Blood sprayed on the back of my neck as he grunted, dropping his arms.

The third man reached down and scooped up gravel and dirt, throwing it in my face as he rushed toward me. My vision blurred as I moved to the right, his fist glancing off my shoulder. I elbowed him in the throat, and he gagged, hands at his neck.

The tattooed man narrowed his eyes but stood just out of reach.

That was fine. His time would come.

The man with the broken nose threw a clumsy punch. I grabbed his arm, spun around on my heels, and threw him into the side of a parked car. He fell to the ground face-first and didn't get back up.

"Don't kill them," Kelly said.

"I won't," I promised him.

The first guy had started sucking in air again, still bent over, and he went down hard when I kicked him in the side of the head.

The smart man raised his hands in front of him as if that would stop me.

I knocked them to the side.

I grinned at him. "You should run."

He didn't.

"Okay," I said, grabbing him by the shoulders. I kned him in the stomach. He collapsed, wheezing, wet eyes blinking rapidly.

"Here!" I heard a man yell.

I turned to see another man toss my attacker a wooden baseball bat. He caught it deftly and laid it against his shoulder. He spat on the ground, never looking away from me.

I shook my head. "That's not going to help you."

He came for me, bat raised.

He brought it down where I'd been standing. It bounced off the ground as I pressed against him, spinning around him until I was at his back. He turned his head just as I reached over his shoulder, grabbed the bat, and ripped it from his hands. I threw it to the side.

"You should have told me your name," I whispered in his ear.

I was distracted.

I didn't see him reach into his pocket.

I heard a click.

A metallic whisper I recognized from how things used to be.

Tanner and Chris with their knives. From when they were human, breakable and soft.

He thrust his hand back.

It wasn't big, the switchblade. Six inches at most.

But fuck did it hurt when he stabbed me in the side.

I shoved him away.

He stumbled forward.

I looked down.

The handle of the knife stuck out from my shirt. Blood bloomed like roses against the fabric.

I reached down and grabbed the handle, feeling the blade in my gut. I gritted my teeth as I pulled it out.

Kelly said, "Leave. Carter. Please leave."

I threw the knife on the ground, my blood glistening on metal.

The wound began to close.

I lifted my head slowly.

The tattooed man took a step back.

He said, “Your eyes, what the fuck is wrong with your eyes—”

“You should have told me your name.”

I rushed him as the fog thickened.

Kelly said, “Carter.”

Kelly said, “Carter, stop.”

Kelly said, “Carter, you need to *stop*.”

I lifted my head.

He wasn’t there.

The man below me whimpered. I looked back down at him, hearing Sarah screaming, begging for me to stop, to please just stop, please, please, *please*. My hands shook. Two fingers on my right hand were broken. The knuckles on both were split and coated with blood.

Some of it was mine.

Most wasn’t.

The man’s face was swollen and slick. He was babbling, telling me he was sorry, he was so sorry, man, don’t hurt me anymore, please don’t hurt me, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, your eyes, your eyes, why do they look like that, why are they *purple*?

The fight had drained out of him. All that remained was fear.

He was afraid of me.

I looked back up at the crowd.

They were horrified.

A few had their hands over their mouths.

Sarah was sobbing. She was terrified.

I said, “I didn’t... I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean to—”

The bartender pushed through the crowd. He carried a shotgun. He pointed it at me. “I don’t know who you are, but if you touch him again, I’ll blow your head off.”

He tracked me with the shotgun as I stepped away from the tattooed man. Sarah rushed forward, going to her knees next to her brother. She cradled his face in her hands as he moaned. “Oh god, I’m sorry, I didn’t ask them to—”

“His eyes,” the man babbled. “His eyes. His eyes. *His eyes*.”

“Get out of here,” the bartender said coldly. “I’ve already called the cops.

You've got maybe five minutes before they show up."

I nodded and turned toward the truck, my eyes burning.

I only stopped when the bartender said, "Wolf."

I didn't look back.

"Don't let me catch you here again. Your kind isn't welcome here."

I left.

peter and the wolf/our father

The third note came in August.

I thought I was dreaming most days. Kelly was there more and more, and everything had a hazy edge to it. It was getting harder to wake up.

The roads all looked the same. The days bled together.

Kelly said, "You're going to lose your mind."

I laughed, though it sounded rusty and broken. "I think it might be a little late for that."

He sighed. "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

"I have to. He would do the same for me."

He had that stubborn set to his jaw. I ached at the sight of something so familiar. "You don't know that. You don't even know him."

"Years. He was with us for years."

"And stuck as a wolf," Kelly (*Not-Kelly*) reminded me. "Feral. For all you know, he doesn't remember anything. Like Robbie."

"He saved us," I whispered, hands tightening on the steering wheel.

Kelly shook his head. "I know. But don't you miss me? Don't you want to come home?"

"More than anything," I said hoarsely. "You know that."

"I need you, Carter. Why would you do that to me? You know what losing Robbie did to me. You were *there*. And yet you didn't even hesitate in leaving me behind." He was crying. "I don't understand. How could you be so cruel?"

I couldn't look at him. I was numb. "I love you."

"Do you?"

"Yes. More than anything."

"Then come home. Please."

I swallowed thickly. "I... can't. Remember what Joe said? To that hunter."

David King. To tell Ox.”

He laughed through his tears. “Not yet. Not yet. Not yet. It’s all happened before and it will all happen again. These circles. We keep going in circles. Ox and Joe. Gordo and Mark. Me and Robbie. We keep making the same mistakes over and over and over.”

“I know.”

“What are you going to do about them?” He nodded toward the front of the truck.

“I’ll handle it.”

But he was already gone.

I looked out the windshield.

Wolves growled.

I got out of the truck, hands raised, and was surrounded almost immediately.

“Who are you?” the Alpha demanded, hand around my throat. She pressed me against the truck, the handle digging into my back. “What are you doing in my territory?”

“I’m not here to hurt you,” I managed to get out.

“Then why are you here?”

“Can’t... breathe....”

Her grip lessened, and I sucked in air. Her nostrils flared as her forehead furrowed. She shook her head as she narrowed her red eyes again. “What do you want?”

I reached up and settled my hand on her wrist. I held on gently so she wouldn’t think I was going to hurt her. “I’m looking for someone.”

“There’s no one here for you.”

“Not anymore.”

“Why would you think he was here in the first place?”

I grinned at her. “I never said it was a *he*.”

She sighed as she let me go. “Shit.”

THEY WERE A YOUNG PACK, all unmated. The oldest, the Alpha, was only twenty. She wouldn’t tell me her name and refused to let me talk to any of the others. That was fine. I didn’t come for them, only for what they could tell me.

Theirs was a house set back in the Canadian wilds. No one else was around for miles. They liked it better that way. They didn't want me going inside. I never pushed.

"No witch?" I asked as she came back to me after whispering to one of her Betas.

She hesitated. "No. We... had one once."

"But not anymore."

"Killed," she said. "Or so my mother told me. Years ago. In Oregon. Mom said she deserved it. Listened to someone she shouldn't have. She tried to kill an Alpha. Apparently she took the hand of a witch, and the witch's mate killed her."

I looked up at the wide expanse of sky above and thought of Kelly speaking of circles. "Emma."

The Alpha nodded slowly. "Emma Patterson."

"She was in over her head."

"Should I ask how you know this?"

"Probably not. And I was never here." I nodded toward her pack. "Make sure they know that too."

"Don't worry about them. I know you."

"I doubt that."

"Who were you talking to in the truck?"

"No one."

"I heard you."

"It doesn't matter." I looked at her. "When was he here?"

She hesitated. "A month ago."

I nodded. "Was he alone?"

"No." She looked off into the trees. "There was something with him. Something bigger. We never saw it. But we felt it. Deep in the forest. It felt like a cancer. It was wrong. Black."

"Sounds about right," I muttered. "What did he want?"

The Alpha shrugged. "He didn't speak much. I think.... Do you know the story of Peter and the Wolf? My mother told it to me."

I shook my head.

She said, "Peter lived in a clearing in the forest with his grandfather."

Jesus Christ. “A clearing.”

“He goes out into the clearing, and when he does, he leaves the garden gate open. There was a duck that lived in the garden. It saw the gate open and went through, wanting to go swimming in a pond. There, the duck meets a bird, and they argue about swimming and flying, going back and forth and back and forth. The bird and the duck don’t know that Peter’s cat has also come through the open gate. It’s hunting. At the last moment, Peter sees the cat and warns the bird and the duck. The bird flies away. The duck swims to the middle of the pond.”

“I don’t know what this has to do with—”

“Peter’s grandfather is upset that Peter went into the clearing alone, asking him what would happen if a wolf came out of the forest? Peter says that boys like him aren’t afraid of wolves. His grandfather, seeing his grandson is foolish, locks the gate.”

Her pack sighed around us. It sounded like the wind.

The Alpha said, “Soon after, a wolf comes. It’s big and gray. The cat, seeing the wolf, manages to climb a tree and escape back into the garden. The duck, not seeing the wolf, leaves the pond. The wolf comes for it. The duck runs. But the wolf is faster and swallows the duck whole. Peter, seeing the beast eating his friend, makes a decision. He gets a rope and climbs the tree. He tells the bird to fly over the wolf’s head and distract him while he lowers a noose to catch the wolf by his tail. He succeeds. The wolf struggles to get free, but Peter ties the rope to the tree and it only makes the noose tighter.”

I didn’t speak.

The Alpha tilted her head back toward the sun. “Hunters come. They’d been tracking the wolf, and they want to kill it. Peter doesn’t want death, even if the wolf had eaten the duck. He convinces the hunters to help him take the wolf to a zoo. There is a parade, led by the hunters and the bird and the cat and Peter, dragging the wolf by the rope. The grandfather is there too, and though Peter was successful, his grandfather says, ‘What if Peter *hadn’t* caught the wolf? What then?’” She looked at me. “In its hurry, the wolf swallowed the duck whole. If you listen very carefully, you’ll hear it quacking in the wolf’s belly.”

“That... was certainly a story you just told me.”

She snorted, and for a moment she wasn’t an Alpha. She was a young woman exasperated by someone who didn’t understand what she was saying. “You’re trying to catch a wolf by the tail. But what if you *can’t* catch it? What then? Will you be swallowed whole?”

I said, “Sometimes I think the noose is already around my neck. I can’t

breathe because it's being pulled tighter and tighter."

"By your own choice. You left the gate open. You're inviting the wolf inside. I've heard things. We all have. Rumors. Of the destruction of Caswell. Of a great and terrible beast that cannot be killed. Of a pack unlike any other, led by two Alphas, one of whom is a king. The other a savior. This pack has suffered again and again. And yet they still go on." She smiled. "Have you ever heard of such a pack? It's a miracle. Even here, so far away from everyone, we know things. Secret things."

I was very tired. My head hurt, and my palms were sweaty. "He's important."

Her smile took on a melancholic curve. "He would have to be. Though I hope you don't take offense when I tell you it only cements my belief that men are the stupidest creatures alive."

I laughed for the first time in a long time. It crawled out of my throat, sounding like broken glass. "I won't argue with you there."

"I thought not. If they ask, I'll tell them that you were here. They deserve to know. After everything." She reached up and cupped my face, and though she wasn't my Alpha, I couldn't help but lean into it. I couldn't remember the last time another wolf had touched me. Her eyes filled with red as her voice grew deeper. "You fight, little prince. And even when you stumble, you push on. Why?"

My eyes stung. "I don't know how to stop."

"Even when you feel the pull of the noose?"

"Even then."

She let me go and took a step back. "Wait here."

I did.

She left me standing in front of the house, her pack trailing after her, shooting curious glances over their shoulders. Once the door had closed behind them, I sagged against the truck. I tried to keep my breathing slow and even, but my chest hitched.

Kelly said, "Go home, Carter. Before you can't."

I didn't look at him. "I'm close. Closer than I've ever been."

He sighed.

Only the Alpha returned. She had a piece of paper in her hand, and I had to stop myself from ripping it from her. She held it out between two fingers. When I reached for it, she pulled her hand away slightly. "I'll give you this. But then

you leave. I won't have anything brought down upon us. We've been through enough. We don't want your fight. Go away. As far as you can. And never come back."

"Did you read it?"

She stared me straight in the eyes. "Yes. And though I know you won't listen, you should do what he says."

She pressed the paper into my hand before heading back toward the house. I unfolded the paper as she closed the door, the unmistakable click of the lock like a gunshot.

LEAVE ME ALONE. GO HOME OR I'LL HURT YOU.

I laughed until my stomach clenched.

What if Peter hadn't caught the wolf?

What then?

NOVEMBER CAME IN with a wave of cold air that chilled me to my bones. I was always cold, no matter how many layers I wore. I slept in the truck more than in a bed. I felt like I was moving through water, slowly drowning.

One night I lay curled on the seat, my knees bumping against the dashboard, a hand in my hair as Kelly hummed quietly.

I turned my face into his stomach and breathed him in. It almost felt real. If I tried hard enough, I could convince myself it was.

He pressed a finger against my ear and said, "I hated school. I was never very good at it. I didn't like being trapped inside all day. Green Creek was better in most ways, but I didn't want to be in a classroom. After being surrounded by wolves for most of my life, the humans smelled weird. But then I took a physics class and learned about quantum mechanics."

I groaned. "Seriously? Haven't I suffered enough?"

He smacked my forehead. "Hush. Listen. There's this idea that we're all floating through time and space, a collection of particles like stardust. And every now and then, these particles collide, and for a moment everything is bright and real and we exist together. I think about that a lot."

I could barely breathe. "I wish you were here."

"And I wish you weren't. This can't go on forever, Carter. Soon you're going to be standing on a ledge. And you'll either have to back away from it or

jump. And I don't know what'll happen to you if you do." His hand went back to my hair, his fingernails scraping against my scalp.

"I'm close."

"To the ledge?"

"To him."

"Is there a difference?"

I didn't answer him.

He let it be. "What are you going to say if you find him?"

"What do you mean?"

"The first thing. Say you actually catch up to him. He's standing in front of you, demanding to know what the hell you're doing and why you didn't listen to him."

"He'll be scowling," I whispered.

Kelly snorted. "Well, yeah. He's a Livingstone. It's their default setting. Speaking of, you sure you want to get involved with that?"

I turned over in his lap, looking up at him. "Seemed to work out for Mark okay."

He smiled down at me. "It did. But it also came with a lot of baggage. I can't imagine it'll be any easier with him." He paused, considering. "That and the fact that he has a penis, which you have no idea what to do with."

"Yeah, I'll be honest. I haven't really thought about that part yet. Baby steps."

He traced my eyebrows with the tip of a finger. "There could be others. It doesn't just have to be him."

"You could say the same about Robbie. But you didn't let that stop you."

"At least Robbie doesn't come with a psychotic extended family." He grimaced. "Michelle Hughes doesn't count."

"Why Robbie?"

"What do you mean?"

"There could be others. It doesn't just have to be him."

"But it was."

"How did you know?"

He pressed his finger against my chin. "It wasn't like that. At first."

"I know. I was there."

He said, “I think it was.... You know how in winter, the days are short and the nights are long?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s how it was for me. It was a long winter night, and then one day it was like the sun rose for the first time since I could remember. I saw him and I felt... warm. Alive. I didn’t know what to do about it. I didn’t know if I *wanted* to do anything about it.”

“But you did, even though you were scared.”

“It’s a scary thing.”

“I’m scared too,” I whispered to him even though he was Not-Kelly. “And I don’t know how not to be.”

“That’s okay. Tell me. You find him. You’re standing before him. You see his face, and he’s scowling at you. What’s the first thing you say?”

I thought for a long moment. “Years.”

“Years?”

I nodded. “I would say to him... you were there for years. You wouldn’t leave me alone. You stayed by my side, and I didn’t understand why. I didn’t like it at first. I hated it at first, if I’m being honest. I had this shadow, this great, hulking shadow that didn’t know what privacy meant. I mean, have you ever tried to jerk off when a wolf is scratching at the door trying to get in? It’s fucking terrible and—”

“Carter.”

“Right. Sorry. Um. Okay. I hated it for a little while. But then I just... didn’t. It became part of me. I would say you became part of me. A constant. And I didn’t know what I had until it was gone. I’m sorry that I didn’t see you for what you were. I’m sorry that I took you for granted. I’m sorry that I let you go. And I know you don’t want me here, and I know you said you didn’t want me, didn’t want our pack, but maybe... maybe you could see me. Because I see you now. I see you, and I don’t know if I ever want to see anyone else. I slept better when you were curled around me. I dreamed that we were running, just you and me. I want to know everything. Where you came from. What you’re like. What makes you happy. What you thought about when you saw me for the first time, if you could even think at all. Why did you stay with me for as long as you did? And then I would say hey, and hi, and hello, Gavin, hello. My name is Carter. And I think you’re my....” I couldn’t finish.

“Penis and all?”

“I’m pretty sure I can figure that part out. I’m a quick learner.”

He laughed until he cried. “That sounds pretty good.”

I closed my eyes.

He said, “The burner phone in your bag. All it would take is a phone call and this could be over. You know I would pick up. You could hear my voice, and I would yell and scream at you and demand to know where you were. I’d tell you to stay *right there*, that we were coming for you because I would never let you go. Do you know how easy it would be? Carter... do it. Please. For me. For your pack. For yourself.”

“I can’t.”

“You can,” he snapped, and I flinched. “Why are you doing this to yourself? Didn’t you trust us? Didn’t you trust *me*? We would have helped you with anything. With *everything*. We were moving heaven and earth to find him. To bring him back to you.”

“Were you? Or were you looking for Robert Livingstone?”

“That’s not fair.”

I tilted my head back against the window. “Do you ever think what it would be like? If we weren’t who we are. If we weren’t Bennetts.”

“Who would we be?”

I shrugged. “Anyone. No one. People wouldn’t look to us to sacrifice everything we have. We give them our blood, our lives, and it’s never enough. They always want more. And it never ends. Joe is a king, like our father. Mom is a queen. In Caswell, after everything was done and they were starting to rebuild, they looked to Joe to fix them. To fix it all. And since I was his second, they looked to me too. They called me a prince. I hated it.”

“They need hope,” Kelly said quietly. “That’s what they see in us. That’s why they need us. To fight for them.”

“Maybe they should learn to fight for themselves.”

When I opened my eyes again, Kelly was gone.

The cab of the truck was cold.

I tugged my jacket tighter around me and slept.

My dreams were green, green, green, and I was running through the trees, my paws digging into the earth. Around me, my pack sang their wolf song, and I was home.

THE FULL MOON IN NOVEMBER fell on a Friday.

Kelly was with me most days. He would stay for hours. Sometimes he wouldn't speak. Other times he would tell me stories that I already knew, stories about our father, our mother. About Joe and Ox. Gordo and Mark. Chris and Tanner and Rico and Jessie. It was like he was plucking memories from my head and laying them out bare. For all I knew, he was. He was a ghost, but he was part of me. A projection.

I looked in the rearview mirror a lot, not recognizing the stranger staring back at me. He was thin, his cheekbones pronounced under a scraggly beard, circles under his eyes like bruises. I flashed my eyes at him.

He flashed his back.

Blue.

Then orange.

Blue.

Then orange.

Sometimes I dreamed in violet, of a locked door where something heavy scratched on the other side. It whispered *let me in let me in i promise it will be easy i promise it won't hurt i promise you won't regret it just let me in let me let me let me in.*

I didn't.

But it was getting harder to ignore.

As the full moon approached, I crossed into Minnesota, following the directions of a witch in Kentucky who wanted nothing to do with wolves.

The air grew colder.

The sky was covered in a blanket of thick gray clouds.

It smelled like snow.

I didn't know then that it was all about to end.

Here, at last.

I was being hunted.

awake

Isabella, Minnesota, was barely a blip on the road. A sign announced the town followed by a couple of buildings, but it looked dead. It reminded me of a place in Virginia called Lignite, where we'd fought for a member of our pack on a bridge.

The woods around Isabella were thick. I'd seen signs telling me I was in the Superior National Forest, and I tried to remember if I'd ever heard of a wolf pack here. It seemed like the perfect place. It was in the middle of nowhere, and it felt free. But the territory was empty.

The moon was tugging on me, scratching at the back of my mind. It was getting harder and harder to ignore it.

I drove through Isabella and didn't see anyone. Small towns lay ahead, the closest almost thirty miles away. It seemed like a good place to stop. I would be safe here. I heard deer moving in the trees, and I wanted to find them. To chase them. To eat them. But not yet. I was close. I knew I was close.

I pulled the truck onto a dirt road. The canopy of the trees hung over it, creating a natural tunnel unlike anything I'd ever seen. I almost missed it. It was hidden away, the road almost overgrown.

The truck bounced on the old road, the potholes deep. Branches scratched against the sides. It was going on four in the afternoon, but the darkened sky above made it feel much later. The moon hid behind those clouds. My gums itched.

I was on the road for almost ten minutes before it ended in a small clearing. At one end of the clearing was a run-down house. The paint had long since peeled away, the wood weathered, looking almost charred. There was a hole in the roof near the front, about two feet across. The roof over the porch had collapsed.

The door was closed.

Two of the front windows were busted out, glass lying in the grass.

I stopped the truck.

My skin was vibrating as if a low electric current was coursing through me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

Kelly said, "Maybe you should leave."

I didn't look at him. "Do you feel that?"

"Carter. You need to go."

"Why?"

"Something's wrong with this place. It feels...."

"Haunted."

He touched my arm. "Yes."

I looked down at his hand. "I'm already haunted."

"By me." He pulled away, folding his hands in his lap. "I'm just a figment of your imagination. Maybe even your conscience." He shook his head. "Whatever I am, I'm telling you this isn't a good place."

I looked back at the house. "I don't know."

I could feel him glaring at me. "Remember when we went to that old witch's house by the sea while trying to find Richard Collins? You said that was the point in horror movies where you yelled at the screen for people to *not* go inside the house."

I reached for the door handle. "I'm a werewolf. I'm the one usually waiting inside the house."

"It wasn't funny then, and it's not funny now. Don't be stupid. Get out of here. Spend the full moon somewhere else."

"There's no one else around." I glanced over at him. "I'll be right back."

He groaned. "That's exactly what you're *not* supposed to say. Jesus Christ."

I opened the door and climbed out of the truck.

Not-Kelly did too. It struck me that I'd never actually seen him get out of the truck before. He was just always there.

But now?

Now I heard the door creak as he opened it, felt it rock when he slammed it shut behind him. I heard his footsteps on the dirt road. But I couldn't hear his heart. It was like it was dead in his chest.

He stopped in front of the truck. "Well?"

I stared at him with a roiling sense of unease.

“What?” he asked.

I shook my head slowly.

He grunted. “Let’s get this over with. And I swear to god, if something jumps out at me and I scream, you can’t make fun of me or I’ll punch you in the junk.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

We walked toward the house.

His arm brushed mine.

I could feel the hairs on his forearm. The delicate bones in his wrist.

I wondered if I was asleep.

If none of this was real.

I extended the claws on my right hand. I held up my left hand and scraped a claw against my palm. I winced as I drew blood. Pain.

I felt pain.

It wasn’t a dream.

I stared down at my hand as the wound healed.

“What did you do that for?” Kelly asked.

He was watching me with those bright blue eyes. “Do you remember that day in the woods before we left Maine? Just you and me. Dad said he didn’t know when we’d come back, so if there was anything we needed to do, we had to do it then.”

Kelly nodded. “We were walking. To nowhere. Anywhere. We didn’t have a destination in mind.”

“And you asked me a question.”

“I asked you if things were going to change for us. Joe was hollowed out and empty, Mom was barely holding on, Mark wasn’t talking, and Dad always had this pinched look on his face. I didn’t know what was going to happen. It felt like we were falling apart. I didn’t want to lose you too. You promised me that would never happen.” He raised his right hand, palm toward me before he closed it into a fist. “You cut your hand. And then mine. You were quick, before it could heal. You pressed your blood against mine. You said we’d always be together.”

“Yeah. I did.” Even though it was cold enough to see my breath, sweat rolled down the back of my neck.

“Why do you ask?”

“I love you,” I told him. “You’re my tether.”

He smiled. “I know I am. You’re my big brother. There’s no one like you in all the world.” His smile faded. “And that means you should listen to me. Let’s go, okay? Just you and me. We’ll get out of here, find a place where we can run together. Just like we used to.”

I wanted that almost more than anything.

I said, “I don’t know how much longer I have.”

He cocked his head. “Until what?”

“It’s breaking. In my head. I thought... I thought you’d be enough. But it’s like it was before. I can feel it pulling on me.”

He took a step toward me. “I can’t be everything, Carter. I want to be, but I can’t. A tether can only do so much. Wolves aren’t meant to be alone. You need more than this. More than me. I’m nothing but a ghost. A memory. And it’s not enough.”

I looked back at the house as the first snow started to fall. It was nothing more than a flurry, the air filled with dancing flakes. It felt cool against my heated skin. “I could have killed those people at the bar.”

“You wanted to,” he said. “It was close.”

“Yes.”

“What happens when you can’t stop yourself? Do you really want to take that risk?”

I could feel him staring after me as I walked toward the house. I climbed the porch, stepping over the beams that had fallen. The door was peeling. The doorknob was cold to the touch. I turned it, but it barely moved.

Locked.

I pushed against it. I barely had to put any pressure on it before the wood cracked and gave way. The door swung open, the hinges creaking.

The house smelled of mold and dust.

I sneezed. It echoed flatly through the house.

Snow drifted in from the hole in the roof, landing in what had once been a living room. The fireplace was made of crumbling brick. There was an overturned chair, the fabric ripped, stuffing sticking out, yellowed and withered. The floor groaned with every step I took.

A picture hung crooked on the wall. The glass was cracked. The photograph had three people in it. A man with a quiet smile. A woman with sparkling eyes.

And a boy.

He stood between the man and woman, each with a hand on his shoulder. His eyes were dark, his hair black and windswept.

I'd seen a photograph once of when Gordo was a kid, hanging off of Mark's back. The boy on the wall looked almost the same. The shape of the nose was off, the bridge bumpier. His cheeks were freckled. His eyes were farther apart. He was stockier than Gordo had ever been.

And he was smiling. Brightly. He was missing a couple of teeth, an endearing gap that almost made him look like he had fangs.

I knew this face.

I'd only seen it once before, and only briefly. And this face had been much older, eyes narrowed, teeth grinding together as words came from his lips, sounding as if they were being punched from his chest.

Don't. Touch. Him.

Shadows crawled along the walls and floor as the day began to die.

But I couldn't look away from the picture on the wall.

It seemed impossible that I would have found this place after all this time.

It couldn't be real.

I was dreaming.

I was somewhere far away from here, and I was dreaming.

Except....

Except there was still blood on my hand from where I'd cut my palm.

The pain had been biting.

I reached up and touched the frozen boy's face.

Something moved behind me.

I whirled around in the gathering darkness.

There was nothing there.

Not even Kelly, the ghost that he was.

Except....

Except there came the smell of an old-growth forest, and try as I might, I couldn't convince myself that it came from the woods around the house.

It was soaked into the floor. The walls. The ceiling. I sucked in a great breath, letting it fill my lungs, and as the moon called to me, as it whispered *run little prince it's time to run it's time to run and sing your songs*, I knew I was

close, closer than I'd been in almost a year.

I thought of him as he was when we'd run in the forest together, just the two of us.

The way he'd lay against me in the grass, head on my chest.

I took a step toward the open doorway.

"Hello?" I croaked out. "Are you...."

I took another step, and the forest was *alive*, it was so fucking *present*, and there was blood on my hand, a red smear that told me I was here, that I was here and this was real. All of this was real.

Another step.

I swore I heard the low growl of an angry wolf.

Another step and I was almost to the door. Almost to the ruined porch.

And then—

The rumble of engines.

I blinked slowly.

Lights through the trees.

Headlights.

There were vehicles coming down the road. A bunch of them, by the sound of it.

I rushed forward, pressing myself against the wall, out of sight.

I inhaled.

I exhaled.

The moon whispered, *run shift run little prince run with your paws on the ground and the wind in your hair run run run*

My claws pierced the wall. Plaster trickled down.

Loud music blared from one of the vehicles, harsh and grating. It made my head pound, and I gritted my teeth against it.

Hair began to sprout along my neck and face.

Light filled the windows as the vehicles began to pull up next to mine. The music continued to blast as the engines revved.

I heard voices above the noise.

Human voices.

The music switched off.

The vehicles switched off.

The lights stayed on.

I peered around the edge of the doorway.

Against the bright lights, I could make out figures climbing out of oversized trucks. Someone was laughing, his voice deep. I saw the flash of metal in his hand, the unmistakable shape of a gun. He walked toward my truck, scraping the barrel of his gun along the side. He looked inside and then toward the house. He was older, his face heavily lined, white hair hanging down around his shoulders. He wore jeans and an old leather jacket, the collar popped up around his neck. He had rings on three of his fingers, the stones large and gaudy.

“This it?” I heard him ask one of the others. I counted ten of them, eight men and two women, all packing. “This the truck?”

“Think so,” someone replied. “Same one Barry described.”

The man nodded and started to turn toward the house. I jerked my head back, breathing in and out through my nose.

The man raised his voice. “Hey! Are you in the house? Why don’t you come out here where we can see you.”

I kept my mouth shut, listening for every movement they made. If they were smart, whoever they were, they’d surround the house. Block all the exits.

They gathered together in front of the house instead.

Either they were fucking stupid, or they were cocky.

It almost didn’t matter which. They’d cornered a werewolf on a full moon.

“We know you’re in there,” the man called out. His voice was even, almost cheerful in its long, slow drawl. “You don’t know how hard it was to track you down.” I heard him spit onto the ground. “Imagine my surprise when I received a phone call and was told about an Omega attacking people at a bar. An *Omega*, of all things. Been a while since I’d seen one of those, especially since word on the street is they’re all under control of some Alpha in Oregon. You lost, Omega? Why don’t you come on out before I huff and I puff and blow your fucking head off.”

His group laughed darkly.

“Nothing?” the man said. “That’s disappointing. You trying to get to that Alpha, Omega? Trying to make your way west? We tend to avoid that place, if I’m being honest. A big group of hunters went there once, few years back. Raised some hell, or so I’m told. None of them were ever heard from again. I’m many, many things. But I ain’t an idiot. It’s best if I pick off the stragglers like you. Tell me, Omega. How far gone are you? Do you feel it eating away at your

brain? What are you thinking about right now? You want to kill me? You want to close those big teeth of yours around my throat until you swallow down my blood? Come on out! I'll give you the chance."

I looked at the picture on the wall.

The boy so familiar and yet still a stranger. His face was illuminated by a pair of headlights.

"Tell you what," the man said, almost conversationally. "I'll give you until the count of five. If you don't show yourself, we're gonna have a problem. And my daddy taught me that any problem could be solved by shooting it. Good man, my daddy. A bit foolish. Got his arms torn off by a wolf. Died screaming. But he knew what he was talking about, for the most part. Shooting always does seem to solve the problem, so long as you keep your arms attached to your body. And believe me when I say we've got a *lot* of ammo, all of it silver. Perfect for a rogue wolf. Gotta do our part, you know? Keep the good, innocent folk safe from the monsters."

A hallway stretched out in front of me, but part of the ceiling had collapsed into it, blocking my way. A window to my left, near the fireplace. One to my right, and I could see the trees beyond it.

Or the front door.

Four choices.

"Okay," the man said. "Let's get this show on the road, shall we? Here we go. One."

My fangs dropped.

"Two."

Hair sprouted along my face and neck as my jaw began to stretch.

"Three."

My claws dug into the wall, black hooks four inches long.

"Four."

My eyes flashed, and I saw the world with the sharpness of a wolf.

"Five."

I dove to the ground as the gunfire rang out. I loped away from the open door, bullets whizzing around me, plaster and shards of wood raining down around me. A bullet hit the ground less than a foot from my hand, creating a divot and causing the floor to splinter. I looked up in time to see a bullet hit the photograph on the wall, right between the two adults, the glass shattering. It fell to the floor, the frame broken and bent.

I went for the window to the left near the fireplace but snarled when a bullet grazed my arm, the burn excruciating. I pivoted right and was met with more gunfire.

A table lay overturned toward the back of the room. I leapt toward it, landing hard on my shoulder on the other side, curling my legs against my chest, trying to make myself as small as possible. Bullets struck the table, causing it to vibrate, the wood splintering.

My arm ached, the wound not healing.

“Hold up!” the man shouted, and the guns stopped firing.

get up, the moon whispered. get up little prince get up and shift and run and hunt and kill

“You still alive, Omega?” the man called. “Thought I heard something in there. But I’m getting old, so it might’ve just been wishful thinking. Hearing’s not as good as it used to be.”

I was angry.

So fucking angry.

My hands shook.

My heart raced.

My fangs tore my bottom lip as I bit down.

I growled, low and deep.

“Ah,” the man said. “There you are. Heard that before. Cornered animal. Has a particular sound to it. Desperate. Pissed off. Willing to do anything to save itself. What will you do?”

“Boss,” a woman said. “I think I heard something in the woods. There’s—”

The man sounded annoyed when he said, “You didn’t hear shit, darlin’. The wolf is in the house. And he’s alone. He’s an Omega. There’s nothing else here.”

“But—”

“I swear to Christ if you don’t shut your mouth, I’ll come over there and shut it for you.”

The woman fell silent.

The man said, “Come on out, Omega. There’s nowhere else for you to go. I’m doing you a favor here. Don’t you want it all to stop? I’m told that turning Omega is like losing your mind. I can help you. I can—”

“Boss,” the woman said, her voice shaking. “There’s something in the woods. I swear it. Can’t you hear that? Can’t you—”

“Did you hear what I fucking *said*?” the man snarled. “Bitch, I’m going to shove my fist down your throat if you—”

From the woods came the snarl of a furious wolf.

And I recognized it.

“No,” I whispered as the hunters outside the house began to shout.

Gunfire erupted again, but it wasn’t coming toward the house.

I rose from behind the table.

I saw the bright lick of fire erupting in the dark from the guns the hunters carried. I vaulted over the table and ran toward the door, my clothes tearing as I let the shift come over me.

I burst through the doorway, knocking the beams from the porch out onto the hunters. One of the men glanced back at me over his shoulder, his eyes so wide it was like they were pure white. He started to swing his gun toward me, but I landed on top of him, roaring down at his face. I was still half-shifted, and he screamed at me, a high and pitiful sound. He tried to raise his gun, but I bit down on his arm, feeling his bones crunch between my fangs. I twisted my head sharply, and blood spilled out onto my tongue.

He took in a gurgling breath before his eyes closed and didn’t reopen.

I looked up to see the others still firing into the woods. I thought I saw a flash of movement in the shadows between the trees, and I wanted to howl, wanted to sing because it was *familiar*, it was—

A timber wolf burst from the trees, eyes violet and blazing. His massive head swung back and forth, taking in everyone standing in front of him. There was a pause in the gunfire, as if all sound had been sucked from around the house.

The timber wolf’s gaze landed on me.

His eyes narrowed.

And then he moved.

He was quick, quicker than the humans could follow. They fired their guns, but the bullets only hit empty ground, dirt and gravel spraying upward. One of the men stumbled backward, trying to get away, but the wolf was on him, claws tearing into soft flesh. The man cried out wetly before it cut off as his neck broke in a savage twist.

I tried to shout in warning as one of the women swung a shotgun in his direction, but the words came as a snarl. He jumped up, the body of the dead hunter jerking as silver pellets struck his stomach and side, blood arcing onto the side of the house.

I went for the others as the woman screamed, her shotgun cleaved in half as the timber wolf bit down. I slammed a man into the side of one of their trucks, the windows blowing out, shards of glass falling around us.

He raised his hands and said, "Please."

And I said, "No."

He never got another chance to speak.

I whirled around and was about to yell for the wolf again when I heard a gun being cocked, the barrel pressing against the side of my head.

I looked over.

The man with the white hair, the one who'd said he was going to blow my head off, nodded at me with a grim smile. "Two of you. Didn't expect that." Then he raised his voice. "You move and I'll kill him right here, right now."

I looked beyond the truck.

It was a horrific scene. The clouds above parted slightly, allowing the moon to shine through. Shadows melted away, and I could see the ground covered in blood and gore. Three men still stood, and one woman, though she was bloodied and her right arm hung uselessly at her side, obviously broken.

The timber wolf raised his head. The hair on his face and around his mouth was red. It dripped off him as he took a step toward us, lips pulled back over his fangs. His eyes glowed violet in the dark, and I wanted to tell him to run, to get out of here while he still could, to save himself.

I opened my mouth, and the hunter smashed his gun on the side of my head. I stumbled forward, dazed, as I fell to my knees. My vision blurred, and I wanted to kill. I wanted this man dead.

I panted toward the ground as the hunter pressed the gun to the back of my head, standing above me.

"I'll do it," the hunter said. "Don't think I won't. You don't like that, do you? This one yours, Omega? How is that? I thought Omegas traveled alone." He cocked the gun as the wolf took another step toward us. "Unless it's that magic I heard about. Nasty shit if you ask me. All witches should be put down, just like the wolves. This is a human world, and it should stay that way."

I rocked back on my knees, the wound on my head healing even as blood dripped down the side of my face. I looked back up at him, still caught in my half-shift. I grinned, and he flinched. "Killed your people," I growled. "Killed them dead."

The man nodded slowly. "That you did. Shame, too. Aren't many of us left.

Not like there used to be. Your kind has seen to that.” Quick like lightning, he pulled out another gun as the wolf roared at him, and pointed it at the wolf’s head. The others aimed their guns at the wolf too, and I felt the moon on my face. If I was going to die here, if *we* were going to die, we’d put up a good fight. I thought Kelly would be proud of me.

The man said, “The way I see it, this can go one of two ways. The right way and the other way. The right way being that I put you down like the rabid dogs you are.” He dug the barrel into the side of my head. I felt my skin split. “The other way—and I’m a big fan of this one, so pay attention—the *other* way is that you shift back and tell me how many more there are of you. Because I was expecting *one*, and yet here we have two. By that logic, there could be three or four. Hell, there could be a whole *pack* of Omegas. You shift back and tell me how many and where they are. And *then* I put you down. I know that might not seem like a good deal for you, but I’ll tell you what. In the long run, I think it’ll do us both some good. You won’t have to feel like your brain is on fire, burning you from the inside out. I’ll get to help a few more of your kind to see the error of their ways. And since I’m the magnanimous sort, I’ll sweeten the pot a little.” He kicked me in the back, knocking me forward. “This one seems awfully fond of you. I’ll kill you first and then him so you won’t have to watch.” He stepped on my back, pressing down heavily. “Ticktock. Ticktock.”

The timber wolf roared at him again.

“Shift *back*,” the man said.

“There’s no one else,” I snapped at him. “There’s no one here, you piece of shit, you motherfucker. I’ll kill you, I’ll fucking *kill* you—”

A sharp crack of gunfire.

Pain unlike anything I’d ever felt bowled through me. I screamed into the ground as the silver began to burn in the back of my calf.

“He’s got a few more limbs,” the hunter said mildly. “I’ll put a bullet in them too.”

The wolf moved back. The other hunters tracked every step he took.

“Run,” I said, teeth grinding together. “You hear me? You *run*.”

He didn’t.

He tilted his head back and howled a rage-filled song.

It felt like a forest fire overtaking me.

Grass tickled my cheek.

Kelly crouched down next to me. He pressed his hand against my sweat-slick

forehead.

“I’m sorry,” I told him.

He smiled sadly. “I know.”

The timber wolf’s howl echoed through the forest.

And as it began to die, there came an answering howl.

I’d never heard such a sound. It came from all around, as if it were in the air itself. My body shook at the heavy weight of it, the furious song of a monster.

Kelly said, “He’s coming. Carter, whatever you do, whatever happens next, you need to leave while you still can.”

“Not without—”

His eyes flashed orange. “No. It’s too late for him, it’s too late, and you need to—”

Trees crashed in the forest. The roots groaned as they were torn from the ground. The hunters covering the wolf in front of me pointed their guns toward the forest, panicked looks on their faces. The barrels of their guns shook. The surviving woman took a step back.

“What is this?” the hunter above me breathed. “What the fuck *is* this?”

“Alpha,” I whispered.

The woods fell silent.

The moon disappeared behind the clouds.

“What do we do?” one of the hunters cried. “What do we do? What is it? *What is—*”

Something landed on the house. The structure groaned and shifted but still held.

I lifted my head.

There, on the roof, was a beast.

Robert Livingstone was bigger than I remembered him being. One eye glowed bright red, the other gone, its socket empty. He bent over the edge of the roof, craning his neck forward, mouth open, saliva dripping from his fangs, tail swishing. He pulled back slowly before standing upright on his hind legs, towering over us.

“Oh my god,” the man above me whimpered. “Oh my god, no.”

The hunters didn’t have a chance to fire their guns. One moment Livingstone stood on the roof above us, and the next he jumped, landing on the group near the timber wolf. A man and a woman died instantly, bones breaking as he stood

on *top* of them. One of the remaining hunters raised his gun, but Livingstone swung out his arm and hit the man in the chest, sending him flying into one of the trucks. It rocked up on two wheels before overturning.

The second to last hunter tried to run, but Livingstone caught him between his jaws, and he made it three more steps without his head before falling to the ground.

The timber wolf rushed toward us, the man above me distracted by the beast. The wolf leapt, and the man raised his gun at the last second. I snapped my head over, closing my fangs around his leg, and bit down. The man screamed, the gun slipping from his hand. He was knocked off his feet as the wolf landed on top of him. He didn't scream after that.

I rolled over onto my back, my leg on fire, stomach twisting.

I blinked slowly toward the sky.

And then came an immense pressure, a tight angry band that wrapped itself around my arms and chest, and I was lifted off the ground.

I tried to fight it.

But I was too weak.

And here, at last, I was face-to-face with Livingstone.

His breath was hot and rank as he pulled me toward his mouth. His one eye was like a burning red sun. His nostrils flared as he inhaled, a growl coming from deep in his chest.

"Fuck you," I managed to say.

And then: "*Don't.*"

Livingstone snapped his jaws.

"Put him down. Don't do this. Down. *Now.*"

Livingstone roared in my face.

"If you hurt him. I'll leave you. Be alone. Always alone. Forever. No one else."

Livingstone shook me, my head snapping back and forth.

And then he dropped me.

I landed roughly on the ground, screaming at the fresh wave of pain that shot through my leg. My vision was tunneling, and my hands were numb.

Then, from above me, came a whisper. "Are you... are you real?"

I opened my eyes.

A man stood over me.

His black hair hung down around his face, his dark eyes narrowed. He was naked, his skin pale. His shoulders were hunched as he scowled down at me, the hair of the timber wolf receding as he shifted back into human. He looked younger than I remembered him being in the brief moments I'd seen him in Caswell. He could have been my age.

“You fucking idiot,” he grunted, voice deep and raspy. “I told you. To stay away. To go home.”

And I said, “*Gavin.*”

Something crossed his face, and it was so fucking *blue* that my heart broke cleanly in two. It was fear and longing, rage and anguish all swirling together in a complicated storm.

He said, “Can’t be here.”

I said, “I found you.”

He said, “Never wanted this. Never wanted *you.*”

I said, “Too fucking late, you dick. You lie. I can hear it. *I can hear it.*”

He said, “Let you die.”

I reached up and touched his face. “You’re real.”

He reared back as Livingstone snarled above him. “Why are you here? What do you want?”

I closed my eyes. “To feel like I’m awake.”

And then I only knew darkness.

the only thing/nosy fucker

I stood in a clearing deep in the woods outside of a small mountain town.

The sun was warm on my bare back.

The trees swayed in a cool breeze.

The branches shook. The leaves shuddered.

I said, "What do you want from me?"

And there was no reply.

I said, "What am I supposed to do?"

And there was no reply.

I said, "Who am I supposed to be?"

And my father said, "You always did ask questions. You were curious, even before you learned to walk. I'd turn away from you for just a second, and when I'd look back, you were trying to crawl to the bookshelves. Or into the kitchen. Or to a tree. Once, when you were very young, I lost you."

I hung my head.

A hand cupped my face, the thumb brushing over my cheek.

"I was tired," he said. "I wasn't prepared for what being an Alpha meant. I thought I was, but... your mother was taking a nap. She'd more than earned it. I took you outside, and you were in the grass near the porch. I closed my eyes, and they didn't open as quickly as I expected them to. And when they did, you were gone." He sighed, and it sounded like the wind in the trees. "It was white, the panic I felt. It consumed me, blocking my sight and smell and hearing. I almost fell down the steps. I looked around wildly, and I thought, *No, please, not you too, please, you can't leave me, you can't leave me.*"

I couldn't look at him. It hurt too much.

"So I did the only thing I could."

"You howled," I whispered.

“I did,” my father said. “I howled as loud as I ever had. It was the call of an Alpha, the first time I’d ever done it. It tore from me, and I thought my throat would rip. It echoed around me. It felt like it went on forever. And you know what happened next?”

I shook my head.

He chuckled. “You howled back. You’d never done it before, no matter how much I practiced with you. Your mother always laughed at me, telling me you’d do it when you were good and ready. It was a tiny thing, high and reedy. And then you did it again and again and again, and the *relief* I felt then. Oh god, Carter. It was so green. I turned around, and there you were, underneath the porch. You stuck your little hand out, opening and closing. Like you were saying, ‘Here I am, Daddy. Here I am, I heard you call for me, I heard you singing, and here I am.’ I picked you up, and though I thought about scolding you, I didn’t. Because I knew that you’d done what I’d asked. I howled, and you howled back because you were mine.”

His hand was in my hair, and it felt so real.

He said, “Listen well, my son.”

He said, “Listen with all your might.”

He said, “Your pack is howling you home.”

He said, “For you are one of the lucky to hear the songs of wolves, to have them say your name as if you are the moon that pulls at them.”

Lips pressed to my forehead, and I breathed him in.

“Wake up,” my father said against my skin. “Wake up and sing so the world knows your name. You need to *wake up*—”

I GASPED AS I SAT UP, my heart thundering in my chest. I blinked rapidly, the image of the clearing fading, and with it, a white wolf with red eyes.

I said, “Dad?” and it came out in a broken whisper.

“Dreaming” came the reply.

I turned my head.

I was in a small room. Blankets curled around my waist. My skin was slick with sweat. It was warm. A fire burned in an old fireplace. The walls were wooden slats, and gray light filtered in through one of the windows.

I was on an uncomfortable bed, the springs of the old mattress jutting against

my thighs. I grimaced at the soreness in my leg, but it wasn't too bad. My throat was dry, and my eyes felt heavy.

And there, sitting in the corner in the shadows, was a man. He looked tired. His hair hung around his face. His eyebrows were drawn down, and his mouth was twisted painfully. He looked at me and then away. The light from the fire flickered along the stubble on his jaw and cheek. He looked... hollow. He gripped the blanket around his shoulders tightly.

“What happened?”

His head jerked up toward me, and his scowl deepened. “Stupid. You were stupid.” He spat the words forcefully, like each one taxed him greatly. His lips pulled back over human teeth. The two in front were slightly crooked, and I stared at them, my hands shaking until I curled them into fists. “Told you,” he said. “Stay away. You don't listen. You never do.”

I said, “Gavin?”

He flinched. He was wearing ratty shorts and little else, his knees bony, legs thin. The shorts were familiar, and it took me a moment to realize why.

They were mine.

I'd thrown them in my bag, which had been in the truck I'd left behind when I'd gone into the house.

Then I remembered. “Hunters.”

He growled, eyes flashing violet. “Dead,” he said, and there was something feral about it, tinged with primal satisfaction. “All dead. Blood on the ground.” He bared his teeth again. “Killed them. Humans. They came here. You brought them here.” It was an accusation, sharp and biting.

“I didn't know.”

He grunted, keeping a death grip on the blanket like it was shielding him.

I shifted my legs off the bed. He reared back, but I ignored him. I was naked under the blanket, and I looked down. The muscles in my leg were sore and tense, but the skin was smooth and unblemished.

“I was shot.”

“Stupid,” he muttered again. “Should have left you. You die. I don't care.”

“But you didn't.”

He sneered at me.

I nodded slowly, rubbing my hand on my leg. I looked around the room again, taking it in. It was a single room, the floor made of dirt. The ceiling was

vaulted, the beams crisscrossing overhead. The room had three windows, and the only light came from the fire. A battery-powered lantern sat on an old table, but it was off. There were scratches in the walls, long and deep, as if something had been trapped inside and tried to get out.

Two headless rabbits hung from a rope near the fire, twine around their back legs. They'd been skinned. My stomach grumbled at the sight of them.

Gavin glanced at me, frowning. "Those are mine."

I held up my hands. "Not gonna touch them, dude."

His frown deepened. "Not dude. Don't say that."

I looked around again. "This is a cabin."

He didn't respond.

"Is it yours?"

He huffed out an angry breath but didn't speak.

I rolled my eyes. "You have to give me something here, man. I've spent almost a year looking for you."

"Didn't ask you to."

"Yeah, well, fuck you too."

He stood up suddenly, my shorts slipping on his hips. I stared a beat too long at the dark hair on his chest and stomach. He snarled at me. "You're better. I fixed you. You leave. Now. Go away."

I blinked. "What? I'm not going to fucking *leave*. I just got here! You take off like it's *nothing* and make me track you all over the goddamn continent, and you think I'm going to leave?"

"Yes."

"Not happening."

"Why?"

I looked him straight in the eyes. "You know why. Whether you like it or not, and fuck knows *I* don't, you're my m—"

One moment he was standing by the chair. The next he was in front of me, the blanket around his shoulders fluttering to the floor. His knees bumped into mine, and he gripped my face harshly, fingers digging into my cheeks. "Don't," he growled. "Don't. Don't say it. Nothing. You are *nothing*. I am *nothing*."

I reached up and gripped his wrist. My thumb pressed against his pulse point, and it felt like thunder.

His eyes widened, and he jerked his arm back, stumbling away as if I'd

scalded him. He whirled around and stalked toward the door. He paused with his hand on the latch. "Leave," he said without turning around. "Don't be here. When I get back."

I squinted against the morning light as he opened the door, then slammed it behind him. Motes of dust sprinkled down from the ceiling as the walls shook.

"Shit," I whispered.

I FOUND THE REMNANTS of my ruined jeans sitting in a pile in the corner, the stench of blood wafting off them. They'd been shredded like someone had taken a knife to them.

Or claws.

I tilted my head, listening.

All I could hear were the sounds of a forest alive in the throes of an early winter. Somewhere in the distance, leaves rustled as an animal moved through them. I didn't hear the heavy drum of Livingstone's heart or the sounds of his son.

I went to a window and looked outside.

There was a thin layer of snow on the ground. Icicles hung from the trees. The glass was cold against my fingers. I couldn't see a road, only thick forest. I didn't know where we were in relation to the house. To my truck. I could probably find it if needed.

But if he thought I was just going to leave after all this time, he was in for a rude awakening.

I went back to my bag and opened it up. There, sitting on the top, was my phone.

It was smashed, the screen cracked.

I stared down at it.

It'd been in my truck. I hadn't taken it out into the house.

Which meant the hunters hadn't touched it.

It'd been broken after.

"Asshole." I took it out of the bag and tried to power it on. Nothing happened.

I tossed it to the side, looking back to my bag. What few possessions I'd brought with me were still there, minus the shorts. I found the item I was looking

for at the bottom.

It was soft and warm. I glanced toward the door. I didn't hear Gavin. I pulled the hoodie out and raised it to my face, inhaling deeply. The scent had faded after so long, but I chased after it greedily. Just when I was about to give up, I smelled it.

Home.

Kelly.

"What the hell do I do now?" I asked him. A year. I'd had a year to get to this point. A year to plan for what would happen if and when I found him. And now that I had, I was at a loss. I didn't know why I'd thought he'd make it easy. He was a Livingstone. I was a Bennett. We never made things easy.

Kelly didn't answer.

I put the hoodie on. It was tight in the shoulders and the sleeves were too short, but it made me feel better.

I pulled on the only other pair of jeans I'd brought. My leg groaned, but it already hurt less. I popped my back and neck. I was thirsty, and I had to piss.

There was no bathroom.

Because of course there wasn't.

I slipped on my boots without socks. There were splashes of my blood across the back of one of them. I wondered what had become of the hunters. If they lay in front of the cabin, blood frozen, eyes wide, snow in their open mouths.

"Or maybe Livingstone ate them," I said to no one.

The thought felt like a lance of ice.

I went to the door.

Took a deep breath.

And opened it.

The air was still. A clump of snow fell from one of the trees. My breath poured from my mouth in a fog. I inhaled deeply, and it was crisp and bright.

There was something running just underneath it all, like a dark current. It felt like a shadow, tendrils reaching out and infecting the ground beneath my feet.

I knew what it was.

Who it was.

And I didn't want to piss it off any more than I already had. I remembered the look on Robert Livingstone's face when his son had shifted before him back in Caswell, stopping him from killing me. And even though I'd been distracted

by the startling realization of what I should have known all along, I hadn't missed the betrayal that Livingstone had felt. His fury had almost felt alive. There, at last, he'd found what he'd been looking for, and Gavin had practically spat in his face.

But at the house with the hunters, Livingstone had listened to him when Gavin told him that if he hurt me, Gavin would leave him. That he would leave his father and he would be alone.

And whatever anger Livingstone felt toward me didn't compare to his son's threat.

I didn't know how long that would last.

I didn't want to take any chances.

I groaned as I relieved myself against a tree. Even though I had no idea what the hell was going on, I had to keep from laughing at the absurdity of it all. My scent was here now. In this cabin. It was probably going to tick Gavin off when he came back and saw that I'd pissed here, like I was leaving my mark.

If he came back, that was. For all I knew, he was running.

"That's fine," I said. "You do that. See how far you get. I'll fucking find you then too."

I turned around after putting my dick away and zipping up my pants. Trees surrounded the cabin on all sides. It was an old thing, and if it weren't for the smoke rising from the chimney, I would have thought it abandoned. There was a cord of wood stacked underneath a tarp on the right side.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

My skin itched.

I was being watched.

I looked around.

Nothing.

For a moment I thought about doing what he asked. Going back in and grabbing my bag. Finding my truck. Getting the fuck out of here.

But I hadn't come this far just to bail now.

I started back toward the cabin but stopped when I saw something lying near the door.

My shorts, discarded on the small wooden porch.

I picked them up.

And then I went inside and closed the door behind me.

HE CAME BACK a few hours later as a wolf.

I heard him prowling outside of the cabin, paws crunching the snow. I looked out the window and saw a big timber wolf pacing in front of the cabin, ears flat against his skull, teeth bared. He was growling angrily. I watched as he went to the tree I'd urinated on. He sneezed, shaking his head.

And then he lifted his leg and pissed in the same exact spot.

I snorted.

He snapped his head toward the window.

I saluted him like an asshole. "Have at it, motherfucker."

He glared at me before turning around, giving me his back. He sat down, looking into the woods, shoulders stiff, ears at attention.

He was ignoring me.

He'd done it before. "And you call *me* a child," I said, knowing he could hear me.

Sure enough, his ears twitched.

"Fine. Stay out there. I'll just be in here, eating your rabbits."

He turned his head, flashing violet eyes in warning.

"What are you gonna do about it? Come in and roll in my stuff some more? Yeah, that's right. I saw your wolf hair all over the shit in my bag. What's that about, you nosy fucker?"

He turned away again.

Fine. Two could play at that game.

There was a large rod next to the fireplace. The metal was blackened. It was a spit. I picked it up and grimaced as I looked toward the rabbits. "You can do this. No big deal. You've eaten these things raw before."

The rabbit, though skinned and drained of blood, was slimy and wet, the flesh cold. I heard the crunch of bones as I shoved the spit through it, causing my stomach to twist. I gagged when the edge of the spit poked through the rabbit's neck, the end glistening wetly. I could have shifted (and most likely eaten it as it was), but I stayed human, hoping to get a reaction out of Gavin.

I didn't have to wait for long.

I skewered the second rabbit before putting them over the fire, locking the spit in place on the latches on either side of the fireplace. There was an old crank

on the side of the fireplace, and I twisted it, causing the rabbit to spin.

The smell of cooking flesh was rank and wild.

I heard an angry growl from outside the door.

“Guess you’re gonna have to shift back, huh? Opposable thumbs, a feat in evolution that—”

The door opened.

He dropped back down on his paws, wearing a look that could only be described as smug. He came inside and, without looking away from me, raised one of his back legs and kicked it against the door, slamming it shut.

I wasn’t impressed. “Oh, so you figured out how to work a door. Good for you. I’ve never been prouder. Seriously. It’s—*what the fuck!*”

He stood next to me and shook, spraying me with the water on his fur. I tried to shove him away, spitting out a mouthful of wet wolf, but he snapped at my fingers. And then he pushed his gigantic head against my shoulder, knocking me away from the fire. With a snort, he sat down where I’d been sitting, staring at the rabbit.

“Petty bitch,” I mumbled, pulling myself up. I wiped the water from my face and flicked it at him. He side-eyed me hard but otherwise didn’t react. “Keep it up, dude. See how far it gets you. And don’t act like those fucking rabbits weren’t for me. They were fresh. You caught them and skinned them while I was passed out. And do we even need to talk about how you obviously pulled a silver bullet out of my leg? Because we could do that too. I know you, man. This bullshit act you’ve got going on isn’t going to fly with me. Do us both a favor and knock it off. It’ll make things easier.”

He turned his head away pointedly.

I narrowed my eyes. “So that’s how it’s gonna be, huh? Fine. Be that way. See if I care.”

He stiffened when I crawled toward him. He growled in warning when I sat next to him, only inches between us. I reached up and turned the crank, spinning the cooking meat.

“You got me wet,” I reminded him. “I’m going to sit in front of the fire until I dry off and the rabbit is done. Plenty of room if you’d like to move somewhere else.” There wasn’t, in fact, plenty of room. Given his size while shifted, the cabin felt smaller than it had when I’d first woken up. “Or you can go back outside.”

He didn’t move, still keeping his head away from me.

I sighed. “Whatever. You do you. But I’m telling you now, we’re gonna have a goddamn conversation, and we’re gonna do it soon. You’re going to shift when we do, because I expect you to participate. I deserve answers, one way or another.”

He turned his head slowly to look at me.

I was relieved, thinking I was getting through to him.

I should have known better.

He sneezed in my face.

I fell back, shrieking as I rubbed my face. “Why are you *like* this!”

His tail thumped against the floor.

I WAS RAVENOUS as I tore into the rabbits. Gavin had no plates or cutlery or even a kitchen, just a sink that didn’t work. I hissed as the hot flesh burned my fingers when I tried to pull the first rabbit from the spit. I blew on it, hoping it would cool quickly. I was close to just eating it as it was. The flesh was split and cracked, and disgustingly, juices leaked from it onto the table. I had to stop myself from bending over and licking it up.

Gavin snarled at me, pushing me away from it. I thought he was going to go for the rabbit, but he nosed at my hands. They had already healed, the sting fading. He snorted onto my palms, first the right, and then the left.

“I’m fine,” I told him.

He froze as if he hadn’t realized what he was doing. He stomped away to the other side of the cabin near where he’d been sitting when I woke up. He grabbed the blanket he’d dropped to the floor earlier and, with a practiced flip of his head, tossed it up and over his shoulders. It covered the top of his head, and he lay down away from me, facing the wall.

“Oh, so now you’re pouting. Great. Wonderful. Extraordinarily mature of you.”

He didn’t move.

“I can still see you. Your ass is hanging out. Blanket’s not that big.”

His tail tensed ramrod straight. He rose slowly, turning around and facing me before lying down again, lower half against the wall. The blanket fell off his eyes as he lowered his head to the floor.

I ignored him, going back to the rabbit. It was cool enough now. I barely

cared about the cracking of bone as I ripped pieces off and shoved them in my mouth. I groaned as I chewed, feeling light-headed. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten anything substantial. I knew I'd lost weight in the past ten months, but I'd been so driven to find him that I hadn't given it much thought.

Now, though?

I'd barely eaten a quarter of the rabbit before my stomach clenched. I swallowed what was in my mouth, licking the tips of my fingers.

I glanced at the wolf.

He was watching me, nose twitching. As soon as he saw me looking at him, he looked away.

"Full," I admitted. "It's... been a while since I've eaten something like this. Stomach must have shrunk."

He huffed out a breath.

"You should eat too. Keep up your strength. You're gonna need it for what I'm going to do to you."

He lifted his head quickly, staring at me.

"Not like *that*," I said quickly, horrified with myself. "I don't—dude, what the hell."

He sneered at me again.

It was startling how used to that look I was, how often I'd seen it. That void in my chest, that gaping black hole that had felt like it'd been eating me alive over the past year, seemed to lessen. I couldn't feel him, not like I used to. Whatever bond had been between us, between him and the pack, was gone. I should have seen it for what it was while I still had the chance.

It hit me just how fucked this situation was. I was so far from home, and while I'd found what I'd been searching for, what had it gotten me? We'd tried after Robbie had been taken, some of us thinking darkly that he'd left of his own accord. But no matter the front we'd put forward, mostly for Kelly, it'd still felt like a lie.

I wondered if they were acting the same now.

Lying to each other.

And themselves.

All because of what I'd done.

Kelly had crumbled at the loss of his mate. At first he'd moved through the house like a ghost, haunting the rooms and hallways. He hadn't spoken much

and barely ate. I'd chided him, I'd pleaded with him, I'd yelled at him, telling him he couldn't let himself go, that I'd be *damned* if I was going to let him waste away in front of me.

I hadn't known it then, but I'd been stoking a fire in him, one that rose until it consumed him with growing whispers of *Robbie Robbie Robbie*.

And then, after everything, just when he was starting to heal, I'd turned around and left him too.

My chest hitched.

My breath caught in my throat.

I blinked rapidly, willing away the burn in my eyes as I shivered.

Everything was blue here, in the middle of nowhere.

Gavin grunted as he rose from the floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him walking toward me. He stopped in front of me, dropping the blanket in my lap. I glanced up at him. He wouldn't look at me as I pulled the blanket over my shoulders. I ignored the scent of old-growth forest that enveloped me. I couldn't get distracted.

"I'm fine," I told him roughly. "Don't worry about it. Eat. It's going to get cold. You hate it when your food is cold."

His eyes widened briefly before he went to the table. He nosed at the remaining rabbit, sniffing along the edges. And then he bit down on it, bones crunching as he chewed. His throat worked as he swallowed the thing almost whole. His tongue came out over his lips, chasing the taste.

Then, without so much as a look in my direction, he went to the door again. He hit the latch with his snout and pulled it open. Cold air swirled in, and I shivered. I didn't know what he was doing or where he was going. I thought about following him, but I couldn't make my legs work.

I closed my eyes when I heard the telltale grind of muscle and bone. He exhaled explosively.

I sat down on the bed and waited.

A moment later a man wearing nothing but a scowl appeared in the doorway, carrying pieces of wood from the stack next to the house. He hit the door with his foot, closing it behind him, the thin muscles on his hairy thighs flexing. He stomped over to the fireplace and dropped the wood next to it. He crouched down in front of the fire, feeding it with logs. The ridges of his spine stuck out, bumpy down his back to the top of his—

He said, "You're staring."

My face grew hot as I quickly looked away. “I am not. And you should put on clothes.” Not that I thought he had any. I’d looked through the cabin in his absence, and it was mostly empty. Nothing that could have told me anything about him or what the hell he was doing here. What his plan was. What I could do to convince him to leave.

“No.”

“Your dick is just... hanging out.” I stared furiously at the far wall. “That’s not cool, dude.”

“Don’t. Not dude.”

“I’ll make you a deal. I will absolutely try not to call you that if you just get dressed.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his shoulders hunch. “Don’t have clothes. Always wolf. Easier.”

“For what?”

“Everything.”

“How long have I been here?”

He scrunched up his face. “Two days.”

The full moon was Friday. Which meant it was Sunday. I ignored the pang in my chest. “Where did you go? What happened to the hunters? What happened to my truck? How far away from the house are we?”

“Talking,” he muttered. “Always talking.”

“Oh, am I *bothering* you? I’m so sorry. I feel just awful about it. I mean, sure, you’re probably not used to hearing another voice, seeing as how you decided to run to the ass end of nowhere and—”

“Stop.”

I didn’t. I couldn’t. “You broke my phone.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Stop it. Stop asking questions. Always questions. No more. Enough.”

Jesus fucking Christ. I wanted to knock him through the goddamn window. “Yeah, not gonna happen. Sucks for you.”

He huffed out a breath. “Tomorrow.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“You leave.”

I turned back to him. His face was illuminated by the fire. It was strange seeing him as he was now after all this time. It was like being familiar with a stranger. Wolves never looked like their human parts when they shifted, and vice versa, but there was something about his face, the set of his jaw, the way his eyes flashed. I would have recognized him anywhere. “Only if you’re going with me.”

He pulled his lips back over his teeth. For a moment I thought he was smiling, or at least trying to. But it twisted down like he was in pain. “Not going. You go. I stay.”

“The quicker you get that idea out of your head, the better off we’ll be. If you think I’m just going to go after all this time, you’ve—”

“You found me.”

I blinked. “I did.”

He didn’t look at me. “How?”

“Oh, so you get to ask questions, but I can’t?”

“Yes. No more questions. I get many questions.”

“Why?”

“That’s a question.”

The skin under my right eye twitched. Of all the aggravating motherfuckers for me to be stuck in the middle of nowhere with, I had to choose this one. I made terrible choices. “Maybe I don’t have to tell you anything since you won’t extend me the same courtesy.”

“Fine.”

“*Fine.*”

He stood and began to pace, shoulders stiff, hands flexing and unflexing. His feet scraped against the dirt floor.

I grabbed the shorts from where I’d set them on top of my bag and tossed them at him. He glared at me as he snatched them out of the air.

“Put those on.”

“Why?”

“So I don’t have to see your junk flopping around. Just do it. Please.”

He looked down at them, then down at himself. The light from the fire rolled over his bare skin. He’d lost weight since I’d seen him last, and though he wasn’t quite skin and bones, he was too skinny for his own good. Wolves needed to eat. We burned hot, our metabolism going into overdrive to compensate for

our shifts. If we were too weak, we wouldn't be able to turn wolf, or back to human.

"You don't like. When I'm naked."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm *trying* to have a conversation with you."

"No conversation." He tossed the shorts back at me. I knocked them away, and they landed on the floor. "I stay like this. You don't like it. Leave." He jerked his head toward the door.

I couldn't help it. I laughed at him. "You really think that'll work?"

He walked toward me, hips rolling. I swallowed thickly, feeling like prey in this small room. He stopped right in front of me, and if I turned my head *just* right, I'd be face-to-face with his—

He said, "You're sweating."

"At least your observational skills are still intact. Which is more than I could say for—"

He took *another* step forward. I spread my legs to keep him from bumping into them, and he moved between them. I could hear him breathing, could see the muscles in his stomach tightening, the sharp jut of the bones in his hips covered in shadows. "Found me."

"Yeah." My voice sounded like I had a mouthful of gravel.

"Chased me."

"Yeah."

"Look. Look at me."

I was helpless not to. He grinned down at me, and it was a nasty thing full of sharp teeth. His eyes flashed violet, and I could see the wolf just underneath.

"This what you want?" he asked.

"I don't.... That's not...."

He bent slowly toward me. I leaned back on the bed, my hands flat against the thin mattress. I was cornered by an Omega wolf, but I couldn't bring myself to shove him away. He invaded my space, not quite touching, but I could still feel the heat rolling off him. It was like he was on fire, burning from the inside out.

His smile widened. It looked crazed.

I dug my hands into the mattress.

"Take it," he said. "Take it."

"No."

The smile disappeared. “Know nothing. Lost little boy. Think you’re so smart.”

This was a game to him. Intimidation. He was trying to force my hand. “Found you, didn’t I? No matter where you went, I still found you.”

“What now? Little boy.”

I didn’t have an answer.

“You won’t leave?”

I shook my head slowly.

“Then I will.”

“Go,” I said, jerking my head toward the door. “See how far you get. I don’t care if it takes days or weeks or months. Hell, it could take another fucking *year*, but it doesn’t matter. I found you once. I will find you again. You think Livingstone will keep me from—”

His hand covered my mouth, pressing harshly. His eyes glowed, his forehead furrowed as he bent his face toward mine. “Don’t,” he snapped at me. “Don’t say his name.”

I shoved him away. He hadn’t been expecting that. He stumbled back as I stood, letting the blanket fall to the bed. He pulled himself up to his full height, but fuck him. I was bigger than he was. Wider. Stronger. Maybe he had the feral strength of an Omega, but I was irritated and just about done with his bullshit. “Why?” I demanded. “Is he going to hear me? Is he out there in the woods? Can he hear me now?” I pushed by him and went for the door. I threw it open, letting it bang against the side of the house. The clouds were gathering again, the air sharply cold. “You out here, Livingstone?” I shouted. “Come on, you fucking asshole! Show your face! I’m right here! You want—*mmmph!*”

He wrapped his hand around my mouth and pulled me back into the house. He slammed the door again and leaned against it, chest heaving. His eyes were wide and wild, his hair hanging down around his face. “What are you *doing?*”

“I have no idea,” I muttered. “But you’re not going to scare me away. Neither will he. You’re stuck with me whether you like it or not.”

“I don’t.”

“That makes two of—”

Something roared in the woods. It sounded very big and very angry.

The walls of the cabin shook.

Gavin closed his eyes. “You... don’t understand. Never. Never should have come here. Stupid boy. Stupid child.”

“I’m not a *child*.”

“Then why you act like one? Stay here. Don’t go into woods. Don’t follow me.”

And then he was out the door, pulling it shut behind him. I made it to the window in time to see him hit the ground on four paws, hurtling toward the tree line. The last I saw of him was his tail, and then he was gone.

leave us behind/slow drumbeat

He didn't come back that night.

I waited, watching through the window as the shadows lengthened and snow started to fall, but he never came. Twice I went outside to get more firewood, listening to the sounds of the forest around me, but there was nothing.

I gave a brief thought that maybe he'd followed through with his threat and left, but it didn't feel right. That *off* feeling about the woods was still as strong as ever, like it'd been infected with something rotten.

I almost locked the door.

I didn't in case he came back.

And since I wasn't stupid, no matter what he said, I didn't go into the woods, even if the itch to do so was maddening.

I went back through the cabin. I remembered something Robbie had told us about how he'd had a hidden cubbyhole in his house in Caswell where he'd kept his secrets. I told myself that Gavin could have done the same, and though I didn't know what he'd keep hidden, I hoped it would give me something, *anything*—an insight to who he was as a man.

But the walls were sturdy and hadn't been altered.

There was nothing under the bed.

I eyed the fireplace, wondering if I should douse it and check the brick in the back.

Kelly said, "What do you think you're going to find?"

He was sitting on the bed. He wore the same hoodie I had worn, the one I'd stolen from his room before I left Green Creek. He watched me with a curious expression, and though I tried not to look directly at him, it was almost impossible not to.

"Carter?"

"I don't know."

He nodded. The bed squeaked as he slid on it back against the wall, legs crossed in front of him. He tugged at the sleeves of the hoodie, something he did when he was nervous or tired. He looked around the cabin. “Doesn’t seem like much, huh?”

“No.”

“He doesn’t have anything.”

I looked around the cabin. “It’s like he’s...”

“Stagnant. Stuck.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“You found him, though.”

“I... He doesn’t want me here.”

Kelly snorted. “I could have told you that a long time ago. Come on, man. You had to know that’s what he was going to say. And there’s probably some truth to it too, though I think it has less to do with you and more to do with his father. What’s the plan here, Carter? You’ve had a year to come up with something. You can’t have thought he was going to listen to you. You left us all to find him. Guess what? He’s here. You’re here. What happens now?”

“I don’t know.”

Kelly shrugged. “Did you ever?”

“I thought so.”

“Why?”

“Why did you never stop going after Robbie?”

Kelly said, “Because he was my mate. I love him. And I promised myself that nothing would stand between us, that I would do anything to get him back.” He cocked his head at me. “Do you love Gavin?”

No. No, I didn’t. Not like he meant. Not like that. It wasn’t *like* that.

And he said, “Oh, yeah, sure, completely not like that at all,” and it should have scared me more that he answered me although I hadn’t spoken out loud. But I was just so relieved he was here, that I wasn’t alone. “Yet here you are.”

“Here I am,” I echoed.

“Carter?”

“Yeah?”

“Come here.”

I went. I couldn’t not. He was my brother, and I was lost.

He welcomed me with open arms, pulling me down onto the bed. I lay between his legs, my head on his chest. I ignored the fact that I couldn't hear his heart. It didn't seem important, not when his hands were in my hair, tugging gently. He hummed a song that reminded me of our mother under his breath. I squeezed my eyes shut.

"It's okay," he said quietly.

It wasn't. Nothing about this was okay. "What do I do?"

"Well, threatening him doesn't seem to be working. In case you were wondering."

"Not helping."

"And it's not like you can take out Livingstone on your own."

"*Really* not helping."

He laughed. "Yeah, sorry about that." He sobered. "Is this worth it? All that you've endured to be here, now, where you are?"

"I don't know," I whispered.

"But?"

"It feels... important."

He said, "I dream about you. Can I tell you about it?"

I could barely breathe.

He said, "In these dreams, we're happy. We're together. It's you and me and Joe. We're running together. Sometimes we're wolves, and sometimes we're human. You're the fastest, because you've always been. But you never leave us behind. Joe's the strongest, because he's the Alpha, and it's his job to be brave."

"What about you?"

He shifted slightly underneath me. "What do you think?"

"The smartest. You're the smartest. I always thought so."

"Did you?"

"Yeah. And you're... kind. Even to those who don't deserve it. I don't know how to be that way."

"That's why you have me," he said. "To show you kindness. To remind you that even when all seems dark, there is always a light if you just know where to look for it."

"You're not—"

"Real," he said. "No, I'm not. But for now, let's pretend I am. Let's pretend we're together. We're happy. It's you and me and Joe. We're running together."

The wind is in our hair, and the ground is solid beneath our feet. We howl at the moon and the stars because they're ours, and nothing can ever come between us. Nothing will ever keep us apart."

My eyes felt heavy, and as I drifted away, listening to my little brother telling me stories of my greatest wish, I wondered if it was ever going to be real again.

KELLY WAS GONE when I opened my eyes.

The sky outside was dark.

I sat up in the bed, unsure what had awoken me. The fire was low, the embers glowing. Snow fell outside the window, the flakes fat and white.

The door creaked as if something pressed against it.

The cabin was cold as I stood from the bed.

I looked at the door.

It creaked again, and it took me a moment to realize what it was.

Scratching.

Something was weakly scratching against the door.

I went to it. I put my hand on the latch, took a breath, and then opened it.

A timber wolf lay in front of it, sides heaving. He lifted his head, tongue lolling out of his mouth. His eyes flashed violet, but the color was dull. He let out a whine and lay his head back down.

I crouched next to him, holding my hand out above him, fingers shaking. When he didn't snap at me, I pressed my hand against him, looking for a wound. His fur was cold and wet, but he didn't seem to be injured.

"What happened?" I asked him.

His tail thumped once.

"Can you get up? Get inside?"

He closed his eyes. I felt his muscles tense as he tried to stand, but he only made it partway up before he collapsed again.

"Shit," I muttered. "I swear to god, if you try and bite me, I'm gonna leave you out here. You get me?"

He grumbled.

"Yeah, yeah. I don't care. Don't bite me."

I slid my hands underneath him. His heart was slow and sluggish against his ribs. I grunted as I lifted him. He was much heavier than I expected. Either that or I was weaker than I thought. It was awkward trying to get him through the door, and he yelped when his head banged against the wall, tail twitching against my side. "I feel real bad about that. Stop moving or I'll do it again."

Somehow we made it inside. I laid him on the floor in front of the fireplace as carefully as I could. He sighed as he closed his eyes. I went to the fire and threw more wood on, stoking the embers until the logs caught. It'd take a while to get the room warm again, but I was wide-awake now.

I went to the lantern on the table, found the switch on the side, and flipped it up. The light was bright, and I squinted against it as I lifted the lantern. I set it down on the floor next to him. "I'm going to touch you again," I told him. "Don't get any ideas."

One eye opened, staring at me balefully.

"Don't give me that look. Just... let me do this."

He didn't argue as I ran my hands over him again. His paws kicked slightly as my fingers pressed against his stomach, and I was struck, then, by how it used to be. In Green Creek, my shadow trailed after me no matter where I went. Some days he would sleep on the floor next to my bed. Others he'd be *on* the bed, and I'd have to fight for a little corner, my legs curled up against my chest, uncomfortable but not doing much to make him move. It took me longer than I cared to admit to realize he was doing it on purpose. I finally caught him when I tried to stretch my legs and my feet pressed against his stomach. I'd curled my toes and was shocked when he snorted, almost like he was laughing.

How bright and fierce this memory was, something so tiny in the face of everything. I'd forgotten that he was ticklish on his stomach.

I left his stomach alone. It hurt too much to think about.

There was nothing.

Not on his body or his hindquarters or his head, though he didn't let me get too close there, snapping his fangs at me as I ran a finger along the side of his face.

Whatever was wrong with him didn't seem physical, at least that I could find.

"What happened to you?"

He turned his head away from me.

"I'm going to find out. You know I will."

Nothing.

“Whatever.” I reached back and grabbed the blanket from the bed and pulled it down and over me. I lay down on the floor, the fire warm against my chilled skin. His back paws pressed against my legs, and I waited for him to move them, to put more space between us.

He didn’t.

The sky was just beginning to lighten when I fell asleep.

HUMAN EYES STARED DOWN at me when I awoke.

He looked away quickly, turning to feed the fire.

He was wearing my shorts again.

“What time is it?” I asked as I rubbed my eyes.

He didn’t answer.

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t have a clock. And my phone is broken. I don’t even know why I’m asking.”

“You still did,” he grunted. “Mouth always open. Always moving.”

“Maybe don’t focus on my mouth so much.”

He stiffened.

I sighed. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“The witch,” he said. “The witch told you.”

It took me a moment to figure out what he was talking about. The woman in Kentucky who’d given me his note. The witch who’d rushed out after me before I left, telling me she knew who I was looking for. And where to look. “She... recognized you. Said it came to her later.”

He nodded tightly. “Mistake.”

“What is?”

He waved his hand jerkily. “This. Everything. All of it. Should have known. Should have seen.” He tapped the side of his head. “I... got lost. In here. Foggy. Heavy.”

I pushed myself up, the blanket sliding to the floor. I was stiff and sore, and my jeans felt rough against my legs. I didn’t have anything to change into. “Because you’re an Omega.”

His face twisted painfully. He sneered at the fire. “Yes. Omega. Bad wolf.

Big bad wolf.”

“I get it, man. I was there too.” Understatement. Though it’d scared the shit out of me, I’d trusted Gordo when he said I needed to give in to it. That I needed to let it consume me. It’d been easier than I expected. I was holding it back, and once I let go, once I let the Omega rise, Kelly’s tears stinging my nostrils, I had time to wonder why I’d fought it at all. There was rage, sure, a furious storm that almost obliterated everything else, my humanity falling away into nothing. But it’d felt *comforting*, almost seductive. The tendrils of violet that wrapped themselves around my head and heart were strong and thick. I gave in to the animal underneath, and I knew that fog Gavin spoke of. I’d lived it.

And yet, through it came a bright and shining light, a beacon in the dark.

Ox.

Gavin said, “Not like you were. Magic broke. It’s different. You feel it now?”

Not like it used to be. But it was closer than I cared to admit. “No.”

“You lie. Smell different. Not Omega. But not Beta.”

“You don’t know what I was like before. You weren’t there. You only came when shit went crazy. When that hunter chick dragged—”

He whirled on me, hand raised, claws out.

I didn’t flinch.

He did. He stared at his hand in horror, claws receding. He slid away from me, putting space between us. “No. Don’t. Don’t talk about. About her. It’s not. It’s not. Don’t.”

I held up my hands. “Okay.”

“You need pack,” he said, curling in on himself. “You need home. Go. Before you can’t.”

I shook my head. “I told you, I’m not going to leave here without you.”

“I’m not going.”

“Then I guess we’re stuck here. You think you’re stubborn? Man, you haven’t seen anything yet. Where did you go last night? What happened to you?”

“Stop talking.”

“Fuck you. Did you go to Livingstone? Is he doing something to you?”

“Stop. *Talking.*”

“Make me.”

He said, “I heard you. Talking. To your brother. To Kelly. He’s not here.”

I recoiled. “That’s not.... It wasn’t anything. It’s—”

“You left him.”

Anger, bright and hot. “You left—”

Me.

I couldn’t get the word out.

“Make things worse,” he said, and I knew then what he was doing. What he was trying to force. “Robbie gone. Kelly sad. Robbie comes back. Kelly happy. Then you leave. Break him again. And now he’s ghost. In your head. I know ghosts. I *see* ghosts.”

Are you... are you real?

I felt cold. “What ghosts? Who do you see?”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. You hurt him. You hurt Kelly. Go home. Make him better. Make yourself better. Find pack.”

It dawned on me then what this meant. The hidden meaning behind his words, a gift I didn’t think he meant to give. “You remember.”

He lifted his head, eyes narrowing. “What?”

“You said *Kelly*. Kelly sad. Kelly happy. How do you know his name?”

He glanced toward the door like he was looking for an escape. “Heard you say it. Crazy. You’re crazy. Talking to ghosts.”

“And Robbie? You said his name too. You remember, don’t you. The pack. The people. Do you remember everything?”

He looked like a cornered animal, eyes panicky. “No, no, no.”

“You *do*. Because I remember being an Omega stuck in all that violet. It wasn’t like it was as a human. It was... broken down. Base instinct. But I knew. I could hear them. I could *feel* them. My pack. My Alphas. My tether. Voices in my head through all that rage. I wanted to hurt them, but I loved them still.”

He rocked back and forth, hugging himself.

“When? When did you know? *What* did you know? Did you know about Gordo? That he was your—”

He seemed to seize, nearly falling over. He caught himself at the last moment, hands against the floor, claws digging into the dirt. “Gordo,” he growled through clenched teeth. “Gordo. Gordo. Not brother. *Not* brother.”

“I don’t know how to break it to you, man, but he kind of is. Half brother, at least.”

“Not brother. Witch. Don’t need him. Don’t want him. Don’t want *you*. Go.

Go.”

“I won’t.”

He stood abruptly, going for the door.

“Why did you stay?”

He stopped but didn’t turn around.

My throat was raw. “If you didn’t want us, if you didn’t want a pack, then why did you stay with us? Years, Gavin. You were there for *years*. You can lie to yourself, but don’t think it’s working on me. You could have gone anywhere. But you knew, didn’t you? About Gordo.” I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “About me.”

He reached for the door.

“I’ll follow you.”

He paused again.

I didn’t know what else to do. I needed him to hear me, to understand. *I* needed to understand. “I don’t know where you’ll go, but I’ll follow you.”

He leaned his forehead against the door, panting. “You can’t. You can’t.”

“I don’t care.”

“You *can’t*.”

“Because your father is out there.”

He nodded against the door, hands in fists at his sides.

I stood, staying where I was so I didn’t spook him. “We can leave. The both of us. We’ll go back to the truck. If it hasn’t been damaged, we can drive out of here. Gavin, we can go *home*.” The words tasted like ash, a burning dream of all that I’d left behind.

And he said, “I have no home.”

I grunted as if gut-punched.

But he stepped away from the door.

He dropped the shorts, stepping out of them and leaving them where they fell. He inhaled deeply, and I barely made a sound when he shifted into the timber wolf.

He shook his head, ears against his skull.

He went to the bed and hopped up onto it. It creaked dangerously under his heavy weight. He lay down, his paws hanging off the edge. He closed his eyes. He looked ridiculous, the bed too small for something his size. I wondered if he’d always slept there before I arrived.

“Just because you’re shifted doesn’t mean I’ll stop talking.”

He turned his head into his stomach, paws over his head.

“...AND *THAT* BRINGS US TO SENIOR YEAR,” I told him, hands behind my head as I lay near the fire. I’d been talking for the past three hours, hoping to get some sort of reaction out of him. I knew he wasn’t sleeping because I’d feel his eyes on me every now and then. When I’d look, he’d snap them closed, but if he was trying to be subtle, he was failing. “Which is probably my favorite of all the school years, because that’s when I lost my virginity to a nice girl named Amy. She had the biggest—”

He growled.

I grinned at the ceiling. “Something you’d like to add? Oh shit, sorry. You can’t talk right now. Sorry, dude. Where was I? Ah, right. So, Amy. She was... pretty, you know? And she laughed real loud. And Jesus Christ, she probably could suck a filament out of a lightbulb without breaking the glass.”

He growled louder.

I looked over at him.

He closed his eyes quickly, taking in slow, deep breaths like he was asleep.

“And then after Amy was Tara, and she could do this awesome twist with her wrist—something in your throat? You keep making weird noises. You all right? Yeah, you’re all right. Now where was I? Oh. *Tara*. Man, say what you will about small-town girls, but they sure know how to—”

The breath was knocked from my chest as he landed on top of me. I made a small croaking sound as the timber wolf covered me completely. “You... *dick*.”

He growled again, the underside of his snout pressed against my face.

I was about to shove him off me when I heard it.

Something big moved through the forest toward the cabin.

It pulled at my head, little whispers that I couldn’t understand.

An Alpha.

“Oh no,” I whispered into Gavin’s throat.

He spread himself out on top of me as the lumbering beast drew closer. His tail lay across my feet, his back legs against my shins. His front legs stretched along the sides of my head, and he rumbled softly in his throat.

I turned my head slightly toward the window, able to see it with one eye.

It was late afternoon. The snow had stopped falling an hour or two before, leaving what I thought was a good foot outside. The light was gray and weak, and I could see the trees in the forest.

For a moment, at least.

Because then they were blocked out by something massive in front of the window. It was vague, what I was seeing through frosted glass, a hint of shape. There was black fur over hard muscle, what I thought was a forearm. And then a large, misshapen hand appeared on the glass, long claws scraping against it as the pull of *alpha alpha alpha* crawled over my skin, foreign and cold.

It moved away from the window as it circled the cabin, the floor underneath me quaking with every step it took. Gavin's heart was sonorous, a slow drumbeat against my chest.

The beast growled as it reached the south end of the house. I felt it down to my bones.

Gavin lifted his head slightly, looking toward the other window.

I tilted my head back.

A red eye stared in at us.

It blinked once. Twice.

The beast growled again before it moved away from the window.

And then it was gone, its footsteps fading away as it went back into the forest.

We didn't move until we could no longer hear it.

Gavin rose above me, ears twitching. He was careful as he stepped off me, going toward the window, staring out into the forest.

"We can't stay here," I told him quietly.

He didn't look at me.

I didn't sleep much that night.

not fair/thump thump thump

Kelly said, "You have to make a choice."

I pushed a branch out of my way. The snow crunched under my feet. The air was startlingly cold, and Kelly's hoodie didn't do much to keep the chill away. I had a coat, but I'd left it in the truck. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and everything was blue. The morning sun felt like a lie as I shivered, my breath trailing behind me in a stream.

Kelly said, "He's not going to let you stay."

"I know," I muttered. I couldn't look at him. I didn't want to see the disappointment on his face.

Kelly said, "Then what are you going to do? I don't get it, Carter. You tried. You really did. You made your case. He doesn't want you. He doesn't want to go with you. Leave before Livingstone kills you. Just leave them both and come home."

I stopped and closed my eyes.

I felt him watching me. Even though he wasn't real, even though I couldn't hear his heartbeat, his gaze was boring into my back.

"Joe," I said.

"What about him?" He sounded irritable, like he was done with my shit. This Not-Kelly was just a figment of my fevered imagination, but he felt like a truth I wasn't ready to face.

"He told me that pack is everything. But then he looked at me with this weird expression on his face. He was... ten? It was after he'd shifted for the first time. That fire was back. I could see it in his eyes. He said that he didn't agree with some of the things Dad told him."

"Like...."

"The need of the pack outweighs the need of everyone else. He didn't like that. He said that if a member of his pack was in danger and he had to choose

between them and the rest of the pack, he knew what he'd do."

"What?"

I held a branch out of the way for him. "He would do everything he could to save everyone. That no one would be left behind, no matter what."

"That's not—"

"Gavin is a member of our pack."

Kelly hung his head, looking down at his boots. "Shit."

"I'm not an Alpha," I told my brother, needing him to understand. "But I have to do everything I can to—"

"Because he's your mate."

I winced. I wasn't ready for that. It was locked away in a box wrapped in chains in the back of my mind. It was dangerous. "I would do the same for anyone."

"Except Robbie." And *there* it was. Faint, but on the tip of my tongue. The anger. He was a ghost, but I could taste it. "Robbie was a member of our pack, and you didn't do shit to help me find him."

"I know," I whispered, and a bird took flight, its belly red against the blue sky. "And I'll never forgive myself for that. I should have done more."

Kelly waved me away. "It doesn't matter. Robbie is... he's safe now."

"Because you never gave up on him."

"He would have done the same for me. Can you say the same for Gavin?"

"He saved us in Caswell. I have to do this."

"You don't," Kelly retorted, but then he deflated. "But it doesn't matter what I say. I could tell you that you're slipping further and further away. That your eyes are violet right now. That you're turning Omega again. It doesn't matter, though, does it? Nothing I can say will change your mind."

I started to reach for him but stopped myself. "You can still try."

He laughed, though there was no humor in it. "The longer you drag this out, the worse it'll be. Livingstone isn't going to let him go. He's a beast, Carter. Running on instinct. And he sees Gavin as *his*. As his pack. If he thinks you're a threat, he's going to do everything he can to save his pack." He glanced back over his shoulder, looking beyond me. "He's following us."

"I know." I didn't need to look back the way we'd come to know it. Gavin was there, somewhere in the trees. If he was going for stealth, he wasn't very good at it.

“It’s not that,” Kelly said, as if I’d spoken my thoughts aloud. “There’s something between the two of you. It’s like it is with Robbie and me. We—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

He threw up his hands, and for a moment I remembered him when he was a kid, all gawky limbs and a toothy smile, calling *Carter, Carter, Carter, pick me up, up, up, up!* I always had because I was helpless not to. I would have done anything he’d asked. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. “Keep on ignoring it and telling yourself everything is fine. That always works out well.”

“I love you,” I told him.

He looked back at me again, eyes wide and so damn blue. His expression softened. “Hey, I know. I love you too. Always have. Tether bros.”

We continued on.

THE TRUCKS WERE STILL PARKED in front of the house. The trucks belonging to the hunters dwarfed mine, parked on either side of it, blocking mine in. They were all covered in a layer of snow. And though the snowfall had been heavy enough to hide the evidence of the slaughter of the hunters, I could still smell the blood soaked into the ground, the stench heavy and thick. Even if I hadn’t been there to witness what had happened, I’d have known this was a place of death.

The bodies were gone. I tried not to think about what that meant, though a dark, twisted little voice in my head whispered that Livingstone had seen to them.

Kelly was gone. He’d disappeared as soon as the house came into view.

Gavin was circling the house off in the trees.

I ignored him.

I went to the truck first. The keys were still in the ignition. I started it. It caught after a few seconds, black smoke pouring out of the exhaust before the engine smoothed out. I turned it off again and sighed in relief.

I grabbed my coat from the bench seat and was about to climb out of the truck again when I noticed the picture was missing. The one of me and Kelly and Joe. It’d been sitting on the dash where I’d put it the day I left Green Creek. It never moved. *I* never moved it.

But it was gone.

I got out of the truck, bending over to look on the floor. Under the seat.

Nothing.

Maybe one of the hunters had taken it.

I slammed the door harder than I meant to. The truck rocked. Snow slid down onto the hood from the windshield.

I closed my eyes and breathed in through my nose. Out through my mouth.

It was just a picture.

Get in the truck, Kelly whispered. Get in the truck and drive. I'm waiting for you. I'm always waiting for you.

A wolf howled in the trees, a long and mournful sound.

“Jesus,” I muttered as I opened my eyes. “I hear you. Idiot.” I pulled on my coat. It did little to warm me.

I went to the house, climbing over the remains of the porch to the door still hanging open. I heard Gavin in the trees pacing back and forth, growling lowly. I ignored him. Either he'd follow me or he wouldn't.

The house looked different in the daylight. It was... softer, somehow. No less lonely, but it looked more like a home than it'd been at night. It had good bones, though the skin of it had long since rotted away, leaving only a husk.

The photograph that'd been on the wall was in pieces on the floor. I crouched down, brushing away the glass. The bullet from the hunter's gun had pierced the photo right above the little boy's head. They were still smiling, of course. All of them were.

I picked it up, the frame collapsing around it and falling to the floor.

Gavin was in front of the house now. He was agitated, huffing out sharp breaths.

I set the photo on the cracked mantel of the fireplace.

The rest of the house was just as dead.

Cabinets in the kitchen were all open, some of the doors hanging on their hinges. The sink was filled with dead leaves, the window above it long since broken.

Three doors lined a long hallway. The first door led to a small bathroom. The shower curtain was plastic with seashells on it. The floor was tiled, and the toilet was green. A framed stitchwork hung above it with the faded legend SMILE THOUGH YOUR HEART IS BREAKING in red yarn.

The second door was a master bedroom. The carpet was dirty and frayed. The bed was moldering, sagging in the middle. A chest of drawers lay on its

side, deep claw marks along the back of it. A nightstand lay in pieces below a gouge in the wall, as if it'd been thrown.

The third door led to—

“Don't.”

I paused with my hand on the doorknob. “Is this you?”

“Leave. Go back to the cabin. Or get in the truck. This isn't yours.”

I pushed open the door. The hinges squealed.

“Stop,” he said. “Stop, stop, stop.”

I looked back at him. He was nude, his skin rippling with gooseflesh. His hair hung around his face, and his mouth was twisted. His eyes were violet, and I saw the hint of fangs between his lips. “This is where you were sent. After....”

He shook his head furiously. “Fuck you. Fuck this house. Fuck it.”

I stepped into the room even as he snarled behind me.

It was small. The window looked out on the forest behind it. The room was sparse, with only a bed and an overturned chair, a poster on the wall too faded to read. The carpet here was spongy, as if it'd soaked through. I looked up and saw a hole in the ceiling near the bed, the branches of a tree swaying outside.

Gavin was in the doorway, gaze darting around the room, the ever-present scowl on his face. Not for the first time, it struck me how much he looked like his brother in the days before he'd found his way back to my uncle again.

“This is where you grew up.”

He wouldn't look at me. “Doesn't matter.”

“Did you know?”

“What?”

“About wolves. About witches. Magic and monsters. About where you'd come from.”

His lips pulled back over his teeth. A drop of blood fell from his right hand, where his claws had dug into his palm. It hit the carpet and spread, a red splotch. He said, “I....” His jaw tensed. “Eventually.”

“Who told you?”

He jerked his head toward me. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Just a question.”

“Always questions. Never stops.”

“You followed me, man. You didn't have to.”

He grunted. “Making sure you don’t die. You’re stupid. You die easy. Get lost in woods. Freeze to death. Should have let you.”

I almost smiled, but I didn’t want him to think I was mocking him. “I can handle myself.”

“You were shot. Try and handle better.”

“When did you know? How did you know?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Okay.” Then, “Where are they?”

“Who?”

“The people in the photograph. Your parents.”

He stepped into the room, shoulders hunched as if he were trying to make himself small. “Gone. Gone.”

I nodded slowly. “I know what that’s like.”

He glanced at me and then away. He looked like he was struggling with something. I wondered what it was like, being in his head. If he felt untethered and lost in a storm of violet rage.

And then he said, “Thomas,” and my heart stuttered in my chest. “Thomas Bennett.”

“Yeah,” I said hoarsely. “That’s... yeah. My dad. I know, man. Right? I know what it’s like. To have them be gone.”

He shook his head. “Not that. He told me. Alpha. Thomas. About wolves. About witches. Magic and monsters.”

The room swayed around me as my vision doubled. “What?”

His nostrils flared. “He came here. When I was a kid. Told me things.”

“How?” I asked, and it was blue. All of this. This house. This place. His words. Everything was blue.

“His father. Alpha.”

“Abel.” My grandfather.

He nodded. “Thomas said he put me here. Hid me away. Gave me away. I hate him. He’s dead, and I’m happy he’s dead. I don’t have to kill him.”

“I didn’t know.”

Gavin glanced at me before looking down at his bare feet. “Secrets. Everything is secrets.”

That I knew.

And then Gavin said, “I looked for him. After. In Green Creek. Years after.”

I took a step back, a buzzing sound in my ears. I felt unmoored, anchorless and floating away. “When?”

He must have heard the thunderous beat of my heart, the tangy sting of sweat on my skin. He looked at me miserably, and I never wanted to see that expression on his face again. His anger I could deal with. His wrath I could take. This was too much.

He said, “He was already dead. I didn’t know. With others. Omegas. Went to Green Creek.” His hands flexed, blood smeared on his palm though the wound had already healed. “You were... gone. With your brothers. And Gordo.” This last was said with a sneer. “The others remained. Omega took girl. Jessie. Tried to use her. Ox came. Not a wolf. But still an Alpha. He asked a question.”

“What is your name?” I whispered, the memory of what I’d been told rising like a ghost. They’d killed the ones who’d attacked. They let the others go. We’d found one of them in the town of Portal. Gordo had— “Oh Jesus Christ. You were there. You were *there*. All this time. They knew you. They *knew you*.”

His eyes flashed, but all I felt from him was an ocean of blue. “Didn’t hurt them. Didn’t *want* to hurt them. I...” He took a step back. I couldn’t breathe. He said, “Left. Away, away, away. Caught. By hunter. By *Elijah*.” He spat her name like a curse. “Chain. Around neck. Always silver. Always choking. Dying. I wanted to die. But she wouldn’t let me.” He looked around wildly. “This house. Haunted. Only ghosts. Everything is haunting me.” He glared at me. “*You’re* haunting me. Gavin, Gavin, Gavin. That’s all you say. Why, Gavin, why. How, Gavin, how. You never stop.”

I was spiraling out of control, barely able to keep up. “I can’t.”

“I hear you,” he said. “Talking. To Kelly. To ghosts. He’s not real. Maybe you’re not real too. Dreaming. I’m dreaming. I want to wake up. I want to wake up. *I want to wake up!*”

He lurched forward, and I steeled myself for an impact. But he didn’t go for me. He flipped the old bed over. The rusty framed snapped. He went to the walls, claws extended as he tore into them, plaster breaking and raining down around him. It looked like snow in his hair.

I grabbed him from behind, pinning his arms to his sides. He roared, kicking his feet up against the wall and pushing off, causing me to stagger backward. I kept upright and held on as tightly as I could. “Gavin, *stop*.”

He panted as he laid his head back on my shoulder, his cheek scraping against mine. The scent of him, of the wild and untamed forest, flooded my

mouth. I wanted to bite into him. Make him bleed. Hurt him for hurting me.

He howled then, the cords on his neck sticking out in sharp relief. It made my skin vibrate, and I knew what it meant to want to wake up, to want to know this was real.

I said, "You're not alone."

I said, "Not anymore."

I said, "I'm here. Okay?"

I said, "I'm here. I swear it."

I said, "I'm *real*."

He sagged against me, his skin too warm and slick, and as I whispered to him, as I told him again and again that I was real, I felt him shake and shudder.

I held on for dear life.

HE SAID, "I STAYED. Because I couldn't run. Not anymore. Tired."

I looked over at him sitting against the opposite wall in the small bedroom. He'd taken one of the ratty blankets off the remains of the bed and draped it over his shoulders. It was early afternoon, and winter sunlight filtered in through a broken window.

"In Green Creek."

He nodded, blowing out the side of his mouth to get his hair off his face. "I remember. Bits and pieces before... before then. Like little flashes of light. Hunters. Elijah. Always moving. She was mean. And loud. Said we were her *pets*. No pet. I am no pet."

I hesitated. Then, "The other wolf with you. With them. Did... did you know him?"

He shook his head slowly. "No. Just another wolf. Dead."

I grimaced. "Yeah. Gordo was trying to—"

"Don't care what Gordo does."

"He's your brother."

"Witch," Gavin growled. "Magic. I hate it. Hate all of it. Father magic. Hurt people. Gordo magic. Hurt people."

"Only to protect himself and pack."

Gavin glared at me. "Never anything else?"

I thought about the Omega in the alleyway. Gordo had said he'd let him live, but I hadn't believed him. "No."

"Liar."

I was startled into a laugh. "Heard that?"

He grimaced. "Loud. Your heart is always loud." He banged his hand against the wall behind him. It echoed throughout the house. "Thump, thump, thump. Always loud. Want to turn it off."

"That's... not how it works."

"If you're dead it does."

That was pointed. "Do you want me dead?"

"Yes."

And his own heartbeat betrayed him. A slight flutter, but there nonetheless. "Liar."

He scowled at me. "Not lying. You die, I get silence. You die, I don't have to hear thump, thump, thump always."

I said, "Then kill me."

His eyes narrowed. "Really?"

I nodded. "Go ahead."

The asshole looked like he was considering it. Then, "Not today. Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe tomorrow," I echoed. I looked around the room. "Was it nice?"

"What."

"Here." I waved my hand. "This place. The people in the photograph. Was it nice?"

"Why?"

I sighed. "Dude, seriously, this whole answering a question with a question thing is getting old."

"Then stop asking questions."

"That's not how this works."

He pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. "That's not how *what* works?"

I leaned my head against the wall. My ears were cold. "At the bar in Green Creek. The Lighthouse. You came. You followed the others."

"Hunting them," he said, sounding oddly proud. "Very good at hunting."

Always quiet.”

“You were going to hurt them.”

“Easier. Easier to kill. If I did, she wouldn’t hurt me. Wouldn’t cut me. Silver knives on bottom of my paws.”

I didn’t think it was possible for me to hate Elijah more than I already did. Part of me knew that she’d done *something* to him and the other wolf to keep them docile, to make them subservient. Outright torture seemed plausible, especially after what she’d done to Chris and Tanner. But hearing it from him made me wish she was still alive so I could kill her myself. She’d gotten off easy. “You didn’t, though. Kill.”

He fidgeted, obviously knowing where this was headed. “No. I didn’t. Wanted to. But didn’t.”

“Because I was trying to kill you.”

He cocked his head, and it was such a wolf thing to do, I almost laughed. I’d seen that look before, though he’d been a timber wolf when he’d done it. He was annoyed. It shouldn’t have calmed me as much as it did. “You could never. Better wolf than you.”

“You’re bitten. I was born wolf.”

“You’re too loud,” he retorted. “I kill, I kill them all. But then you came out and said *grr*.”

“I did *not* say *grr*, you asshole.”

“*Grr*,” he repeated, like he was mocking me. “All loud and stupid with your stupid heart.”

“Thump, thump, thump.”

He nodded. “Should have killed you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I could have,” he snapped. “If I wanted to. Torn out your throat. Your stupid heart. Eat it. I would eat it.”

“Still didn’t do any of that, though.”

“I was tired. And you were saying *grr*. Like you were brave. And then you were shouting—”

“You were trying to drag me into the fucking woods!”

“Bury you,” he said, and his eyes flashed. “In the woods. Bury you and come back to eat you.”

I huffed out a breath. “You’re so full of shit. You were trying to keep me

away from everyone else. You were trying to protect me.”

“No. Bury you. Eat you later.”

“You’re a real son of a bitch, you know that?”

He was pleased with himself. His lips twitched. Then it faded and he said, “Did you know her?”

I was taken aback. “Who?”

He looked away, gritting his teeth. “Nothing.”

“Oh, no way. Not gonna happen, dude. Who? Who did I know?”

“Stop. I’m not dude.”

“I don’t give a shit about that. Who are you—” And then it hit me. I wished it hadn’t. The ice was cracking beneath my feet. “Your mother.”

He glared down at his lap.

I said, “No. I.... That was before me. I didn’t—she was already gone.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t think I ever even knew her name,” I admitted. “It’s.... I don’t know. There’s this history. Livingstone. Bennetts. It goes back a lot longer than I do. Always together somehow. Like we’re twisted in with each other.”

“You’re a Bennett.”

“Glad to know you can retain information. Proud of you.”

He didn’t appreciate that. “I’m not Livingstone. Not twisted with you.”

“A rose by any other name,” I said quietly.

“What?”

I shook my head. “It’s... something Kelly said to me once. It’s this weight. A name. Especially our name. Bennett. It’s a crown that we can never take off. No matter where I am, no matter what I’m doing, I can’t change that.”

“Here.”

“What?”

“Here,” he said again. “Name doesn’t matter here. No crown. No roses. Just... you. Just Carter.”

I laughed wetly. “Again. Say it again.”

He frowned. “What?”

I could barely breathe. “My name. That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you say my name. Again. Please say it again.”

He said, “Carter, Carter, Carter,” and I remembered him as he once was, a

shadow I couldn't escape. He was there, always there, whether I wanted him to be or not. All those years we were together, his eyes bright and knowing, giving me shit without even uttering a word. And there came a day in the spring, when the flowers were blooming and the trees were alive with green, a day no different than the one before.

But on this day I'd headed out of the house at the end of the lane and realized he wasn't following me. And I felt it then, a queer sense of loss disguised as irritation. I'd gone back *in* the house, muttering to myself about what a pain in the ass he was, and found him in the kitchen. He didn't notice I was there, or at least he didn't acknowledge me. He was staring as if enraptured as my mother swayed near the sink, singing along with an old song on the radio. Elvis asking if you were lonesome tonight, did you miss me tonight, and my mother was singing, singing, singing, a wolfson, a lovesong, and though her grief had lessened over time, I could still taste it, the ache in her voice. She loved my father despite all his faults and would miss him forever.

And Gavin.

Oh god, Gavin.

How he'd *watched* her, his eyes bright and knowing though still lost to the animal within. There was curiosity there, and no small amount of wonder tinged with fear. He was... softer, somehow, the closest to human I'd ever seen him. And I wondered—not for the first time, though it was sharper, clearer—how much he knew, how much he retained. If he knew what she was. A queen. A wolf mother. And if he recognized her as a protector.

He started to move his head up and down like he was nodding. I didn't know what he was doing at first. It wasn't until Elvis started singing again that I realized he was moving with the beat of the song. Not dancing, no, but still moving.

It was the first time I saw him as more than a feral wolf.

Eventually he stiffened, turning to look at me, expression almost guilty.

My mother said, "Such a lovely song, don't you think?"

She wasn't talking to me.

The wolf turned back to her. He stood slowly before walking over to her. He pressed his nose against the palm of her hand. She chuckled, running a finger along his snout up between his eyes to the top of his head. He huffed at her before leaving her be. He bumped into me as he left the kitchen, and I stood there in the kitchen of the house at the end of the lane, unsure what I'd just witnessed.

My mother said, “He’s got good taste.”

I found my voice. “In music?”

Her eyes were shining. “That too.”

I trailed after the wolf in a daze.

In the days and weeks and months that followed that spring afternoon, I found them together more and more, always with music playing. Sometimes he moved his head up and down. Other times his tail thumped the floor, keeping the beat of the music. And she never asked him to change, never asked him why, why, why aren’t you human? Why don’t you shift back? Why do you keep on as you are?

None of that mattered to her.

I didn’t know how she went on after all that had happened. She was stronger than I could ever be, and she didn’t need to be a witch to know magic.

Gavin said, “Blue.”

I blinked, the kitchen fading, leaving only the cold remains of a house that had once been a home. “What?”

He was watching me, mouth turned down. “Blue. You’re blue. Like ice. Cold.”

I missed her terribly. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Saying my name.”

He looked away. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s something to me.”

“Easy,” he said. “You’re easy.”

I snorted. “Thanks. I think.”

He shook his head. He was frustrated, opening his mouth, no sound coming out. I waited for him to find the right words. He said, “This.” He waved his hand between the two of us. “This is... not. Right.” He picked at the frayed edges of the blanket. “I’m not... good. In my head. I can’t focus.” He scrunched up his face, sticking out his tongue between his teeth in concentration. “You think. You think you come here. For something. For me. But don’t need this. Don’t need you. Better off somewhere else. You go. I stay.”

I leaned forward. “I’m only going to say this once more. And then I’m never going to say it again. Listen to me. Okay? *Really* listen to me this time. Can you do that?”

His head jerked up and down.

“Good. I’m not leaving. You don’t need me, fine. You don’t want me, fine. I’m not going to... force. Anything.” My palms were slick with sweat. “I don’t even know how... that works. Like. At all. So. And even if I *did*—I mean, I’m constantly surrounded by all the homo in our pack, so you would think I’d have *some* idea, and it’s not like it sounds bad, I just... okay. It’s like—are you *laughing* at me?”

The rusty, broken sound crawled up from his throat, and he was huffing out his nose, but he was *smiling*, and I understood then what Joe had seen in Ox, why Gordo and Mark were always going to find their way back to each other, why Kelly never stopped searching for Robbie. It was warm like a summer day. It was candy canes and pinecones, it was epic and awesome, it was dirt and leaves and rain, it was grass and lake water and sunshine.

It was a forest so alive, so untouched.

The surge of affection I felt for him was wild and unexpected. I wanted to reach out and put my hands on him, to press my face against his chest and hear his heart up close.

I stayed where I was.

But he laughed.

Ah, god, he laughed.

waiting for you/because i am

The days passed slowly by.

I was dreaming.

I wasn't dreaming.

I was awake.

I wasn't awake.

I was slipping.

I wasn't slipping.

I was building toward something I couldn't name.

I was terrified.

I was exhilarated.

I was losing my mind.

HE STAYED HUMAN in the cabin more and more. He'd disappear into the woods, and though I'd consider following him, my cowardice kept me inside. Livingstone didn't come back, but I felt him in the surrounding woods, a darkness that pulsed like a dying heart.

Gavin would be gone for half the day, and I'd wait by the window until he returned.

He always did.

On one such day, he stumbled out of the trees as a wolf, his gait uncoordinated. He nearly fell outside the cabin but managed to catch himself at the last second.

I rushed out the door without thinking.

I caught him before he collapsed, his head hooking over my shoulder, his fur wet and cold but his body burning hot. I wrapped my arms around his back,

asking him if he was hurt, what happened, what did he do to you, what's wrong, what's *wrong*?

We stayed there for what felt like hours, my knees growing numb, his weight heavy and unwieldy.

He was trembling, and I couldn't get him to stop.

I said, "You can't keep going on like this. You can't keep doing this. I don't know what *this* is, but it's hurting you. It's killing you."

He tried to pull away.

I wouldn't let him.

He growled.

I said, "You have a place. With us. With our pack." I took a deep breath. "With me. And I know it's scary. I know it's not what you wanted, but it's there all the same. We can leave this place. We can go home. And when we get there, everyone will be furious with us, so angry that we could leave them all behind after everything. And we'll let them yell at us because it means they love us. It means that they never forgot us." My voice shook. I was scraped raw, flayed open, lifeblood spilling out and staining the snow. "We're pack and pack and pack. Don't you want that? Don't you want—"

He pulled away from me.

He went into the house.

I stayed outside in the snow.

HE LET ME HAVE THE BED.

I told him it was big enough for the both of us, and the thought made my skin thrum.

He shifted and lay down in front of the fire.

I stared up at the darkened ceiling, the flames flickering and popping.

As the night deepened, I said, "Back at the house. Our house. In Green Creek."

His ears twitched. He was listening.

I said, "When the Alpha died. Shannon Wells. More blood spilled needlessly. I was confused. I never asked for this war, never wanted to spend my life fighting. I was angry at my father for letting it get this far, even though he'd been dead for years. It felt like we continued to pay for his mistakes. A name is a

name is a name, but by any other name... and I remember thinking how easy it would be. For this to all be over. Michelle Hughes was the Alpha of all. She had what she wanted. And then your father was on the screen, thousands of miles away but there all the same. He asked if we weren't tired of everything, all this death. All this fighting. And it made *sense* to me, because I was. I hated myself in that moment, because it felt like a betrayal."

I turned my head to look at him.

Violet eyes were watching me.

I said, "And then he said he wanted Robbie, and I knew there was no way in hell we'd ever let that happen. That even though I could understand where he was coming from, what he wanted would never happen. Still, there was that little voice in the back of my head, and it was whispering *what if, what if?* I'll never forgive myself for that." I closed my eyes. "Then he said your name, and you *listened* to him. You stood up, and you were *listening*. I hated you so goddamn much. You didn't lie, not exactly, but you knew. You knew who you were. What he was to you. What *Gordo* was to you, and you didn't say anything."

He whined pitifully.

"But then he said he wanted you. That he wanted you to come to him, and it was like this fire started in my chest. I was never going to let that happen. I was never going to let you go to him. I didn't understand why. Even in the face of all the little asides, all the knowing smirks that make me feel so goddamn stupid in retrospect. You want to know why I'm here? Why I chased you across miles and miles and for months and months? It's because it's not fair. It's not fair that I finally find something of my own, something all for me, only to have it taken away. Your father was right. I'm tired, Gavin. Of everything. Paying for the mistakes of all those who came before us. All I want is to live free and feel like I'm not dying with every breath I take." And it was there, finally, the box unlocked. I embraced it as best I could. "You're my mate. And if you don't want that, I'll learn to deal with it. I'll move on. Find someone else. But even if that happens, I'm not going to leave you behind. Pack doesn't get left behind. And no matter what else we are to each other, we're always going to be pack. You were his first. But you're ours now. Nothing will ever change that." I opened my eyes, and the shadows danced along the walls.

He stood slowly, swaying side to side.

I thought he was going to go out the door and disappear into the forest.

He came to the bed and stood above me, head cocked.

He leaned forward, pressing his nose against my forehead, and I said, "Oh,"

because in the storm of indecision swirling within him, in the violet Omega rage, was blue and green swirling together, and it *ached*.

He pulled his head away, trailing his nose down my arm.

He opened his jaws, teeth glinting in the firelight.

I wasn't scared. He wasn't going to hurt me more than he already had.

He closed his teeth around my wrist, the skin dimpling. The pressure didn't hurt, and his breath was hot against my skin.

He tugged on my arm. I went, pulling the blanket along with me.

He led me toward the fire before he let me go. He *huffed*, a low sound that was almost like a whisper.

I spread the blanket out on the floor before lying down.

He sat next to me, staring at the fire.

I waited.

A moment later he hung his head, ears drooping.

And then he lay down, curling himself around me, tail curling over my legs.

I lifted my head as he pushed his nose against my ear. He moved closer, and I lay back against his neck.

His tail thumped once. Twice.

He laid his head over my shoulder, his chin resting on my chest.

It felt like it did before.

When we were home.

I thought I saw Kelly standing in the corner of the cabin, but there was nothing there.

I raised my hand and let it settle between his ears.

He closed his eyes.

"We've been here before," I whispered. "You and me. Remember? In Green Creek. You always slept in my room."

He sighed.

"Mom told me once that it was easier to process grief as a wolf. Humans are so complex, vast and contradictory. But when you're a wolf, it's easier. Things make more sense. All those little shades of gray fade away into nothing. I didn't understand her then. I do now. I want to shift, but I won't. Because this hurt, this pain, is mine. I won't let it be stripped from me. It's so blue I'm drowning in it, and I think I'm breaking. Grief is funny like that. There are days when I can tell

myself I'm forgetting. That it's behind me. And then there's an ocean of blue, and I don't know how to keep my head above water."

He opened one violet eye, studying me.

I smiled at him, pressing my thumb against his forehead. "You think you know what's right. That sacrificing yourself is going to keep the rest of us safe. But you're a Bennett now, because a name is a name is a name. And I'm sorry for that. It's a heavy burden but one that means you'll never be alone again."

He closed his eyes, turning his head inward, hiding his face.

I said, "So do what you think you need to, so long as you remember that this isn't how it ends for you. Or for me. We're more than this. We deserve more. After everything we've been through, we're owed. And if you think I'm just going to leave you here, then you don't know me very well. I've got my claws in you now. Where you go, I go. And if that means following you into the dark, so be it."

His tail thumped against my legs again.

And then we slept.

I DREAMED OF A CLEARING.

I ran as a wolf.

My pack was with me, their voices in my head, singing *BrotherLoveSonPack you are here you are here and i will eat you up i love you so so so much run with us run and feel the earth feel the pack it's green green green because hope never dies hope always remains so long as we're here.*

They sang, a wolfsong that tore at my skin, and it was *violet* and terrible, but it was *mine*, it was for *me*, and it said *please please don't leave me don't leave me carter carter carter i do what i do because i have to it's the only way and i i i thought i was alone i thought i would always be alone but then i found you i found you in this storm and i thought you were the sun i thought you were home i thought you were mine.*

I howled, and the world shook.

WHEN I AWOKE, he was gone.

The fire was dead, embers barely smoldering.

The cabin was cold.

I blinked up at the ceiling, still caught in the dream of running with my pack, his voice in my head like we were connected, like the threads between us had reformed.

I rubbed at the ache in my chest.

I sat up.

My neck hurt.

I felt empty, hollowed out.

I stood and went to the window.

Clouds had gathered again in the night. They threatened more snow.

Paw prints broke through the thin crust of snow outside the cabin.

A red leaf lay in one of the prints, having fallen from a tree near the cabin still caught in autumn.

I stared at it.

And made a decision.

I PULLED MY COAT TIGHTER around me. I was colder than I ever remembered being, but I needed to see for myself. Where he was going. What he was doing. It was dangerous, but I was running out of options. It was getting harder and harder to realize I was awake. The world had become hazy around the edges like it had when I paced behind a line of silver in the basement of the pack house.

The paw prints were close together. He was walking, and there were times when the prints connected as though he was dragging his feet. He wasn't running toward something. He was trudging, and he didn't want to go.

I didn't know how long it lasted. How long I went. A mile, two, ten. I walked, and the clouds grew thicker, and the forest was dead as that diseased heart pulsed. It tugged on my mind, a sour caress, and I fought it through gritted teeth. It whispered wordlessly. It was a low hum buzzing in my skull.

And then I heard him.

Talking.

Gavin said, "Always here. Never leave, do you? Talking, talking, talking. Always talking."

I held my breath as I pressed my forehead against a tree, the bark rough.

A beat of silence. Then, "I *don't*. Stop. Go away, ghost. Go away, you're not

here, you're not here, *you're not here.*"

And then he laughed, a terrible sound that made my skin crawl. It sounded like he was choking. He said, "You're not real, I know, I know. I saw you. You were sleeping. Safe. Ghost. Always haunting me. I hate you. I need you. Please let me die. Please leave me here."

My breath rose like mist around my face.

"You *can't*," he retorted to someone only he could see. "Kill you. He'll kill you, and I'll be alone. I'll be alone. Please don't go. Why? Why? Let me look. Let me see it. All I have. It's all I have."

I pulled my head away from the tree. I gripped the trunk, claws digging in as I leaned around it.

Gavin crouched in the snow about ten yards away. He was nude and alone, his hair loose and hanging around his face. The bones in his spine jutted out. He turned his head to the side and barked, "Stop! Don't. You don't *know*. I do. I do. It's not real. It's a lie. Everything is lies. Hurts, Carter. It hurts inside my head."

My hands shook.

He said, "Stay here. Keep it safe. Broken. It's all broken. All that I have left." He continued on, muttering quietly. He was digging in the snow at the base of a tree.

A low roar echoed throughout the forest. In it, I heard *here here here come come to me come to me*.

Gavin sagged. "I know. I know." He raised his head toward the sky. "I can't breathe. Crushing. I can't stop. I can't stop, Carter. Please help me stop." He stood slowly and nodded. "You promise? You won't leave me?"

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. My throat was closed.

"Okay," he said. And, "It's secret. You. This you. My ghost. You're not real. Sleeping you is real. I think. Saying words. Always saying words. Gavin, Gavin, Gavin, that's all you say. Skinny. Beard and skinny you is real and you never stop talking."

My face was wet. I told myself it was because of the snow.

I heard the familiar grind of muscle and bone and he was away, heading deeper into the woods.

I waited until the sounds of his footfalls faded.

All that remained was my thunderous heart in my ears.

I found the courage to leave the safety of my hiding place. I stepped around the tree.

The snow was trampled where he'd been crouched, and for a moment I almost convinced myself there was a second set of footprints, that he'd been talking to someone who'd actually been there.

There wasn't.

"You know what this is," Kelly said suddenly. I looked over at him. He was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and I didn't want him to catch a cold again. I thought he'd been dying. Even though he was a wolf now, I worried. I tried to hand him my coat, but he just laughed at me. "You know what this means. He sees you even when you're not there. Like I'm not really here. It's how you hold on, the both of you. You try so hard. You always have. It's one of the things I love most about you."

"A tether," I whispered.

Kelly nodded. "I think so. Weird, right? You two are the same. Even with everything that separates you. Holding on to that last thread even though the truth is right in front of you. It can't last, Carter. It won't. Something has to give."

There was a hole in the base of the tree. It looked like an old den for a small animal. Dead leaves and grass littered the inside. I leaned over and reached in, steeling myself in case the hole *wasn't* empty and I was about to get bitten.

I didn't.

I touched the leaves.

The grass.

And then I felt it.

A thin, stiff piece of... plastic? It was—

I pulled it out.

Three smiling boys stared up at me from the photograph.

Joe said, "Mom wants a picture."

Kelly groaned. "What? Another one? Why?"

Joe shrugged. "It's my first day of high school. And the first day of your senior year. And Carter's leaving tomorrow to go back to Eugene."

I said, "I can't wait. Get the hell out of this town."

Joe rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I bet. That's why you come home almost every single weekend."

I put him in a headlock. He laughed as he tried to get away from me. Kelly watched us, smiling. "Gotta keep you in check. Make sure the whole Daddy-

said-I'm-going-to-be-an-Alpha thing isn't going to your head."

"It's not. I don't care about that."

"Right," Kelly said as I let Joe go. "Because you only care about Ox these days."

Joe flashed orange eyes. "I do *not*."

"You *loooove* him," I said, my voice high and mocking.

"Fuck you, Carter!"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," another voice said.

We looked toward the doorway to my room. Dad was there, arms crossed over his chest, and his lips were twitching.

Joe groaned. "Carter started it."

"Carter started it," I mimicked. He glared at me when I pushed him off my bed. "I don't know, Joe. You don't sound like an Alpha to me. Just a whiny little brother. Maybe Dad made a mistake."

"Many mistakes," Dad agreed. "Three of them I regret more than others, especially if they don't get their butts in gear. Your mother is waiting."

Joe grumbled under his breath as he left my room, pausing only to stand on his tiptoes and kiss our father on the cheek.

Kelly patted my hand before he left too. Dad wrapped a hand around the back of his neck, leaning forward and whispering, "I can't believe how grown up you are."

Kelly blushed. He said, "Stop," but he didn't mean it. And then he was gone.

I stood up from my bed. My duffel bag was packed and ready to go. I was already looking forward to getting away. I loved them, my pack, but I was free when I was out of Green Creek. I was finding myself.

Dad was watching me.

"What?"

He shook his head fondly. "Just thinking, is all."

"About?"

"How little you used to be."

I flexed. "Not so little anymore."

He laughed. "Glad to know your ego is in check as always." His smile faded. "I miss you when you're not here."

I frowned. "Is everything okay?"

“Of course. Things are as they always are. You would know if they weren’t.”

“O... kay. What’s with all the feelings, then?”

“I’m a father,” he said dryly. “I tend to have those.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. I picked up my bag, hoisting the strap over my shoulder. “Have at it, then, Pops. I gotta get on the road.”

He came into the room and stopped before me. He reached up and put his hands on my shoulders, squeezing gently. In my head, I heard him whispering along the bonds that stretched between us, and it was *SonLovePack i love you i love you i love you*.

He said, “I’m very proud of you. I can’t wait to see what you’ll do with your life.”

“You’re being weird.”

He jostled me a little. “Being retrospective isn’t being weird.”

“Yeah, well, you’re making it weird.” I grinned at him. “Must be an Alpha thing. Make sure you teach Joe all about that. Should be easy, seeing as how he’s already weird.”

My father said, “Joe will be Alpha. But you and Kelly... your job will be just as important. Because you will be his pack. And an Alpha is nothing without his pack. I know I... I’ve put a lot into him. Spent more time with him these last few years, and it took me away from you and Kelly—”

“Oh, hey, Dad, no, that’s not what I meant. You don’t have to—”

“Listen.”

I did.

“You are a Bennett, a name with meaning. With responsibility. They will look to Joe to lead them, but he will look to you for guidance. For hope. Because you are his just as much as he is yours. Nothing will change that. And I know you’ve never been the type to be jealous of something like that, but I need you to hear this from me, okay?”

I nodded, unable to speak.

My father said, “I love you no matter who you’re meant to be. I don’t care that you’re not an Alpha. You are as important, and not just to Joe. To me. You mean so much to me, and I don’t think I’ve told you that enough.”

“Dad,” I said in a choked voice.

He pressed his forehead against mine, and I breathed my Alpha in. “No matter where your travels take you, just know that I’m always here waiting for

you whenever you decide you're ready to come home."

He hugged me then.

I held on as tightly as I could.

And later, when Mom was telling us to get together, to smile, Kelly, smile *big*, Dad was next to her, and I could see how proud of us he was.

It went like this:

We stood in order, oldest to youngest, Kelly in the middle, his arms around our shoulders. I laid my head against him. I could feel him smiling, and the tips of Joe's fingers pressed against my back.

Mom said, "Ready? One. Two. Three."

The camera clicked.

Ox came out of his house dressed in his work shirt, his name stitched on the chest. Joe left us and ran toward him, talking excitedly. Maggie appeared in the doorway, already dressed for the diner. She called after Ox, holding out a brown paper lunch sack. She waved at us.

We all waved back.

My mother cried as I left.

Dad did too, though he tried to keep it from us by wiping his eyes when he thought we weren't looking.

Joe and Kelly hugged me as hard as they could, and I breathed them in, my brothers, my pack.

"I promise," I whispered in the snow as the memory faded.

I put the photograph back in the tree.

He would know I'd been here. My scent would be thick around this tree.

I looked at the tracks leading away.

I stood.

Kelly said, "Don't. Carter, please. Stay here. Go back to the cabin. Or better yet, find the truck and leave."

"I can't," I said, looking down at the paw prints in the snow.

"You *can*," he retorted. "You need to get to us. Call home. Tell us where you are. Let us help you. I need you. Why can't you see that?"

"What would you do if this were Robbie?"

"That's not fair. He's my mate."

"And Gavin is mine."

Kelly snorted derisively. “Not yet. He’s feral, Carter. He doesn’t care about you. He doesn’t want you here. He’s told you that over and over, and you just won’t listen.”

My hands curled into fists. My fangs lengthened. “Stop.”

And Kelly said, “I won’t. You need to listen to me. This is stupid. There are others, Carter. Other people who could be your mate. It’s not just Gavin. You know that. You haven’t even thought about being with a man before. You never have. I could smell them, the women you fucked. It would cling to your skin for days, and you didn’t give a shit about who knew. If he was really your mate, you would have known the first time you saw him. I knew with Robbie. Mark did with Gordo. And you saw how Joe was the first time he met Ox.”

My fangs pierced my bottom lip as I ground them together. Blood trickled down on my chin. “You don’t know shit about me, then.”

“He’s using you,” Kelly (*Not-Kelly*) said. “He used all of us back in Green Creek. We kept him safe. And you know as well as I do that he *knew* who we were. Who Gordo was. Who Livingstone was. And he did *nothing*.”

“He saved us.”

“He saved *himself*,” Kelly growled. “And you fell for it. You left us all behind because you fell for it. You promised me, Carter. You promised it would always be me and you. Why do you hate me so much? What did I ever do to you to make you hurt me like this? Fuck you, Carter. Fuck you for making me think you gave a damn about me.”

“Leave it,” I said in warning. “No more. Kelly, I’m telling you to stop. Now.”

“Or what? What will you do to me? You’re nothing. You’re a shadow of who you used to be. You turned feral once, and I begged you not to. And yet here you are, doing it all over again. Jesus Christ, no wonder you lost Joe.”

The blood drained from my face. “What?” I whispered.

Kelly nodded slowly, and his face was twisted like I’d never seen before. Oh, he was still my brother, the same shape and size and color, but he was darker somehow. Eyes flat and cold, the light snuffed out. “I know, Carter. I wasn’t supposed to, but I know. Joe was with you. Dad told you to keep an eye on him. But you didn’t like your little brother trailing after you, telling you to wait up, Carter. Wait for me! You were with your friends, and you didn’t have time for the little king. You ran, and Joe tried to keep up, but you were too fast. You laughed, your friends laughed, and then Joe was gone. A beast came from the forest and stole our brother away, and you let it happen.”

I moved without thinking. I lunged for him, snarling, claws extended, wanting to tear him, spill his blood, make the truth stop pouring from his mouth. He didn't flinch. He didn't try to get away.

No.

He smiled.

And I passed right through him because Kelly wasn't there at all.

I landed roughly on the ground, skidding through the snow. I came to a stop near an old oak tree, blinking up at the gun-metal sky.

I knew my eyes were flickering violet. That ol' familiar feeling.

"Help me," I whispered. "I'm slipping."

There was no response.

I FOLLOWED HIM deeper into the woods.

There were rabbit tracks. Gavin had stopped near them, and I could see the long divots in the snow where he'd put his snout, chasing the scent.

But he'd let it be and continued on.

I did too.

"Kelly," I said as I trudged through the forest, "I'm sorry. Come back. Please come back."

He didn't.

I wanted to go back to the tree. Find the picture. Hold it against my chest until I felt awake again. It was mine, I knew. All mine. Gavin stole it from me, but I found it. It was *mine*.

I pushed on.

I walked for what felt like days. Sometimes I thought I saw wolves moving in the trees around me out of the corner of my eye, but anytime I tried to find them, tried to see them straight on, they were gone.

"You did this," I told my father. "You did this. You knew. You knew about Gavin, and you said nothing. You kept him away. You hid the truth from us. From Gordo. What more could you have done to him? You took Mark away from him. You left him behind. You didn't tell him he had a brother. You let Joe get his claws in Ox without him knowing what it meant. You *died* when we needed you most. Why would you do that to us? I love you. I hate you. I wish you were here. I wish you weren't my father."

A wolf howled, and I didn't know if it was real.

"I try," I panted, skin slick with sweat even though I was freezing. "I try so goddamn hard to do the right thing. To keep my family safe. To be a good wolf. And what does it get me? I'm thousands of miles away from home. I'm losing my mind. I want him. I don't know why. Maybe it's all a dream. Or magic. He did something to me. Made me care about him. Made me miss him when he was gone. Made me put tires to the secret highways even though I told myself I would never do that again. He saved us. He saved himself. He is my shadow. I am his. Livingstones and Bennetts. Bennetts and Livingstones. It's a circle, a snake eating itself. Kelly? Kelly!"

Clumps of snow fell from tree branches.

A flash of brown in the distance. A buck. A big one.

"Run," I whispered to it. "It's not safe here in these woods. I'll hunt you. I'll kill you. I'll eat you up I love you so."

And on and on it went.

THE TRACKS LED to a cave.

I stared at it. The mouth was large and gaping, a black hole from which came the sound of the diseased heart, the pulse that pierced a hook through my brain and pulled, pulled, pulled.

The fog in my head cleared slightly.

"Yeah," I whispered to myself. "Now would be a good time to turn around. Only people with a death wish would go into caves in the middle of nowhere."

I looked around for Kelly, hoping he'd be there with me. I needed to apologize for trying to hurt him. Tell him I didn't mean it.

He wasn't there.

I didn't blame him.

A low whine came from the cave, pathetic and weak.

Gavin.

I went to the cave.

Water dripped somewhere inside.

Gavin's heart raced.

The diseased heart was slow and steady.

I took a deep breath.

And went inside.

It was warmer than I expected, humid and wet. I stepped over piles of leaves. Over branches long dead. Bones littered the ground. Some looked small. Sitting on a rock was the skull of a deer, the bone stripped clean. I thought I saw a human rib cage, but I told myself it was just a trick of the low light.

The cave narrowed almost immediately. Tufts of black hair hung from the walls, as if a large animal had passed through and rubbed up against it. Above the smell of snow and stagnant water, animal parts and blood, there was something darker. Something deeper, as if it'd seeped into the earth. It burned my nose.

I found them only moments later. The cave opened up again to a larger space, and in the failing light, I saw the outline of a beast moving slowly. It inhaled. It exhaled.

And there, in the darkness, was a single red eye, as bright as a dying sun.

It wasn't pointed toward me.

It was staring at the ground below it.

At a timber wolf.

He lay on his back, his eyes weakly flashing violet. His jaws hung open, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. He struggled, legs kicking, but his father had a large misshapen hand pressed against his chest and stomach, claws like hooks digging into the soft flesh. Gavin whined again, eyes wild and unseeing. It tore at me, and I had to stop myself from rushing in, from leaping at the beast that held him down.

Livingstone leaned his head down, growling as his remaining eye flashed a deeper red.

I felt it then. In my head.

Gavin was mine.

Gavin was his.

A conduit.

It was faint, but there all the same.

It whispered *SonWolfPack, mine you're mine i am wolf i am alpha give yourself to me i can i can i can smell him on you i can smell the bennett the interloper the prince who will take you from me kill him kill him kill him you must kill him alpha i am your alpha kill him if you don't i will i will i will.*

I could hear him, hear Livingstone, because I could hear Gavin.

Gavin saying, screaming, *no please no please no please no stop stop stop stop STOP STOPSTOPSTOP DAD PLEASE DAD IT HURTS IT HURTS IT—*

And I said, “Let him go.”

The beast jerked his head toward me.

His eye blazed.

He roared, the sound flat and muffled as it bounced off the walls of the cave.

Gavin turned his head. When he saw me, he howled and began to kick at his father. Livingstone snarled as Gavin’s claws sliced his skin. He pulled his arm back, and Gavin rolled away quickly, pulling himself upright. Livingstone hit his head on the ceiling as he tried to come for me, but before he could reach me, Gavin stood between us, his shift melting away.

He held up his hands to his father as if to ward him off. “No. Stop. Don’t.”

Livingstone did, though he continued to rumble angrily.

Gavin looked over his shoulder, a look of sheer agony mixed with fury on his face. “Get out.”

I took a step toward him. “I—”

“Get. *Out!*”

“Fuck you. I’m not leaving you here!”

Livingstone knocked Gavin to the side as he charged toward me. I ducked as thick claws swiped over me, sparks falling like stars as they connected with the rock wall. I ran toward him, meaning to go *under* him, but he was too quick. My breath was knocked from my lungs when he picked me up, pinning my arms to my sides and slamming me against the wall. Bright lights flashed across my vision, and I felt hot breath against my face. I shook my head, clearing the lights away, only to see Livingstone’s mouth wide open.

“*Youuuu,*” he said, and it rattled my bones. “*Always youuuu. Bennett. Another Bennett. Taking from me. You can’t have him. He’s mine.*”

I thought my ribs would splinter if he applied a little more pressure. My vision was tunneling, and I thought about Kelly and Joe. They were going to be so mad at me for dying so far from home.

“I’ll do it,” Gavin said. “I’ll kill myself. Right here. Right now.”

Livingstone reared back, looking down at Gavin.

Gavin stood with his hand at his own throat, claws digging in. Blood ran in rivulets down his neck and bare chest, striping his skin. His eyes were clear, and his hand flexed briefly, the blood trails thicker.

“No,” Livingstone snarled. “No. You can’t. Alpha. I am your Alpha. You cannot die. I won’t let you.”

“Then let him go.”

Livingstone’s red eye grew brighter. “Bennett. Always. Kill them. Kill them all.”

“Leave you,” Gavin said, and I gasped as the grip around me loosened. “Even you can’t keep me from dying. You’ll be alone. You’ll have nothing. You’ll have no one. Let. Him. Go.”

Livingstone roared again. He turned his head toward me, jaws snapping, fangs inches from my face. “You can’t have him.”

“I’m going to kill you,” I promised him through gritted teeth. “When you least expect it, I’m going to kill you for everything you’ve—”

“Carter! Shut up.”

Livingstone shook me hard, my head snapping back and forth. The back of my skull knocked against the cave wall, and I was floating away. It was getting harder to breathe, but it seemed unimportant. I knew only the ringing in my ears. I said, “We heard them. The songs. Wolves. Ravens. The heart, always the heart. It means we’re coming home. They’re strong, and nothing else matters when we hear them. Kill me. It won’t matter. Because in the end, our songs will always be heard.”

“Don’t!” Gavin cried, and I didn’t want him to see this, didn’t want him to see what his father would do to me. For all his bravado, for his prickly exterior, he was still my shadow, still the timber wolf who followed me even when I told him not to. He was there, always there, and when he wasn’t, when he was gone, when he’d left with his father, I understood how a heart could crack so cleanly in two without even a whisper of warning. He’d been stuck as a wolf until I was about to die. He’d shifted for me.

I said, “Hey,” and “It’s okay” and “Look away. Please look away.”

The stench of his blood grew thicker as he demanded Livingstone let me go.

And then I was flying.

It was darkness, and then I was outside again, the air snapping cold against my skin. I screamed when I hit a tree and my back broke. The tree cracked, the wood splintering as it fell over. I landed on top of it, my body made up of useless limbs. I slid off into the snow. I couldn’t come back from this. It was too much. It was too big. Bones could heal, but I couldn’t feel my legs.

I looked up at the sky through the canopy. The clouds had parted above me,

and through the gray, I saw blue, blue, blue.

“I am because I am,” I whispered.

“Carter? *Carter!*”

I screamed again when something in my back shifted back into place, and suddenly I could feel *everything*. I was on fire, my skin blackened and charred. I writhed on the ground, my arms and legs skittering in the snow. I rode the wave of pain, struggling to catch my breath.

And then *he* was there above me, wearing a halo of blue sky. “Get up. You have to get up. Carter. *Carter.*”

He grabbed my arm and pulled, and I cried out as the world tilted around me, the colors bleeding together in streaks of gray and white and blue. I was up on my feet, my arm around his neck, his cheek scraping against mine like a kiss.

He said, “Shift.”

He said, “You have to shift.”

He said, “It’s the only way. Shift, turn wolf.”

He said, “Now, now, now.”

I tilted my head back and I—

am wolf

i am wolf

hurts it hurts it hurts it

gavin

gavin

gavin

saying run

telling me to run

can’t

can’t leave

can’t leave you

he says you have to

he says you’ll die

he says he’ll kill you

come with me

come away

*we'll run
just the two of us
we'll run far
why
why won't you believe me
why won't you do this for me
he says sometimes
he says sometimes we can't have what we want
no
no
no
i won't stop
i can never stop
i am bennett
i am wolf
i am
he says run i'll follow just run
yes yes yes
run we'll run
and i do
i run
good wolf
i am good fast wolf
where are you
where are you
where are*

I SHIFTED AS THE cabin came into view. My back hurt, my front hurt, everything hurt, and I fell to my hands and knees, gagging, a thin line of spittle hanging from my lip before dropping into the snow. I was so fucking cold, my teeth chattering, and my eyelids were stuck, gummy and heavy.

I crawled toward the cabin.

I made it to the door before my arms could give out.

I pushed it open.

The fire was dead.

It was cold.

I found the blanket left on the floor.

I threw it over myself, curling up into a ball on the floor.

“Kelly,” I moaned as I shivered. “Kelly, help me. Kelly, please. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you. I didn’t mean it.”

But he never came.

heartbeat

Gavin didn't come back that night.

The sky darkened.

The promised snow never fell.

When I could move without feeling like I was dying, I built a fire, my hands shaking. It took a long time before I started to feel warm.

I stood gingerly. The pain was lessening, but it still had its teeth in me.

I went to the window.

The glass was frosted.

I slept, but it was broken. Kelly was there, standing off in the distance. No matter how much I tried to run toward him, I never got any closer.

I SAT UP WITH A GASP.

It was morning.

The fire was out again.

I heard—

I smelled—

I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders and went to the window, sure there would be someone standing outside the cabin.

There wasn't.

Only the trees.

The clouds were gone.

The sun was shining.

I said, "I know you're there."

I said, "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

I said, "You can't hide from me."

I said, "This is a dream. I'm still dreaming."

I was delirious.

I was hot.

I was cold.

I said, "Dad?"

But my father was dead and nothing but ash.

I went to the door.

I opened it.

Cool air washed over me.

I blinked against it.

I stepped out into the snow.

I barely felt it against my bare feet.

I walked away from the cabin.

I didn't know where I was going. My skin thrummed.

I said, "Where are you?"

I laughed.

It came out sounding like a sob, choked and wet.

And then I saw him.

In the snow.

Behind the trees.

A white wolf. Black on his back and chest.

His eyes burned red.

He said *chase me i love you chase me*.

I said, "Daddy?" because I was just a little boy again, and my father, my *father* was there, and he was never going to leave me, he was never going to leave me again.

He ran.

I chased after him.

Tree branches slapped against my face and chest, sharp stings as the blanket flared around me. I almost dropped it. I almost let it go.

PackLoveSon to me to me come to me

He was there and then he wasn't.

He was in front of me.

He was beside me.

He was behind me, nipping at my heels.

i love you PackLoveSon i love you i love you and i will guide you home

“Dad!” I cried.

I entered a clearing, one I didn’t recognize. It all looked the same. The trees. The snow. The earth. It wasn’t my territory, it wasn’t home, and I couldn’t find him, I couldn’t—

I tripped over a tree root and crashed onto the ground, the blanket underneath me.

I came to a stop on my back.

I looked up at the sky.

“I tried,” I whispered to my father. “I’m sorry I wasn’t good enough.”

I closed my eyes.

He spoke then, his voice loud and clear. “You are more than I ever thought you could be. My brave son. Listen. Can you hear it?”

I said, “Daddy. It hurts.”

He said, “I know. And I would take it from you if I could. I would take it all. It was never supposed to be this way. None of it. Howl, Carter. Howl as loud as you can. Sing your song. They will hear you.”

And because he was my father, I did as he asked.

It came out thin and reedy, a desperate aria of blue.

I opened my eyes.

There was no one there.

My father was dead.

He’d died years ago.

He wasn’t here.

He wasn’t with me.

He wasn’t—

“Carter?”

I turned my head.

Kelly stood there. He looked different. He wore a coat, heavy and black, zipped up the front. He had dark circles under his eyes, cheeks flushed red. He took a stuttering step forward.

I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you. I didn't mean to hurt you. Please don't disappear again. I need you."

His expression crumpled as he rushed forward, stripping his coat off. He fell to his knees next to me, and then I was *surrounded* by the scent of him, and it was like he was there. It was like he was real. It felt like home, and I said, "Why are you crying? Please don't. I can't stand it when you cry."

He said, "What happened to you? Oh my god, Carter, what happened to you?"

"I don't know. Did I scare you?"

"You bastard," he said, rubbing my arms through his coat, his face streaked with tears. "You fucking *asshole*. Do you know how long I've been—"

"I wish you were real," I told him, needing him to understand. "I wish you were here so I could be strong again. So I can be brave again. My phone broke. I had your phone number, but it broke. I always wanted to call you. I howled. Did you know that? At the full moons. I howled for you to hear me just like I said I would."

He said, "Stay here, don't move, stay here." And then he was up and running.

I did as he asked.

I stayed.

His coat was warm on my chest. It didn't do much for my legs, but that was okay. I inhaled deeply and laughed at how odd this was. How strange. It was like he was real. It was like he was—

I sat up slowly at the sound of crashing through the trees.

It was coming toward me.

My legs were shaky as I stood.

Kelly appeared again. His eyes were wide, and he skidded to a stop when he saw me.

He said, "Carter?"

And it was then I heard it.

Something I hadn't heard in a very long time.

His heart.

I heard his heartbeat.

Not-Kelly never had a beating heart, no matter how hard I tried.

Not-Kelly was a ghost, and ghosts didn't have hearts.

But this Kelly did. It was the loudest sound in all the world.

And then someone else appeared beside him.

He was bigger than I remembered. Stronger. Greater. *More*. I felt it wash over me, *Alpha Alpha Alpha*.

I said, my voice fractured like glass, “Are you... are you real?”

And Joseph Bennett said, “Carter. You’re....” I watched as a single tear slid down from one of his red, red eyes.

Kelly’s shoulders shook.

Joe’s chest hitched.

I sank to my knees in the snow.

They came for me.

They engulfed me, and it was frantic, the way their hands rubbed against my face. My hair. My chest. My back. They were talking over each other, each of them saying my name again and again and again.

Joe, Joe, *Joe* took my face in his hands. His thumbs brushed away the tears as he breathed heavily through his nose. He studied me with blue eyes, and I swore for a moment it was our mother who held me.

Joe said, “His eyes. They’re violet. He’s Omega.”

Kelly said, “Can you find it? Can you find him?”

Joe said, “He’s there. It’s faint, but it’s there. I can—”

Kelly said, “Do it. Make him hear you. Do it now.”

Joe’s eyes turned to fire, and white hair sprouted along his neck and face. And something shifted in my head and chest, and it felt alive, a mass of roiling, knotted threads. They shuddered. They quaked.

And then Joe roared.

It was the song of an Alpha.

It slammed into me and I—

“WHERE’S YOUR BROTHER?” a boy asked me.

“I don’t know,” I muttered. I looked back over my shoulder. A group of girls was following us, whispering to each other. When I looked at them they giggled, waving and blushing. I could hear the sounds of Caswell in the distance, the lapping of the waves from Butterfield Lake. But Joe was gone. He’d been calling

to me to wait up, that he couldn't run as fast as we could, Carter, Carter, I'm going to tell Dad!

"He's always following you," another boy said. He had a mean face, and I didn't like him much. "Both of your brothers do. It's annoying."

I glared at him. "They're not annoying." They *were*, but only I could say that. They were my brothers, not his. "Don't talk about them like that."

"He's going to be the Alpha of all," the first boy said, shoving the second. "Better watch your mouth or he'll kick you out of the pack."

"Whatever," the second boy said. "I'm not scared of him. He's just a little kid. He's not the Alpha of anything." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "My dad says that Bennetts don't deserve to be in control. They ruin everything they touch." His smile widened. "Can't even keep their own pack safe." He leaned forward. "What was it like when the hunters came? Did you see them kill anyone? Was there a lot of blood?"

My father told me the only time I could hit someone was when I was protecting myself. That I needed to set an example. People looked up to me because of my name. I had to be the better person, he told me. I had to be just and kind.

I said, "Raise your hands."

The boy looked at me. "What?"

"Raise your hands. Put them in fists like you're gonna punch me."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"I want to see your fighting stance. Dad's been teaching us new stuff. I want to show you."

The boy's smile faded. "I don't...."

"Come on, man. Do it. Let me see your stance."

He spread his legs. He raised his arms. His hands curled into fists. "Like this?"

"Move your thumb. If you keep it like that, it'll break if you punch someone."

He moved his thumb. "Better?"

I nodded. I looked at the first boy. "Does it look like he's going to attack me?"

The first boy shrugged. "I guess."

"Good." I turned back to the second boy. He stood there, fists raised. He

screamed when I punched him in the goddamn mouth. His lips split, blood spilling and staining his teeth.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you?” he howled, putting his hands to his face.

“Don’t talk about my brothers again,” I told him. “If you do, I won’t hold back next time.”

He was crying, his nose bloodied and broken.

He stumbled backward.

The girls weren’t laughing anymore.

I left them behind.

“Joe!” I called as I headed back toward Caswell. “Hey, Joe! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you. Come on out. You want to play? We can do whatever you want, I promise.”

He didn’t answer.

I told myself it was okay. It was fine. Nothing was wrong. He was probably snitching back at the house. I was going to get in trouble.

I walked through Caswell, looking for him. People waved. Witches. Wolves. Humans. They said, hey, Carter, hey, what’s up? Good to see you, Carter. Yo, Carter!

I said, “Joe. *Joe!*”

I went to the house. It was a big house. It was a nice house. I hated it. It wasn’t home. And even though I’d been here longer than I ever was in Green Creek, I knew it wasn’t where we were supposed to be. It didn’t feel right.

Kelly sat on the porch, an open book in his lap. He looked up at me as I approached. “What are you doing?” His voice was high-pitched and wobbly. I loved him more than I could ever say.

“Did Joe come back?”

He shook his head. “I’ve been here for almost an hour. He hasn’t gone inside.”

“Shit.” I whirled around, scanning the compound, listening as best I could for that birdlike heart that beat in my little brother’s chest.

“You cussed,” Kelly said, sounding awed.

“We need to find Joe.”

I heard Kelly stand behind me. “You were supposed to be watching him.” It wasn’t an accusation. Not from him. It was merely statement of fact. But it still burned.

“Help me.”

He did. We ran through the compound, looking everywhere we could think of. In the school. On the docks. In the garden that belonged to a kindly old witch who was blind but could see the future, or so it was said.

He wasn't there.

He wasn't anywhere.

Panic clawed at my chest.

“Joe!” I shouted.

“What's wrong?” a deep voice said, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

Kelly and I turned around.

There, standing with a strange smile on his face, was my father's second.

I said, “Have you seen Joe?”

Richard Collins shook his head slowly. “Have you lost him?”

“No,” I snapped at him. “I didn't *lose* him. I just can't find him.”

He laughed. “Oh, I see. Well. I'm sure he hasn't gone far. I'll keep an eye out for him. Run along, little princes. You should notify your father. He'll want to know.”

I didn't want that.

I didn't want my father to be angry with me.

To tell me I should have been watching Joe.

That he was my responsibility.

“I don't like him,” Kelly whispered as Richard walked away, heading toward the front gates.

“I don't either. Come on. Maybe Joe's back at the house already.”

He wasn't.

And it was as we were climbing the steps that we felt it.

Fear. Through the bonds. It was a small thing, because Joe was a small thing.

But he was *scared*.

We barely made it to the door before it burst open, banging against the side of the house. Our father was there, eyes red, nostrils flaring. He saw us, and we cowered before him. He said, “Where is he?”

And I said, “Dad, I—”

He pushed by us, tilting his head back. He roared, and it filled the world,

consuming all other sound. The people of Caswell stopped what they were doing. Every single one of them. They looked to my father as his call echoed over the lake.

Mom appeared on the porch, her hand at her throat. “Thomas?” she asked, voice wavering. “What is... what’s wrong?”

“Joe,” Dad said. “Something’s happened to Joe.” He glanced back at me. “He was with you. Where did he go?”

I hung my head. “I don’t.... Dad. I didn’t—”

A man appeared as if out of nowhere. He stood before my father, bowing low. “Alpha,” Osmond said. “What’s happened?”

“My son,” Dad said through gritted fangs. “Lock Caswell down. No one gets in or out. *Now.*”

Osmond hurried away.

“Joe!” Mom shouted as she came off the porch. “*Joe!*”

He didn’t answer.

And later, as we moved through the forest at night through the pouring rain, all of us screaming *Joe Joe Joe*, I promised myself that when Joe came back, when he came back and he was *fine*, I was never going to let him out of my sight again. I was going to hold him and hug him and shake him and yell at him for scaring me, for scaring all of us, how could you do that to me, Joe, how could you do that to us?

But we didn’t find him.

Joe was gone.

“Please,” my father said into the phone, gripping it so tightly that I thought it would break. “Please, Richard. Please give me back my son.”

And Richard Collins said, “*No.*”

I GASPED AS I AWOKE.

“Hey, hey,” a voice said near my ear. “Carter. Stop. Carter. *Carter.*”

I struggled against the arms around me. They were stronger than I was, and I was getting crushed. I couldn’t breathe. I was caught.

“Joe!” I shouted. “Where are you, Joe? Come back! Please come back!”

“I’m here,” he said. “I’m here. I’m here. We both are. Carter, open your eyes. Open your eyes.”

I moaned, still trying to get away. “No. This isn’t real. None of this is real. I need to wake up. I need to *wake up*—”

“Carter.”

I opened my eyes.

I was in the cabin on the bed.

Kelly kneeled next to me. His hands gripped my legs, holding them down.

“That’s it,” Joe whispered in my ear, and I sagged back against him. “That’s it. We’ve got you. We’re here. You’re awake. We’ve got you.”

Kelly said, “Look at me.”

I was helpless not to. I sucked in a deep breath, greedy for the scents of pack and home, knowing if this was a dream, it would be the end of me. I couldn’t come back from this if it wasn’t real. It’d always been Kelly I saw. If it were Joe too, and they were ghosts, I wasn’t going to recover.

Kelly nodded. He took my shaking hands as I reached for him. His skin was warm, familiar. His heart was loud. He looked tired, and his hair was longer than when I’d seen it last. And there was green there, so much green between the three of us, but it was wrapped in blue, and I wanted to take it away from them both, wanted to keep them from ever feeling like that again.

I said, “Yell at me.”

Kelly blinked. “What?”

“Yell at me,” I begged him. “Both of you. Yell at me. Shout. Scream. Tell me you hate me. Tell me how angry you are. Tell me how stupid I was. Please.”

Kelly shook his head. “I’m not going to—”

Joe squawked when I jerked away from him. Kelly fell back on his ass in the dirt. I stood from the bed, the blanket falling off me. I was wearing clothes that weren’t mine. They were warm and clean and smelled like *packpackpack*. I squeezed my eyes shut.

When I opened them again, Kelly and Joe stood a few feet away, looking unsure. Joe was bigger than he used to be. Power radiated from him in soothing waves. My throat closed when I realized he was just like how Dad had been. A king. He looked like our mother, but he felt like our father.

The Alpha of all.

Discordant. Everything. Joe, tiny little Joe following after me, telling me that he couldn’t keep up, he wasn’t as big as me, wait up, wait up, wait up!

And then there was this man, this great man standing before me, and all I

wanted to do was fall to my knees in front of him, to bare my neck and beg for him to understand, beg for them both to yell at me so I knew they still loved me.

Joe said, "I hate your beard."

I gaped at him.

He shrugged. "It looks terrible. You need to shave."

I said, "What."

Kelly said, "And you need to cut your hair. Probably wash it too." His nose wrinkled. "Probably need to wash a lot of things."

I said, "What."

Joe took a step toward me. "I know you're confused. And I know you don't think this is real. Your head is a little... messed up right now." His gaze hardened. "That's what happens when you break from your pack. I had to force it on you. It was the only way to get through to you. You were Omega, Carter. You were turning Omega again. I couldn't let that happen."

I said, "I don't...."

Kelly said, "You feel it?"

I looked to him. I felt like I was moving underwater. "Feel what?"

He tapped his chest. "Joe. Me. Us. Here. You feel it?"

I did. It was thin and weak, but there all the same.

Bonds.

Stretching between us.

"That's real," Kelly said quietly. "I swear it. It's real, Carter."

"You're... here?"

Joe nodded. "We are." He took another step toward me. He was careful. Cautious, like he was approaching a cornered animal.

He grunted when I grabbed him by the arm and pulled him toward me. I wrapped myself around him, burying my face in his throat. I breathed him in as he hugged me as hard as he could. A wave of pain rolled through my back, and I cried out. He took a startled step back. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Hurts. Back. I got—no. No, no, no." I shoved Joe toward the door. Kelly told me to stop, stop, Carter, *stop it*. "You have to get out of here," I snapped at them. "Both of you. You need to leave. Before he—"

"Livingstone," Kelly said. "We know."

That stopped me cold. "What?"

Joe and Kelly exchanged a look. “We feel him,” Joe said. “It’s how we knew we were close. He’s out there, isn’t he? Somewhere in the woods.”

“He’ll *hear* you,” I snarled at them. “He’ll know you’re here. He can’t—”

“He won’t,” Kelly said. “Not unless he’s close. We’re protected. Muted. He can’t hear us. He can’t smell us. Not while we’re here.”

“How?” I demanded. “You don’t know what he is. You don’t know what he can do. He’s—”

The door to the cabin opened. I jumped forward, shoving my brothers behind me. I snarled at the shadow in the doorway.

“Oh, go to hell, Carter,” the shadow said. “Is that any way to act for saving your sorry ass? I swear to god, I’m surrounded by morons.”

“*Gordo?*”

Gordo Livingstone stepped into the cabin. He scowled as he shut the door behind him. The lines around his eyes were more pronounced, hair a little longer. He looked me up and down, shaking his head. He took in a shuddering breath. “Come here.”

I couldn’t move.

He rolled his eyes before coming toward me. A moment later I was enveloped by the warm scent of his magic as he hugged me, his hand going to the back of my head, fingers in my hair. “I can’t believe you,” he grumbled into my shoulder. “How could you possibly think this was okay? What the hell is wrong with you?”

My knees gave out, but he held me up, leading me back toward the bed. He almost fell over when he sat me down but managed to keep himself upright. He crouched before me, and I thought he was trying to pull away. I didn’t want to let him go. “Look at me.”

I did. “You still don’t have a hand.”

He snorted. “Yeah, imagine that. Haven’t figured out how to grow one back. Weird, right? Hold still.”

I didn’t look away for fear that he’d vanish.

He reached over and slid the sleeve of his jacket up his arm. His tattoos were glowing, and I watched as more and more were revealed. Signs. Symbols. Roses. And then the—

Raven.

There should have been a raven.

Sitting on the roses.

But it was gone.

What was left was scar tissue, and though it looked as if it were long since healed, it was still white and lumpy, the skin knotted.

“Yeah,” he said, following my gaze. “Long story. Don’t worry about it right now.” He pressed his stump against my thigh, and the roses began to bloom. They rolled through my leg and into my stomach and chest. It was warm and sweet and safe.

He sighed and shook his head. “He’s not.... We got to him in time. He isn’t my father’s. He doesn’t have a hold over Carter.”

Joe nodded. “I thought as much. I tried to repair the bonds as best I could.”

“It’ll be better once we get him back to Green Creek,” Gordo said as he stood. His knees popped. “Getting too old for this crap.” He put his hand on the back of my neck, pressing my face against his stomach. I clutched at his hips, breathing heavily. “Yeah, yeah. Good to see you too. We’re going to have a long talk. You’re up to your neck in shit, man.” He stepped away, wiping his eyes. “Fucking werewolves. You self-sacrificing assholes.” He jerked his head toward the door. “Joe. Outside.”

And then he exited the cabin without looking back.

Joe hesitated before looking to Kelly, who stood at the window looking out. “Won’t be long.”

“It’s fine,” Kelly said stiffly. “I’ll keep an eye on him. Let them know.”

I thought Joe was going to argue, but he didn’t. He said, “Go easy, all right? We don’t.... Just go easy.”

Kelly didn’t speak.

Joe kissed my forehead. “We’re gonna have so many words,” he said. “You have no idea the hurt you’re in for. And you’re gonna take it with a smile on your face.” He followed Gordo out of the cabin, closing the door behind him.

Silence fell.

I looked to Kelly.

His back was to me.

I wanted to go to him.

I didn’t move.

He said, “You found him,” and it was tight, the words strained. “Gavin.”

“He’s... yeah. I did.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know. With Livingstone the last time I saw him. I barely got away.”

“What happened?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Carter.”

I looked down at my lap. I could feel him. His anger. His hurt. It was bright and harsh, but it was *real*, and I didn’t know how to handle it. Not-Kelly had been a void. A black hole sucking in light. This Kelly, the real one, felt like a galaxy of stars.

“Did he hurt you?”

I winced. “Gavin didn’t. It was Livingstone.”

“What did he do?”

I didn’t want to say it. I wanted to keep it locked away. I said, “He broke my back.”

Kelly made a wounded noise, leaning forward, pressing his forehead against the frosted glass. “Jesus Christ.”

“I healed.”

“You *healed*,” he spat. “Oh, thank god for that.”

“I had to, Kelly. I had to help him. I don’t know what Livingstone was doing, but he was *hurting* Gavin. It was like he was feeding off him somehow.”

“How long have you been here?”

I didn’t know. “What day is it?”

Kelly said, “Thursday.”

“The date.”

I could hear him grinding his teeth. “December 9.”

Fuck. I didn’t know so much time had passed. “A few weeks, then.”

He smelled like he was burning. “And you didn’t think to get a hold of us? To let us know you’d found him? To even give us some idea you were still alive?”

“Phone broke.”

“Oh,” he said, and it was *mocking*. “Burner, right? Because you left your other phone in your room. Wanna know how I know that? Because I called it. After watching your fucking video, after screaming for you outside the house, I called it. I should have known. I really should have. It would have been too easy

to track you otherwise. But when I heard it ringing from in the house, I almost let myself believe you were still there. That even though I couldn't hear you, you were in the house and you were going to pick up the phone."

"I..."

"But you didn't," he said. "Because you were already gone. Like we hadn't just spent a year trying to get Robbie back. Like you hadn't witnessed just how much that destroyed me. No. Of course not. Because you got it in your head that you needed to go chasing after Gavin like he was the only thing that mattered."

"I didn't—"

He spun around. His eyes were orange. The thread between us, familiar and foreign all at the same time, thrummed as if plucked. "You want me to yell at you? You want me to scream at you? Fine. You asked for it. How could you? After everything we've been through, after everything that has been taken away from us, how the fuck *could* you?" He stalked over to me. I reached for him, but he knocked my hands away. His voice rose. "I *asked* you to trust me. I *begged* you to listen to me. That we would do all that we could to find him. That I wouldn't let this go. I wouldn't let *him* go. I told you to hold on to me as tightly as you could. And you walked away like it was nothing."

"No. No, it wasn't like that, it wasn't *like* that—"

"You didn't trust me enough," he said coldly. "You didn't believe me when I said I'd do anything to help you."

"You don't understand."

He laughed bitterly. "I don't understand? That's what you're going with? Fuck you, Carter. I understood better than *anyone*. Robbie was taken from us. Taken from *me*. For thirteen months, I did all I could to get him back. And even when half the pack was against it or, even *worse*, apathetic about it, I fought for him."

I couldn't look at him. I struggled to find the words. I said, "You weren't alone. Gordo, Ox. They—"

"I don't *care!*" he shouted at me. "Even if I was, I still would have done everything I could. I was never going to let him go. He's my fucking mate, and I would have torn this world apart to get to him, even if I had to do it by myself. And don't you dare try and say that's what you were doing here because it's not the same. You had your entire pack willing to help you, to do anything we could to get Gavin back. But you decided to play martyr. Like Dad. Like Ox. Like Joe. Jesus Christ, you were supposed to be better. You were supposed to—"

I stood. His chest bumped into mine. He didn't look away. He wasn't scared

of me. He wasn't intimidated. "You don't know what I've been through."

"Damn right I don't," he snarled. He shoved me, and I took a stumbling step back. "Because you got it into that fucking thick skull of yours that you had to do this on your own. Let me guess. You convinced yourself that it was better this way. Easier. That no one else would get hurt if you could find him on your own."

He wasn't wrong. Those days following the battle in Caswell were a haze. I felt like I was disappearing, fading into the background.

Kelly shook his head like he was disgusted. "We always try to have one fucking minute where we can breathe without worrying about what is coming next. Monsters. Hunters. Feral wolves. I never thought I'd have to face you abandoning our pack. Abandoning me."

I reached for him again. He wouldn't look at me. "Kelly, I need you. I love you."

His eyes were wet when he said, "You promised. You promised it would always be you and me. You *promised*."

And I said, "I know, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

He punched me in the mouth. I didn't see it coming. His fist smashed just below my nose, and my lip split as I stepped back, my knees hitting the edge of the bed. He looked shocked by what he'd done. I wiped the blood from my mouth with the back of my hand. It was bright red, a smear that looked like our mother's paint.

His eyes were wide.

He was panting.

The skin on his knuckles was split. They healed slowly.

He said, "I love you so much I can barely breathe. You were always supposed to be there for me. Like I always tried to be there for you. How could you leave me?" His face crumpled, and I thought I was dying. "Didn't you know what it would do to me?"

I grabbed his hand. He tried to pull away again, but it was halfhearted. He sounded like he was choking, his shoulders hunched up near his ears. He bowed his head against my chest, and I held on for dear life. His fingers tightened against my own, and it was a tether, an anchor, holding me down, keeping me from drifting away.

I said, "I never wanted to be away from you."

He said, "You left, you left, you left."

I said, "You were always with me. No matter where I went, you were there."

He said, "Ah, god, please."

I said, "I howled for you. Every moon. Just like I said I would. I sang, Kelly. I sang for you because I needed you to hear me."

He said, "I found you. I found you."

I said, "I'm sorry. I should have believed in you more. I should have trusted you more. I should have—" But whatever else I could have said was lost when he hugged me, when he wrapped himself around me like he was never going to let me go. He sobbed against my neck, and I swallowed thickly, eyes burning.

"I'm so angry with you," he whispered. "And I don't know how to stop."

"I know," I whispered back. "And I don't know how to make you stop."

"Don't. Don't take this away from me too. Let me have it. It's mine."

The door opened.

I looked over Kelly's shoulder.

Joe was there, watching the two of us, a strange look on his face.

"He's coming."

wolf brain/without you

Gordo stood near the tree line, arms crossed. He was muttering to himself, eyes slightly vacant. His tattoos were glowing, but it was different than it used to be. The feel of his magic washed over me, but it was quieter. More focused. He brushed his fingers over the scar tissue where the raven used to be. He heard us coming out of the cabin and shook his head. "It's not going to last long. If we do this, we have to be quick."

Joe stepped next to him, laying a hand on his shoulder. "We will be."

"Did you get ahold of the others?" Kelly asked.

"Yeah. Ox knows." He glanced back at me before looking into the woods again. "He'll call the others back."

"Others?" I asked.

"Yeah, others," Kelly said. His voice was flat. "Out looking for you like we've been for the past year. We got lucky and found you first. And wipe your mouth. You've still got blood on it."

"Do I want to know?" Gordo asked.

"I punched him in the face for being a fucking idiot."

"Yep. Didn't want to know." He rubbed his hand over his face. "He's almost here. Carter, it's probably best if he sees you first. He's going to be able to smell the rest of us the closer he gets. Is he going to run?"

"I don't know," I muttered. "He's kind of a dick."

Gordo snorted. "Yeah, I'm not surprised." He hesitated. Then, "Is he... is he loyal? To my father?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. Whatever Livingstone is doing to him, it's hurting him. I only saw it for a moment. It was like he was feeding off him."

"Is that when he broke your back?" Kelly asked, a nasty curl to his words.

Gordo turned to look at me, eyes wide. Joe didn't. He'd heard.

Fuck. “Yeah. That’s... that’s when he did that.”

“I’m also gonna punch you in the mouth,” Joe said without looking at me.

“Get in line,” Kelly grumbled. “I want another turn.”

“Children, that’s enough,” Gordo said. He took a step back, gaze still trained on the woods. “He’s almost here. Joe, Kelly, move away. He needs to see Carter first. We don’t know how he’ll react with the rest of us here. Especially if he’s feral. If he shifted back after Caswell, he might not even recognize us.”

“He knows,” I said quietly. “He’s been human here with me. He saved me from hunters. Bullet to the leg.”

They all stared at me again.

I really needed to learn to keep my mouth shut.

“Yeah,” Joe said, shaking his head. “I’m definitely going to punch you later. Just so you know.”

They stood behind me, leaving a few feet between us. The fog in my head was clearing. I felt present, more so than I’d been in a long time. They were angry. Their anger was alive and biting. But they were here. They had my back. They weren’t going to let me go again.

I could breathe.

I felt him in the woods. It was faint, but there all the same. I wondered if it had always been there. If I’d just been too lost in my own head to recognize it. It was thrumming, a low beat without words. It was like the moon.

I heard him in the snow. His quick breaths. He was hurt. Not physically, though he seemed weak. I didn’t think Livingstone was trying to kill him. He wouldn’t do that.

He growled.

He knew someone was here with me.

“Gavin,” I called, though I couldn’t see him yet. He blended in with the trees and the snow. “It’s okay. No one is here to hurt you. I promise.”

He was confused. Scared. Angry. It ran warm like a low fever. I thought he would turn and run. He didn’t. He paused somewhere just out of sight, and I heard him whine.

“What’s wrong with him?” Joe whispered. His eyes were red.

“What is it?” Gordo asked.

Joe said, “I don’t know. I haven’t felt anything like it before. It’s twisted. He’s...”

I took a step toward the trees. “Gavin. Come on, man. You know them. Okay? It’s Joe. Kelly. And Gordo.”

A wolf snarled.

Gordo rolled his eyes. “We can just leave you here. Take Carter with us and —”

Gavin burst out from the tree line, his fangs bared, hackles raised. His tail jutted out in a straight line, his head lowered toward the ground. His eyes were violet, and he snapped a warning at us.

I raised my hands. “We’re not going to hurt you. I swear. Gavin, look at me.”

His gaze darted behind me, tracking their movements.

“Jesus,” Kelly breathed. “I forgot how big he was.”

Joe snorted. “Don’t let Robbie hear you say that. Might get jealous.”

“*What?* Oh, fuck you, Joe, that’s not what I—look out!”

Gavin darted forward. He closed his jaws around my wrist. I winced at the pressure from his teeth, but he didn’t break the skin. He jerked his head back, tugging me away. I tried to hold my ground, but he dug into the snow. I stumbled forward as he let me go, standing in front of me, putting himself between me and the others. He backed up slowly, crowding against me, pushing me toward the trees.

“Well,” Gordo said. “We tried. Sorry, Carter. Looks like you’ll have to stay here.”

I smacked Gavin on the back of the head. He turned to look at me, eyes narrowing. “Knock it off. They’re not going to hurt me.” His nostrils flared, and he pressed his snout against my hand. I looked down to see the smear of blood. “Okay. I can explain that.”

“I punched him in the face,” Kelly said. “And I’m going to do it again.”

Gavin didn’t like that. His ears flattened as he fucking *hissed* at Kelly, a sound I’d never heard from a wolf before. I tried to walk around him, but he wouldn’t let me.

“This is going well,” Gordo said.

“Not helping,” Joe said, pushing by him. My little brother kept his hands up, palms toward us. Gavin had pushed us almost to the tree line. His tail twitched, the tip brushing against my hip. “Gavin. Look at me.”

Gavin did.

Joe nodded. He was being cautious, eyes only for the wolf. “That’s right. Hey. I know you didn’t expect us to be here. And I don’t even know if you understand me right now. But I need you to know that no one is going to take Carter from you. No one is going to hurt either of you. You have my word as an Alpha.”

Gavin whined, shoulders stiff.

“Yeah,” Joe said, taking another step. “I promise. You know me. You do. Somewhere inside that wolf brain of yours, you know me. Not only as an Alpha. But as Carter’s brother. I would never let anything happen to him. Or to you. You’re important, okay? And not just to Carter. To me too. You’re with me.” He tapped his chest. “Here. You’re my pack. You have been for a long time. And I’m sorry we didn’t see it for what it was. We should have done better. We should have done more. For you. For Carter.”

Gavin relaxed incrementally. I thought Joe was getting through to him.

It was a lie.

Kelly shouted in warning as Gavin launched himself at Joe, snow kicking up around him in a cloud of ice. He was quick, but Joe was quicker. He took two running steps toward us, then fell to the ground on his side, sliding through the snow. Gavin sailed over him, his teeth missing the top of Joe’s head by inches.

He landed roughly in the snow, paws slipping out from underneath him. He recovered quickly, whirling around as Joe stood in front of me.

“Gordo,” Joe snapped. “Now.”

Gordo raised his hand as his tattoos began to glow again.

I said, “*Wait*,” but it was already too late.

The air grew thicker, almost stifling. The hairs on my arms stood on end. Gordo’s magic felt *bigger* than it’d been before, unrestrained. Gavin snarled as his shift was ripped from him, the hair receding, his fangs receding into his gums. He grunted as he fell to his hands and knees, back rippling.

Gordo lowered his hand, looking weary.

I shoved by Joe and went to Gavin. I put my hand on his bare shoulder. “It’s okay,” I said, mouth near his ear. “They’re not going to hurt you. They want to help.”

“No,” Gavin said, the word sounding as if it’d been punched out of him. “No. No. Help. No. *Help*.”

“Yes help. Listen to me. You know them. Just like you know me. It’s Kelly. It’s Joe. It’s Gordo. Pack. They’re our pack.”

He raised his head, hair hanging down around his face. “Pack.”

“Yeah, man. Pack.” I looked up at the others. Gordo was pale, eyes like bruises. Kelly was tense, as if he thought Gavin was going to attack again. Joe gave us a wide berth as he circled around back to the others. “And pack is everything.”

He turned his head to look at me. “You. Call them. You. Brought them here.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t. But they found us all the same. Because that’s what pack does. We don’t leave anyone behind.”

“Hurt you. Broke you.” He started to reach for me, his claws extended. He pulled his hand back at the last second. I let it go. “Heard it.”

“Yeah, but I’m okay now. I healed.”

“Witch,” he muttered. He glared at Gordo. “Magic. I hate it. No magic. No more magic.”

Gordo opened his mouth, but I beat him to it. “Okay. No more magic.” Joe pressed his hand against Gordo’s chest to hold him back. “For now.”

Joe took off his coat. He tossed it to me. I caught it and placed it over Gavin’s back. I pulled his wet hair back over the collar. It was the first time he’d ever let me touch him like this as a human. Such a small thing, but I was in ruins because of it.

He pushed himself up, settling back on his legs. He grumbled as if annoyed when I tried to fix the coat. “Don’t need it.”

“Just... let me do this, okay?”

I thought he was going to argue.

He didn’t. I tried forcing his arms through the sleeves. He fought against it. I sighed and tried to zip it up instead. He pushed my hands away when I got a *little* too close to his junk.

“This is going well,” Gordo said, turning his face toward the sky.

THE CABIN THAT’D BEEN our home for weeks suddenly felt too small. Kelly and Gordo stood in one corner, watching Gavin as he paced near the door. He glared at all of us in equal measure, mumbling threats that never amounted to much.

Joe sat on the bed, head cocked, hands on his knees. It was surreal, seeing

them here after all this time. If it weren't for the ache in my back, I would have thought I was still dreaming. I had so much to say. I couldn't find the words to say any of it.

Gordo spoke first. "Does your truck still work?"

I nodded. "Think so. Started it a while back."

Gordo stared at me. "How long have you been here?"

"Weeks," Kelly said tightly. "He's been here for weeks."

"Kelly," Joe said without looking away from Gavin. "Go easy. We talked about this."

Kelly scoffed but didn't say anything more. It hurt more than I thought it would.

Gordo rubbed his jaw. "If your truck doesn't start, we can take one of the others. Who did they belong to? Joe and Kelly said they smelled blood at that other house."

"Hunters."

"Dead?"

"Very," Gavin muttered. "Killed them." He snapped his teeth at Gordo. "Made them bleed."

Yeah, it was a little more than that, but they didn't need to know that right this second. "A group of them. Not Kings, I don't think. They weren't organized. They were after me. There was a... situation. At a bar."

Gordo shook his head. "Of course there was." Then, "We could probably all fit in my truck, but it'd be tight. Probably better if we take two when we go."

Gavin stopped pacing, looking at Gordo, eyes narrowed. "Go?"

Gordo didn't look away. "Yes. Go. As in leave. As in getting your sorry ass back to Green Creek. And it would be just *grand* if you put on some pants. I don't need to see your dick out like that."

Gavin dropped the coat to the floor.

Gordo groaned and looked away.

Gavin looked pleased with himself.

"Carter," Joe said.

I jerked my head away. "What? I wasn't looking at anything. You can't prove it."

His lips twitched. "I didn't think you were." He nodded toward my bag on the floor. "That's all you got?"

“Yeah. Travel light.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Kelly muttered. He crouched down, pulling the bag toward him. He looked disgusted as he rifled through it. I didn’t blame him. What remained in it didn’t smell very good. I hadn’t been able to wash anything for a long time, including myself. He lifted the bag off the floor and set it on the bed next to Joe. Joe didn’t look at it. He only had eyes for Gavin.

“Not leaving,” Gavin said. “Stay here. I have to stay here.”

“Why?” Joe asked.

Gavin was growing agitated again. He was twitchy, moving like a marionette, limbs jerking. “Why,” he said. “Why, why, why. Always why. Bennetts. Always questions. Always talking. I hate talking.”

Gordo looked startled. “Well fuck me. I guess we do have something in common after all.”

Gavin bared his teeth at him. “Not your brother. Don’t want you. Don’t need you. Never have. Witch. Magic. It stinks. Hate it.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if you have any room to talk about smelling bad—”

“Gavin,” Joe said. “Look at me.”

He did, though he looked as if he tried to fight it.

“You can’t leave,” Joe said slowly. “You have to stay. Why?”

“Father,” Gavin said. “Big. Strong. Powerful. I hear him. In my head. He says stay, stay, stay. He’s wolf. He’s beast. I stay, he stays.”

“You’re keeping him here,” Joe said.

Gavin nodded, head jerking up and down.

“Away from everyone else.”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“Because he has you, and that’s all he ever wanted.”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“Is he your Alpha?”

And Gavin hesitated. He looked confused. Unsure.

Joe stood. “He’s not, is he? He thinks he is, but he’s not.”

Gavin was breathing heavily, chest rising and falling.

“You know he’s not,” Joe continued, sounding sure of himself. I was in awe of him, how different he was. Oh, he was still Joe, but there was more to him now. “He’s not your Alpha, because you already have one. Two, in fact. Isn’t

that right?”

Gavin bumped into me, and he turned his head to look at me. He grabbed my hand, his grip crushing. I didn't try to pull away.

“Gavin,” Joe said, voice deeper. His eyes filled with fire, and in my head, I heard the faint whisper of *pack* and *pack* and *pack*. “You were never his. No matter what he told you. No matter what he did to you. You were never his.”

Gavin hung his head, mouth slack as he panted.

Joe put his hand under his chin, lifting his head until he could look him in the eyes. “I don't know what's happened to you. And I don't know what you've been through, but an Alpha isn't supposed to hurt his pack. An Alpha is supposed to protect them. To keep them safe and whole.”

“In my head,” Gavin said miserably. “Always in my head.” He screwed up his face. “I hear him. Always calling. I keep him here. I stay, he stays.” He let my hand go, pulling his face from Joe's touch. “You go. Take Carter. Leave. Go far away.”

“And leave you here?”

Gavin nodded. “Yes.”

“What if I don't want to do that?”

“Then you die,” Gavin snarled. He pushed Joe away. “All of you die. He'll know. He'll know you're here. Magic. It can't last forever. Not your pack. Not my Alpha. Don't want this.” He glanced at me before looking away. “Don't want any of this.”

It stung more than I expected it to. And I was *tired*. “Maybe you should shift back. It's easier when you're a wolf. At least then you act like you give a shit about me.”

“Carter,” Joe snapped.

“I *don't*,” Gavin growled. “I've told you. Over and over. You don't listen. You never listen.”

“Whatever, dude. All I've done is try to help you. I left my pack behind to go after your sorry ass and you pull this crap? Go, then. Go back to your fucking father. See how long you last. I don't care anymore. You want us to leave you? Fine. We will.”

Kelly grabbed me by the arm, pulling me toward the door. “Outside,” he said. “Now.”

“Child,” Gavin spat at me. “Still a child. And don't call me dude.”

“Oh, fuck you, man,” I said, trying to get Kelly to let me go. “I'm not a

child. We're probably the same goddamn age. You don't know shit about me. You don't know—"

Kelly shoved me through the door and out into the snow.

I RANTED.

I raved.

I paced back and forth, throwing my hands up in anger.

I said we should just go.

I said we should just leave him here.

I was tired. My back hurt. My leg hurt. My head hurt. I couldn't focus. Kelly and Joe and Gordo were knots in my chest, and I couldn't untangle them no matter how hard I tried. I wanted to shift. To run as far away as I could.

I wanted to forget Gavin existed.

I said, "And who the fuck does he think he is? That fucking asshole. Ungrateful. That's what he is. He's ungrateful. We took him in. We gave him a home. We—"

Kelly said, "Bambi had the baby."

I stopped and closed my eyes. The air was cold and burned my nose when I inhaled.

"She got big, though please don't tell her I ever said that."

I laughed. It sounded like I was crying.

"End of August," Kelly said. "She worked at the bar all the way up until her water broke. And even then she poured a few more beers before she called Rico to let him know. He wasn't allowed at the bar those last few weeks. He would growl at anyone who got within a few feet of her, and she kicked him out. Told him to stay away or she'd beat his ass."

I wiped my eyes. "She could do it too."

"She could," Kelly said. "She's scary when she wants to be. She called Rico, and then one of her bartenders drove her to the hospital. And it happened fast, faster than I thought it would. Mom made Rico wear sunglasses, even when he was inside. He couldn't figure out how to keep his eyes from staying orange. He told everyone he had light sensitivity. It was ridiculous. But then he came out, and he was smiling so wide. So bright. And when he spoke, he only said two words before he broke down."

“What did he say?” I asked hoarsely.

“A boy.”

“I... wow.”

Kelly nodded. “Bambi came through like a champ. She was already barking orders by the time they let us see her, and Carter, oh my god. This kid, man. This tiny little kid. He looks like Rico. It’s... intense. And Rico, he was next to Bambi, and the way he looked at her. Like she was everything to him. I watched as he took this wet cloth and pressed it against her forehead. It was kind. And loving. And you could see from the look on his face that he couldn’t believe what was happening, but in the best way possible.” He looked off into the trees. “His name is Josh.”

“Josh,” I whispered.

Kelly said, “Joshua Thomas Espinoza.”

I jerked my head toward him.

“She asked Mom.” Kelly smiled quietly. “Said that even though she never met him, she thought she loved him. She said it was a gift to the wolves. Mom cried, but you could tell they were good tears, you know? I think people forget that it’s okay to cry when you’re sad, but it’s also okay to cry when you’re happy. It made her happy. For a little bit at least.”

I hung my head.

“And for a moment,” Kelly continued, “I could pretend all was right in the world. It was a lie, of course, but I tried to make myself believe it wasn’t. It was harder than I thought it would be. Because even though it was this great thing, there was still a piece of us missing. We weren’t whole.”

The door opened. Joe came out onto the porch. He looked at the two of us but didn’t speak. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the side of the cabin. Watching. Waiting.

Kelly said, “I hated you that day,” and I could taste the bitterness in his voice. “I didn’t want to, but I did. You should have been there. You should have been right by our side. Making jokes. Taking pictures. Demanding that you be the first to get to hold the kid. But you weren’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you mean it?”

“I think so.”

He shook his head as he glanced at Joe. “I’ve tried for a long time to understand, to see it from your perspective. And every time I do, I can’t get past

the fact that you just... left. That even in your grief, you thought you were doing the right thing. Leaving a note. A video. As if that would be enough.”

“I love you,” I pleaded with him. “The both of you. You and Joe. More than anything. I thought I was doing the right thing. You’d just gotten Robbie back. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy.”

His eyes flashed. “Really.”

“Yes.”

“How could I ever be happy without you?”

And oh, how that broke me. I wrapped my arms around my stomach, bending over, trying to catch my breath. I heard Joe step out into the snow, but I held my hand up, wanting them to keep away from me. I couldn’t handle them touching me. Not right now.

Kelly said, “When we got here, when we found that house, when we found your truck, all I could smell was blood and death. I thought we were too late. That...” He swallowed thickly. “I never want to feel like that again.”

“It’s his house, isn’t it?” Joe asked.

I nodded miserably. “It was. At one point.” And then, “Dad knew about him. About this place.”

“What?” Joe whispered.

“Gavin said Dad came here when he was a kid. Told him about wolves. And magic. Where he’d come from.”

“Jesus Christ,” Kelly muttered. He looked haunted. “Just when I think we’ve found out all there is to know about him.”

“Gavin came to Green Creek. When we were hunting Richard Collins. He was one of the Omegas that Ox and the others fought against.”

Joe’s eyes filled with red. “He *what*?”

“No. Not like... not like that. He didn’t hurt anyone. He only joined up with them to try and find Dad.”

“Dad was already dead.”

“Yeah. But he didn’t know that. Not until he got to Green Creek.”

Kelly sighed. “That means he’s been an Omega for a long time. Explains a lot if you think about it. It’s weird, though.”

“What is?” Joe asked.

“How connected we all are. Bennetts and Livingstones. No matter how hard we fight against it, it’s always there.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

They both looked at me. Kelly said, “Why?”

“Because it was all for nothing. You heard him in there. He doesn’t want... this. Our pack.” I almost didn’t say it. But then, “Me. This. Whatever this is. And I don’t care anymore.”

Joe snorted. “Yeah. Okay, Carter. You keep telling yourself that.”

I glared at him. “I *don’t*.”

Kelly squinted at me. “It’s like Mark and Gordo all over again.”

I reared back. “It’s *not* like—”

Joe rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Huh. I never thought about it that way. That’s... disturbing. But accurate. Grumpy asshole. Self-sacrificing asshole. Yeah. Okay. I see it now.”

I scowled at them. “I will fuck the both of you up, don’t think I won’t.”

“You look like the guy parents tell their children to stay away from,” Joe said. “It’s the beard. It’s kind of gross.”

“Fuck off, Joe.”

He grinned at me, and it was like we were kids again, just the three of us, and nothing had ever hurt us.

I said, “I know you’re angry with me. I know you don’t understand. I know part of you probably even hates me. But I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I could keep you safe. You... Shit has happened. To all of us. And all I wanted to do was to stop it from ever happening again. You could have Ox. You could have Robbie. You could have your pack. I’m your big brother. It’s my job to make sure nothing happens to you.”

“What about you?” Joe asked. “Who’s supposed to take care of you?”

“I... I don’t....”

“Because that’s bullshit,” Joe said. “No offense—you know what? Fuck that. *All* the offense. You’re an idiot, Carter. Like, the biggest idiot I’ve ever known in my life, and I’ve known a lot of them.”

“Damn right,” Kelly snapped.

“Yeah, you’ve got a point,” Joe said. “You’re our big brother. But that’s as far as it goes. Because it’s not just one way. We’re supposed to protect each other. That’s what brothers do.”

“That’s what pack does—”

“I’m not talking about pack,” Joe said sharply. “I’m talking about you and

me and Kelly. No matter what we've done, no matter what we've seen, it's always been the three of us. I never lost sight of that. Kelly didn't either. Why did you? And don't think it's because we couldn't understand. I was away from Ox for over three years. Robbie was taken from Kelly for thirteen months. We understand more than anyone else what it's like, Carter. And you'd just got done being an Omega, and you decided to run the risk of losing yourself again. For what? For Gavin? Do you really think he'd want that for you?"

"He doesn't want shit from me," I muttered.

Kelly shook his head. "You can't believe that."

"You heard what he said."

"I heard someone who's scared," Joe said. "Someone who's been lost for a long time. He can't trust us because he can't trust himself. You know what that's like. You were an Omega too. How much it fucks with you. He's doing what he can to keep his head above water. He's not living, Carter. He's surviving. And he's lashing out because he's trying to do what he can to protect you. He cares about you. You know that. I know you do."

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to believe him, but I didn't know how. I was still reeling at the fact that they were here, that they were real. I was being pulled in a thousand different directions, and I didn't know which way was up. "I don't know what to do," I admitted. "I can't think straight. My head, it's...."

"I know," Joe said quietly. "But for once in your life, just stop. Let us help you. You don't have to be strong for us all the time. We need to be that for you now. We would do *anything* for you." He sniffled. "You need to start remembering that you're not alone. We need you just as much as you need us."

I went to them then. I couldn't not. They were ready for me, arms open wide. They surrounded me, my head against their shoulders, and they allowed me this moment. To break. To be tired. To wish that things could be different. Joe's hand was in my hair, and Kelly was whispering in my ear, voice wet and cracked, saying he was still angry with me but that he was never going to let me go, that I was theirs, theirs, theirs, and it wasn't just a matter of pack. "We're brothers," he said. "And no one will ever be able to take that away from us. Carter, don't you see? We found you. We *found* you."

They held me up as my knees gave out, and I knew no matter what happened next, I wasn't going to be alone.

scar tissue/broken parts

Gordo stood in one corner of the cabin, Gavin in another.

They glared at each other, neither of them speaking.

They barely acknowledged us when Joe closed the door behind him. “Going well?” he asked.

“Heard every word you said,” Gordo grunted.

“Talking,” Gavin said. “Always talking.”

“It’s genetic,” Gordo said. “They never shut up.”

“Speaking of genetics,” Kelly muttered.

Gavin and Gordo turned their heads at the same time to look at him, eyes narrowed.

“We’re leaving,” Joe announced. “In the morning. All of us.”

Gavin snarled. Joe looked unaffected. He had the Zen Alpha bullshit going on, something he’d obviously learned from Ox. He repeated, “All of us.”

Gavin shook his head furiously. “Can’t. Stay here. Need to stay here.”

Joe said, “Do you know me?”

Gavin looked confused. “Joe. Alpha.”

Joe cocked his head. “Do you remember me from before? In Green Creek.”

“Yes.”

“And you remember the pack.”

He hesitated.

“Their names,” Joe said. “Tell me their names.”

He looked at me, but I didn’t speak.

Gavin said, “Joe. Kelly. Carter.” He sneered. “Gordo.”

Gordo rolled his eyes.

“Who else?” Joe asked.

“Stop.”

“Who else?”

Gavin backed away slowly, but he didn't have far to go. His back hit the wall. He said, “Why?”

“Because I asked you,” Joe said. It was subtle, but I heard the deepening of his voice, the undercurrent of Alpha. His eyes remained blue, but it was undeniable.

“Mark,” Gavin said, and my heart lurched in my chest. “Tanner. Chris. Rico. Jessie. Bambi. Dominique. Elizabeth. She dances. She sings. I like it when she sings.”

“We all do,” Kelly whispered, and I took his hand in mine. He didn't try to pull away, instead squeezing my fingers tightly.

“And?” Joe asked Gavin.

He shuddered like a tremor rolled through him. “Ox. Loud. Heard him. Alpha, but different.”

Joe nodded. “He is different. Alpha of the Omegas. Did you hear him above all others?”

Gavin shook his head.

“Who, then?”

He shook his head again.

“Gavin.”

“Carter,” he bit out. “Always Carter. Heart. His heart. It went—”

I said, “Thump, thump, thump.”

I could feel their eyes on me, but I only saw Gavin. He scowled. “Thump, thump, thump. Tricky heart. Makes me forget everything else.”

“Do you know why?” Joe asked gently.

“No.”

“I think you do.”

“No.”

“You want us to go away.”

“Yes.”

“To leave you here with your father.”

“Yes.”

Joe said, “Okay. We will. And we'll take Carter away from you.”

And Gavin's eyes filled with violet. His fangs dropped and his claws extended from his fingertips. He pushed himself off the wall, going for Joe. Before we could react, Joe sidestepped Gavin, grabbing his arm and twisting it behind him. Gavin struggled, but Joe didn't let him go. He put his head next to Gavin's, his nose near Gavin's ear. He said, "Maybe the others can't hear it. You're good, Gavin. But I know when someone is lying, even if they've convinced themselves they believe what they're saying."

Gavin laid his head back on Joe's shoulder, his throat bobbing. Joe let his arm go but didn't move away. "It hurts. It hurts."

"I know it does," Joe said. "But there's a way to make it stop. You trusted us once, I think. Even if you didn't quite understand it, you did. You stayed with us. You lived with us. You made yourself a home. This place? It's not where you belong. You don't need to go this alone. You're like Carter that way, carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, thinking you're doing the right thing. You're not. It'll crush you. Let me help you carry it. Let *us* do what we can to make it right. None of us want to leave you behind."

Gavin looked at me, eyes still violet. I nodded at him.

He was confused. Unsure. I didn't know what to say to convince him. We were close, I knew. So damn close.

It was Gordo who spoke next. "You trusted Thomas Bennett."

Gavin closed his eyes. "No."

"Okay," Gordo allowed. "Trusted him enough to at least try to find him. That's what Carter said, right? You went to Green Creek to look for Thomas."

Gavin didn't speak.

"You don't have to trust us," Gordo said. "Not yet, at least. But if you thought Thomas could help you then, you need to think about what we can do for you now. I don't know you. But if you're anything like me, you're thinking it's easier to do this on your own. It's not. Believe me when I say that. I tried for the longest time, and I ended up wasting years. Thomas was to blame for a big part of that. He wasn't perfect. He fucked up more than you know. But he loved us. He did what he thought was right. We've all had to pay a price because of our fathers." He pulled his sleeve back, revealing the scar tissue where the raven had once been. "Some of us more than others. Look at me."

Gavin did.

"You see this?" Gordo held out his arm, his stump smooth. The lines and symbols carved into his skin were familiar, the roses blooming. He traced the scar tissue with his finger. "This is the price I paid. This is how our father was

able to do what he did. A failsafe. I was only a kid when he had Abel Bennett hold me down. To take a needle and mark me. But it wasn't just about the tattoos or the magic or me becoming a witch like him. He was planning, even then. In case something ever happened to him. It was dangerous, more than even he knew. He used me to bring him back to life. And it went too far. The bite from the Alpha mixed with Livingstone magic and it twisted him into what he is now. You may think you have something with him. You may think he cares about you. And maybe he does, in his own way, like he did with Robbie. But in the end, he's using you. Just like he used me." Gordo dropped his arm, covering up the scar. "I promised myself I would never allow it to happen again, to me or anyone else. So I had Aileen and Patrice burn it off. It hurt like hell, but I would do it again if I had to. Because that's what you do for the people you care about. You give it all, and when it doesn't seem like enough, you give even more."

Gavin watched him for a long time before nodding slowly. "Mark."

Gordo blinked. "What about him?"

"He was there. When the raven burned."

"Yeah. He was. Even though I told him he didn't have to be. He doesn't... he doesn't listen."

"Like Carter."

Kelly squeezed my hand again, but he didn't have to. I knew what Gavin was implying. It was the first time he'd done so, even if it was in a roundabout way. Gordo and Mark. He thought we were like them.

Gordo snorted. "Yeah. Stubborn assholes. But that's the thing about the Bennetts. They get their claws in you and they'll never let you go. They rip your skin, blood spilling out, but still they hold on. I tried to fight it. I don't want to anymore. When we bleed now, we bleed together."

Joe let Gavin go as he took a step forward. Gavin went to Gordo and stood in front of him. It was like looking at a fractured mirror. Gavin reached up, fingers shaking. He poked Gordo in the cheek, trailing his fingers along his nose between his eyes. Gordo didn't move.

Gavin said, "I see me. In you."

Gordo sighed. "I wish you didn't. It'd make things easier."

"Livingstone."

Gordo shook his head. "Not anymore. Haven't been for a long time. It's just a name. It doesn't define me. I know who I am. I'm a Bennett. And you can be too."

It was profound, coming from him, this man who for so long had hated everything about who we were. And I never blamed him for that, not once I knew the truth.

Gavin said, "Bennett?"

Gordo nodded.

Gavin backed away from him.

I held my breath.

He looked at all of us, his gaze lingering on me. I didn't turn away.

He said, "He'll come. For me. For you. I hear him. In my head. He's Alpha."

"Your Alpha?" Gordo asked.

Gavin grimaced. "I... no. And yes. He needs me. I am his pack. He stays because I stay. He lives because I live. Takes from me. Makes him whole. Don't remember much, but it hurts. Like knives in my paws."

Jesus Christ. "That's what he was doing to you. In the cave in the woods."

He nodded miserably. "Monster. Beast. Like me."

I couldn't keep my anger down. "You're not him. You're nothing like him."

"You don't know. What I've done to survive." There was something sour emanating from him. It took me a moment to realize it was shame. "Hurt people. Didn't mean to. But I did. Monster. Same as him."

"I don't know that you are," Joe said. "Do you want to hurt me?"

Gavin glanced at him. "Sometimes."

"But not all the time."

He shook his head. "Thump, thump, thump. Keeps it away. A drum. A song." He started wringing his hands. "But sometimes I want you to bleed. All of you. Put my teeth in you. Bite you. Tear you. Monster."

I wondered if one could love a monster. If it even mattered. Whatever else my father had done, he had never been malicious, had never done something so wrong he couldn't take it back, even if it seemed like it at the time. Gordo knew that better than most. He understood absolution.

Gavin said, "He'll come. No matter what. He'll come for me."

Gordo grinned, razor-sharp. "I'm counting on it."

And that was when Gavin decided it was time to get naked. He dropped the shorts off his hips and stepped out of them.

"Jesus," Kelly hissed. "Carter, you're going to break my hand. Let me go!"

I dropped his hand, looking up toward the ceiling. “Sorry, sorry. Didn’t mean to.”

“Asshole,” Kelly muttered, shaking his hand. “And don’t think I don’t smell that. Now isn’t the time for you to get a boner over—”

I slapped my hand over his mouth. “Oh my god, would you shut *up*?”

He rolled his eyes. I grimaced in disgust and pulled away when he licked my hand, something he used to do when we were kids. He looked smug, and I never wanted to let him out of my sight again.

“What are you doing?” Joe asked Gavin.

“Shifting,” Gavin muttered. “Wolf.”

“Because it’s easier for you?”

Gavin started to shake his head but stopped. He glanced at me before looking down at the floor. “Yes. But not that.” He scowled again. “Carter said I be wolf and then act like I give a shit. About him.”

“Fuck,” I whispered. Then, “I didn’t mean that. I was pissed off.”

“I’m pissed off too,” Gavin said. He put his hands on his hips as he glared at me. “Thump, thump, thump. I hear it. So loud. Turn it down.”

“That’s not how it works. I told you that.”

“Why?” he said, and he was *mocking* me. “That’s you. That’s how you sound. Why, why, why.” He puffed out his chest and lowered his voice. “Turn into wolf, Gavin. Be human, Gavin. Put on clothes, Gavin. Answer stupid questions, Gavin.”

“That’s *not* how I sound!”

“I can’t believe we spent almost a year and drove thousands of miles just to watch you fail at flirting,” Kelly mumbled. He laughed when I punched him in the shoulder.

Gavin frowned. “Flirting. I’m not a girl.” He squinted at me before looking down at himself. I followed his gaze until I realized I was staring right at his dick.

“Gross,” Kelly said, nose wrinkling. “Seriously, man. I can *smell* that.”

“Shift or put on clothes,” I said, face hot.

“I see you naked,” Gavin said. “In Green Creek.”

“That’s not the same! And why the fuck were you staring at me when I was naked!”

He laughed then. It was like the first time I’d heard it, rusty and broken,

almost like he was wheezing. But the corners of his eyes crinkled, his lips pulled back in an approximation of a smile, and I wondered how it could be this easy. That I could ever cause such a thing so simple and extraordinary as him laughing. Someone like him, more wolf than man, feral and dark, but he was *laughing*, and I didn't want him to stop.

I said, "Please. Please come home. With us. With me."

His laughter faded, as did his smile. "Home."

"Yeah, home. Where we belong."

"If I stay?"

I took a deep breath. "Then I stay too."

Kelly started to speak, but Gordo shook his head.

"Why?" Gavin asked.

"You know why."

He nodded slowly. "I don't... know. How to be. Like this."

"Human."

"Yes."

"That's okay," I told him, and I'd never meant it more. "If you need to shift, then do it. If you think you can stay as you are, then do it. I just... I like hearing your voice."

He looked baffled. "You do?"

"It's a good voice," I said, and Kelly sounded like he was choking.

Gavin said, "I forgot. How I sound. Strange. It's strange. Speaking. It's hard. All jumbled."

"It'll get easier. I promise. I'll help you."

"Help me," he whispered. He took a step toward me, and everything else melted away. He stood in front of me. He was shorter than me by a good few inches. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me, if he felt the same as I did. Confused. Terrified. Desperate. And I needed to make sure nothing could ever hurt him again. "You'll help me."

"Whatever it takes," I promised.

He poked me in the chest. "Thump, thump, thump."

I took his hand in mine and pressed it flat against my chest over my heart. He stiffened but didn't pull away. "Whatever it takes," I said again, and it was the truth.

He heard it.

His eyes widened, his fingers curling against me.

Then he said, "Home," and I knew nothing would ever be the same.

HE LAY IN FRONT OF THE FIRE, shifted, his tail curled around him, his eyes closed.

"First thing," Gordo said, sitting with his back against the wall. "We leave first thing."

"He's right," I said. "Livingstone will know. He'll come for us. To Green Creek." Joe and Kelly were outside, the failing light coloring the sky in a bone-deep bruise.

"I know."

"Can we stop him?"

"We don't have any other choice."

I nodded. "He's... stuck in his shift. Like Gavin was."

"I don't think he expected it when we came to Caswell. I think he thought he was almost immortal."

"Because of what he did to you. The raven."

"Something like that."

"It's not fair."

He snorted. "That's an understatement."

I looked at him. "Tell me."

"About what?"

"Home. Tell me about home."

He said, "It's cold. There was snow on the ground when we left, though not much. Your mother put up some Christmas decorations. I asked her how she could focus on something so trivial. She told me that she knew you were coming back. I don't know how she knew, she just... did. She said you'd want to see it when you came back. That it would be a homecoming for you and Gavin. Ox helped. You know how he gets at Christmas. Like a little kid. Robbie enables him. You should see the shop. It looks ridiculous, all these lights and baubles."

"But you don't stop them."

"No."

"Why?"

He said, “Because it makes them happy. And I would never want to stop that.”

“Still bitch about it, though.”

He laughed. “I have a reputation to maintain.” He sobered. “It’s going to be rough. I won’t lie to you about that. But we’ll do as we’ve always done.”

“We’ll fight.”

“Yeah, Carter. We’ll fight.”

The door opened.

Gavin’s ears twitched.

Kelly came in, followed by Joe.

They looked at me.

“What?”

Kelly held out his phone.

The screen was lit.

A timer counted across the bottom.

And there was a single word on display.

It said *Mom*.

My chest hitched. “Is that....”

And through the speakerphone, she said, “Hello, my son. My love. My everything. Hello. Hello. Hello.”

I put my face in my hands and cried.

THAT NIGHT I SLEPT between my brothers, their bodies warm, their heartbeats familiar. I breathed them in, this scent of *packpackpack*, and for the first time in a long time, my dreams were green.

I awoke only once, late in the night. I looked toward the window. Gavin sat in front of it, staring into the dark.

I pulled out of Kelly’s arms. He frowned in his sleep. I reached down and smoothed out the lines on his forehead, whispering that I was here, that he was okay. He sighed, curling toward Joe.

I went to the window and settled on my knees next to Gavin. I rested my arms on the windowsill. It was cold, ice crawling up along the pane of glass.

“Thank you.”

He looked over at me, eyes violet.

I didn't look away.

“For keeping watch. Guarding. These past few weeks. I know you did while I was sleeping.”

He huffed out a breath, a low grumble in his throat.

“You don't have to do that. You don't have to hide from me.”

He looked back out the window. I leaned my chin on my arms, my beard scratching my skin.

He pressed his nose against my shoulder, a question without words.

I needed him to know. I needed him to understand. To hear me, to really hear me. And so I said, “This is ours. This pack. This life. This world. It's ours, and no one can take that away from us. We're going to be okay. You and me. We're going to live. And maybe it won't be perfect, but we'll figure it out. We'll make ourselves a home. I don't know what this is between us. I'll trust you to know what's right for you. But I just want you to know that I'm here if ever you're ready. It scares the shit out of me, but I know it's worth it because I know *you* are. I'm sorry I didn't see you for who you really were. You helped to fill in the broken parts of me, and I didn't even realize it, not until it was too late. I don't want to ever feel like that again. I came for you because you deserve to have someone at your side, someone who doesn't want to hurt you.”

He whined, pressing against me. His fur was warm, his wolf body hot.

“I don't know what this means or what it could be. But I think I want to find out. My father told me once that when I found you, when I found the person I was supposed to be with, I'd know. I didn't believe him. I wasn't like Joe or Kelly with their wide eyes and belief in something like magic. I get it now because of you. So whatever you want. Whatever it takes. You're with me now. Where you belong. And I'm not going to take that for granted again.”

He laid his head on top of mine, breathing in deeply.

We stayed there until the sky began to lighten.

shift

“We move quick,” Gordo said. “No matter what happens.”

We stood just inside the doorway of the cabin. Joe and Kelly were grim but focused. Gordo’s tattoos were glowing but muted. Gavin paced the interior of the cabin, nose to the ground. He stopped near the bed. He sneezed and shook his head before grabbing my pack between his teeth. He carried it to me, set it at my feet. He looked up at me, head cocked.

“You’re with me?” I asked him, and it felt like such a loaded question.

His eyes flashed violet.

And for a moment, I thought I heard a voice in my head. It whispered *carter carter carter*.

I reached down and took his face in my hands. “Stay with me. At my side.”

His tongue scraped my palm.

Gordo was watching us when I looked back at him. He arched an eyebrow.

I said, “We don’t stop. We don’t look back. No matter what happens.”

Gordo grinned, wild and bright. “Goddamn, I’ve missed you. You asshole.”

And then he opened the door.

“TWO TRUCKS,” Gordo said as we jogged through the trees. “You said yours still runs?”

I nodded. “It should.”

“I’ll drive. Joe and Kelly in the other truck. Gavin in the back. He can’t stay as a wolf for long. We’ll come across people soon enough. They’ll see him.”

“We can worry about that once this place is behind us,” Kelly said. He was breathing harshly, a thick stream of fog pouring from his mouth. “I hate it here. It’s like poison.”

“It’s him,” Joe said. His eyes were red. “He’s infected this place. I can feel it. The woods are dying, like he’s sucking the life from everything around him.”

I told myself the chill I felt was from the air.

THE TRUCKS WERE STILL PARKED in front of the house where we’d left them. I wondered if anyone would look for the hunters, if they’d be able to track them here. It didn’t matter. We’d be long gone if that ever happened.

There was a newer truck parked at the rear that hadn’t been there before. Joe told me it was Ox’s. He’d replaced the one that got wrecked when we fought in Caswell. I shuddered at the memory of the children raining down from the rooftops, their eyes vacant, their claws dripping with blood. I hoped they never remembered what had happened.

Kelly grabbed me by the hand as he stopped next to my truck. I looked at him.

He said, “This is real. I need you to know that. This is real. We’re here. We came for you, the both of you. You’re awake, Carter. I swear you’re awake.”

I hugged him tightly, breathing him in, relishing the beat of his heart.

“There’s time for that later,” Gordo snapped. “Get to the truck. Don’t get stuck trying to turn around.”

We separated. Kelly looked like he was going to say something else but stopped himself. Gordo was right. We had to focus.

Joe squeezed my shoulder before pulling Kelly toward the truck. My brothers looked back at me over their shoulders as if they thought I’d disappear once I was out of their sight. I didn’t blame them.

Gordo took my bag from me, and the keys. “Get Gavin in the back.” He turned toward the cab and opened the door.

I rounded the truck. Gavin followed me. The stench of blood was still thick in the air. It made my gums itch. I pulled down the tailgate, glancing at Gavin. He stood next to me, back rigid as he stared off into the forest. I touched him between the ears. He startled, looking over at me. “We good?”

He jumped into the back of the truck. It creaked and shook from side to side under his considerable weight. He whined at me. I understood. *Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go.*

I lifted the tailgate and locked it in place.

The truck rumbled to life, black exhaust pouring from the tailpipe and

making my eyes water. As I went to the passenger side, I glanced over my shoulder to see Joe back up slowly and execute a sloppy three-point turn. His truck's tires spun briefly before they caught, lurching forward as he turned down the country road.

I climbed inside and closed the door behind me. The heater was on full blast, but it hadn't yet warmed up. My teeth chattered. I reached to the back window and slid it open. Gavin stuck his snout in, nostrils flaring. His tongue lolled out between his fangs.

Gordo pulled forward toward the house. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

"I wouldn't count on it," I muttered.

He managed to get the truck turned around with little trouble. He pulled around the other vehicles, tree branches scraping against the passenger side. Ahead, the other truck's brake lights flashed as they waited for us to catch up.

Gordo turned the headlights on and off to let them know to keep going. They started up again, truck bouncing on the old road.

The house was barely out of sight behind us when Gordo grunted.

I looked over at him.

He was grinding his teeth, a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. Gavin pulled his snout out from the window, growling as he struggled to stay upright in the snow that had settled in the bed of the truck.

Gordo said, "He's awake."

The engine revved as he pressed his foot down on the gas pedal. We jerked forward just as a roar came from deep in the woods.

"Go, go, go," I chanted. I looked out the window, sure I'd see a large black mass barreling toward us. I pressed my hands against the roof of the cab as the truck fishtailed around a corner. Gordo spun the wheel, easing up on the gas as the truck drifted. We narrowly missed a tree, the trunk almost grazing the side of the truck. We straightened out and picked up speed again.

Ahead, Joe and Kelly hit the main road. They didn't slow as they turned right, sliding so much that I thought they'd overturn into the ditch, but Joe kept control. I looked behind us to check on Gavin and—

"Oh shit," I whispered.

I felt Gordo's eyes on me. "What? What's wrong? What's—"

Robert Livingstone crashed onto the road behind us, trees falling down around him. He rolled once, the ground shaking as he pulled himself up. It was one thing seeing him at night killing the hunters or circling the cabin. Or even in

the darkness of the cave. It was something else entirely in the daylight, the beast easily ten feet tall as he stood on his hind legs. His remaining eye burned in his massive head, the hair covering his body almost entirely black except for the white around his face and chest. His limbs were thick with muscle, and as I watched, he fell down on all fours, launching himself after us, fangs glinting in the weak sunlight.

“Hold on,” Gordo spat.

“To *what?*” I shouted, but it didn’t matter.

He hit the road, spinning the steering wheel to the right. The truck’s tires squealed as we swerved. Time slowed around us as I looked back out my window to see Livingstone crouched low, muscles coiling as he prepared to jump. I braced myself for the impact, knowing that if he hit us, it was all over. The truck would roll, and Gavin would be thrown from the back.

Gordo spun the steering wheel to the left, and the truck’s tires slid along the road, wet sludge spraying up around us. Gavin grunted as he fell to the side, almost tipping out and over the back of the truck.

Gordo slammed his foot on the gas. We shot forward *just* as Livingstone leapt, mouth open wide with what looked like endless rows of fangs, his misshapen hands in front of him, claws like black utility hooks.

I screamed for Gavin to stay down as Gordo regained control. The engine shook the cab as we shot forward, Livingstone roaring as he sailed over the bed. Gavin lay flat, but Livingstone reached for him, one claw gouging Gavin’s shoulder. Blood sprayed against metal. Livingstone snarled in fury as he crashed down onto the other side of the road and rolled off into the trees, which were torn from their roots. He got up almost immediately.

Gordo looked in the side mirror, hands tightening on the steering wheel as Livingstone began to chase us. “Oh, I have such a bad idea.”

I gaped at him. “What? No! No bad ideas!”

“Take the wheel. Keep us straight.”

“Are you out of your goddamn *mind?*” I yelled at him but did as he asked. Joe and Kelly were a couple hundred feet ahead, tearing down the road. “Maybe you should have let me drive, you dick!”

“You’re a terrible driver,” Gordo muttered. He turned in his seat, keeping his foot pressed against the gas. He pushed open the driver’s door, hanging out the side. Cold air rushed into the cab, whipping his hair around his head as he narrowed his eyes. He muttered under his breath as his tattoos flashed brightly. The roses twisted around the scar tissue where the raven had once been. The feel

of his magic was at once familiar and strange. There'd always been an order to it, even after he'd lost his hand, but this felt different. It crawled over me as the roses bloomed larger than I'd ever seen them. They grew along his arm, the vines stretching tightly, the thorns so real I thought they'd prick my skin if I touched them. The roses and vines curled around the stump of his wrist. I looked back as the road behind us split apart as if the tectonic plates beneath the earth had awoken angry. Tons of cement rose in the air as Livingstone roared. He tried to run through it, but a chunk of black rock slammed into his head, knocking him to the side. Gordo grunted as he brought his arm down, and I could actually *smell* the roses, the scent thick, as if I stood in the middle of a garden.

Livingstone hit the ground as the remains of the road fell down around him and on top of him. A red eye flashed once before it disappeared under rock.

"Take *that*, motherfucker!" I crowed.

Gordo pulled himself back inside the truck, pushing my hands away from the steering wheel. He hit the brakes hard, the hood of the truck pointing toward the road before we came to a stop. Ahead, Joe and Kelly did the same, and I could see them staring back at us with wide eyes.

Gavin pulled himself to his paws in the back. The wound was slowly healing. Damage from an Alpha always took longer. His fur was matted with blood, but he paid it no mind as he stared back at the ruins of the road.

"Was that it?" I asked. "Is he dead?"

Gordo shook his head, staring at his side mirror. "I don't.... It can't be that easy."

"You dropped a fucking *road* on him. How the hell did you do that?"

"You'd be surprised what I can do now that I've been unleashed."

A phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and tossed it to me. I looked down to see Kelly's name on the display. I answered. "Did you see that?"

"Why are we stopped?"

"I don't—"

"Fuck," Gordo said, and I looked back out the window again.

At first there was nothing.

And then a pile of cement shifted.

"No," I whispered.

But it wasn't the beast who rose.

A pale hand appeared. Human. Five fingers reached toward the sky. They

flexed once, twice before another hand appeared, the skin bloodied.

And then Robert Livingstone stood.

He was nude, his body covered with nicks and cuts in various stages of healing. His white hair fluttered around his head in the breeze. He only had one eye, the other shut tight and scarred over, a mass of tissue that wrapped around the side of his head. He shook himself and craned his neck from side to side.

“Jesus Christ,” Kelly whispered through the phone. “He can shift.”

He took a step toward us.

Gordo reached for the door handle. I grabbed his arm, held on tight. He glared over at me, trying to pull away. I said, “*Don’t*. Not like this. We can’t take him like this. Think of Mark, Gordo. He’s waiting for you. Please don’t do this.”

He slammed his hand on the steering wheel. “Fuck. *Fuck!*”

I glanced back and saw Gavin standing on his hind legs, staring back at his father. The wolf was stiff, his hair standing on end.

Livingstone tilted his head back and howled. It rolled over us, and I felt it down to my bones.

The call of an Alpha.

It echoed around us, and I felt the *pull* of it, the desire to submit, to bare my neck even though I knew he’d tear my throat out.

Gavin took a step toward him, chest bumping against the tailgate.

I reached back through the window, grabbed his tail, and yanked as hard as I could. Gavin jerked his head back at me, eyes violet.

“No,” I growled at him. “You don’t belong to him. He can’t have you. Fight it, you hear me? You *fight it*.”

Gavin stared at me for a long moment before turning back to look at his father.

I saw the moment it hit Livingstone.

When he realized Gavin had made his choice.

Something crossed his face. It was blue and blue and blue, but underneath I felt the pulse of *black*, of rage, his wrath rising up and smothering all else. The blue faded as his face twisted. His eye burned red. He nodded slowly.

And he said, “So this is how it will be, then. I see.” He pressed his fingers against his face, the skin dimpling. He pulled his hands away and looked down at them. “What have I become? This... thing.” He dropped his hands. For a

moment he looked like a frail old man, lost and confused. But then it melted away as his face hardened, his brow furrowing as his eyes narrowed. “You did this to me. Gordo. My son.”

“Go,” I said.

Gordo was transfixed, still staring at his side mirror.

Livingstone took a step toward the truck. “You can’t leave well enough alone. You never could, even when you were a child. And here you are again. I thought... I thought the boy would be enough. The princeling. I thought Gavin would....” He shook his head. “Why must you force my hand? I left you alone. I took what was owed to me and I *left you alone*.”

“Gordo!” I shouted. “Fucking *drive*.”

Gordo jerked out of his stupor. He looked at me like he didn’t recognize me. Then light filtered in again, and he looked ahead. I could hear Kelly shouting into the phone, but I ignored it. Gavin was snarling, and Gordo wasn’t moving. I glanced back to see Livingstone take another step. He turned his face toward the sky.

He said, “I can see the truth of it all. Of what I was supposed to become. And what I’ll do with it. This will end one way or another. Gavin. Come to me. Stay by my side. I never understood the ties that bind a pack together. I do now.”

I gripped his tail as hard as I could, but Gavin made no move to jump out of the truck.

A tear trickled down Livingstone’s cheek. “Even you, then? You stand with them? They take. They always take. They don’t know how to do anything but. Bennetts. All of them Bennetts.” He wiped his face. “Your world will burn. I’ll make sure of it. And in the end, when you’re begging me for mercy, pleading with me to spare their lives, I will remind you of this moment. When you turned away from me, your own father. And I will tell you *no*.”

“Kelly!” Gordo shouted. “Are they ready?”

Kelly said, “Yes.”

“Do it. Do it *now*.”

He was out of the truck before I could stop him. Gavin snarled at him but stayed where he was.

I put the phone back up to my ear. “Kelly. *Kelly*! What is he doing? He can’t do this on his own!”

And Kelly said, “He’s not alone. We never were. Look.”

They came from the trees. Dozens of them. I could hear their heartbeats,

rapid, like the flutter of a bird's wings. They stood between us and Livingstone.

He cocked his head and said, "What's this?"

Witches. All of them witches. Some I recognized from Caswell. Some from when I was a child and they bowed before my father. Two more stepped from the trees, moving slowly but surely.

Aileen and Patrice.

Livingstone smiled. "What do you think you could possibly do to me? This is my becoming. You can't touch me."

"Oh," Aileen said, her voice husky. "You'd be surprised what we can do. And we're not going to touch you."

Gordo said, "We're going to contain you. You're a wolf now. And I know how to trap wolves. You taught me as much."

Livingstone's eyes widened.

The witches all pulled out knives, some longer than others. They flashed in the sunlight, and I smelled the burn of silver. Gordo was first, slashing the scar where the raven had once been. Blood spilled. He jerked his arm out, blood landing on the ruins of the road. The others followed, slicing hands and palms and forearms. The stench of blood was immediately thick, mixing with the scent of silver. They all raised their hands as one, and I felt a large wave of magic began to build. Sparks filled the air in front of the witches, colliding and melding with each other, bright like fire.

Livingstone lunged forward. I screamed for Gordo, but Livingstone crashed into the sparks, which flashed as they amassed. He fell backward and landed on the ground, his nose broken but already healing, blood on his lips. He sat up, his hands flat against the pavement.

On either side of the road, as far as I could see into the forest, the barrier rose.

"Witches," Kelly said in my ear. "They came with us. Once we knew where you probably were, they came. They knew what he was capable of. His strengths. His weaknesses."

Livingstone picked himself up from the road as the witches lowered their arms. He slowly approached the ward. He raised a hand and hissed when it blackened as if burned once he pressed it against the ward. "Clever," he said. "I taught you well. You can't possibly think this will hold me forever."

Gordo shook his head. "Not forever. But it will for now. And that's all the time we need." He turned away from his father, walking back toward the truck,

his blood dripping onto the road. He held his head high, his shoulders squared.

He stopped when his father said, “Gordo.”

He didn’t turn around.

Livingstone said, “You’re making a mistake.”

Gordo’s eyes narrowed as he looked down at the knife in his hand.

Livingstone said, “Once I find a way out of here, I will come for you. I’ll come for all of you. And not you, not your pack, *no one* will be able to stop me.”

With a practiced move, Gordo flipped the knife in his hand and caught it between his fingers by the blade. He whirled around, hand coming up behind his head before throwing the knife. It spun end over end, and—

Livingstone clapped his hands together, catching the knife by the blade, the tip pressing into his forehead. A trickle of blood dripped between his eyes and off the side of his nose to his mouth. When he smiled, it stained his teeth. He dropped the knife to the ground, his hands already healing from the burn of the silver.

“Next time,” Gordo told him, “I won’t miss.” And then he turned around and came toward the truck. “Aileen, Patrice,” he said without looking back, “you know what to do.”

“We do,” Patrice said. “Get dem home. Do what you must.”

Gordo climbed into the truck, face hard. The truck roared as he hit the gas. We shot forward. Gavin lurched but remained upright, his tail curling around my hand. Livingstone stood in the middle of the ruined road, watching us. The last I saw of him was the red in his eye before we turned a corner, leaving him behind.

I WOKE UP SCREAMING in the middle of the night, still caught in the tangle of a nightmare where my brothers turned to dust in front of me, carried away on a harsh wind. They were gone, gone, gone, and I was alone.

It was dark. I couldn’t see.

And then my vision cleared.

Joe and Kelly were there, eyes wide, telling me to stop, Carter, please stop, you’re safe, you’re okay, we’ve got you, we’ve got you.

“Not real!” I cried as I struggled against their hands. “Not real, you’re not *real*. Why aren’t you real?”

They held me down, pressing me into the bed.

Kelly's mouth was near my ear. He said, "Listen. Listen to me." He took my hand and pressed it against his chest. His heart thundered. "Do you feel that? Do you hear it? That's how you know. You're safe. You're with us. We've got you. We're in a motel in Wyoming. We're with you. Me and Joe and Gavin and Gordo. All of us. I promise you."

My skin was slick with sweat. My head was pounding. I waited for them to dissolve again and leave me.

They didn't.

I closed my eyes, trying to calm myself. Joe's hand was on my forehead, brushing through my hair. He hummed a little song he'd learned from our mother. About how he didn't mind being lonely when his heart told him I was lonely too.

"He needs to be home," Gordo said quietly as Gavin growled. "He needs the pack. All of us."

My brothers lay on either side of me, and I didn't dream again.

I HEARD GORDO THE NEXT MORNING. He was pacing outside of the motel in the middle of nowhere. I saw him through the window, phone pressed against his ear. Kelly and Joe had gone out to pick up something to eat. Gavin was curled on the floor, a blanket covering him as he snored.

Gordo said, "And I don't know what to do. It's like it was before when everything was dark. When I left you behind even though every part of me was screaming to keep you with me. Mark, I don't know what to do. I don't know how to fix this. I don't know how to make it all end. We can't keep going on like this. I love you. I miss you. I need you. Please don't ever let me go."

I SHOWERED.

The hot water felt good on my skin. I tried not to focus on how dirty it was as it sloughed off me.

When I finished, I climbed out, rubbing myself with a towel, desperately avoiding the fogged-over mirror. I didn't want to see what I looked like, what the past year had done to me.

A disposable razor sat on the sink next to a travel bottle of shave foam and a small pair of scissors. They hadn't been there when I'd gotten in the shower.

I thought about ignoring it.

Instead, I wiped away the condensation from the mirror.

A stranger stared back at me, his eyes wide, his hair hanging down near his shoulders. His beard was unkempt over a thin face. His skin was pale, and as I watched, he rubbed a hand against his chest, his collarbones jutting out.

I didn't recognize him.

And yet he was me.

I didn't like this man.

But I understood him.

I started with the scissors, hacking off as much of the beard as I could. I cut my skin, and it bled. And healed. Bled. And healed. Dirty-blond hair filled the sink, and I saw the shape of my jaw, the sharpness of my cheekbones.

I spread the foam on my face. It was unscented but still stung my nose.

When I was finished, I looked at the man in the mirror again.

His face was too thin.

His eyes too haunted.

"Do it," I muttered. "Do it."

I flashed my eyes.

They flickered orange.

I told myself it was enough.

THEY STOPPED TALKING when I opened the bathroom door.

They all looked at me, but no one spoke.

I looked down at my feet, scratching the back of my neck.

And then I was surrounded by the scent of an old forest: organic decay, moss on trees, so bright and green. A hand gripped my jaw, forcing my head up.

Gavin stood there, turning my face side to side, his gaze roaming over every inch of my face. I let him have his fill.

Eventually he said, "There you are."

I wondered how he could say so much in so little.

HE MOSTLY SLEPT on the way home. We couldn't take the chance of him being seen as a wolf, so he stayed human. As we crossed into Idaho, he lay with his head on the window, using Gordo's coat as a pillow. His leg pressed against mine, and I didn't move it.

Gordo said, "Do you remember what it was like?"

"When?"

There was a song on the radio, something old and soft. He tapped his finger on the steering wheel. "When it was the four of us."

"I don't like to think about it."

He nodded as if he expected the answer. "Look at us now. All that we have."

"What?"

He shrugged. "Everything."

Gavin whimpered in his sleep, and I took his hand in mine without thinking, brushing my thumb against his palm. He quieted.

Gordo said, "I hated your father. For the longest time."

"I know."

"I wish I hadn't."

"You weren't wrong." Gavin's hand twitched in mine.

"I thought I knew him. But I didn't. He was more than he appeared."

"Why do you think he went to find Gavin?"

Gordo hesitated. "I don't know. Guilt? Or maybe he thought he was doing the right thing. He always tried, even when he was wrong."

"Your father thinks the same way. That what he's doing is right."

Gordo scowled. "My father is nothing like Thomas Bennett. And don't ever say anything like that again."

I was quiet for a while, the miles melting away. The moon hung in the blue sky, growing fatter every day. Whether by accident or design, we would arrive back in Green Creek the following day.

Sunday.

I looked down at Gavin's hand in mine. His fingers were thin and knobby. There were a few wiry hairs between his knuckles. His palm was soft, and I traced the lines and blue veins.

I said, "We were lost. The three of us. Grieving. Our father was dead. Our pack was broken. We were chasing a monster. But you came with us. You followed us. You watched over us. Why?"

Gordo looked out the window at the rolling farmlands. “Because you’re my family.”

“Even then?”

“Even then.”

I laid my head on his shoulder. He grumbled under his breath but didn’t try to move me.

THAT NIGHT I RAN with my brothers for the first time in a year.

Kelly shifted, Joe shifted, and I felt fragile and thin, like glass.

Gordo said, “Go. Run. I’ll stay with the trucks.”

I glanced at Gavin. He jerked his head toward Kelly and Joe, both of them standing at the edge of a forest. Watching. Waiting. He said, “Fine. It’s fine. I’ll stay with Gordo.”

“You’re just going to sit there and scowl at each other.”

“We are *not*,” Gordo snapped.

Both of them were scowling.

I turned away from them. I lifted my shirt over my head and dropped my jeans. The air was cool, but not like it’d been at the cabin. Leaves crunched underneath my feet. I breathed in and out, in and out, and I

I

am

wolf

i am wolf

brothers i hear my brothers

sing

sing for them sing so they can hear me sing so

they know i’m here i’m here i’m here

GORDO AND KELLY swapped trucks in the last miles.

Gavin sat rigid and straight next to me. He’d been this way ever since we’d passed the sign announcing we’d crossed into Oregon. I took his hand again, the first time I’d done so while he was awake. He gripped it tightly.

Kelly said, "Ghosts." It was sudden and out of nowhere. I was still getting used to hearing his voice again. Hearing his heart.

I looked at him. "What?"

"You saw ghosts."

There was a wolfsong in my head, and it was only growing louder. They could feel us. They knew we were coming home. They were waiting for us, and though it was faint and distant, it would only get louder.

I said, "I don't... I saw you."

"You were talking to me."

"Yes."

"Did... I talk back?"

All the time. "Every now and then."

"Do you know why you saw me?"

"Because I wanted it more than anything."

He nodded. His eyes were wet, but his cheeks were dry. He said, "It's because I'm your tether."

"Still. Always."

And Gavin said, "Ghost Kelly because of tether?"

I looked at him. It was the first time he'd spoken in hours. "Yeah. Home. He reminded me of home."

"Home," he whispered. Then he broke the world. "I saw ghost Carter. When I was alone. Always talking. But there was no thump, thump, thump. Wasn't real. Wasn't *there*. Thomas told me about tethers. Wolves need them. Witches. Humans too. He said people forgot that. Humans need them too. Didn't understand. Do now."

The silence was deafening.

Kelly's voice was choked when he said, "Gavin? Did... did our father turn you into a wolf?"

Gavin shook his head. "No. Not him. He said I couldn't be wolf. Because of blood. Magic. I wasn't... like that." He sounded frustrated, like he couldn't find the right words. "I asked him. Give me bite. Make me like him. He said no. I was mad. Made him leave. Told him never come back. He was sad. He hugged me. I didn't hug him. But I did it. I found a wolf. Alpha. Red eyes. When I was older. Bit me. It hurt. I almost died. Alpha said I couldn't be in pack. He said I was dark. My eyes weren't right. Violet. Always violet."

My hands shook. He didn't let me go.

Gavin said, "Easier as wolf. Didn't need anyone. Didn't need pack." He looked out the window. "Alone. Scared sometimes. I found other wolves. Like me. Omegas. And then the bad man tried to hurt us. To make us listen. To make us his."

There was a buzzing in my ears. "Bad man?"

He nodded. "Richard Collins. I didn't want to listen. I didn't want to be with him. I tried to tell others. Tried to make them leave. But they didn't want to. I didn't know what to do. Brain on fire all the time. He made it worse. Bees in my head."

Oh, how I hated the beast and all that he'd done. All that he'd taken away. "Did he know who you were?"

Gavin shrugged awkwardly. It was such a human thing. He was learning. "No. Didn't like him." He bared his teeth. "Bad, bad man. Tried to get in my head. I wouldn't let him. Different now. Found it. What Thomas told me to find."

"What was it?" Kelly asked.

And Gavin said, "Tether. I found tether. Thump. Thump. Thump. Sound never left. Never went away until I went away. Then ghost Carter there, but I didn't hear it. Not like before. I asked him why. He said because I was crazy." He frowned. "Don't like ghost Carter very much." He stiffened as if he heard what he was saying. "Don't like real Carter very much." But he didn't pull his hand away from mine.

"But your eyes," Kelly said. "You're still... you're still an Omega."

"I know." He looked back out the window. "But I'm not bad wolf. I'm good wolf. I don't hurt people. Only those that try to hurt me. Makes me feel bad if I do. So I don't." He looked like he was going to say something else, his mouth opening and closing, but no sound came out. I thought he was done until he sighed. He lifted his hips and reached into the pocket of the jeans Gordo had given him. They were loose on him. He said, "Here. This. This is yours. I kept it for you." He frowned. "Well. I kept it for me. That's stealing. I don't like stealing."

And he handed me the photograph of three smiling boys.

"What is it?" Kelly asked.

I showed him. "I... had this in the truck. Took it with me." I didn't need to say where I'd found it after it went missing, but I thought Gavin knew already.

“Kept it on the dashboard so I could see it whenever I needed it.”

Kelly took the photo from me and glanced down at it, throat bobbing up and down. He nodded and then set it on the dash. He pressed his fingers to his lips and then touched the faces of the boys.

We drove on.

AN HOUR LATER I FELT IT.

The wards, so much bigger than they'd been before. I closed my eyes as I let it wash over me. It was healing, or something so close to it that it didn't matter.

I opened my eyes in time to see the sign for Green Creek.

At the bottom, carved into the wood, was a howling wolf.

daddy rico/hello hello

My father said, “Here it is.”

I opened my eyes and looked out the window. The trees were green and seemed to stretch on for miles. I could smell them. The scent was old. Familiar. Flashes pulsed in my head, bits and pieces of how it used to be. A tiny town in the mountains. A wolf pack running under a full moon.

Mom looked back at us. She smiled at me and Kelly, but her smile faded when she got to Joe. Mom and Dad said he’d get better. I didn’t believe them. “Joe,” she said quietly. “Do you see?”

Joe didn’t answer. He didn’t look at her.

Kelly poked him in the cheek. “Hey. Joe.”

He turned to look at Kelly, who flashed his eyes at him.

Joe’s lips twitched, almost like he was trying to smile. But he didn’t.

“It’ll be different here,” Dad said. “Better. You’ll see. Everything will be better.”

I didn’t know who he was trying to convince.

Kelly sighed and dropped his hand back to his lap. “There’s no other wolves.”

“No,” Mom said. “But that’s okay. We have each other. And you and Carter will get to go to a real school. Meet new people.”

“I don’t like new people,” Kelly said.

Mom shook her head. “You’ll learn. You have to. You—”

Joe made a noise. It was small, but there. A sigh, an exhalation. Almost like a whine. I could see Dad’s eyes widen in the rearview mirror as Mom turned around.

But Joe wasn’t looking at us.

His hands were pressed against the window. He made the sound again.

Dad slowed.

I looked back to see Mark doing the same behind us in the large moving truck.

“Joe?” Mom asked. “What is it?”

But he ignored her. He was looking out the window at a diner, a place called the Oasis. I could see a woman inside. A waitress. She stood next to a table. Sitting at the table was a kid. He looked like he was my age, but bigger. His hair was dark. He was smiling at the woman. She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead.

“Joe?” Dad asked.

But Joe never looked away from the window.

Soon the kid from the diner would show up in the yard, my brother tugging on his hand, telling us of candy canes and pinecones. Of epic and awesome.

But that was later.

My father said, “Let’s go home.”

We drove on.

I saw it before we left the street. My father did too. I know he did.

The sign.

GORDO’S.

He didn’t say anything.

I didn’t either.

GREEN CREEK HADN’T CHANGED in the year I’d been gone. It looked as it always did. Oh, some of the stores looked as if they’d gotten a fresh coat of paint, and the awnings were new, but it was still the same town I’d left behind. Lights had been hung up on lampposts and garland placed along benches and signs.

And the people.

All of the people.

They heard us coming.

They appeared in the doorways.

On the salted sidewalks, the melting snow shoveled off the curbs.

They filled the streets.

Kelly slowed the truck to a halt before turning it off.

“Why are we stopping?” I whispered.

I felt him looking at me. “You know why. They’ve been waiting for you.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

He said, “You can. I know you can. After everything, you deserve this. They’ll want to see you.” And then, remarkably, he laughed. “Mr. Mayor.”

I groaned. “Holy shit. I forgot about that. How the hell did that happen?”

“I have no idea,” Kelly said. “Everyone is going to yell at you.”

I looked at him. “They know?”

He nodded. “They do. They... they aren’t pack. But most understand what it means. Or at least the idea of it. They know you’re important to us. To this place.” His smile trembled. “To me.”

I reached over and wrapped my hand around his neck, pulling him close. He pressed his forehead against mine. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Never giving up on me.”

He breathed me in. “You’re my brother. I would never let you go. And you made me a promise once.”

“That I’d always come back to you.”

“And you did.” He laughed again. “You did.”

He climbed out of the truck. People swarmed him, all talking excitedly. They waved at us through the windshield, standing on their tiptoes, trying to see me. To see us.

I looked at Gavin. “All right?”

He shook his head. “Loud. All the noise. I don’t... They don’t know me.”

“Not as you are now. But they remember the wolf always following me around.”

He scowled at me. “You die easy. Fall in hole or something and die.”

Because *that* was something that often happened. “We’re going to have to talk about everything. And it’s not going to be a one-sided conversation.”

He looked away.

“But not yet. Let’s get through this first, okay?”

He nodded stiffly.

And then I heard a howl.

My chest hitched. I knew that song. I knew it very well.

It echoed through the street. The people fell silent. They bowed their heads as if in reverence.

I looked out the door Kelly had left open.

The crowd parted.

There, standing in the middle of the street, was an Alpha.

He was as big as I remembered him, bigger than almost anything in the entire world. He wore a work shirt, his name stitched in two red letters on his chest. He told me once when he'd first been given a shirt like it that it made him feel like he had a place to belong. That he'd found his home.

Oil stained the tips of his fingers.

His dark hair was a little longer, ruffling in the quiet breeze.

He smiled, slow and sure.

I almost fell out of the truck trying to get to him, needing to feel him, needing to know he was real and to let him know that I had never forgotten him, had never forgotten any of them, and please, please, please let me still be in your pack, please let me still be your Beta, please let me stay.

The townspeople spoke in hushed whispers, reaching out to touch me on the arm, the shoulders. They didn't touch my neck because they knew it wasn't their place. But I only had eyes for him.

I moved as if in a dream, the colors around me muted and hazy.

And if it was a dream, if I woke and found none of this was real, I would never recover.

I stopped in front of him.

He watched me, the power emanating from him all-encompassing.

I fell to my knees, grabbing his hand and holding on as tightly as I could.

And with the last of my strength, I tilted my head to the side, baring my throat to him.

His smile broke. He took in a great, shuddering breath, closing his eyes. He pulled his hand away from me, and I felt cold. But then he cupped my face, his thumbs brushing my cheeks.

He opened his eyes. They swirled with a mixture of red and violet.

Oxnard Matheson said, "Hello, Carter."

"Alpha," I whispered.

The smile returned full force. He held me in his big hands, and I turned my

face to kiss his palm. Somewhere deep inside my head, I heard his voice for the first time in a long time. It was faint, but I knew it would grow stronger.

It said, *BrotherPackLove i hear you i see you you are here you are home.*

“Did you find what you were looking for?” he asked.

I nodded in his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“For?”

“Everything.”

“That’s... appropriately vague.”

I said, “Please. Please let me stay. Please let me come home. Please don’t let me leave again. Ox, Ox, Ox, I can’t do this on my own anymore. I’m tired. I’m so tired, Alpha. And I can’t, I can’t, I *can’t*—”

He pulled me up before I knew what was happening. And then he enveloped me, wrapping his arms around me, holding me against him. I clutched at his back, and for a moment I was reminded how it felt to hug my father. How safe it always made me feel. How it always felt like everything would be all right in the end. I didn’t know what I’d had when I left. I didn’t understand, not fully. I did now.

Ox whispered in my ear, quiet words of love and peace, a song that only exists between brothers. Even when my knees buckled, he held me up. I tried to take it in, tried to take it all in, but it was too much. It was too big. Too grand. I felt so small.

He pulled away, but only just. His breath was warm on my face.

He said, “My Beta. You’ve been gone from me for a long time. From all of us.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so goddamn sorry.”

He shook his head slowly. “There’s time for all of that later. Let me look at you. Let me see you.”

I did. His gaze crawled over me, and then his fingers brushed against my throat, and there it was in my chest. A bright light. A bond between an Alpha and his wolf. It wasn’t like it was with Joe. Joe’s was ingrained with me because our blood was the same. Ox’s was different but no less important. He leaned forward and kissed my forehead. I knew everyone was watching us, but I didn’t care. All that mattered was that my Alpha was accepting me back, even in the face of all I’d done.

He said, “He’s here. You found him.”

I nodded. “He’s scared, Ox. He’s—”

“Motherfucker!”

I barely had time to react before my breath was knocked from my chest. I went down hard, rolling on the ground, heavy bodies falling on top of me.

“You stupid *asshole*,” Rico growled, orange eyes bright.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Chris snapped.

“You’re the dumbest wolf in the history of any wolf *ever*,” Tanner snarled.

“Can’t... breathe....”

“Yeah, well, you deserve it,” Rico said, sitting on my legs. He was dressed like Ox, in his work shirt and pants. He’d apparently decided a goatee was the right thing to do for his face. I wondered how much shit Bambi gave him for it. I hoped it was a lot. “What the fuck were you thinking? I always knew you were an idiot, but I didn’t think you were *that* big of an idiot.”

“It’s the mystical moon magic,” Tanner said. He was behind me, near my head, leaning over me and studying my face. “Makes you do dumb things like killing deer and running away to chase after a piece of ass.” He frowned. “Do you even know what do to with a dick? I mean, good on you for realizing what everyone else knew for a long time, but man, you’ve gotta change your whole outlook on things. I know what to do with *my* dick, but someone else’s?” He shook his head. “That’s a lot of work.”

“Would you stop talking about *dicks*?” Chris hissed at him. He was crouched at my side, my hand in his. “Everyone can hear you!”

Tanner rolled his eyes. “Oh, like they don’t know.” He looked down at me again. “I’m being serious. Everyone knows.”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. I glared at Rico. “Would you get off me?”

“Nope,” he said easily. “You’re lucky I’m not tearing out your intestines.” He lifted his right hand, holding it above my stomach. Claws popped out from the tips of his fingers. “I’m pretty much the best werewolf that ever existed. I got that shit locked down like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Are you... threatening me?”

He squinted down at me. “Yeah. Is that not clear?” He looked at Tanner and Chris. “I thought that was pretty clear.”

Chris shrugged. “I got it. But Joe said that Carter was a little nuts, so maybe he forgot what it felt like to be threatened.” He looked down at me again. He leaned forward until his face was a few inches from my own. “He still *looks* like Carter. Too thin, but otherwise, yeah. Are you still a little nuts?”

Tanner shoved him. “Don’t joke about stuff like that. It’s mean.”

“I’m trying to see if he’s Omega Carter or Regular Carter.”

“Oh,” Tanner said. “Huh. Right. Well, then. Keep going. I want to know now too.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

They looked down at me, startled.

I couldn’t stop. I clutched my stomach, the sound bellowing out of me.

“Uh-oh,” Rico said. “I think we broke him.” He stood up, his feet on either side of my legs. He held his hand out for me. Still laughing, I took it. He pulled me up with ease, stronger than he’d ever been as a human. He squawked when I hugged him. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered into my throat as he patted my back. “Good to see you too. *Pendejo*.”

Chris and Tanner apparently didn’t want to be left out, and I wondered wildly what an outsider would think if they came into Green Creek at that moment. They’d see the streets filled with people who were watching four grown men clutching each other like it was the last thing they’d ever do.

“All right?” Chris asked as they pulled away.

I nodded, wiping my eyes. “I am now.”

Tanner looked over my shoulder. “I see you got your boy.”

“He’s not my—”

“Nope,” Rico said. “Not even going to listen to that. You want to tell that shit to yourself? Fine. Knock yourself out. But don’t you try and say that to us. Not after what you did to find him. I will fucking lay you out. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Oof,” Chris said. “That’s right. You haven’t met Daddy Rico yet.”

“Do it,” Tanner whispered to me. “Call him Daddy Rico. See what he does.”

“Daddy Rico,” I said promptly because I was helpless to do anything but.

And oh, how Rico *smiled*. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket. He flipped it open, and an entire *sleeve* of photographs in plastic fell out. There were at least ten of them, and in all of them was a baby with a shocking amount of dark hair. “He looks just like me,” Rico said proudly. “Well, that’s what *I* think. Bambi says he looks like her grandfather, which, I mean, don’t tell her I said this, but that’s just ridiculous. Why would my child—excuse me, *our* child—look like an old man?” He shook his head. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Again, don’t tell her I said that.”

I reached out and touched the pictures. “Is he pack?”

Rico puffed out his chest. “Damn right he is. Future Team Human right here. I’m going to give him my guns when he’s old enough.”

Oh dear god. “How does Bambi feel about that?”

Rico shrugged. “It was her idea. She’s pretty much the best.”

“Joshua,” I said. “Joshua Thomas Espinoza.”

He nodded. “I didn’t know your dad, not well at least. Met him a couple of times. But it seemed like the right thing to do. Bambi thought so too. We asked your mom, and she said it was okay.” He looked nervous. “You’re okay with it too, right?”

I hugged him again. “Yeah.”

He laughed in my ear, patting my back. “Trust us,” he said quietly. “From here on out, okay? Just... don’t do anything like that again. You scared us, Carter.”

I pulled away. “I’ll do my best.”

He wasn’t pleased to hear that, but he didn’t argue. “Come on. Let’s get to the house. I know there are some people who want to see you.”

I looked around. “They’re not in town?”

Tanner shook his head. “It’s Sunday, papi. Tradition. They’re at the house waiting for us. We only came into the shop today to get ahead on work so we can close for a couple of days. Give you a proper welcome back. Probably yell at you a little too.”

Chris grabbed me by the arm, pulling me back toward the truck. “By proper welcome, he means lying on top of you. You know how it is.”

“Being a werewolf is so weird,” Rico said. “If I’m not randomly craving hunting down some raw meat, then I’m wanting to make sure everyone I know smells like me. But I can do backflips for whatever reason, so I guess it all evens out.”

“He does them even when there’s no reason to,” Tanner whispered to me, and I wanted to hear them talk forever. “Walking into a room, walking into the garage, just... walking anywhere, really. It got old real fast. You’ll see. Maybe you can convince him to cool it. He doesn’t listen to the rest of us.”

We were stopped almost immediately, people crowding around us, smiling widely as they shook my hand or squeezed my arm. They said they were happy to see me, that it was good I was back, that it wasn’t the same without me. A few of them told me they’d taken over some of my responsibilities to the town, even though the title of mayor was mostly for show, to keep Bennetts embedded into

the fabric of Green Creek.

Will, the owner of the motel on the outskirts of town, was one of the last. He was carrying, his revolver strapped to his hip. He hugged me roughly. “Good to see you, Carter,” he said. “You tell me where to shoot, and I’ll kill whatever I need to. Been training some of the guys.” He stepped back. “And by guys, I mean men *and* women. Jessie made sure of that. Said that women are just as good a shot as men. I thought about arguing with her, but then a couple of the girls from the diner put me to shame during target practice, so I decided it was best I let Jessie do whatever she wants. Seemed safer, anyway. I’m all about female empowerment now.”

I grinned at him. “Jessie is scary when she wants to be.”

“Don’t I know it. Now, get on home, you hear me? Your mama is waiting. You’re probably in for an earful. I’d hate to be you right now, that’s for sure. Elizabeth Bennett is not to be trifled with.”

He turned around and started waving his hands. “That’s it!” he yelled. “That’s the show, folks! Get out of the damn road and let them through. Boy’s gotta get home so they can do werewolf stuff. Let ’em hear it!”

My skin prickled when the humans tilted their heads back and howled. All of them. They’d gotten better at it. They almost sounded like wolves.

I paused when I saw Ox standing at the passenger side of the truck. He wasn’t speaking, though the window was rolled down. Gavin’s head was bowed.

“What’s going on?” I asked Kelly. I trusted Ox, but it still made me nervous.

Kelly shook his head. “Just... being near him, I guess. Letting him know that he’s welcome. That he was always supposed to be here.” He looked at me. “Does he know that, you think?”

“He’ll learn,” I muttered. “One way or another.”

“Go easy on him, Carter.”

I blinked. “What?”

Kelly bumped his shoulder against mine. “He’s not used to this. He’s been a wolf more than he’s been human, and for a long time. He’s got to learn how to be this way again. You’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“I can do it,” I said, hating how defensive I sounded.

“I know. And he’s lucky to have someone like you. Just be gentle about stuff.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Gentle? Gentle about what?”

He sighed. “Oh boy.”

“*What* stuff? Kelly? Kelly!”

But he ignored me as he walked around to the driver’s side.

Ox reached in and touched Gavin’s shoulder. Gavin didn’t pull away, but it looked like he wanted to. He was radiating so much discomfort a human could have sensed it. Ox withdrew his hand. “Whenever you’re ready,” Ox said. “I’ll be here.”

Gavin nodded tightly. He lifted his head and relaxed when he saw me.

THE DIRT ROAD WAS THE SAME.

The trees were the same.

Gavin was breathing heavily. Before I could ask him what was wrong, he reached over and grabbed my hand again and pulled it into his lap.

I said, “Thump, thump, thump.”

He nodded. “Loud. Always loud.” Then, “Ox. Oxnard.”

“What about him?”

“Said I was still Omega.”

“Yeah. I guess you are.”

“Said I didn’t have to be. That I needed to trust him. He would be my Alpha. Joe too.”

I needed to tread carefully. “They were once. Weren’t they?”

“I don’t know.” He looked down at our hands. “Maybe.”

“He won’t hurt you. Neither will Joe. They want you here almost as much as I do.”

He looked at me. Kelly had given him a piece of leather cut from his pack. Gavin had used it to pull his hair back off his face, tying it off. It looked good on him, even if his brow was furrowed. “You’re different.”

“How?”

He shook his head. “Just... more. Different. Stronger? I think. Not like you were before.” He flashed his violet eyes at me. “You were like me. Animal. Wolf. And in the cabin, the same.”

It hit me then. “You didn’t know me as a Beta. I was always an Omega, ever since you came to Green Creek.”

He looked away. “Not like me. Not anymore.”

I squeezed his hand. “Is that bad?”

“I don’t know. Just here. By myself.”

“You’re not,” Kelly said, and Gavin jerked his head up. Kelly glanced at him before looking out at the road before us. “It doesn’t matter if you’re an Omega or a Beta. You don’t have to do this alone, Gavin. You saw what happened when you left. Carter found you. Remember that, okay? And this isn’t just about Carter. We were all looking for you.”

“Looking for my father,” Gavin bit out.

“That too,” Kelly allowed. “But if we could find him, we could find you. And not just because of what you are to my brother.”

“What am I?” he asked, and it was a challenge.

“Yeah,” Kelly said dryly. “I’m not even going to touch that. You two can figure that out on your own. I think.”

I opened my mouth to snap at him, but the words died on the tip of my tongue.

I barely noticed the blue house passing us by on the left.

Because there, standing on the porch at the house at the end of the lane, was the rest of my pack.

Robbie was bouncing on his feet, his glasses crooked on his face.

My uncle Mark was smiling a secret smile, the raven on his neck looking as if its wings were fluttering. Gordo had told me they’d thought about trying to remove Mark’s raven like they’d done to his own, but Aileen and Patrice hadn’t thought it necessary.

Bambi stood near the door, a bundle in her arms. I watched as she leaned down and pressed a kiss to a small sliver of skin.

Jessie had her arm wrapped around the waist of Dominique, her head lying on her shoulder.

And there, walking slowly down the steps, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, was a queen.

My mother.

Elizabeth Bennett.

Her hair sat in a loose ponytail over one shoulder. Her hand was already at her mouth, and even from this distance, I could see the sheen in her eyes.

“Mom?” I whispered.

She tilted her head back toward the sky, tears falling freely. She was beautiful, this woman, this wonderful woman who had given so much. A sharp

lance of guilt pierced my heart because I knew that I'd only added to it. I needed her forgiveness. I needed her to see me. I needed her to tell me I would always be her son, even in the face of what I'd done.

She was all I could see.

Kelly climbed out of the truck.

I pulled my hand away from Gavin.

I stepped out into our territory. It washed over me, and I wanted to howl because this was where I belonged, this was where I was supposed to be.

This was my home. This place. These people.

My mother took a step toward me.

She said, "Carter."

She said, "Hello."

She said, "You're here."

She said, "I knew you'd come home."

She said, "I always knew."

And then she was running.

I caught her as she leapt at me. I stumbled back but somehow managed to stay upright. Her hands were in my hair, and she was sobbing against my chest, and I'd forgotten how much *bigger* than her I was, the top of her head barely at my chin, and I was struck by the dissonance in her, how fragile she seemed. How breakable, but it was all a lie. She was strong, stronger than anyone else I knew. I didn't know how she'd done it. How she'd survived after all she'd lost. And I, blinded to anything else but Gavin, Gavin, Gavin, had only added to it. These happy tears were for me, but I didn't know if I deserved them.

I said, "I found him. Mom, I found him, and I know I should have listened, I know I should have trusted you more, but I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I was lost in my own head, and I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I could keep it away from you. Keep all the death and blood and fire. That if I could do this on my own, you wouldn't feel like you were being torn apart."

And she said, "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Not anymore. You're home. You're home, and all the rest will come later." She pulled back, taking my face in her hands. Her smile was watery, her cheeks flushed. Her blue eyes were so much like my own, and I wished I could be as brave as she was. As forgiving. And, as she was a mother, she said, "You're too skinny. Why are you so skinny? Didn't you eat? I'll feed you. I'll feed you until you're sick of food, and then I'll make you eat more."

I laughed then, at the ridiculousness of it all. And if it came out cracked and soft, then it was just for us.

She kept ahold of me as the others came, never letting me get too far away from her.

Mark was first. My father's brother. He looked different, though it wasn't entirely physical. He was a Beta again. He seemed calmer, more at ease. He pressed his cheek against mine, rubbing his scent into me. I sucked in a breath, and I remembered being a kid, maybe five or six, and my uncle putting me up on his shoulders, my legs draped over his chest. "You ready to fly?" he'd said, and I crowed with my arms over my head. He'd run then, run through the forest, faster than any human, the wind whipping through my hair. He'd been laughing, and when we'd come back, my father had smiled at us, arms over his chest.

Mark said, "I'm so happy you're home. After all this time. Here you are."

"Here I am," I whispered, and then he was with Gordo, kissing him soundly, lips smacking. Gordo grumbled at him, but he didn't mean it. He was smiling, the lines around his eyes and mouth deep and kind.

Jessie came next, standing in front of me, looking me up and down critically. "Bennett."

"Alexander."

"You're up to your neck in shit."

"I figured as much."

And then she jumped on me, wrapping her legs around my hips, her chin hooked over my shoulder. "Dumbass," she muttered against my skin. I spun her around, her hair smelling like lilacs.

Dominique was there, eyes alight. They were orange, and it was a piece of a puzzle I never knew we were missing. She was *packpackpack*, and I wondered what she sounded like when she sang to the moon now that she had found healing. She spoke in her whiskey-smooth voice, her lips quirking. "I'm not going to jump on you."

I set her girlfriend down. "You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure, white boy. You're as thin as a whisper. I don't think you can handle me."

I grinned at her. "We could always find out." I held out my arms.

"Another time." She leaned in and kissed me on the corner of my mouth. "Welcome back, Carter." She stepped back, Jessie taking her by the hand as she wiped her eyes.

Robbie nearly tripped down the steps. The haunted look that had been a permanent fixture since he'd returned to Green Creek was gone. The recovery of his memories had taken a toll on him, but he'd had the pack to hold him up as he found his place again. He was shaking his head, and before he came to me, he touched Kelly's face, fingers trailing along his jaw. "You did it," he said quietly.

Kelly nodded. "Told you I would."

Robbie turned to me. He puffed out his chest, hands on his hips. "I'm going to kick your ass."

I blinked. "Uh. Okay? Well. You can *try*, but unless you learned some new shit while I was gone, you're going down, Fontaine."

And then he was in my arms. "You don't know what it was like," he whispered. "You can't do that again. Not to Kelly. Not to Joe. They need you, Carter. And we do too, almost as much as they do. Promise me. We can't go through this again."

And even though I couldn't make such a promise, I did anyway.

Bambi was last. She moved slowly down the steps with her precious cargo. Rico was at her side, and it was as if he was glowing from the inside. He was strutting, continually glancing between Bambi and the baby in her arms.

They stopped before me.

Bambi said, "Would you like to meet your nephew?"

"But we're not—"

"Carter."

"Yes, ma'am."

And then I had an armful of blanket and child, Rico telling me I needed to prop up his head, adjusting my elbow until I had it right. "I read a lot of books," Rico told me. "I take this shit very seriously."

I looked down.

Joshua Thomas Espinoza stared up at me, blinking slowly. His eyes were dark, like his father's. Rico pulled the blanket back slightly, and a little hand reached up to touch my nose and chin. I pressed my lips against his forehead, breathing him in. "Hello," I whispered to him. "It's so nice to meet you. I'm Carter. Apparently I'm your uncle, even though that's not quite how genetics—"

"Carter."

I shook my head. "Yeah, yeah." I looked up at Bambi and Rico. "You did good."

“Right?” Rico said. “He’s pretty much the most beautiful baby ever born. And I can say that with absolute certainty. I’ve seen baby pictures for most of the people here. You were all ugly compared to him. Especially Tanner.”

“Hey!” Tanner glared at him. “You *know* I was dropped a few times. It’s not my fault I had a weird-shaped head. Not cool, man.”

And then my mother said, “Who do we have here?”

I turned to look at who she was talking to, Bambi taking Joshua back.

I had a moment of panic, fierce and terrible, when I saw the truck was empty, the passenger door hanging open. He was gone, he was gone, he was—

“Hello,” my mother said.

A timber wolf stood at the back of the truck, peering around the side. He saw us looking at him and ducked back like he was trying to hide, but he was too big. I could see the tops of his ears over the truck, the curve of his back. He leaned his head forward again just barely, nose and whiskers twitching. He whined quietly and pulled his head back again.

I started to step forward, but Ox grabbed me by the arm, shaking his head. *Just wait*, he mouthed.

I did.

Mom approached the timber wolf slowly, her shawl fluttering behind her. She only had eyes for him, and he watched her warily, ducking his head back behind the truck again as if she wouldn’t be able to see him.

She stopped near the back wheel well and took the shawl from her shoulders, settling it on the ground in the thin crust of snow. She sat down upon it, hands on her knees. It was cold, and I could see the gooseflesh along her arms, but she stayed still.

She said, “Gavin.”

He made a noise that I’d never heard a wolf make before, almost like the hoot of an owl. It was as if he were acknowledging her. He knew what she was.

She said, “You were with us for a long time. And I knew you as much as a mother knows her children, though you were always as you are now. I would like to see your face, if you’d show it to me.”

He pawed at the ground.

She nodded as if she understood. “You saved us. You saved Carter. When all seemed lost, when my son’s fate lay in the hands of a monster, you found it in yourself to let go of the wolf and return to your true self. I never got a chance to thank you for that. I’d like to now.”

He leaned around the truck again, this time his whole head. His eyes were violet.

“You had a place here,” she said. “With us. Even when you were lost to your wolf, you recognized us for what we were. What Gordo was. What Carter was. Isn’t that right?”

He huffed out a breath in response.

“But regardless of family or fate, you would still have belonged to us just as much as we belonged to you.”

He stepped out from behind the truck.

“Jesus,” Rico whispered behind me. “I’d forgotten how big he was.”

Gavin glanced at me over my mother’s shoulder. I nodded at him, and he turned his gaze back to her, though he kept his distance.

“I know you’re scared,” she said. “And you’re unsure. It’s blue. But I see the green in you. You know us. You know this place, don’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

He took a step toward her.

She said, “Can I tell you a secret?”

He cocked his head.

She said, “I knew your mother, brief though the moment was. I have this... gift. Ever since I could remember. It doesn’t always work, but when it does, I know what I’m witnessing. Certain people shine. Brightly, as if their innate goodness was a palpable thing. Her name was Wendy. Wendy Walsh. And she shone. It was happenstance, this meeting, the passing of ships in the night. She didn’t know who I was, but I knew her. She was lovely. An innocent in all of this. She didn’t know what we did. She didn’t know what your father truly was. She only saw what he allowed her to see, as was his way.”

Gavin growled.

Mom nodded. “She was his tether. Was it fair of him to put that burden upon her? It would be hypocritical of me to say one way or another.”

Joe leaned his head against Ox’s shoulder.

“But I know this,” Mom continued. “She shone brightly. And I wondered then, as I do now, what things would have been like if only we’d done right by her. If Abel Bennett had brought her into the fold instead of sending her away. We are wolves, yes. We can do many things that others cannot. But we can still make mistakes. Awful, terrible mistakes. We should have seen what was coming. We should have known how deep the darkness ran within our own

pack. We didn't, and she suffered because of it. Her hand was forced in a way it never should have been. And you... you were never given a chance to know you had a family. A brother."

Gordo looked away, Mark whispering in his ear.

"I'll ask for your forgiveness," my mother said. "But I won't demand it. It's not conditional of you being here. You'll always have a choice of whom to trust. But if you allow it, I would like to earn it. I know it'll take time, and time may be something we don't have. But you are not a thing to be discarded. You are flesh and blood. You are important. And not just because of my son or my witch. You are important to me, to this pack, because you have proven yourself beyond measure. We have lost much. We have suffered." Her voice cracked, but she pushed on. "But we stand tall, because we are the Bennett pack."

Gavin bowed his head.

She reached out slowly. He didn't pull away as she pressed her hand on the underside of his jaw, lifting his head. She looked so small compared to him, but she was unafraid. "Regardless of what relationships you forge with the pack, what decisions you make about the future you see for yourself, you will always have a place here. I have missed you. I know the wolf before me, and if you'll let me, I'd like to know the man."

He stepped away from her. He looked above her at the rest of us. No one spoke.

He looked to me.

I nodded.

He walked back behind the truck. The hair along his back began to recede as muscle and bone shifted. He gasped quietly. Gordo stepped forward. He went around to the passenger side of the truck and gathered up the clothes Gavin had discarded. He walked to the back, muttering to his brother that it was too cold to be naked. Gavin grunted, and Gordo sighed.

When Gavin reappeared, he was wearing jeans and a coat, though he'd forgone the shirt and shoes. He looked skittish as he stepped out from behind the truck, hands clenched in fists at his sides.

"He's like a hotter version of Gordo," Bambi muttered.

Jessie snorted into her hand as Rico glared at the both of them.

But Gavin only had eyes for my mother.

She stood slowly. "Gavin," she said.

He nodded, head jerking up and down, eyes darting side to side. I wanted to

go to him, to tell him it would be all right, but I was rooted in place.

“I like your face,” Mom told him. “It’s a good face.”

He grimaced, hair hanging down. He reached up and brushed it back. And then he said, “Music.”

“Music?”

He nodded again. “You. In the kitchen. Or... painting. You play music. You sing.”

“I do,” she said.

“I... like. The music. I like it. When you sing. I remember.”

I could hear her smiling. “I thought as much. You should know that no one else watches me paint. I won’t allow it. It’s private. Personal. I need focus. Not even Thomas was allowed in my studio. He never knew how to stay quiet. His sons get that from him.”

“Always talking,” Gavin muttered.

“Yes. They tend to do that. There was only one other person who ever watched me paint, and though our time together was brief, I will treasure it always.”

“Who?” Gavin asked.

“Her name was Maggie. She was Ox’s mother. And like your mother, she shone brightly. I loved her more than I can put into words.”

“She’s gone,” Gavin said.

“Yes,” Mom said quietly. “Gone with the moon. Like so many others.”

He gnawed on his bottom lip. “Not good. At this. Being human.”

“You seem like you’re very good at it to me, but I understand how it’s easier to stay as a wolf. Before you came, and after Thomas and Maggie were taken from us, I only knew grief. I was a wolf for many months. It hurt too much otherwise. But pain is life. It reminds us of what we have. It’s a lesson I wish none of us had to learn, but sometimes we don’t have a choice. And yet here we are, as we are now. Together again. I know it’s not what we planned, but I like to think everything happens for a reason.”

“My father.” His mouth twisted down.

“Yes.”

“Bad wolf.”

“Is he?”

Gavin held up his right hand. He extended his claws. “In my head. Voice.

Heard him. Didn't want to, but did. Only way. I thought. And I...." He looked frustrated. "Can't find words."

Mom said, "You seem to be doing just fine to me. He's still out there."

He lowered his hands, the claws disappearing. "Still out there. Come. He'll come here."

"I know."

"Bring pain. Hurt."

"He'll try," my mother said, her voice growing harder.

"For me," Gavin said. "He wants me. Robbie too. Heard him. Gavin, Robbie. Gavin, Robbie. He loves me. Loves Robbie."

"I'm sure he does in his own way. But sometimes love is poison, and it drips in our ears until our blood runs with it."

"Bring pain," he said again, suddenly insistent. "You. Pack. Everyone. I go, he stays away."

"Do you want to go?"

I couldn't breathe.

He looked around. At the house behind us. At the blue house behind him. At the dirt road that led away, away, away, and I knew it was pulling at him, whispering for him to run as fast and as far as he could.

But then he turned back around to us, to her. He said, "Thump, thump, thump."

"What's that?"

"Heart," he said. "Carter's heart."

"You hear it."

"Yes."

"It speaks to you."

"Yes."

"What does it say?"

He looked stricken. "Gavin, Gavin, Gavin. Not poison." And then he went to her, his head bowed. He pressed it against her chest, his arms hanging at his sides. He breathed heavily and shuddered when my mother reached up and put her hands in his hair.

"There you are," she whispered to him. "Hello, hello. You're home. So, no. No, Gavin. You aren't to go away again. We are stronger together than we ever are apart, and this is where you belong."

it's platonic/into this river

They left us alone for a time. Kelly and Joe wanted to follow me from room to room like they had when they were kids, but Mom pulled them away, telling them to let us be, at least for a little while.

Gavin was twitchy, like he wanted to shift back to a wolf but was fighting against it. He crowded close as we walked into the house. My throat closed when I first went inside, the scents of home washing over me, embedded into the bones of this old house. The history here was long, and though it wasn't always good, it was still mine.

Nothing much had changed. It looked as it had the day I left. The door to the office was closed, and I couldn't make myself open it, remembering how lost I was the last time I'd been inside, recording a video for Kelly and feeling like I was dying.

Gavin followed me up the stairs as I trailed my fingers along the wall.

"It's all the same," I said.

"No."

"No?"

"Louder. Bigger. More."

I looked back at him. "You've never been in here without being a wolf. You seem to be doing okay with the stairs."

He scowled. "I know how to walk."

"That's good. I'd hate to have to carry you."

"Lie."

I snorted. It was surreal being back here with him as he was now. Even in my wildest dreams while on the secret highways, I never allowed myself to think this far ahead. How it would be if I found him and brought him back. I was at a loss as to what to do. What to say. How I should act, what I should ask him. There was so much I needed him to hear, but I could think of none of it.

We stopped in front of a closed door.

“Room,” he said. “Our room.”

“Our room,” I echoed. Then, “You don’t have to stay here. Not if you don’t want to. Kelly told me he and Robbie are back in the blue house now that all the Omegas are gone. His old room is empty, if you want it. Or anywhere else.”

“Stay here,” he said. “Better.”

“For who?”

“You,” he said. “So you don’t die.”

I sighed. “I’m not going to die.”

“You say that. How many times you almost die?”

He had a point. We seemed to almost die more than I cared to think about. “We’re safe here. We—you can heal.”

His scowl deepened. “Not broken.”

I held up my hands. “Not saying you are, dude. But I know how I feel. And I can imagine what it must be like for you. We’ve been through shit for a long time.”

“Not dude.”

He looked outraged when I flicked him in the forehead. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen no matter how much you say it. And listen to me.”

He batted my hand away. “I am. I always do. You never stop. I listen to you. You need to listen to me.” He had a stubborn set to his jaw as he glared at me.

“I can do that. I can listen.”

“I stay here.”

“Good to know,” I muttered, but he wasn’t fooled. He pressed against my back as I turned toward the door, urging me forward. I twisted the doorknob and pushed it open.

The room had been cleaned recently, though motes of dust hung in the air. I stepped inside, and Gavin followed. I collapsed onto my bed with a groan. The bed in the cabin had been terrible. Mine was soft, the blankets heavy and warm. I pressed my face into the pillow. It smelled like Kelly and Joe, as if they’d lain here in my absence. I told myself I was just going to rest for a moment before getting up and going back downstairs. But my eyelids were heavy, and I felt like I could relax for the first time in a long time.

I opened my eyes again to see Gavin standing naked above me.

I groaned and put my hand over my eyes. “Come on. You gotta warn me

when you're going to do that."

"Oh. Carter?"

"Yeah?"

"I took off my clothes."

I peered at him through my fingers. "You're a fucking asshole. And I swear to god, if you're making fun of me, I'm going to end you."

"Not make fun. Don't know how."

"You're a goddamn liar, and you know it."

He shrugged. "Prove it."

"Put your clothes back on."

"You see your brothers naked."

Jesus fucking Christ. "Okay, wow. You really need to not say that outside of this house. And now that I'm thinking about it, don't say it inside this house either."

"Why?"

"Because it sounds weird."

"It's true."

"I know that, but other people won't understand."

He crossed his arms over his chest, almost like he was pouting. "People know about wolves here." He made it sound like *I* was the idiot.

"Still doesn't mean you can tell them that. Werewolves are one thing. Nudity is something else entirely. It's—*why are you still naked.*"

"Itchy. Clothes itchy."

He wasn't wrong. I was still wearing Kelly's jeans, and even though I hated having them on in bed, I wasn't quite sure I could trust myself to take them off while he stood there in all his glory. The universe had a terrible sense of humor, putting us together. "You have to put on clothes if you're going to stay human."

"Fine."

I took my hands off my face and saw him shift back to a wolf. He shook himself before he turned to the bed, laying his head on the mattress, eyes wide as he stared at me. "Oh no. You can stay on the floor. I'm finally in my bed again, and I'm going to stretch—stop it!"

He growled at me as he bit down on the leg of my jeans. He started tugging them off, almost pulling me down to the floor. The jeans slid from my hips. He got them half off before he started on the other leg. He jerked his head again, and

I threw my pillow at him.

From somewhere below, I heard Gordo say, “Maybe we should have left them in Minnesota. We need to soundproof that room so I don’t have to hear if they start screwing. I’m already scarred enough as it is.”

“Fuck you, Gordo!” I shouted. “I’m not going to—Gavin, you’re ripping my pants off!”

Gordo sighed deeply.

Gavin looked pleased with himself, holding my pants in his mouth. He shook his head side to side, letting them flap around his head before he dropped them on the floor. He put his front paws up on the bed. I tried to kick him off, demanding that he stay on the floor. But he was a three-hundred-pound timber wolf, and he was apparently going to do whatever the hell he wanted. He climbed up and over me, his back paw nearly squashing my junk before he settled on my legs, turning so he faced the door. He lowered his head and closed his eyes.

“Get off me.”

He didn’t react.

I tried to move my legs. I couldn’t. “Gavin, I mean it.”

He opened one eye scornfully.

“Move.”

He growled and closed his eye again.

“Fine. Whatever. Do what you want. I don’t care.”

He huffed out a breath like he thought I was full of shit. Which, to be fair, I pretty much was, but I still had to save face somehow.

I closed my eyes again, planning on resting just for a moment until I could clear my head.

A moment later I was asleep.

My dreams were green, and I ran with wolves.

I WAS GROGGY WHEN I WOKE. The sunlight had moved from the floor to the wall, which meant it was late afternoon. Gavin was breathing slowly, his tongue lolling out onto my leg, my shin wet with his spit.

“Gross,” I muttered.

I heard someone chuckle.

I looked over to see Mom sitting in the chair at my desk, her legs folded underneath her.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” I told her.

She shrugged. “Sure. Though you should know that excuse has never worked on me.”

“What’s going on?” I tried to sit up, but Gavin moved in his sleep until he was lying on my knees. My shins were probably crushed, and I’d never walk again.

“I was watching you sleep.”

“Mom,” I groaned. “That’s creepy.”

She smiled. “Is it? I hadn’t noticed. Besides, I’m allowed. I’m your mother.”

I waved my hand at her. “How long have you been sitting there?”

“A few minutes.”

“Oh, that’s not—”

“I lied. An hour.”

“*Mom.*”

“Consider it penance for leaving.”

I sighed. “That’s... fair. Still creepy.”

“I never claimed not to be.” She nodded toward Gavin. He was twitching in his sleep. “Is he all right?”

I looked back at the ceiling. “I don’t know. It’s gonna be slow going. He’s been a wolf for years. You heard him. It’s easier. I don’t even know how he managed to shift back in the first place back in Caswell.”

“Really,” Mom said dryly. “You have no idea what would have caused him to shift back. No idea at all.”

“I’m going back to sleep,” I announced. I closed my eyes. Then, “You’re still watching me, aren’t you.”

“No, of course not. I’m watching Gavin.”

“Mom!” I turned my head to look at her again. She was laughing quietly into her hand. “You’re not funny.”

“I’m hilarious. I’ve always thought so. Just because you don’t appreciate my sense of humor doesn’t make it untrue. Your hair is long.”

“Didn’t have enough time to get it cut,” I muttered.

“Kelly told me you had a beard. He referred to it as an infestation on your

face.”

“I was busy.”

“Too busy to have basic hygiene?”

“Mom.”

She stood from the chair and walked over to the bed. She leaned over me, her hand pressed against my forehead. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

My eyes stung. “I think so.”

“Was it worth it?”

“I...”

She said, “I think it was. In the end. I’m not happy with the way you went about it, and you’re grounded for the rest of your natural life, but I’m so very proud of you. I don’t know if he’s ever had someone fight for him as hard as you have.”

“You can’t ground me,” I said weakly, her praise like a fire in my chest.

“Be that as it may, you’re still grounded. And though it may seem like I’m not angry with you, don’t be fooled. Once the happiness at your safe return quiets down, I’m going to yell at you. Scream, even. Do you believe me?”

I nodded.

“Good.” She leaned down and kissed above my right eye. “Get up. Everyone is waiting.” She turned and walked to the door.

I was confused. “For what?”

“Tradition, of course,” she said. “It’s Sunday, and we have much to be thankful for.”

And then she left, closing the door behind her. I listened as she walked down the hall toward the stairs, the creaks and groans of the house familiar.

“I know you’re awake,” I said. “You drooled on me.”

Gavin snorted as he raised his head. He yawned, his fangs sharp, as his jaw cracked. His stomach rumbled as he laid his head back down on my legs, watching me out of the corner of his eye.

“Me too. But you gotta turn back, okay? Just for now. When we’re done, you can shift again. Not that you need to eat any more. Christ, you’re heavy. Were you always this fat?”

The sound I made when he snapped his fangs at me wasn’t one I was proud of.

HE WASN'T HAPPY WITH ME as he followed me down the stairs. He pulled at the hoodie I'd given him, but I thought it was all for show. It smelled like pack, and I caught him sniffing it when he thought I wasn't looking. I'd given him a rubber band to tie his hair back. He'd fumbled with it, glaring as it broke.

"You're hopeless," I muttered before motioning for him to turn around. He did so without complaint. I didn't even think twice about it as I did it for him, his hair soft. "And now I've created the first hipster werewolf. I'm not proud of this. You shouldn't be either."

"Hipster?" he asked.

"Never mind. Come on."

He did, crowding behind me again. At first I thought it was because he still didn't understand the concept of personal space, but when we reached the bottom of the stairs and the voices of the others grew louder, he ducked his head, his shoulders hunched as if he was trying to make himself smaller. When I glanced back, he had a panicked look on his face, breathing heavily through his mouth.

"You don't have to hide," I said quietly. "Not here."

He frowned down at the floor. "Not hiding."

"A little bit."

"Very loud."

I startled. "I guess it is. Not like it was in the forest."

"Just you and me."

"And your father, who wanted to kill me," I reminded him.

His lips twitched like he was amused at the idea of me being murdered.

I looked toward the kitchen, feeling the pull of the pack. It wasn't like it was before when it was as bright as the sun, but it was there. A whispered promise. "They're loud," I said. "And it's going to take time. Time we probably don't have. But they want you here. Never forget that. This is yours as much as it is mine."

He looked up at me, and my heart clenched at his hopeful expression. "It is?"

I nodded. "Yeah, man. Of course it is. We're pack."

"Bennetts."

"It's more than that." I paused. "Can I tell you something?"

“Yes.”

I bumped my shoulder against his. “It’s a little loud for me too.”

“It is?”

“I’ve been gone for a long time. And I was by myself for most of it. I never... I never had that before.” I heard my mother singing in the kitchen, and I could barely focus. “Even when I was away for school, I could always pick up the phone and hear their voices or drive for an hour and be back here.”

“Good or bad?” he asked.

“It just was. I was in my own head. And that wasn’t so good because I started not to trust what I was seeing or hearing. But I learned how far I could go, how hard I could push myself. I was stretched to my limits, but at least I know what my limits are now.”

He gnawed on his bottom lip as he pulled on the hoodie strings. “For me.”

“What?”

His eyes flashed violet. “You did it for me.”

“I guess I did.” This thing between us was awkward. I didn’t know what I was doing. I felt reckless, out of control. But I didn’t think I wanted it to stop. Thump, thump, thump, and my skin itched, fingers twitching as I stopped myself from taking his hand in mine again. “After what you did for us, I had—”

“For you.”

I blinked.

“For you,” he insisted. He was scowling again, but it wasn’t like it was before. His cheeks were flushed, and he would look at me, then look away. At me, then away. “Helped you. Saved you. Them too, but mostly you. Couldn’t die. Couldn’t watch you die.”

I said, “Okay,” and I wondered if this was a beginning to something I never thought possible. A gift, and one I never thought I needed.

I reached out and took his hand.

He stared down at our hands for a long moment. Then, “I’m hungry.”

I laughed until I could barely breathe.

I LED HIM INTO THE KITCHEN, and Mom stopped singing. She glanced at our joined hands, and though I knew she wanted to say something about it, she didn’t. Instead she said, “There you both are. Come here.”

We went.

We stood before her, and she looked at us both. “Gavin,” she said warmly. “Did you sleep well?”

He shrugged awkwardly before nodding.

“Good. You must be hungry.” She’d heard him, but we all acted like she hadn’t. “Kelly and Joe told me about your little cabin. It sounds lovely.”

That was not the word I would’ve used, but I knew what she was doing.

“Small,” Gavin muttered. “Not like here.”

“I don’t suppose it was,” she said easily. “However, it’s not about the size of something, but what you do with it.” She blinked. “Oh dear. I think that’s another conversation entirely.”

“*Mom.*”

She grinned. “Yes?”

“You know what.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I was just asking Gavin about his cabin.”

Gavin glanced between us. Whatever else he was, he obviously wasn’t versed in innuendo yet. I dreaded the day he would be. But then he said, “Carter’s pretty big,” and I wondered if it was too late to send him back.

Mom coughed roughly as I looked toward the ceiling.

Gavin huffed out a breath, and it took me longer than I cared to admit to realize he was laughing at me. Again.

“I’m going back to bed,” I grumbled, but Mom pushed us both toward the dining room.

“Later,” she said. “You’re home, and we’re going to fawn over you and berate you, among other things. And you will take it because you don’t have any other choice.”

The others stopped talking as we appeared in the entryway. The table in the center of the room was new, bigger than the one we’d had before. I remembered the days when it’d been just us, just Dad and Mom, Kelly and Joe, me and Mark, and how it’d felt like enough. It wasn’t. I could see that now.

Ox stood at the head of the table, watching over his pack, a serene look on his face. Joe was next to him, and he looked more at ease, more relaxed than I ever remembered him being.

Kelly and Robbie sat on the far side of the table. Rico and Bambi were next

to them, Joshua sleeping in his mother's arms. Tanner and Chris turned around to look at us, and their eyes were orange, a pulse of *packpackpack* that felt wild and sharp. Jessie and Dominique sat seated next to them, and I heard Jessie whisper, "I used to have a little crush on Carter. Even when I was dating Ox. I had very weird taste."

"Jesus Christ," I muttered as both Gavin and Joe growled at her.

"I like to think you traded up," Dominique told her. She pushed a lock of hair off Jessie's shoulder. "Men are gross."

Gordo and Mark appeared behind us, and I wished I never had to smell the stench I could smell on them again.

"Your shirt is buttoned up wrong," Mom told Gordo, sounding amused.

Mark puffed out his chest as Gordo mumbled death threats at all of us.

"So gross," Jessie agreed.

Mom pushed us toward two empty chairs before taking her own seat at the other end of the table from Ox. There was food piled high in dishes on the table, and I saw that she'd made all my favorites: meatloaf and mashed potatoes and thick, crusty bread wrapped in a dish towel. My mouth watered, and I had to stop myself from tearing into it. Ox had yet to sit, his hands on the back of his chair.

We all looked to him as the room fell silent, Gavin's hand still holding tightly on to my own.

Ox nodded, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slow. He said, "We're here. Together again. Finally." He looked at each of us in turn, saving Gavin and me for last. "I never..." He shook his head. Joe touched the back of his hand. "Through it all, we're still here. It's all I ever wanted. Thank you. Carter. Gavin. Welcome home." His gaze hardened slightly, and his voice deepened. "This is where you belong. Never forget that." And then he smiled, and it was like he was sixteen years old again, a boy bigger than he had any right to be, quiet and kind. "Let's eat. Anything else can wait until after. We have much to discuss."

He sat down as Joe lifted his hand and kissed his fingers.

It was practiced, this meal. The food being passed around, the people smiling and laughing at each other. I felt out of sync with them, out of place. There was a history here I was a part of, but a year had passed since I'd last been with them all. They had grown as a pack without me, and I didn't know quite how I fit in.

Dominique was pack. Bambi was pack. Even Joshua was pack. Rico was a wolf, and Mark hadn't been an Omega for a long time. I was jittery, my leg bouncing up and down underneath the table. They were careful around me—

around *us*—as they smiled and laughed. I took what I was offered, putting food on my plate and Gavin's.

As Tanner reached across the table to hand me the basket of bread, his shirt pulled away from his neck, and I saw the bumpy ridge of a scar on his shoulder.

I gaped at him.

He frowned as everyone quieted.

“What?” he asked. “Is something wrong with the bread?”

“You have a mate?” I demanded.

“Oh.” He set the basket on the table. “Uh. Yes? Sort of.”

“Who is she? Why isn't she here?” I didn't know how I felt about that. It was honestly none of my goddamn business, but it was strange to know a person that I didn't know who was so tied into the pack existed in the world.

“Oh boy,” Jessie said. “This is going to be hysterical.” She sat back in her chair, eyes alight. “Tanner, would you like to tell Carter who your sort-of mate is?”

He scratched the back of his neck. For reasons I couldn't understand, Chris's face was in his hands. “Yeah. Uh. So. It's no big deal, so when I tell you, you can't try and make it one.”

That didn't sound good. “Why would I—”

Chris dropped his hands and sighed. “It's me.” And then he pulled the collar of his own shirt from his neck. There, on his shoulder, was a matching bite.

“*What?*”

Jessie cackled as Dominique sighed.

Tanner shrugged. “It's... platonic? Like, we're not fucking or anything. But we trust each other. We love each other. And I wanted to have that connection with someone. It's... being a wolf is great, you know? I probably would have ended up taking the bite at some point if Robbie hadn't gone crazy and tried to kill me.”

“Too soon,” Robbie muttered.

Tanner snorted. “But ever since I was turned, there was always this little part of me that wanted something more. And being aromantic made that harder.” He glanced at Chris, his expression softening. “There's no one I trust more. I know he'll have my back no matter what. And I've got his. We're in tune with each other. It made sense for us.”

“What the hell,” I said faintly. “You're not... you're straight!”

Chris rolled his eyes. “Yeah, speaking of. How’s that going for you these days?” He looked pointedly at Gavin.

I sputtered at him nonsensically.

Tanner squinted at me. “Did we break you?”

“He just needs to get acclimated again to how things are now,” Mom said.

“But what happens if you meet someone?” I asked. “Like, a woman or something.”

“Or something,” Chris said wryly. “If we do, we do. But just as long as they know we’re a package deal, then it doesn’t matter. It’s not that I’d put him first every time, but he’ll always be adjacent, no matter what I do.” And then, without artifice, he said, “I love him. And he loves me. That’s the only thing that matters. Who cares about all the rest?”

“But... sex. You have to have sex to get a mate mark.”

Tanner and Chris exchanged a look before turning back to me. “Nah,” Tanner said. “You really don’t. Just as long as the intent is there. Not everything needs to be about sex, Carter. Jeez. Get your head out of the gutter. We’re at the dinner table.”

Gavin laughed beside me.

I glared at him.

“Yeah,” Gordo told me. “I’m right there with you. I don’t know what the hell is going on any more than you do. When they told me what they wanted to do, the first thing I asked was if they were out of their minds.”

“You had sex with Mark and a magic raven tattoo appeared on his throat,” Chris said. “I don’t know that you have any room to talk.”

“Can you please keep your deviancy to yourself?” Rico snapped. “My *child* is present.”

“Oh please,” Bambi said. “He’s four months old. He doesn’t understand anything. Babies are dumb that way.”

Rico looked offended as he leaned down and kissed his son’s forehead. “Don’t you listen to the big, bad wolves. Or your mean mother. You’re the smartest child who has ever lived. I promise.”

And it was then that Gavin decided he’d had enough conversation. He reached down and picked up a handful of mashed potatoes, then shoved them in his mouth. He chewed noisily, grunting as bits of potato stuck to his chin and nose. He swallowed, then picked up a slice of meatloaf and tore into it.

He must have felt us all staring at him, because he stopped chewing.

“What?” he said through a mouthful of meat.

“Dude,” I told him. “You have a fork. *And* a spoon.”

He looked down at the cutlery next to his plate before turning back to me. “I don’t like them. Easier. Goes to the same place. My mouth. Don’t call me dude.”

“Use your fork.”

“No.”

“Gavin, I swear to god, if you—don’t do it. Don’t pick the mashed potatoes up again with your hand.”

He stared at me as he did it anyway. Making sure I was watching, he shoved the food into his mouth again.

I grimaced at the sight. I picked up his fork and put it into his other hand. He scowled at it, gripping it as if it were a weapon. He brought it to his face, sniffing the tines. His nose wrinkled and he tossed it down on the table.

“Gavin.”

“No.”

“*Gavin.*”

“*Carter,*” he said in the same exasperated tone.

“Use your fork.”

“Hands work,” he argued. “I had no forks. No spoons. I had a knife once. But it broke.” He frowned. “Or I lost it. I don’t know.”

“Would you just listen to me?”

“I always have to,” he retorted. “Never stop talking.”

I was outraged. “Oh, here we go. This again. Maybe if you—”

Gordo chuckled, rusty and soft. I looked over to see him with a hand full of mashed potatoes. Mark was staring at him in horror as he ate from his hand. “It’s not so bad,” he said. “Feels weird, though.”

“You’re not helping,” I said.

He shrugged. “Let him do what he wants. It’s not hurting anyone.”

“It’s hurting *me.*”

“Really?” Gavin asked, looking down at his plate.

“No,” Mom said. “Not really. Gavin, you do what you want. Carter’s always been a bit of a drama queen.”

I sighed as Gavin beamed at her.

And if half of the people at the table used their hands for the rest of the meal,

well. They were wolves, I told myself. They didn't know any better.
Apparently I didn't either.

JOE SAID, "CASWELL IS SECURE. It's safe, or at least as safe as it can be. I have people I trust there, people who work for the greater good. They understand the importance of pack. And while not everyone is happy about it, they've put their differences aside. Regardless of what else Michelle Hughes was or what she'd done, they trusted her, for the most part. She'd been their Alpha for years. They had no reason to believe she was in with Robert Livingstone." He tapped his fingers on our father's desk. "Some of them left. They didn't want me as their Alpha. I didn't stop them. They had a right to choose the life they wanted."

We were in the office. Ox stood by the window, looking out into the trees, hands clasped behind him. Gordo sat near him, Mark on the armrest of the same chair, his hand on the back of Gordo's head. Kelly stood near Joe, his eyes on me and Gavin, who had decided he wanted to hide behind me again. Mom was next to him, not speaking, just watching. The others were still in the house, listening, Tanner filling in Bambi and Jessie about what was being said. They'd wanted to give Gavin space.

I shook my head. "And you just let them go."

"Yes," Joe said. "I did. Because I never want to force anyone to be somewhere they don't want to be. I made sure they found places with other packs, so at least they'll have temporary bonds until they figure out what they want to do." He rubbed a hand over his face. "I know how it sounds, Carter. But I'm not the kind of Alpha who asserts his will over everyone, their own feelings be damned. Dad taught me better than that."

"It's the name," Mom said suddenly. It was the first time she'd spoken since we'd come into the office. "Bennett. Some see that as a good thing. Some don't."

"That's putting it mildly," Gordo said. "They'd rather take the chance of turning Omega than have Joe as their Alpha."

By the way Joe sighed, it sounded like they'd had this conversation a few times before. "It's big, being the Alpha of all. Bigger than I ever thought it would be. There's only so much Dad could have prepared me for. It took me a long time, but I learned. At least I like to think I did. But then after everything that happened in Caswell, it was like I was starting all over again. I felt so small and big all at the same time. I wrestled with it. I could have stopped them from

leaving. I could have forced them to stay. I didn't."

"And some already had their minds made up," Mark said. "Regardless of what else happened, they saw Michelle as their Alpha, the man known as Ezra her witch."

Kelly didn't like that. "They should have known better. They saw what he did to Dale, even if they say they didn't. He had some control over them, and they claim it's all hazy, like they couldn't wake up."

I said, "You don't believe them."

He hesitated before shaking his head. "I think they allowed him to do what he wanted and used the excuse of what he did to Robbie as their own. At least the ones who left were honest about it."

Gavin grabbed the back of my shirt. He didn't speak. I leaned back slightly, pressing into his hand to let him know I felt him. "Gordo told me about the raven."

Joe closed his eyes as he leaned back into his chair. "Yeah. That was... I don't even know what that was."

"We should have expected it," Gordo said. "Thomas knew, but not the extent of it or what it meant. He was working off an assumption." He tilted his head toward Gavin. "Seemed he had a few of those."

"Did you know about Gavin?" I asked my mother. "Where he went? What Grandad did? That Dad knew where he was?"

"No," Mom said quietly. "I didn't. At least not that Thomas went to him. If I'd known, I would have.... I knew your father better than anyone here. Everything he did, he did for a reason, even if the meanings behind his actions are lost to us. It wasn't that he didn't trust us. I think it was more that he wanted to keep us safe."

I felt anger rising from the pit of my stomach, a low thrum that I couldn't stop. "Because that's all that mattered to him. Pack. Always pack. He didn't care who he hurt in the process. Gordo. Mark. Gavin."

Joe's eyes flashed open. His eyes were red. "He did the best he could."

"Did he?" I asked. "Yeah, he was right about Gordo's tattoos, but did that really mean he needed to leave him behind? And then he went to Gavin, *knowing* who he was and where he was, and told him about wolves. Witches. Magic. And for what? To tease him with a life he'd never have and just... leave him where he was?"

Gavin whined lowly behind me. It made me want to kill something. I hated

that sound coming from him.

“He did what he thought was right,” Mom said quietly. “He made mistakes, some more egregious than others. But you have to remember that he wasn’t much older than Joe when he was made Alpha after Abel was murdered.”

“A circle,” Mark said, shaking his head. “We’re stuck. It’s all happened before, and it’ll all happen again.”

“Unless we break it,” Ox said, and we all looked to him. He still stared out the window, hands behind him.

“How?” I demanded. “Don’t get me wrong here. You came for me, and I couldn’t be more grateful. But we took away the one thing keeping Livingstone in place.”

“What would you have had us do?” Ox asked calmly, and I wanted to shake him, to get him to look at me and fucking deal with this. He was all about the Zen Alpha bullshit, but I needed his fire. I needed him to be as angry as I was. “Leave you where you were? According to you, Livingstone was feeding off Gavin somehow. What if that had killed him?”

“I’m not—”

“You didn’t trust me enough to help you.”

I stopped cold. “That’s not.... Ox.”

He shook his head. “You decided to take matters into your own hands. You left us all because you thought it was the right thing to do. That if you could find Gavin on your own, the rest of us would be safe. Is that right?”

My mouth felt dry. He was still serene but there was more to it now, an undercurrent that pulled at me. I didn’t want it as much as I had only a moment before. He could be scary when he wanted to be. “That’s... yeah. I guess it is.”

“So, like your father, you made a choice. I thought at first it was a selfish one, that you were only thinking about yourself. But that didn’t last because that’s not who you are. I know you, Carter. I know you very well. You would lay down your life for anyone in this pack without question. Once I remembered that, I had to look elsewhere. Do you know what I found?”

I couldn’t speak. I felt ashamed that I could think so little of him, even if only for a moment.

“I found that you were as you always are. You carry the burden of your name as the oldest son to a king and queen.” He turned his head to look at me. His dark eyes held no hint of red or violet. “I had time to think about all of this. How we came to be here. All that we’ve lost.” He glanced at Gavin, still hiding

behind me, before settling his gaze on me again. “I found that we fight because if we don’t, no one else will. Some of the people in Caswell may not like Joe. But they still look to us to save them. Is it fair? No. But how can we turn them away?” And then he said, “Gavin. I recognize you. It took me a long time after Caswell to figure out why, but then it hit me. You came to Green Creek once. You were part of the group of Omegas that took Jessie all those years ago.”

All the air was sucked from the room. Mark frowned as he sat forward in his chair. “You *what?*”

Ox turned around fully, arms across his chest. I stepped back into Gavin without thinking, like I was shielding him from Ox. “He didn’t—”

Ox held up his hand. “I’m not accusing him of anything. It’s a statement of fact. He was here.” Ox tilted his head at me. “And you know that too, don’t you?”

“He was looking for Dad. He joined up with the Omegas to try to get here. Nothing more. He didn’t hurt anyone.”

Ox nodded slowly. “Gavin, I’m not trying to scare you. If I thought you were dangerous, you wouldn’t be here. Please remember that.”

Gavin muttered something behind me, and I had to fight the urge to pull him away from all of this. Even though the office was bigger than the cabin had been, it felt like the walls were closing in.

“What did you say?” Ox asked lightly.

Gavin tightened his grip on my shirt. It pulled against my chest and stomach. He said, “Didn’t want to. Hurt. I was... lost. Wolf. Omega. I remembered Thomas. Said if I needed help to find him. Didn’t know he was dead.” He pressed his forehead against my back. “Wouldn’t hurt Jessie. Wouldn’t hurt anyone. Not if I didn’t have to. Just trying to survive.”

“We know,” Mom said, and I was grateful when she glared at Ox. “No one here thinks you would.”

“Of course not,” Ox said, and I could see he was fighting a smile. “But it’s a circle just like Mark said. We’re connected, all of us, and it goes back longer than we even thought. We can’t keep making the same mistakes. We need to be better than we were before.” He looked at me pointedly. “We have to trust each other. After Robbie was taken from us, we forgot how to do that. We were divided. We found our way back, yes, but we can’t let that happen again. All the cards on the table. No secrets, not anymore. Do you understand?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I get it.”

“Good,” Ox said. “I’m happy to hear that. Which is why I want you to listen to what I have to say next. Listen, okay? And know that I’m not speaking to you as your Alpha. I’m speaking to you as your brother.”

“Okay.”

He squared his shoulders. “You’re a fucking moron.”

“Hey!”

He shook his head. “Of all the stupid things you could have done, you chose the worst. Taking it upon yourself to go after them, to leave your pack behind like we didn’t matter. How the hell could you think that was okay?”

And *oh*, there it was. His anger. His rage. It tasted like ash. He was furious, and even though he was doing his damndest to keep it from his face, his eyes grew darker, his brow furrowing. “I didn’t—”

“That’s right,” he said flatly. “You didn’t. Didn’t think. Didn’t ask. Didn’t look to me or Joe or anyone else in your pack. You left a fucking *video*, as if you thought that was enough. How dare you. Three years. One month. Twenty-six days. I lived through that. I lived through the thirteen months it took for us to get Robbie back. I saw firsthand what happened with Mark and Gordo. And then you decided to... what? Be wholly original and leave too?”

“Whoa,” Kelly breathed. “That was a bitchy thing to say. Go Ox.”

“I expected more from you, Carter,” Ox said, and he was a fucking liar. He didn’t sound like my brother. He sounded like my father. “And I need to know if I can trust you again. Because with everything we face ahead of us, we can’t be continuing to look behind us to see if someone we trust still has our back.”

“I’m here,” I said stiffly, trying to keep my own anger in check. “I came back. I was always going to.”

“You could have been killed.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were shot,” Gavin muttered, and *now* he decided to say something? “Back broke.”

“Fine,” I allowed. “I was *almost* killed. But I did what I thought was right, and I get you’re pissed off. You have every right to be. I would do it again if I had to.”

“For him?”

“Yes,” I said defiantly.

“Because of what he is to you.”

Jesus Christ. This wasn't going like I thought it would. And yet.... "Yes."
Gavin sucked in a sharp breath.

"Good," Ox said, and suddenly he was smiling. It was dazzling, and I was breathless at the sight of it. "Because you need to take Gavin as your mate."

I almost swallowed my own tongue. I started coughing roughly, bending over, trying not to die.

"You did that on purpose," Joe said, shaking his head fondly. "Jesus, Ox. We *talked* about this."

Ox shrugged. "We did. But he made me mad, so now we're even. I feel better." His smile widened. "All right there, Carter? Do you need a moment?"

"Fuck... *you*," I wheezed.

"Bitchy Alpha," Kelly muttered. "I don't know why more people can't see it."

They were all out of their minds. That was the only explanation. "You can't just *say* that!"

"And yet I did," Ox said. "Funny how that works. Circle. Remember how time is a circle that we're stuck in? Abel couldn't see it. Thomas, for all that he was, underestimated it. We have allowed ourselves to spin out of control trying to survive. It's time that we take matters into our own hands."

"And that involves me and...." I couldn't finish.

He was amused. "What did you think would happen? What was the point of the last year? You found him. You, Carter, all on your own. And while I may not be happy how you went about it, I couldn't be prouder of you for what you've done because I understand the lengths you went to, what you did in the face of the impossible. And I think Gavin knows that. He's very lucky to have someone such as you."

I sighed as I heard the familiar grind of bone and muscle, the tearing of clothes. The hand fell away from the back of my shirt as a timber wolf rose behind me. I turned around to see him backing away slowly, his tail between his legs. He made a soft sound as he curled in on himself, trying to make himself small. It was ridiculous, of course, given his size and the fact that there was nowhere for him to hide.

Before I could go to him, my mother was there. She took his face in her hands, running her fingers along his snout. "You can be however you want," she told him. "If it's easier to be a wolf, then that's okay. I just hope you don't stay that way forever. I like the sound of your voice. Don't forget that." His tongue

flicked out against her palm, and she laughed. “Yes. It’s been a very strange day. I find that when things feel overwhelming, I need to be away for a little while. To hear nothing but the sound of my heart and the breath in my chest. Would you come with me? I’d like to show you something.”

He glanced at me before following her out of the office. I wanted to go after them. I stayed where I was.

“Not cool, Ox,” I snapped when they were gone. “You can’t just say shit like that. You don’t know what he’s been through. This is hard enough as it is.”

“Would you have me lie?” Ox asked. He wasn’t angry, merely curious.

“No. But I expect you to have some fucking tact.”

“You’re in the wrong place for that,” Mark said. “And we don’t have time to sugarcoat anything.”

“He’s here,” Joe said, sitting forward, his arms on the desk. “In my head. I can feel him. But it’s not like it was before. He’s being pulled in too many directions. His father has a hold over him.”

I glared at him. “And you thought dropping that in our lap would make it better?”

“No,” Joe said. “But I have to be blunt. He wants to be here, Carter. He wants to be with us. With you. You have to know that. He’s pack, but it’s tenuous. He needs something to hold him in place. Something to anchor him. It doesn’t help that he’s still an Omega.”

Kelly looked at me pointedly. I knew what he was thinking.

“Thump, thump, thump,” I muttered.

“What was that?” Ox asked.

“He’s... shit.” I looked down at my hands. “He says I’m his tether.”

Gordo laughed. It startled me, given how big and loud it was, something I hadn’t ever heard from him before. Even Mark looked surprised. Gordo sat back in his chair, arms wrapped around his stomach, and he *laughed*.

“Something you’d like to share with the rest of us?” Mark asked, smiling as if hearing his mate like this was contagious.

Gordo wiped his eyes, still chuckling. “It’s just... my father. No matter how hard he tries, no matter how much he hates wolves and Bennetts, it’s his own children who betray him the most. Me with Mark. Gavin with you. God, that must just piss him the fuck off.” His grin was more wolf than man. “I hope it does. I hope it just *tears* at him.”

“Did he really say that?” Ox asked. “You’re his tether?”

“He did,” Kelly said. “When we were driving back. I didn’t think he understood what it meant—the significance of it—given how easily he said it. But I don’t know if that’s quite right. It’s just that easy for him. He’s been a wolf for so long that he doesn’t need the complexities or nuances of being human. He’s running on instinct. And that instinct is pointing him toward Carter.”

“He needs you, Carter,” Joe said. “And I think you need him just as much. I know it’s not what you expected—”

“I don’t care about that.” My heart remained steady.

“Good. Because he needs to have that tether holding him in place. To keep him from feeling the pull from his father. A mate bond is just as strong as the bonds with a pack. Maybe even stronger. It’s why Chris and Tanner decided to do what they did.” He smiled quietly. “Didn’t see that coming, but it makes sense for them. It’s also why Kelly could get through to Robbie, even when all his memories were stripped away.”

I was dizzy. I couldn’t focus. It was too much to take in. “And what about Livingstone? You really think he’s just going to let this go? He won’t. He thinks we’ve stolen from him. He’ll come for us. That barrier won’t hold him forever.”

“We know,” Ox said, a hint of a growl in his voice.

“Then... what?” I looked at all of them. “What’s the plan here? Just wait until he breaks out? Hope for the best? He could hurt people. Innocent people who have nothing to do with this. If he hurts those witches, the ones who stayed behind, then that’s on us.”

“A year,” Ox said. “You’ve been gone a year.”

I frowned at him. “I know you’re pissed, but you don’t need to keep rubbing that in my face.”

“And I’m not trying to, if you’d let me finish.”

I snapped my mouth closed.

Ox nodded. “Over the past year, Aileen and Patrice have gathered the remaining witches. They’ve gone from pack to pack, shoring up their wards. Livingstone is a wolf now. He’s lost his magic. And even though he’s not like anything we’ve ever seen, he’s still a wolf. Which means he has limitations. He’ll feel the call of the moon. And he’s an Alpha, which means he’ll want to find his pack. It’ll be a singular focus, especially if he sees this territory as his. He may draw others to him, stragglers who don’t have a pack or Omegas we couldn’t find, but he’ll learn quickly how limited those numbers are. Things have changed in your absence, Carter. While you were looking for Gavin, we were looking for you, and still preparing for the endgame.” He looked grim.

“Because that’s what this is. It’ll either be him or us. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to let it be him. Green Creek isn’t as it once was. We’re ready.”

“And all that’s left is for me to....” I couldn’t finish.

He moved until he stood before me, and he was all I could see. He filled my entire world as he cupped my face, eyes filling with fire. “Yes,” he said. “But not yet. I want you to heal. To know you’re home, and to see if your heart belongs to someone who needs it more than you know.”

My eyes burned as I reached up and gripped his wrists. “No pressure, right?”

He smiled. “You have a choice, Carter. And even if you don’t choose him, he’ll know that he still matters to you because you won’t let him forget it. And maybe that’ll be enough. I’ll give you as much time as I can, but it can’t go on forever. We need all of us if we can ever hope to take Livingstone out. Think hard on it. This isn’t a decision to be made lightly, and no matter what we’ve told you, it’s up to you. And Gavin.”

“He might not even want this,” I muttered. “He’s said so often enough.”

“We often say things when we’re scared,” Ox said, brushing his thumbs against my cheeks. “Things we might not mean. It’s what makes us human.”

I said, “Ox, I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know how to fix this. I don’t know how to be good enough.”

And he said, “You already are, Carter. Can’t you see? I have faith in you. I love you, and I know he will too. How could he not? Look at you. You are my strength. And I know you can be his too. But you don’t have to carry this alone. We’ll help you. All of us.”

He hugged me then, hugged me as I fell apart. And in an office that still smelled like my father, I breathed my Alpha in.

HE WAS IN MY MOTHER’S STUDIO.

She was painting, bright strokes of green and blue. She had paint on her cheek, and her eyes glittered as she slashed the canvas.

Gavin watched my mother move. It was like she was dancing.

She said, “Today, today, today. Today feels green. There’s still some blue, but that’s life, I think. Sometimes it can be a forest. Other times it’s an ocean. But we float, don’t we? Along the surface. I always thought so, even when I was drowning. There’s a song I like. An old one.” And remarkably, she started singing. “Sometimes I float along the river, for to its surface I am bound. And

there are times stones done fill my pockets, oh Lord, and it's into this river I drown."

He was entranced by her, swaying side to side in time with the song. His tail was curled around his legs, and his eyes were violet.

He didn't startle when I put my hand on his back.

He looked over at me.

I looked back.

I didn't speak.

He leaned forward, pressing his nose against my chest.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

good name/opposable thumbs

He stayed as a wolf.

I didn't fight it, didn't try to tell him to shift back.

He followed me as I walked down the dirt road. It was cold, but the sky was blue. The moon was growing fatter, and I could feel it pulling at me. It was different here, in this place. When I was on the secret highways, it always felt wrong somehow. I'd sung for all the world to hear, but I'd been alone. No one sang back to me, no matter how hard I wished it so. It'd felt like grief.

The gravel crunched under my feet as I let my fingers trail along the trunks of trees on the side of the road.

"There's a history here," I told him. He was walking next to me, pressed up against my side. I didn't push him away. "It's mine." Then, "Or maybe it's ours. Maybe it belongs to you just as much as it belongs to me. You're a Livingstone."

He growled.

"A name is just a name." I wished I could believe that. "But if not a Livingstone, then a Walsh. Or whoever the people were who took you in." I inhaled deeply, sucking in the scents of the territory. "Or anyone else you want to be. You could just be Gavin. It's a good name."

He tilted his head at me, ears twitching. I thought he was smiling.

My face grew warm. "Shut up. Just... take the compliment."

Yeah, definitely smiling. My skin itched.

A bird took flight, calling, calling, calling me. I watched as it flew away. "I'm trying to say it doesn't matter. You can be whoever you want to be. Gordo is a Livingstone still because he wants to change what the name means. I'm a Bennett still because it was a gift from my father." I looked toward the sky. "Even if it can feel like a curse."

He pressed his nose against my hand.

"There's a weight on us," I told him. "But we don't have to carry it alone. I

forgot that. I'm going to do my best to never let that happen again. Jessie says we're self-sacrificing assholes. She has a point. We're headstrong. We make mistakes. But that's what pack is for. To pick us back up when we fall."

He bent his head toward the ground. When he rose again, he had a pinecone in his mouth. He nudged my hand until I took it from him. It was glistening with his saliva, and I barely grimaced. "Thank you?"

He took off into the forest. I heard him crashing through the underbrush. A low thrum emanated from him. It almost felt like happiness, tentative and slight. I continued on, knowing he would follow.

When I reached the end of the dirt road, he reappeared.

He carried more pinecones in his mouth.

He gave them all to me.

I inspected each one as he watched. I didn't know what the hell I was supposed to do with these, but he seemed pleased when I put them in the pockets of my coat.

He fell in step beside me. Every now and then, he'd nose my pockets as if to make sure his gifts were still there.

WHEN WE GOT INTO TOWN, the townsfolk swarmed around us. They came out of their houses, out of their shops, all wanting to stop and shake my hand, to welcome me home. You're a sight for sore eyes, they said. You've been missed. You're in so much trouble for being so foolish. "Hello, Mr. Mayor," they said, and it sounded so ridiculous. "Welcome back, Mr. Mayor." They overwhelmed me, but I still felt a queer sense of pride.

Gavin cowered at first, trying to hide behind me. It wasn't until a group of elderly women came from the diner that he started to relax. They had loved him before, always stopping to fuss over him.

Which is what they did now.

They told him how big he was.

How bright his eyes were.

"So pretty," they said. "Look at you. You were gone and we were sad. Please don't leave us again." They petted him. They pressed their faces against his. They laughed when he snorted in their necks. They flicked his ears, and he growled playfully at them, tail wagging.

And then they were gone, laughing as they walked down the street, looking

back at us and wiggling their fingers.

The bell rang overhead as we entered the diner. Dominique looked up from behind the counter and smiled. She rolled her eyes when a group of men shouted in joy at the sight of us, Will standing with a grunt and walking toward me, hand already extended. His grip was solid as he pumped my arm up and down. “Look what the wolf dragged in! Our illustrious mayor.”

The other men laughed as if it were the funniest thing they’d ever heard.

Will squinted at Gavin. “Wolf again, huh? Figures. If I were a werewolf, I doubt I’d ever walk on two legs again. Thought about asking Oxnard or Joseph for the bite.”

I was slightly horrified at the thought. “You... did?”

He nodded cheerfully. “Yep. But I decided against it. Your Alphas reminded me of the importance of humanity. And while I wouldn’t mind getting rid of these aches and pains, they’re mine. It’s a small price to pay for what I can do as a human to help the pack.”

Thank Christ. I could only imagine what shit Will would get into if he was a werewolf, and none of it was good. “That’s exactly right. Listen to them. They usually know what they’re talking about.”

“Getting back into the swing of things?”

I shrugged. “Trying to. Look, Will. I’m sorry about—”

He held up a hand. “Say no more. I understand.”

I blinked. “You do?”

He nodded. “Oh yeah. Jessie explained to me that our Gavin here is your....” He frowned. “What was it again? Oh! Right. Your mystical moon magic connection. Or something like that.”

I was going to fucking *murder* her. “Oh my god.”

Will leaned closer, his breath smelling like coffee. “I don’t pretend to know all that goes on,” he whispered as if it were a secret just between us. “Shape-shifters, you know? I’m a little out of my depth. But she said that you cared very much about him and that you needed to find him so your mystical moon magic connection could be solidified.”

“Oh my *god*.”

“Ah,” Will said. “So it’s like that, is it? Hell, boy. Are any of you straight? Jesus. No offense, but it’s probably best I didn’t take the bite. I wouldn’t know the first thing about what to do with a penis that isn’t mine.” He frowned. “Though I suppose I could figure it out. I mean, I know what *I* like, so how hard

could it—”

“Dominique!” I said, pushing by Will, who squawked. “Just the woman I wanted to see.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “I don’t know if I believe you.”

“Save me,” I hissed at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Will, sit your ass down and leave my customers alone.”

Will looked outraged. “I’m his *constituent*. I have a right to know what’s going on in my local government, especially when it involves shape-shifters.” He blinked. “Huh. Of all the sentences that have ever come out of my mouth, that was one of the strangest.”

“Hear, hear!” the other men agreed.

“There’ll be time for that later,” Dominique said.

“If we’re not all dead by some evil monster that wants to kill us all,” Will muttered, but he left it alone as he went back to his seat. He patted me on the back as he went by, and I looked for Gavin, sure he was going to be cowering near the door.

He wasn’t. He was at the other end of the counter, sitting next to a man at the end. His eyes were wide and innocent. The man laughed as he handed over a piece of bacon. Gavin barely chewed before swallowing and huffing out a breath, ready for another.

“There are clothes in the back,” Dominique told him. “If you want to shift. We put them all over town just in case. Should be something there that’ll fit you.”

He cocked his head at her.

“Come on,” I told him. “Stop mooching. We’ll get something for you. Leave him alone.”

“I don’t mind,” the man said. “It’s like having a big dog.”

Gavin growled at him.

The man blanched. “Forget I said that.”

Gavin snorted before standing up and following me to the back of the diner. I sat down in a booth. Gavin tried to climb in after me, but I shoved him off. “You’re too big. Either stay on the floor or go get dressed.”

He wasn’t happy with that.

I sighed. “Look. As fun as one-sided conversations are, I need to know you hear me, okay?”

He sat down on his hindquarters, turning his head away from me.

“Pouting’s not going to work.”

One ear turned toward me, but that was it. I watched as his front paws began to slide along the linoleum. He brought them back, but they immediately began to slide again.

“Just like a dog,” I said.

He jerked his head toward me, flashing his eyes.

“Doesn’t work on me, dude. Come on. Your brother’s going to be here soon. I know he’d like to see you.”

He grumbled as he stood. Dominique held the door to the back open for him. She nodded toward me and followed Gavin through the door.

I rubbed a hand over my face. The men at the lunch counter were whispering to each other, but I ignored them, especially when they kept sneaking looks at me as if they thought I couldn’t see them. Dominique reappeared through the door.

I looked over.

She was trying not to laugh.

I arched an eyebrow at her, not sure if I really wanted to know.

“Pants,” she said. “Not really a fan.”

I groaned. “He can’t be naked in public.”

“I’m not,” he said, sounding extraordinarily put out. He walked through the swinging door. I started choking when I saw what he was wearing. Oh, the jeans were fine, the ends rolled up around his ankles. He wore cheap flip-flops. But it was his shirt that almost made me fall out of the booth.

It was pink.

And had rhinestones on the front, spelling out the word DIVA.

“What the fuck,” I said faintly.

He frowned as he looked down at himself. “What?”

“I don’t think that’s the right shirt,” I managed to say.

He scowled at me. “Why? It’s shiny.” He poked the rhinestones on his chest. “I like shiny.”

“It’s for *girls*.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Dominique said, squeezing his arm. “Toxic masculinity rears its ugly head yet again. You can wear any old thing you want. That one’s mine, so I know you’ve got good taste.” She tugged on the shirt,

pulling it tight against his arms. “A little small, but you’re skinny. Too skinny. Go sit down. I’ll bring you out something to eat. And you better eat it all.”

“Bacon?” he asked hopefully, and if he was shifted, his ears would have perked up.

“Bacon,” she agreed. “Sit.”

He practically *strutted* as he came back to the table. He looked ridiculous, and I was struggling not to laugh in his face. I wasn’t surprised when, instead of sitting at the other end of the booth, he crowded against me on my side, forcing me to scoot over. “There’s plenty of room over there,” I told him, knowing it was useless.

“I sit here.”

“I see that. I’m just saying you don’t *have* to. And don’t give me that look. You can’t be pissed off when you’re bedazzled. It doesn’t work like that.”

But oh, he was trying.

And the others in the diner were staring at him, wide-eyed.

I bristled. “What? He can wear whatever the fuck he wants to.”

Will shook his head slowly. “Of course. Just... this is the first time we’ve seen him walking around on two legs.” He grinned. “Looking good, Gavin. Might be something there after all to being a shape-shifter. Better watch out in case I decide to take the bite. Might have to make a little mystical moon magic connection of our own.”

The other men cackled as I banged my head on the table.

“Don’t,” he said, putting his hand between my forehead and the table. “Stop.”

I sighed as I sat back up. “This is stupid. All of this is stupid.”

“What is?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter. You’re not going to move, are you?” Our thighs were pressed together, and his arm brushed mine every time he moved.

“No. I stay right here.”

“Personal space is a thing that exists.”

He grunted. “I’m a wolf.”

“That’s not an excuse.”

“It’s a fact.”

I gaped at him.

He looked smug.

Before I could retort, the bell rang overhead as the door opened. Gordo walked in, nodding at the men at the counter. The shop was closed, the others all still at the house, but he'd come into town to do some paperwork. He started to wave at us, but he must have seen Gavin's shirt, and he nearly tripped over his own feet.

It certainly didn't help that Robbie entered the diner a moment later, rubbing his arms, a smile on his face. That smile froze when he saw us sitting in the booth.

"I don't want to know," Gordo said, shaking his head. "I really don't."

Unfortunately Robbie did. "What the hell are you wearing?"

Gavin shrank away from him, but he had no place to go. I glared at Robbie. "Leave him alone. It's shiny. He likes it. Nobody else gives a shit, so why should you?"

Robbie balked but recovered quickly. "Oh, hey. Totally. I wasn't trying to—sorry, Gavin. You look good. It suits you. I don't think I could pull off something like that."

Gavin scowled at the table. I reached over and took his hand without thinking. His grip was tight.

I sighed. "Just let it go, all right? What are you doing in town anyway? I thought you were at the blue house."

Robbie shrugged before Gordo shoved him into the other side of the booth. "Figured Gordo could use some help. Get done quicker that way."

"Pain in my ass," Gordo muttered, but he was full of shit. They had a dynamic none of us expected. Robbie should have made Gordo want to pull his hair out. He sometimes did. But when Livingstone had taken Robbie, Gordo had been almost as bereft as Kelly, and twice as angry. "Didn't need help."

Robbie snorted. "Yeah, keep telling yourself that. You'd be lost without me."

Gordo didn't argue. He just ignored it entirely. He looked across the table at Gavin, then glanced at me. "All right?" He jerked his head toward the guys sitting at the counter, who were not hiding the fact that they kept sneaking glances our way.

I nodded. "They're harmless."

"I wouldn't go that far," Gordo said. He raised his voice. "Though people should probably mind their own business and let others eat in peace."

The men at the counter turned away quickly.

Dominique came to the table. "The usual, boys?"

Gordo nodded. "Coffee too. A lot of it."

"Can do."

Gavin leaned over to me, dropping his voice to a low whisper. "Usual? Is that bacon?"

"Yes."

He looked relieved as he turned back to Dominique. "Usual. Please."

Dominique smiled at him. "So polite. I like that. Maybe teach the others some manners." She rapped her knuckles against the table before turning around and heading back toward the kitchen, already shouting back at the cook in diner speak.

Gavin was fidgeting. He wouldn't look up at me or at the others across from us. He was obviously uncomfortable, but he wasn't trying to leave or take off his clothes to shift back. Small favors, and all that.

"So," I said.

"So," Gordo said.

"So," Robbie said.

And that was it.

It was a little awkward.

Gordo knew it too. He cleared his throat, looking at his brother, then at me. "I heard from Aileen."

Gavin stiffened.

"What did she say?" I asked. "Anything we need to be worried about?"

Gordo shook his head. "No. He's... they haven't seen him." Gavin raised his head in alarm, but Gordo held up his hand. "He's still there. He can't get out. The wards are holding. They're making sure of it."

"It's not going to last forever," I said. "We need to figure out what we're going to do. He got out once. He can do it again."

"He had Michelle Hughes last time," Gordo said, leaning back against the booth. "Though fuck if I know how that happened. It bugs the shit out of me that we didn't see that coming. Or even consider it."

"She lied," Robbie said, voice flat. "It's what she did. She lied about everything. She was good at it."

Gordo stretched his arm over the back of the booth, fingers against Robbie's

shoulder. “Not your fault, kid. You couldn’t have known. They made sure of it.”

Robbie grimaced. “I know that. But she had everyone fooled. She got what was coming to her.”

“She can’t hurt anyone again.”

“He can,” Gavin muttered.

Gordo looked hesitant. I nodded at him. There was a reason we were here, and it wasn’t just to have lunch. He said, “Hey, Gavin.”

Gavin flinched, clutching my hand in his lap. “What.”

“You doing okay?”

“Yes. Doing okay.” He didn’t sound like it.

“Is there anything you need? Anything we can do for you?”

“No.”

“That’s good. If you do need something, all you need to do is—”

“Ask. I know.” He brushed his hair back off his face as he lifted his head. “You have questions.”

Gordo startled. “That obvious, huh?”

“You’re very obvious. Always have been.”

Robbie coughed into his hand and then glared at Gordo when he smacked him upside the head. “I’m not *obvious*.”

Gavin rolled his eyes, and it was such a Gordo thing to do, I had to bite back the laughter that threatened to burst out of me. “Sure. Okay.”

Of *course* the universe would see fit to put me with this asshole. I didn’t know if I was being rewarded or punished.

Robbie stared out the window, a smile on his face. He looked relaxed, more at peace than I remembered him being before I left. It stung a little to know I’d missed him coming back to himself and how he used to be.

“Ask,” Gavin said. “Questions. Always questions with you. All of you. It’s annoying.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Gordo said dryly. Then, “Just gonna come out with it, okay? Do you hear him? Is he still in your head?”

Gavin shrugged. “Not loud. Not like it was. Close to him. Heard him all the time. It’s... quieter now.”

“Because you’re so far away from him?” Robbie asked.

“Maybe. I don’t know. Territory.” He relaxed his grip on my hand.

“Territory helps. Being here. Makes it quieter. Pack helps too.”

That caught our attention. “Can you feel the pack?” Gordo asked.

“Little bit. It’s quiet. Like Dad.” He scowled. “Like Livingstone.”

“You can call him that if you want,” Gordo said.

“You don’t.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve dealt with his shit for a little while longer than you have. Let’s just say I won’t be celebrating Father’s Day any time soon.”

“Livingstone,” Gavin said again, almost stubbornly. “I call him Livingstone. Not Dad. I had...”

“You had,” I said, squeezing his hand.

He glanced at me quickly before looking back down at the table. “I had Dad. Mom too. Not real parents. But still good.”

“What happened to them?” Robbie asked quietly.

“Dead,” Gavin said in a dull voice. “Long time ago. Still human when it happened. Car accident. I didn’t know what to do. After. Then I was wolf. Then I was Omega. And now I’m here.”

All those years broken down into a few short sentences. I wondered if I would ever know all that had happened to him or if it would be locked away in his mind. Memories hurt when you let them.

“The cabin was theirs?” Gordo asked. “Yours?”

He nodded. “Thought it was best place. I knew it. It wasn’t... here. But it was close. We left Caswell. I tried to stay away. But I needed it. It wasn’t home. Carter followed me. Stupid Carter.”

“Stupid Carter,” Gordo agreed. “But you had to know that was going to happen.”

“No,” Gavin said. “Didn’t know. Thought he was smarter.”

Gordo laughed. “He’s a Bennett. They tend not to think before they act. I’d say it’s part of their charm, but it gets old real fast.”

“I’m sitting right here.”

They ignored me. Gavin said, “It’s not loud. Livingstone. Not like it was.”

“You’re still an Omega,” Robbie said. “He acted like your Alpha, but your eyes are still violet.”

Gavin showed him just how violet they still were. “Won’t hurt people.”

“We know,” Gordo said quickly. “No one thinks you will. If we did, you wouldn’t be in town right now.”

“In basement,” Gavin said. “Like Robbie. Carter. Mark. And the other man.”

“What other man?” I asked.

“The wolf. The one Elijah killed.”

“Pappas,” Gordo said. “Gavin?”

“Questions,” Gavin said. “More questions.”

“More questions,” Gordo echoed. “You remember Pappas?”

“Yes.”

“And all of us.”

“Yes.”

“And everything that happened.”

“Ye-es.” Then, “Sometimes. It’s.... I was wolf. All the time. Different than being human. Simpler. Good wolves. Good humans. Bad wolves. Bad humans. Eat. Shit. Sleep. Run. Carter, Carter, Carter. Thump, thump, thump.” He put his hand on the table, flexing his fingers. The tips of his claws appeared, black and sharp. “Can’t remember everything. But important things.”

That shouldn’t have touched me as much as it did, especially since I was being lumped in with eating and shitting.

“Question,” Gavin said. “I have question.”

“Okay,” Gordo said. “Ask. I’ll answer it if I can.”

Gavin looked up at him. His eyes were clear again, and the lines on his forehead were deep. “Did you know? About me?”

Gordo never looked away from him. “No. I didn’t. If I had....” He shook his head. “I don’t know what I would have done. Especially if I’d found out before everything.” He frowned. “I was angry for a long time. At Mark. Thomas. The Bennetts in general. Wolves. Witches. Magic. I hated it. I hated it all. I was hurting. I’d been left behind, and I had to go it on my own.”

“But you stopped.”

“Stopped what?”

“Hating.”

Gordo sighed. “I did. Look, Gavin. I don’t know what it’s like for you. I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ve been through. But if it’s anything like what happened to me, then I get it. I was toxic. I wasn’t good for anyone. You wouldn’t have liked me back then, and you would have been justified.”

“I don’t like you now,” Gavin said, but it was light, almost conversational.

“Noted,” Gordo said. “And notice how I’m not calling you on your bullshit,

even though I should.” He leaned forward, his arm still around Robbie. He put his other arm on the table, his stump smooth and pale. “I had anger in my head and heart. I hated the wolves for all they represented. I hated the Bennetts for abandoning me. I hated witches because of the magic in my veins. I was too young for what they did to me. What Abel Bennett and Livingstone made me do.”

“You’re better now,” Gavin said. He looked down at Gordo’s stump while I was thinking about the scar where the raven had once been. “Mostly.”

“It’s the price I paid. And I would do it again because it meant Ox was safe. That’s the funny thing about hatred and anger. It feeds the fire, but the longer it lasts, the more it burns. And I was tired of burning because I was burning alone.”

“Forgiveness,” Gavin whispered.

“Or something close to it,” Gordo said. “This pack, it’s... it’s heavy. It pulls at you, even when you don’t want it to. But I need them just as much as they need me. I lost sight of that in the fire. Maybe it wasn’t forgiveness as much as it was acceptance. There are charred remains where the fire used to be. I think it’ll always stay that way. But even in those remains, new things can grow.”

“Mark?”

“Mark,” Gordo agreed, and he smiled softly. I remembered the hard man who’d taken three teenagers under his wing to chase after a monster. The man who’d growled and snapped at us and yet still followed us into the dark. This same man who’d shaved our heads so we could look like him, so we could be as badass as he was. That man was still here, but his sharp edges had been softened, the full extent of his heart on display. He was a roughneck, a mean bastard who could lay waste with nothing but his voice, but he loved us fiercely. “He was a big part of it. But it was the others too.” He jostled Robbie gently. “Even when they didn’t know who I was.”

Robbie pushed his glasses back up on his nose. “You cried when you found me. Remember? Big ol’ manly tears. I thought it was weird that an old stranger was crying on a bridge in the middle of nowhere.”

Gordo rolled his eyes. “And I regret everything about it.”

Dominique appeared, carrying four plates, two in her hands and two stacked against her forearms. She set Robbie’s rabbit food in front of him. Gordo had a chicken-fried steak covered in gravy, already cut into bite-sized pieces. He grumbled that he didn’t need her to do that for him, and she snapped back that until he got himself fitted with a prosthetic, she was going to keep on keeping on.

She put a burger and fries in front of me. I was touched that she'd remembered.

And Gavin's eyes were wide when she set a breakfast plate in front of him, stacked high with bacon.

"Coffee's coming," she said, squeezing Gordo's shoulder before whirling around.

I watched her walk away. "She and Jessie are...."

"Getting there," Gordo muttered. "Taking it slow."

"She's pack."

"She is," Gordo said. Then, "You weren't here, Carter. She needed it. It wasn't—"

"It's fine," I said quickly. "Bambi too. The more the merrier, right?"

Gordo stared at me for a long moment before nodding. "Right. Strength in numbers." I opened my mouth to speak again, but he cut me off. "And no, I don't want to talk about Chris and Tanner. I have no idea what the hell they're doing, and it's none of my business."

"Straight people are weird," Robbie said through a mouthful of lettuce.

"Seriously," I said.

"So weird," Gavin agreed, and we all stared at him. "What?"

"Nothing," I said as he let go of my hand. I figured he was going to plant himself face-first into his food, or at least start grabbing handfuls and shoving it into his mouth. He was glaring at the bacon as if it had offended him. I felt him watching me out of the corners of his eyes as I picked up a knife to cut my burger.

We all froze when he reached for a fork. He grabbed it like he was holding a weapon, his fist tight around the handle. He brought it to his nose and sniffed. He grimaced, pulling it away from his face and scowling. He turned his hand side to side like he was studying it. Then, awkwardly, he turned his fist down, his elbow jutting out and almost hitting me in the face. He stabbed a piece of bacon, but it fell off. He tried again. This time he got it. He craned his neck out, extending his tongue as he brought the fork to his face. He caught the bacon between his teeth and then sucked the entire thing into his mouth like it was a noodle. "What?" he asked us through a mouthful. "Carter said to use forks. They smell bad. Other people put them in their mouths, but I still do it." And as if he needed to prove it, he stabbed another piece of bacon while chewing obnoxiously. He held it up. "See? *See*, Carter?"

“Oh my god,” I mumbled toward the ceiling. “You’re such an asshole.”

IT WAS WHEN WE WERE FINISHING that Gordo said, “I need to get back to the shop. I’ve got a few more things to catch up on before I can head home. Full moon’s this weekend, and we’re already going to miss a couple more days.”

And Gavin said, “Can I see?”

Gordo stopped halfway out of the booth, hand flat against the table. “See what?”

“Shop. Garage.”

“You’ve already seen it,” Gordo said slowly. “Remember? Many times.”

“Yeah,” Gavin said. “Right. Sorry.” He frowned down at the table.

Gordo stared at the top of his head for a moment. “But I guess you haven’t seen it since you’ve been on two legs, right?”

Gavin shook his head.

“Come on,” Gordo said. “Show you a thing or two. It helps to have opposable thumbs. Can’t be any worse than Robbie. He lit a car on fire once.”

“It was an *accident*.”

Gavin hesitated, looking over at me. And the weird thing about it was *I* hesitated too. The idea of letting him out of my sight didn’t sit well with me. I swallowed thickly and said, “Go ahead. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay?” Gavin asked.

“You don’t need my permission. You can do what you want.”

“I know,” he said. “But are *you* okay? You might die. Do something stupid.”

I shoved him out of the booth. “Get the fuck outta here.” But the last word was choked because he smiled at me with the barest hint of teeth.

“Ready?” Gordo asked, looking a little out of his depth.

“Ready,” Gavin said.

But before they could leave, I grabbed Gavin by the wrist. He looked back down at me as I pulled myself out of the booth, grabbing my coat. I put it over his shoulders. “It’s cold out.”

“I can’t get sick,” he reminded me.

“I know you can’t get—Will you just do this for me?”

He watched me for a moment. Then, “Okay.” He slid his arms in the sleeves.

“Good?” he asked, looking down at himself. The rhinestones on his shirt glittered in the light from the diner.

“Good,” I managed to say, desperately trying to ignore the sense of satisfaction I felt. It was too big. Too wild. “I’ll come by in a little bit.”

He followed Gordo out the door, but not before looking back at me. I nodded, and then they were crossing the street, shoulders close together.

“Oh boy,” Robbie said. “You’re in it deep.”

I blinked. “What are you talking about?”

He snorted. “Yeah. Sounds about right.” Then, “You know what? No. That’s not right at all. You know what I’m talking about. We don’t have to dance around it like we used to when you were too dumb to figure it out.”

I sat back down in the booth, rubbing a hand over my face. “It was just a coat.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Which is why you smell like you do. A little too happy about it.”

I groaned. “Stop smelling me.”

“I’m trying,” he said, nose wrinkling. “But it’s *pungent*.”

“I’ll tell Kelly about that shirt of his you stole and slept with for, like, six months before you told him you wanted to put your face on his face.”

He looked scandalized. “You wouldn’t dare.”

I grinned at him. “Watch me.”

“Fine.” He looked back out the window. Gavin and Gordo entered the garage across the street, Gordo holding the door open for his brother. “He’s learning.”

“Who? Gavin?”

He shook his head. “Gordo. Do you think they’ll be all right?”

I was confused. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

“I don’t know. It’s.... Gordo wasn’t very happy with the idea of having a brother when he found out about it.”

“Yeah, but can you blame him? It changed everything for him.”

“I get that,” Robbie said. He began tearing at a napkin, leaving a little pile on the table. “I just... I want them to be okay with each other.” He laughed. It sounded hollow. “But I kind of don’t, too.”

That surprised me. “Why?”

“It’s... you’re gonna think it’s stupid.”

“Maybe. Tell me anyway.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. His lips thinned. Then, “I guess I’m a little jealous.”

I blinked. “About *what?*”

His cheeks reddened. “Gordo didn’t really like me when you all came back. None of you did.”

“We didn’t know you,” I told him. “You were.... We’d been gone for so long, and then we came back and things had changed. It wasn’t just you. It was everything.”

“No, I get that,” he said. “But Gordo was... well. He was kind of a jerk. He *really* didn’t like that I was working at the garage. And I understood, you know? It was his place. He’d made it what it was. And then duty called, and I think he expected it to stay as it was when he came back. But it wasn’t. I was there. He wasn’t mean, but he didn’t like it. And I hated it.” The pile of shredded napkin grew. Dominique was going to kick his ass. “I’m not—I don’t *try* to make people like me. They either do or they don’t. But it was different with him. I’d heard all these stories about him, how angry he was, how he could be gruff and a dick, and I was worried. He was there first, you know? If he wanted to, he could probably convince the rest of you to make me leave.”

I couldn’t keep the shock from my face. “He wouldn’t do that, man. I mean, yeah, he’s a fucking asshole, but he wouldn’t push you out.”

“I know that now,” Robbie said. “And I think I wore him down. Or grew on him. Or something. He started talking to me. Started relaxing around me. And I... I liked him. Once you get past all the bluster, he was....”

“Gordo.”

“Yeah.” He looked relieved. “And maybe he just put up with me at first, but that changed somehow. He was my friend. And then he was my brother. It wasn’t like it was with you or Joe. Or even Ox. I love you guys, but I felt like I’d earned it with him.”

I understood. “And then Gavin came.”

“Right,” he said. He shook his head. “It’s dumb, I know. I have nothing to be jealous about. Gordo deserves this after all the shit he’s been through. To have someone that comes from the same blood. Someone who knows what it’s like to have Livingstone for a father. As much as I try, I can’t ever be like that.”

“Right,” I said, trying to choose my words carefully. “But just because Gavin’s here doesn’t mean Gordo’s going to see you any different. Or think of

you any less. There's room. For you. For Gavin. For all of us. We're pack, Robbie."

"Pack," he said quietly. He smiled, but it faded as quickly as it came. "I get it, though. Brothers. What it means. How you'd do anything for them, even if it means hurting yourself. I never had that. I do now."

"You have all of us."

"You didn't look for me. At first."

I closed my eyes. "Shit."

"Oh, hey, no. That's not—I didn't—fuck. Carter, listen. I didn't mean it that —"

I opened my eyes again. "No. It's fair. You're right. I didn't. And yet you still looked for me when I was gone, didn't you?"

He sighed. "Yeah. I told myself it was for Kelly, and a big part of it was. But it was for you too."

"Thank you."

He recoiled. "I'm not asking for you to—"

"I know, man. But you deserve to hear it from me. Thank you for giving enough of a shit about me to try to come after me. It took me a long time to pull my head out of my ass, but toward the end, I want you to know I did the same for you."

"You did," he said. "You came to the bridge." He laughed. "And I tried to kill you."

"Eh. Something is usually trying to. It's part of being who we are."

He sobered. "I wish it wasn't always that way."

I looked down at my hands. "Me too. But if we don't fight, who will?"

"Do you remember when I was in the basement? After that full moon when Livingstone was still in my head. Kelly was with me, and all of you were still standing on the other side of the silver. It wasn't that you didn't trust me, but it felt like it."

"Not one of our better moments," I muttered.

"Maybe," he said. "But I get it now. The why of it. Gavin crossed the line. He came over to me and laid his head on my lap."

I'd forgotten about that. I'd been itching to cross it myself, if only to get as close to Kelly as possible just in case Robbie wasn't... Robbie. But Gavin had taken it upon himself to show us without words how ridiculous we were being.

Even as a wolf, he was extraordinarily expressive, and the look of disdain he'd given us, had given *me*, was like a cold splash of water.

"I'm jealous," Robbie said, "but then I remember that moment and realize I have no reason to be. Even then, he wasn't trying to take any of you away from me. He was showing us how pack is supposed to be."

I felt weirdly proud. "He's all right, I guess."

Robbie snorted. "You don't have to do that, you know."

"Do what?"

"Act like that. We know how you feel about him. We know because we know you. Always sniping at him, but when you don't think anyone is watching, you get this... look on your face. It's soft. And kind. You have this shield. You think you're supposed to be a certain way. It comes with being the oldest. But it doesn't always have to be like that."

"I don't know what I'm doing."

He reached over and put a hand on top of mine. "You'll figure it out. You always do. Just... can I give you a piece of advice?"

I turned my hand over and wrapped my fingers around his wrist, his pulse strong against my thumb. "Sure."

Robbie said, "Trust him. And yourself. It'll all work out in the end. And when it does, when you see him for what he truly is, it's going to be the greatest feeling in the world. Kelly, he... he makes me better. He makes me whole. I love him because of all that he is and all that he isn't. And like Gordo, you deserve this. I think we all do. And one day, when blood no longer needs to be spilled and we can just breathe, we'll see why we've had to fight for so long. We'll be together."

I let his hand go. I stood from the booth. "Up," I said, wiggling my fingers at him. "Come on, up."

He got up.

I hugged him.

He grunted in surprise, but his arms were strong around me. I put my chin on the top of his head, and I felt him laughing against my throat. "Thanks, Carter."

I heard the click of a camera shutter and looked over to see Dominique lowering her phone. She grinned at us, shaking her head. "Boys," she said. "Silly, lovely boys."

WHEN WE FOUND THEM IN THE GARAGE, Gavin and Gordo were studying an engine block held up by chains.

Gordo was saying, “—and that’s how Grandad said it. Said you have to love it. Said you have to be kind. It’ll piss you off, but if you give it patience, it’ll reward you. It just takes time.”

Gavin nodded. He had a bit of oil on the tip of his nose. “Patience,” he said. Then, “Gordo?”

“Yeah?”

“Grandad. He my grandad too?”

“Yeah. I suppose he was. Good man. Taught me all I know about cars. He died, when I was little. Before you were even born.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve got some pictures back at the house. Maybe you could come over sometime and I can show them to you.”

“I’ve been to your house.”

“You have,” Gordo said. “You pissed in my kitchen. You remember?”

Gavin shrugged. “Nope.”

“Really? Because that was a lot of piss that I had to—oh, fuck you, man. You’re yanking my chain, aren’t you.”

Gavin laughed. “Yeah. Yanking your chain. So much piss.”

Gordo glanced back at us. “You hear this motherfucker? Jesus Christ. Robbie, come here. You need to hear this too. Don’t touch anything, though. I don’t need something else catching fire.”

Robbie went.

I leaned back against the wall and watched the three of them as the afternoon went on. Every now and then, Gavin would glance back at me, as if to make sure I was still there.

white willow/die squirrel die

My mother said, “Tell me. About where you went. What you did.”

We were sitting in the clearing. The full moon was only a couple of days away. The others spread out in a loose circle, watching as Chris and Tanner sparred, claws out, fangs bared. Their blows landed heavy, but they were laughing, even when they began to bleed. Jessie paced around them, barking orders, telling them to straighten their stance, to stay light on their feet. Gavin was watching too, standing between Ox and Joe, bouncing on his feet like he was itching to get in on the action. I shook my head at the sight of him.

I looked over at Mom. We were on a blanket. She had a thermos of hot tea she made me drink from, as if she thought I would die of thirst. Kelly told me she was going to smother me for a little while. I needed it. “It was mostly quiet,” I told her as I turned back to the others. “Long stretches of days and weeks when nothing happened.”

“My wandering boy,” she said. “What did you see?”

I said, “Good things. Bad things. People and their never-ending rage. Roads that seemed to go on and on and on.”

She said, “I should have told you. I shouldn’t have let it drag on.”

“Mom?”

She smiled sadly. “About Gavin. I thought... I thought it was yours to figure out. And I knew you’d get there one day. But the longer it went, I... don’t know. I worried. And there were so many things to worry about. I allowed myself to become distracted. And I’m sorry for that.”

I was alarmed. “You don’t need to—”

“I do,” she said firmly. “And I will. Because I still see the look on your face. In Caswell, when Gavin left with that... that *beast*. Your heart was breaking, and I could do nothing to fix it.” She looked away, blinking rapidly. “I should have told you.”

I took her hand in mine. Her skin was cold. “We’re here now.”

“We are,” she said. “At last. Never leave me again. Not like that. Promise me.”

I said, “I promise.”

“Liar,” she said, wiping her eyes. “But I’ll allow it. How did you find him?”

I told her of this thread in my chest, how it pulled me forward. How I’d learned to trust it, even when it went quiet. I told her about the notes he’d left for me, the same notes that were now hidden in a box under my bed. I hesitated before I told her about Madam Penelope, the witch, the psychic, the woman with the bones who hadn’t really been there at all. I still wasn’t sure if it’d been anything more than a dream. But this was my mother, and she wouldn’t judge me. Not for this. Still, it was hard to get the words out. They came in fits and starts.

She said, “Madam Penelope.”

I winced. “Yeah, I know how it sounds, trust me. But I was losing it, you know? I don’t even think she was real. Everything was fraying, and I was slipping—”

Her grip on my hand tightened. “Did she have feathers in her ears? A Mohawk down the middle of her head? Did she have black powder that she told you to inhale?”

Reality felt thin. Translucent. It was like she was in my head. And maybe she was, because that low thrum of *packpackpack* was growing by the day. “How did you know that?”

She tilted her head back toward the sky and smiled. “You were being watched over. Even when you were so far from home. They were with you on your journey.”

“What? Who?”

“Abel’s mother was a witch. Your great-grandmother. Did I ever tell you that? Her name was Rose.”

I shook my head.

“Before she fell in love with a wolf, she traveled with her pack in a carnival near the turn of the century, featuring magic and wolves. I have the pictures somewhere. These old sepia-toned things with curled edges. There’s one of Rose. She was wearing pants, which I’m sure caused quite the scandal with the good people who came to see what they thought were trained wolves, not knowing what they really were. She has a wooden pipe in her mouth, her teeth

bared in a sardonic smile. She's leaning against a booth made of white willow, which is important to certain witches. There's a sign above the booth, above curtains she stitched herself. Two words were on the sign, words that signified her stage name. Madam Penelope."

I gaped at her. "That's not possible."

She turned my hand over in hers, tracing the lines on my palm. "Isn't it? Perhaps you were dreaming. Perhaps when you were young, you saw the photograph I just described, and in your grief, in your desire for a piece of home, you dreamed of her, pulling her from the depths of your memory. Or perhaps those we love are never really gone. Their blood is in our veins, all their history coursing through us. Is it so hard to believe that those that came before could have seen you for all that you are and decided you needed a moment to breathe? A moment of peace and a place to rest?"

I looked down at our hands. Hers were thin and slight, her fingers bony. Mine were large and blunt, almost like a paw. I said, "I saw him. I heard him."

And she said, "Who?" though I thought she knew. She needed to hear me say it out loud.

"Dad."

Her smile trembled. "Oh. Oh. Tell me."

"He said he loved me."

"He did. So much more than you could even possibly begin to understand."

"I was lost," I told her. "Everything hurt. I was dreaming of ghosts in the snow, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to go on. I was fading. I was slipping. And he told me to howl. He told me to sing."

"Did you?"

I nodded slowly. "As loud as I could."

"And what did it bring you?"

I gripped her hand tightly. "Kelly. Joe."

She said, "When you were born, your father was terrified. He tried to hide it, of course, seeing as how he was an Alpha. But I knew him. I could see it in his eyes. He was big, and you were so little. His hands shook when he reached for you the first time. He asked me how you could be as you were. How it was possible to love you at first sight. He said you were so breakable, so soft, and he didn't know how he could have deserved someone such as you." She laughed wetly, shaking her head. "I told him to stop being silly. That you were a wolf. That you were a Bennett. And even more, you were his *son*. Take him. Take

your son. And he did. And oh, Carter, how he *cried* over you. But they were happy tears. My son, he said over and over. My little boy. How perfect you are. How wonderful it is that you exist.”

“Mom,” I said hoarsely.

She looked out at the others, at Kelly and Joe. And they felt her gaze, because they looked back at her, eyes glowing bright. She said, “You’re more like him than you know. More so than your brothers. You take the weight of everything on your shoulders so that others don’t have to carry the burden. You put others before yourself, even if it’s to your detriment. And finally, *finally* when you find something all your own, it’s snatched away just as you’re beginning to reach for it. It’s not fair. It never is. But just like your father, you didn’t let that stop you. I don’t think leaving was the right thing to do. And yet I understand why you did. What would I do for just one more moment with him? Anything. *Anything*. Carter, can’t you see? *They were with you*. And look what it’s brought you. Look what you’ve done. You found him. Your father would be so proud of you.” Her chest hitched. “I know it.”

I raised her hand to my lips, kissed her palm.

She said, “One day I’ll see him again. And he’ll smile that curious little smile of his, and I’ll know all is right in the world again.” She looked at me. Her eyes were clear. “Don’t take the chance that he’ll always be there. We must remember to say what’s in our hearts aloud because we can never know if it’ll be the last time we’ll ever get the chance.”

“Dad knew,” I said roughly. “Even at the end.”

“I know he did,” she said. “You have traveled far. You’ve found your way home. What will you do with the time you have left?”

I looked at our pack. Kelly and Joe stood next to each other, their hands clasped between them. Ox was grinning as Gordo muttered in his ear. Mark was smiling his secret smile as he watched his mate and Alpha. Tanner and Chris were breathing heavily as they broke apart, shoving each other as they laughed. Rico held his son in his arms, Bambi’s head on his shoulder. Dominique was crouched, her hands against the ground, eyes orange as she watched Jessie bouncing on her feet, motioning for Gavin to enter the circle.

And he did.

Jessie threw a punch.

He dodged it, ducking low.

She arched an eyebrow.

And Christ, how he *smiled* at her, a simple thing, so profound. He growled lowly in his chest, and it caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. He went for Jessie, weaving left, then right, almost quicker than I could follow. Jessie spun low, leg swinging out in a flat arc. He vaulted over her, hands against her shoulders before he landed behind her. He pressed his bare foot against her ass and kicked. She fell forward onto her hands and knees with a grunt and a curse.

“Holy shit,” Tanner said.

Gavin raised his arms above his head and crowed. It wasn’t quite a howl, but it was close. He looked over at me. “Carter. *Carter*. See that? Did you see that?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I saw that. Though you should probably stop gloating.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why? I just—*oof*.”

Jessie tackled him, knocking him off his feet and flat onto his back. She pinned his arms to his sides with her thighs. He was outraged as she leaned forward and kissed the tip of his nose.

“That’s why,” I said, and for a moment I thought I saw a white wolf in the trees beyond the clearing, eyes red.

And then it was gone, as if it’d never been there at all.

I WAS HEALING, though it was slow going.

The bonds were repairing themselves, and I felt like I could breathe.

I took meetings in town with the people of Green Creek, letting them fill me in on all that I’d missed. They scolded me for leaving. They told me that I should have asked for help. Humans all, and yet they had a fire in their eyes, and I wondered if they had the hearts of wolves.

“Monsters,” Will told me as we sat in the diner. Gavin was in the kitchen, trying to convince Dominique to give him more bacon. He told her it was for Gordo, but she saw right through his bullshit. “We all know about monsters now. Anything comes, we’re ready.”

I looked across the table at him. Before I left, he’d taken it upon himself to act as a sort of second, an intermediary. “Why?” I asked him.

“Why what?”

“Why do you do this?”

He tapped his fingers on the table. His nails were bitten to the quick. “Been

here a long time. I knew your dad. Your grandpop. Always thought your family was a bit... eccentric.”

I snorted. “Eccentric.”

He laughed. “I don’t speak ill of the dead. Never have. But I always thought there was something a little off. That there was more to them than anyone knew.”

“You were right.”

He nodded. “Never thought it’d be shape-shifters. Aliens, sure. That was a big one. Or a cult.”

“Jesus Christ, Will.”

“But it didn’t matter to me, not really. They were as much a part of this town as I was. And now you are too. It’s in your bones. It’s in your blood just as it’s in mine. Green Creek belongs to us just as much as it belongs to you. We would do anything to protect this town.”

“Why?” I asked, suddenly needing to know. “Why have you kept all of this secret?”

He looked out the window next to the booth. Christmas lights blinked on light poles; thick wreaths hung in storefronts. The snow was gone, but the air was still cold. “Because we see the good in your pack. Our eyes were opened, and we now know how special this place truly is. Sure, you get uncontrollably hairy once a month, but don’t we all? You’re ours, Carter. Of course we would keep it a secret.”

I was touched. This strange man, this wonderful human. I said, “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Don’t I know it,” he said. Then, “What happens next?”

“What do you mean?”

He waved his hand. “After... well. After it’s all over. After the beast is dead and gone, after there’s nothing else to chase after you. After there’s nothing left to fear. What then?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “It’s all we’ve known for so long.”

He nodded as if that was the answer he expected. “I hope you get to find out. I hope we all do, but you especially. I won’t pretend to understand everything. Sometimes I can almost convince myself none of it is real. But then I remember Ox. And Joe. You and Kelly. Your mother. Still. Your pack is pretty gay.”

I choked on my tongue.

He leaned back against the booth, thumbs stretching out his ridiculous

suspenders. He looked pleased with himself. “What does that mean for the future? I mean, sure, you can just bite people and make them wolves, but it’s not the same, right? It’s not Bennett blood. Joshua, he’s a handsome boy, but Rico was human when he and Bambi—” He made an obscene gesture with his hands. “Not a wolf. Just a little boy.”

I managed to recover. “It doesn’t matter.”

He scrunched up his face. “Why not?”

“We’re.... Nothing lasts forever. There’s always been Bennetts. And because of it, we’ve always had to fight for our lives, whether it be hunters or wolves or witches. We lead because we’re told it’s what we’re supposed to do. But sometimes I wonder if it isn’t time to let someone else take charge. A new line. New blood. Crowns are heavy when you have to wear them all the time.”

“I get that,” he said. “But if not you, then who?”

“I don’t know. There are children in Caswell. Some will be Alphas. They should get the chance to do what we’ve done.”

He looked dubious. “What does Joe think about all that?”

“You’d have to ask him.”

He patted the back of my hand. “I don’t think it’s something we’ll have to worry about for a long time. You’ll be here when I’m nothing but bones in the ground.”

“You think so?”

He smiled. “I do. You’ve got a long life ahead of you, Carter. And one I hope is filled with happiness.” A clatter came from the kitchen, and we looked over to see Dominique chasing Gavin through the door, his mouth filled with bacon. She chased him around the counter, eyes flashing. “Yes,” Will said. “Every happiness indeed. And look at that, right on time. Larry’s here for his twelve-thirty appointment with our illustrious mayor. Fair warning, he’s going to bitch about quite a few things like he always does. Just smile and nod and let him vent. Then give him what he wants, because it’s not that big of a deal. Larry! You old cuss. How you been? Sit down, sit down. Mayor Bennett’s been expecting you.”

“HE CAME FROM THE WOODS,” Aileen said, her voice crackling through the phone. Ox had switched it over to the speaker, and we stood around the desk in the office, listening. “Human. On two legs. Found some clothes somewhere. He

came to the wards.”

“Did he speak?” Gordo asked.

“No. Just... stood there. Watching us. He—wait. Here’s Patrice. He’ll tell you.” The connection was muffled for a moment as the phone exchanged hands thousands of miles away.

“Oxnard?” Patrice asked.

“We’re here,” Ox said, leaning over the desk, hands flat against the wood. “What did he do?”

“Don’t know,” Patrice said, and he sounded frustrated. “Not much, as far as I can tell. Just stood dere. Didn’t try and touch da wards. Didn’t try and cross dem. Eye was red.”

“What else?” Joe asked, because he could hear as well as the rest of us that Patrice was holding back.

Patrice hesitated. Then, “He wasn’t alone.”

Joe narrowed his eyes. “Who was with him?”

“Wolf,” Patrice said. “A Beta. A man.”

“How the hell did he get through the wards?” Gordo asked, looking at Mark, who shook his head.

“Can’t say,” Patrice said. “Shouldn’t have been possible. But it’s dere all da same. Recognized him too. Saw him once in Caswell. Santos, he’s called.”

Robbie grunted as if gut-punched. “Shit.”

“Santos?” Elizabeth asked. “Why is that name familiar?”

“He was in Caswell,” Kelly said as Robbie paled. “Robbie knew him. Livingstone used him to guard the house Dale was kept in.”

Gordo scowled at the mention of the witch.

“He didn’t like me,” Robbie said quietly. “I thought it was because I came out of nowhere and Michelle made me her second. Maybe it wasn’t about Michelle at all.”

Ox looked at him, then back at the phone. “Patrice, the wards are still intact?”

“Oh yeah. But Ox, if dere’s one, den dere could be more. It’s a big place he’s in. We’ve got it surrounded, but....”

“And you know all the witches?”

“Handpicked dem myself.” He paused. “Couldn’t hurt to talk to a couple of dem. Make sure dere on da up-and-up.”

“Do that,” Ox said. “Let me know what you find out. If I need to come out there, I will.”

“It can’t keep like this forever,” Patrice said as Aileen muttered her agreement in the background. “It’s a stopgap. Whatever you’re planning, you gotta do it soon, Alpha. He can’t get to Robbie like he used to, but dat don’t mean he won’t try. And den dere’s Gavin.”

“I know,” Ox said as Gavin cowered behind me.

THE FULL MOON CAME ON A SUNDAY.

We ate until we thought we would burst.

The moon was singing *here i am here i am run run run*.

Bambi stayed at the pack house with Joshua. She told us she’d be fine, that all of us could go, but Jessie wasn’t having it. “I’ll stay here with her. Better to be safe than sorry.” She kissed Dominique before shoving us all toward the door. “Go. Do your wolf thing. I’ll set up the blankets and pillows for when you all get back.”

“Thank *Christ*,” Tanner said, already pulling off his clothes. “I need to fucking kill something.” He dropped his pants and kicked them off before standing with his hands on his hips. “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go.”

“I really wish you hadn’t gotten so used to being naked,” Rico muttered. “I’ve seen more dick in the last few years than I ever have in my entire life.” He shook his head. “My kid is going to be so fucked in the head, I tell you what.”

“You’re already naked too,” Bambi pointed out.

Rico looked down at himself. “Huh. How about that. I didn’t even notice. You like what you see?” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Ox is hot.”

“Hey!”

Gavin was standing away from the rest of us. He was wringing his hands and gnawing on his bottom lip. I went over to him, pulling his hands apart before he broke his own fingers. “All right?”

He nodded jerkily. “I stay here too.”

I frowned. “What? You don’t have to do that. Jessie can handle herself.”

“Not that.”

“Okay,” I said. “Then what is it?”

He grimaced, looking over my shoulder at the others. He leaned forward, dropping his voice. “Full moon. Run in forest.”

“Yeah, man. That’s what we do. You know that.”

“Pack pack pack.”

“And?”

He looked miserable. “I’m not... it’s not....” He scowled as he began to hit the side of his own head.

“Don’t do that,” I scolded him, holding his hands so he wouldn’t hurt himself. “Stop.”

“Words hard,” he muttered. “Still can’t use them all. Tongue gets heavy. Brain not working right.”

“Your brain works just fine. It’ll take some time. You’re still getting used to being human again.”

“Omega. I’m Omega.” He flashed his violet eyes.

“I can see that.”

“Pack scared of Omegas,” he said. “Omegas hurt them. You were Omega. But you’re not anymore. You’re not like me. You’re Beta. You’re better. Not like in cabin. Different.”

I pressed my thumbs into his palms. “Maybe. But that doesn’t mean I’m leaving you behind. It’s... yeah. Okay. It’s different. Not bad or worse.”

He wouldn’t meet my gaze. “Stay here. I can stay here. You go. Run.”

“Really.”

“Yes.”

“Okay. If that’s what you want. I mean, I could probably die or something, but you do you.”

He jerked his head up as he growled. “Die?”

I nodded solemnly. “Might trip over a tree root and break my neck. Or Ox could jump on me and crush my liver. Who the fuck knows?”

“Stupid Carter,” Gavin said.

“Stupid Carter,” I agreed.

“Know what you’re doing.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. So I’m just gonna go, I guess. Don’t know if I’ll ever come back, seeing as how I might be dead and all. If only there was someone out there who could have my back and—”

He put his hand over my mouth. “Stop talking. You make it worse.” His nostrils flared. “Fine. I’ll go. Stupid Carter always almost dies.”

He dropped his hand, shaking his head, muttering under his breath how stupid I was, how I never took care of myself. Ox looked taken aback when Gavin snarled at him and told him to keep his paws away from my liver.

“Do I even want to know?” Ox asked as Gavin stalked out of the house, leaving a trail of clothes behind him.

“Better do what he says,” I called over my shoulder, following Gavin out of the house.

I STOOD IN THE GRASS IN THE CLEARING. I turned my face toward the sky. The stars were bright. The full moon whispered in my ear. In the back of my mind fluttered the thought of where I’d been the last full moon, the hunters surrounding me, Gavin appearing out of nowhere, fangs and claws extended. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

I was home.

I was home.

I was *home*.

Hair sprouted along my face. My cheeks. My arms and shoulders.

My pack stood before me, watching. Waiting.

Gavin was next to his brother, eyes alight.

I opened my mouth and sang a song of homecoming.

It echoed in the forest around us.

Beneath my feet, the earth shifted, little pinpricks of heat pressing against my skin.

Ox’s eyes filled with a mix of violet and red.

Joe was the first to sing back to me. And in my head, faint though it was, I heard him say, *BrotherLovePack i see you i hear you i love you run with me run with your packpackpack.*

I fell to my hands and knees.

Claws grew from my hands and feet.

And I.

I

*am wolf
am wolf and i am here
pack and pack and pack
they smell like me
they look like me
they love me
the witch says hey stop hey would you stop licking me
no i won't
i like it
you smell like me now
overgrown mutts the witch says you big fuckin dogs
not dog
big fuckin wolf
rico wolf
rico wolf is laughing
i can feel it
i jump
jump on rico wolf
bite him
big fuckin wolf
kelly joe
brothers my brothers i love you i love you
kelly smells like me
joe smells like me
i smell like them
jessie on porch
says oh no you don't carter i swear to god if you
i lick her too
ugh ugh she says ugh you suck
i sneeze on her
i hate you she says i hate you so much
she lies
her heart says she lies*

*don't kick me jessie don't kick me
mom pushes me stop pushing me mom i can
do it myself not a cub i am not a little
squirrel
there is a squirrel
die squirrel die
squirrel in tree
fuck you squirrel
gavin gavin gavin
chase me gavin
find me gavin
mark is running
with me
chris tanner
running
with me
all of us
packpackpack
sing our wolfsong
sing our ravensong
sing our heartsong
sing for all the world to hear*

“GODDAMN,” RICO SAID, wincing as he climbed the steps, the hint of light on the horizon. He put his hand on his stomach. “Don’t tell me what I ate. I don’t want to know. I think it’s still kicking.” He belched loudly and grimaced. “Ugh. I think I have something’s *hair* on my back teeth.”

Jessie was at the door, handing us our sleep clothes as we walked in. She looked tired, but not so tired that it kept her from smacking me upside the head. “That’s for sneezing on me, you little bitch.”

I grinned at her.

The blankets were waiting.

The pillows thrown all over the floor.

I collapsed, putting my face into the pillows, breathing in the scent of pack and home. Kelly lay down next to me, yawning so wide his jaw cracked. Joe lifted my head before settling above me, letting me rest against his leg. The others came too, drifting in, blinking sleepily.

Bambi was upstairs with Joshua. I could hear their heartbeats above me.

Gavin stood off to the side, looking unsure.

I was about to call him over when Ox appeared beside him. He wrapped an arm around Gavin's shoulders, pressing his forehead near Gavin's ear. He whispered, "This is yours. This is your home. I know it pulls at you in your head, trying to take you away. I don't know how loud it is, but I need you to remember. You don't belong to him. You never have. You belong to me. To us. You're our wolf. You're our brother. Our friend. And no one can take that from you."

Gavin closed his eyes, swallowing thickly.

For a moment I thought he'd turn and run.

He didn't.

Instead he turned to Ox, arms hanging at his sides, his forehead against Ox's.

He flashed his eyes. Violet.

Ox did the same in return. Fire and rage contained. He squeezed the back of Gavin's neck. "Pack," he whispered.

And Gavin said, "*Pack.*"

Ox stepped back.

Gavin turned to look at us.

I held out my hand for him.

He came.

He curled up next to me, his knees against his stomach, his head resting on my bicep. The others whispered quietly around us as we watched each other.

"You see?" I told him quietly. "I'm different here, yes. But I'm stronger too because I need to be. For them. For you."

He reached up and traced my eyebrows with the tips of his fingers. "For them," he whispered. "For me."

Eventually we slept.

be better/these scars

When I woke, he was gone.

Panic clawed at my chest. I shot up, already struggling to wake, half-convinced that he'd left and I would never see him again.

A hand grabbed my arm. I looked down. Kelly brought a finger to his lips. He jerked his head toward the kitchen and tapped his ear.

Joe was snoring above me, still curled into Ox.

Mom's head lay in Jessie's lap, Jessie's fingers in her hair.

Mark and Gordo were out on the porch.

Dominique was upstairs with Bambi and Joshua.

But it was Gavin's voice I searched for the most. The sound of his heart.

And I froze when I heard it coming from the kitchen, surrounded by Chris and Tanner and Rico.

I looked down at Kelly again with wide eyes.

He was struggling not to laugh.

Rico was saying, "—and it's pretty great, you know? I mean, being a wolf and all. You were human before, so you get it."

"Yeah," Gavin grunted. "Human before. Wolf now."

"Right," Tanner said. "You're like us. Team Former Human. We were so badass. I mean, we still are, but you know what sucks? I picked up a fork the other day and it was *real* silver. It burned the fuck out of my hand. I mean, what the hell?"

"What the hell," Gavin agreed. "Don't like forks. Smell weird. Hands easier. Carter says I can't, though. Stupid Carter."

Kelly covered his mouth, eyes crinkling as he laughed.

"Exactly," Chris said. "Fuck forks and stupid Carter. You get it. See? I knew you would. Hey, Gavin. I got a question."

“Yeah,” Gavin said. “You do. All of you do. Question, question, question.”

“Uh. Yes? Anyway. So, like, do you remember everything? About when you were here before?”

“Not everything.”

“Oh. But, like, most things?”

“Yes. You farted a lot. Blamed it on me.”

“Jesus Christ,” I whispered.

“I *knew* it,” Rico crowed. “Fucking Chris. You’re so gross.”

“Whatever,” Chris said. “It was almost like we had a dog.”

“Not a dog,” Gavin said. “Wolf. Big bad wolf.”

“Yeah, yeah. Big bad wolf.”

Tanner snorted. “Okay, big bad wolf, you woke us up because you wanted to ask us something. Obviously you know we’re the best people in the pack to come to. Go for it.”

Gavin didn’t speak. I could imagine him scowling.

“Hey,” Rico said, and it was quieter. Gone was the bravado. He sounded kind. “It’s cool, papi. Whatever you want to ask us. Take your time. We’ve got you.”

“Yep,” Tanner said. “We’re here for you. You’re one of us.”

“That sounded creepy,” Chris said. “One of us. One of us.”

“Shut up,” Rico hissed. “You’re going to scare him away, and then Carter will kick our asses. You know how he—”

Gavin said, “I want. To be better.”

They fell silent.

Kelly slid his hand into mine. I held on for dear life.

“I have loud voices,” Gavin said. “In my head. Not always real. Long time, even before I was wolf. I heard them. It’s easier. To be wolf. Voices quieter. Can focus better. But can’t always be wolf.”

“Big, bad wolf,” Rico said quietly.

“Yes,” Gavin said. “Big bad wolf. But not big bad human. Harder. Need help. To be better human.”

“For Carter?” Tanner asked, and I held my breath.

“Yes,” Gavin said. “And for me. I talk funny—”

“You talk just fine,” Chris snapped. “And if anyone says otherwise, you tell

me and I'll make sure they know who they're fucking with. No one talks shit about our pack and gets away with it."

And Gavin said, "Carter says mate. I'm his mate. Important. To him."

It was the first time he'd said it aloud. The first time he'd acknowledged this thing growing between us. Kelly must have felt me stiffen, because he turned into me, laying his head on my chest, my heart pounding in his ear. His breath was warm on my skin, grounding me, holding me down so I couldn't float away.

"You are," Rico said. "But it's not everything. Even if you and Carter weren't... you know. You and Carter, you'd still be here because we'd want you here."

"Really?" and it was said with such fragile hope that I thought I would break apart.

"Yeah, man," Tanner said. "Of course you would. One of us, remember?"

"You help me?" Gavin asked.

The others were silent, and I knew they were looking at each other. Then, "Anything," Chris said. "All you have to do is ask."

Gavin exhaled, and it was there, like the old-growth forest: his relief, green and thick. Oh, the undercurrent was blue, and I thought it might always be, but it didn't seem to be as big as it once did. He said, "Make me a better human? Can't remember. How to be good. Big bad wolf, but I want to be good."

"Yes," Rico said immediately. "Though you're already pretty good to us as you are right now."

"I know," Gavin said. "But. There's more. I want to do more." He was nervous, and I had to restrain myself from getting up and going into the kitchen, to make him understand that he had nothing to worry about. Not now. Not today. Tomorrow, sure. We always had to worry about tomorrows.

I stayed where I was, trusting these men to know what was right.

"What did you have in mind?" Tanner asked. "Chris, you should take notes. Get everything written down."

"Already on it," Chris said. I heard him flipping through the notepad he always carried with him. "Go."

Gavin said, "Clothes. I want. New clothes. I like being naked, but I can't always be naked."

Chris snorted. "Yeah, that's a good place to start. I'm sure Carter won't mind, but—"

"And Rico has good clothes," Gavin said. "Dresses nice."

“*What?*” Tanner said, sounding outraged.

“Hell yeah,” Rico said, and I could hear how smug he was. “You’ve come to the right place. Chris and Tanner would look like shit if it wasn’t for me. Gonna get you some threads, man. Fucking rock star over here.”

“Whatever,” Chris muttered. “You tried to make me wear snakeskin cowboy boots.”

Rico sniffed. “They looked awesome. Just because you don’t have good taste doesn’t mean you need to take it out on the rest of us.”

“We were thirteen!”

“I don’t,” Gavin said, and his voice was smaller. “Money. I don’t have money. I could... work. To earn it. Somewhere. I—”

“Don’t even worry about that,” Tanner said. “We’ll take care of it. We’re extremely wealthy, in case you couldn’t tell.”

“You are?” Gavin asked.

“Well... no. But the pack is. And I have no problem spending that money. I mean, it’s just *sitting* there. What else?”

“Haircut,” Gavin said promptly. “Long hair. Gets in my face. Hot.”

“Done and done,” Chris said, his pencil scratching along the notepad. I heard him set it down on the table. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes,” Gavin said. “Questions, questions, questions.”

“Yeah,” Chris said, and I knew he was smiling. “All those questions. We tend to do that. You should have seen what it was like when Ox told us about werewolves and witches.”

“Bad?”

“Nah,” Tanner said. “It actually made sense, looking back. Gordo would always wear long sleeves, even in summer.”

“Weird white-boy arms,” Rico said.

Chris asked his question. “You really like him, huh? Carter.”

“Breathe,” Kelly whispered to me. “Just breathe.”

I closed my eyes and breathed.

Gavin said, “He’s stupid. Always almost dies. I protect him. He needs me. He is strong. And brave. But doesn’t take care of himself. Like he should. I can do that. For him. So he can be strong and brave. For everyone else. Big bad wolf. But I can be good human.”

My mother whispered, “Oh, oh, oh,” and it was filled with such love and joy

that I thought I would drown in it.

Rico said, “Hey, I get that, man. I do. But you know you don’t have to change yourself for him, right? Or anyone, for that matter. You’re good just the way you are.”

“Maybe,” Gavin said. “But not just for him. For me too. It’s hard. Being human. But I want to learn again.”

“Well, then, you’ve come to the right place,” Tanner said, slapping his hands on the table. “We’ll take care of everything, even if you’re a liar by saying Rico dresses better than the rest of us. That’s just bullshit, man.”

“You’ll help me?” Gavin asked, and I ached at the surprise in his voice, like he couldn’t believe it was real.

“Of course,” Rico said. “We’d do anything for you, even if your asshole dad is trying to kill us all. You’re one of us.”

Tanner and Chris joined in. “One of us! One of us!”

“This is why,” Kelly whispered to me, and I put my hand in his hair, holding him close. “This is what it’s all about. This is why we always fight, no matter what comes at us.”

IT WAS AS IF GAVIN had lit a fire under the others. They didn’t want to wait. “Might as well give him what he wants,” Rico told us as Chris and Tanner took Gavin upstairs to get him ready. “It’s not like he asks for something every day.” He hesitated, looking at me. I was sitting with my back against the couch, Kelly’s head in my lap. “You all right with this? Don’t mean to steal him away from you. You can come too, if you want.”

I shook my head. “You guys can handle it. He came to you for a reason.”

He puffed out his chest, and I was helpless against the rush of affection I had for him. “Hell yeah he did. He knows who has the best taste in this pack.”

His eyes widened as Bambi shouted down the stairs, “Rico, I swear to god, there better not be snakeskin *anything* on him, you hear me?”

“Yes, my love!” Rico shouted back. “None whatsoever!” He lowered his voice. “It’s Bambi. Bambi has the best taste. Obviously. Look whose baby she just had.”

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” I said.

Rico rolled his eyes. “It’ll be fine. You’ll see. Get him all done up so you can drool over him and pretend you’re not, even though we can all smell you. And

seriously, that is *not* something I signed up for when I let Ox bite me instead of dying a tragic yet heroic death.” He grinned at me. “We’ll take care of him. We know how important this is for him, and for you.” He turned his head toward the ceiling. “Come on, guys! We don’t have all day!”

They reappeared down the stairs a few moments later, Gavin trailing after Chris and Tanner. He was wearing a pair of jeans I thought belonged to Kelly, cinched up with a belt. He had an old hoodie of mine, the strings frayed. His hair was pulled back and tied off with a purple scrunchie, one I’d seen on Bambi before.

I stood, back popping. Knowing everyone was watching or listening, I forced a smile. I didn’t want them to know how nervous I was about letting him out of my sight. I knew the guys would watch over him, but it didn’t feel like enough.

“Listen to them,” I told him, pulling at the hoodie unnecessarily. “And don’t growl at people, especially if you’re going a couple of towns over. They don’t know about wolves. Not like Green Creek.”

He batted my hands away with a scowl. “I know.”

“And don’t flash your eyes.”

“I know.”

“And—”

“Carter.”

I sighed. “Just... if you need me, you call me, okay? No matter what. I’ll come running.”

He squinted at me. “Take a truck. Faster.”

Jessie coughed, and it sounded suspiciously like laughter.

“Whatever,” I muttered. “Go on. Get outta here. I’ll be here when you get back.”

He nodded and started to step around me. He stopped before grabbing me by the hand and pulling me into the kitchen. He didn’t let me go as he turned to face me. He looked down between us at the floor. His hair was wet. He must have dunked his head in the sink. “Okay?”

“I’m fine. You don’t—”

He shook his head. “Not that. *I’m* okay? I can do this?”

“You can do anything you want,” I told him.

“Can’t piss on Gordo’s floor.”

“Well, no. I mean, *yeah*, you can, but you shouldn’t. But this? Definitely.

You can do this. And you asking is a good thing. I'm proud of you, dude."

"Don't call me that," he grumbled, but his lips were quirking.

"Hey."

He looked up at me. "What?"

"Thank you."

"For?"

I shrugged because I didn't know. "Everything, I guess."

And oh, there was his smile. There it was, bright and warm, and I wondered if this was what it felt like to stare directly into the sun. "Thump, thump, thump."

"Thump, thump, thump," I agreed. I jerked my head toward the living room. "Go on."

"Call you if I need you," he said, sounding determined.

"Yeah. But I don't think you will. Big bad wolf, but a good human. You'll be all right."

I was stunned when he raised our joined hands to his lips. He kissed the back of my hand. And then he was gone, as if he hadn't just devastated me. As if he hadn't just rocked me down to my foundation. I stood there, the morning sunlight pouring in from the window above the sink, motes of dust swirling in the air, listening as he followed Chris and Tanner and Rico out the door.

THEY WERE FOLLOWING ME.

They tried to hide, but I was their big brother. I would know the sound of them anywhere.

The air was cold as I walked along an old dirt road. The deciduous trees were bare, the conifers green, their scent sharp. Patches of snow lay in the shadows where the sunlight couldn't quite reach. The sky was blue, though clouds hung over the horizon.

Kelly and Joe kept their distance. They didn't speak. I thought about calling them out, letting them know I knew they were there. I didn't. They'd join me eventually, especially when they figured out where I was going.

It didn't take long.

In the distance, a covered wooden bridge appeared, rising up over a small creek bed. A thin crust of ice lined the edges of the creek, the water bubbling over the rocks. It was only going to get colder. Soon enough it would freeze over

completely.

I stopped a few yards in front of the bridge.

I looked at the plaque fixed to the entrance.

Six words.

May our songs always be heard.

“He would have loved this,” I said quietly. “This little thing.”

Silence.

Then, “You think so?”

Joe. I nodded but didn’t turn around. Gravel crunched under their boots as they walked toward me. I rubbed my hands together to warm them.

Kelly appeared on my right, Joe on my left. They pressed against me. They each took one of my hands, holding them between their own. I was tired, but it was a good kind of tired. Not like when I was on the road, my sleep fractured by nightmares that felt too real.

“When did you know?” Kelly asked. “That we were following you.”

I laughed quietly. “Right away. You’re both loud. Always have been.”

“I told you,” Joe mumbled.

“I’m a Beta,” Kelly retorted. “You’re an Alpha. That’s all on you.”

“Oh, bullshit. You’re older than me, you should have—”

I said, “He would’ve loved it, but not necessarily about it being for him,” and they fell quiet. I looked at the words carved into the metal. “It’s like the little wolf on the sign for Green Creek. It’s a secret.”

“He did like his secrets,” Kelly said, and I winced at the bitterness in his voice. I couldn’t blame him. I’d thought the same thing time and time again. “Gavin. Ox. Gordo and his tattoos. Richard Collins. It makes you wonder what else he knew and didn’t tell us.”

“He had his reasons,” Joe said, but I didn’t think he believed his own words. “And maybe we won’t ever know what they were, but I don’t think he did it to hurt anyone.”

“Even if he didn’t mean it, it still happened,” Kelly said.

I sank to the ground. They came with me, all of us crossing our legs. Our knees bumped together, and they didn’t let go of my hands. We huddled together. Their warmth chased the worst of the chill away.

I said, “I saw him.”

Joe hung his head. “Where?”

“In the woods. Before you and Kelly showed up. I was lost. Hurting. Slipping. I don’t know if it was part of my head being fucked or... something else. But I saw him. And he told me to howl as loud as I could. And I did, because he was asking me to, and I would have done anything for him.”

“We heard you,” Kelly whispered, laying his head on my shoulder. “It was big. I felt it in my bones. I ran as fast as I could.”

“You found me.”

Joe said, “We knew we would. I don’t know if I can explain *how* we knew, but we did. It was... different. There. More different than any other place we’d looked. We got to the house and we smelled your blood mixed in with all those hunters, and for a moment I thought we were too late. I thought you were—” He choked. I squeezed his hand. He cleared his throat and said, “But I knew. Once I pushed the stench of blood away, I knew. We both did. Gordo too.”

“I’m sorry,” I said roughly. “For that. For everything.”

“We know,” Kelly said. “It’s in the past. I’m still mad at you, but you’re here now. That’s what’s important.”

“Truth,” I whispered. “The truth is important.”

Joe said, “What? What are you—”

“I lost you,” I said, and it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. But he needed to hear it from me. And I needed to tell him. “I don’t know if you remember. But it was my fault.”

He was watching me, but I couldn’t look at him. “What are you talking about?” he asked slowly.

“In Caswell,” I said through gritted teeth. “You were—I was supposed to be watching you. Dad told me to. I was with my friends. I thought you were annoying. You begged for me to wait up, that we were going too fast. But I didn’t. I kept on going. And then I couldn’t hear you anymore, and I was relieved. It was small and quick but I still felt it.”

“Why?” Joe asked. There was no censure in his voice, no anger.

“Because you were the little king. You were so important. Dad was always telling everyone how you’d be Alpha, that you were born to lead. That you’d become something great, and even though I told myself I didn’t care about that, I did.” My face burned with shame. I blinked rapidly. “It wasn’t fair of me to be like that.”

“You were a kid,” Kelly said. “You couldn’t—”

I shook my head. “I was the oldest. I *am* the oldest. It was my job to protect

you. And I... I failed." The last word broke. I tried to recover. "I thought it didn't matter. That Joe would run home and tell Dad how I'd ditched him, and I'd roll my eyes because the little king was telling on me, and Dad would get mad, and I'd think, *there, little king. Are you happy? Are you happy now?*" I hung my head. "I hated myself for feeling like that. It wasn't your fault. You had no choice in the matter. And then you were just... gone."

Joe let my hand go. I thought he was angry. I thought he would rage at me, scream with his eyes flooding red, his Alpha voice rolling over me.

He didn't.

All I felt from him was blue.

He touched my ear. The side of my face.

He said, "I think Dad might have loved Richard. More than just as pack. More than friends."

Kelly inhaled sharply.

"I don't know that for sure. I don't have any proof. But I think he did. He loved Mom, completely and fully, and she was his mate, even if he didn't really like that word." He pressed his hand against my chest, pushing me onto my back on the ground. My coat was thick, but I could still feel the cold seeping in. Joe turned, pointing his legs away from me, laying his head on my stomach. Kelly curled in the crook of my arm, his face against my throat. Joe said, "I asked Mark once if he was ever jealous of Richard. For being Dad's second when it could have been him. You know what he told me?"

"What?" Kelly asked.

"He said he was hurt by it at first. But then Dad came to him and told him that it wasn't meant to be a slight. He said that they were brothers and that nothing could ever come between them. Mark didn't understand it right away. But I think he saw it. Dad and Richard. And he hates himself sometimes for not seeing Richard for what he truly was. I think about that a lot. How they could have been so blind. But then I remember that they'd just witnessed the slaughter of their pack. How Robert Livingstone had leveled an entire block because his wife had just murdered his tether. And then it makes sense to me. You hold on to what you can when all is crumbling around you, even if it's poisoned and dark. It's all you know." He turned his head against my stomach, breathing me in. "Can you imagine what that must have been like for him? To be betrayed like that. To have someone like Richard strike so close to home."

"It's not an excuse," Kelly said, and he was angry. "He should have known. He trusted too easily. Michelle. Richard. Osmond. All of them."

“He tried to see the good in people,” Joe argued. “He was an Alpha.” Then, “I remember, Carter. I remember it all.”

I couldn't speak. The lump in my throat was too large. A bird flew high above us, its wings black against the sky. It sang a lonely song as it passed in front of the pale moon.

“I don't blame you,” Joe said. “I never have and I never will. You didn't know. How could you? None of us did. And that's not our fault. We were kids. We shouldn't have had to worry about monsters. About being taken to a cabin in the middle of nowhere and having my body broken again and again and again.”

I put my hand on the side of his head, my fingers trailing over his lips.

“I have these scars,” Joe whispered. “Except I'm a wolf, so they've healed. But I know. I feel them. We all have them. If we were human, we'd be covered in them. I think about that all the time. How we'd look if everyone could see the map of our lives etched into our skin. But they're hidden.” He kissed the tips of my fingers. “Because we have to be strong. That's who we are. And I don't think that's always fair.”

I said “Joe” and “Oh my god” and “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.”

“I know,” he said. “When Dad found me, when he picked me up and promised me nothing would ever hurt me again, I remember thinking through the haze he couldn't know that. It wasn't a lie, but it felt like a promise he couldn't keep. And even though I was locked away in my head, even though I couldn't speak, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see you. The both of you. Because I was safe when I was with you.”

A tear slid down the corner of my eye, catching on my ear. “I...”

He said, “It wasn't your fault. He would have taken me one way or another. You can't blame yourself for something he did. But you do, don't you? Every day. It's why you went after Gavin like you did.”

“Maybe,” I whispered.

“I get it,” he said. “We're lost without a connection. We're wolves, but it's still what makes us human. Not necessarily a tether, though I think it's close.” He shook his head. “I was jealous of the two of you.”

“You were?” Kelly asked. “Why?”

I felt Joe nod against my stomach. “I didn't care about being an Alpha. It didn't matter to me. I just wanted to be a little brother. I didn't want to sit in the middle of nowhere and listen to Dad go on and on and *on* about what my life was going to be like. What I was going to do. Who I was going to be. I didn't

have a choice. This was the way things were supposed to be, and I... wished it was someone else. Anyone else. Even when we came back here, and even when I found Ox, I wondered what it'd be like if I was someone else. *Anyone* else. Without the title. Without the weight of expectation. Without the name."

Kelly said, "A rose by any other name," and it was like we were kids again, it was like we were cubs, and it was all inevitable even if we didn't know it.

Joe said, "I could just be this little kid with a crush on an older boy who was bigger than all the world."

Oh, the dreams we'd shared. How close his were to my own. "Candy canes and pinecones."

He chuckled. "And epic and awesome. A tornado. That's what he called me. A little tornado, and I think I loved him for it. Even then. Because he knew nothing about wolves, about the scars he couldn't see. And even when he did find out, it didn't matter to him. I think Dad could see that. Could see through to the heart of him. Ox isn't like anyone else."

"Why?" Kelly asked. "What did Dad see in him? I saw it too, but I couldn't find a name. I didn't know what it meant. I still don't. A human Alpha. A—"

"A unifier," Joe said, and I felt a chill race down my spine. "I think that's the best way to describe him. Somehow he can make tethers out of nothing and repair the bonds that already exist. I don't know if it's magic or something else entirely. I don't think that matters. He picks up the broken pieces of us all, and even though he knows they won't fit back together the way they used to, he can still make a recognizable shape. And it's enough. We're strong because we have each other, but it's more because we have him."

"Werewolf Jesus," I said, and my brothers laughed.

"There's no one like him in the world," Joe agreed. He grew quieter. "And I still hate myself sometimes for bringing him into this. Without a choice. He lost because of us. Maggie. She was innocent. And we took her from him, even if we didn't raise our claws to do so. He has scars too. More than I ever want to think about."

"He would have followed you regardless," I said. "Joe, you have to know that."

He sighed. "I know. He's said as much. And that it wasn't my fault. Or Dad's fault. It was Richard's. And Robert Livingstone's. And Osmond's and Michelle's and Elijah's and on and on. And I hear him. I do. But I can't help but think what if? What if we weren't who we are? What if we were just... someone else. Without the name. Without the crown."

Here, Gavin whispered in my head. Name doesn't matter here. No crown. No roses. Just... you. Just Carter.

“Who would we be?” Kelly asked.

Joe shrugged. “I don’t know. Whoever we wanted to be. A wolf. A human. Something else entirely. We wouldn’t have to suffer over and over again because of the blood in our veins. I’m the Alpha of all. I’ve been preparing for it my entire life. I understand its importance. But when I was standing in front of the people of Caswell, when they were looking to me to guide them, to lead them as their home crumbled around them, all I could think was that there had to be more to this life. There had to be someone else who wanted this more than I did. Someone who would do good. Who would be the leader they all wanted. The savior they were so desperate for.” He laughed again, but it was hollowed out. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Anything,” Kelly whispered.

“Anything,” I agreed.

Joe said, “I wonder what would happen if it ended. Our name. If we let it die out. If we were to just... let it go. We would have each other. Wouldn’t that be enough? I mean, look at us. We’re literally the queerest pack in existence. We have Joshua, but he’s not a Bennett, at least not in name.”

“He’s still ours,” Kelly said.

“He is. But what if it ended with us? Mom said once she wondered if our name was cursed, and that stuck with me. I don’t think she meant it. She was angry. She had every right to be, but I still can’t let it go. It rattles around in my head, and when I’m alone, when everything is quiet, I wonder what it would be like if, after Livingstone, we allowed someone else to take charge. To carry the weight of an entire world on their shoulders. To let them deal with all of it.”

“We tried that already,” I said quietly. “Remember? Michelle. And look how that turned out.”

He shook his head. “I know. But I don’t know if I want to be a king. And I don’t know if you want to be princes.”

Kelly turned his head, his hair tickling my nose. “Do we even have a choice?”

“Sometimes I don’t think we do,” Joe muttered. “But it doesn’t matter anyway. I know how things are. I know how they have to be. And I’ll do it because I have to.”

“You have us,” I told him.

“I know,” he said. “And I need that, Carter. The both of you. I know I’m not....”

And even though I was scared, I said, “Say it.”

He was blue. His voice was small and fragile when he said, “When you left. You... made that video for Kelly. You talked about how much you loved him and how much you needed him, and I was hurting because you were gone, but I was hurting because I kept thinking what about me? Didn’t you love me just as much?” He was trembling, and my eyes stung. “I know you did. I know you do now. And I know that you and Kelly have always been close, but I’m your brother too. I hated myself for it. I could see the look on your face, how lost you were. And yet... what about me?”

Oh god. “Joe. Joe. That’s not—”

He said, “I love you. The both of you, more than I could ever put into words. I’m your Alpha, like I’m the Alpha to almost every wolf. But sometimes I just want to be your little brother. To not have to worry about anything else. I want to love Ox without wondering if he’s going to be taken from me. I want to love Mom and show her everything we’ve done hasn’t been in vain. And I want to know that I matter to you. I know you’re each other’s tethers. I get that. I know how important a tether is. Is it everything, though? You two were here first. You have this bond that I can’t have. I just want you to see me. To know that I’m still here and not just as your Alpha.”

“You do matter,” I told him, and my voice cracked right down the middle. “You *do*. Joe, I’m so sorry. I never thought—it wasn’t meant to be like that. I wasn’t thinking. I was lost in my head. Everything was falling apart. Gavin was... gone. And I didn’t do enough to stop him from leaving. I blamed myself for that. If only I could have been stronger. If only I could have been *more*.” I tugged on his hair. He shuddered. He shook. He *quaked*, and I said, “You’ve always been strong. I told myself it was because of what you were, of what Dad made you into. You weren’t like us, or so I thought. And that wasn’t right. You were put on this pedestal, and it wasn’t fair. Joe, I love you just as much as I love Kelly. I failed you if you ever doubted that, and that’s on me. You did nothing wrong.”

Kelly said, “We’re in awe of you, Joe, and everything that you’ve done. If Ox is a unifier, it’s only because he has you. If we’ve survived as long as we have, it’s because *you* led us. We followed you into the dark when Richard Collins took from us. When Elijah came. When Caswell fell. We would follow you anywhere. No matter what you do, no matter if you’re our Alpha or not,

we're always going to be with you."

Joe sniffled, rubbing his face against my stomach. "I know. It's just nice to hear it. It's lonely being an Alpha. Dad never told me how lonely it could be. I wish he had. Even with Ox, it feels like I'm on an island and no one can get to me." He laughed wetly. "Stupid, right?"

"No," I whispered. "It's not stupid."

"I wish..." Joe stopped. He frowned. "It doesn't matter."

"Don't," I told him. "Say it. Say it all."

He took a deep breath. "I wish Dad had never been an Alpha."

And there it was. Out in the open. A thought we'd all had at one point or another, spoken aloud and laid bare. It wasn't fair, but then life never really is. But it was Joe who had the courage to speak his truth while the rest of us hadn't dared.

Kelly said, "Me too."

I said, "Me three."

They laughed.

"But we can't change that," Joe said, and though he was still blue, there was green relief mixed in, as if he'd revealed a great secret. Finally. At last. "This is who we are. This is who we're supposed to be."

We were quiet for a time, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I was cold, but it didn't matter. I didn't want to move. Moving meant breaking apart, pushing them away. I wanted to stay in this moment for as long as we could.

It was Kelly who filled the quiet. He said, "Dad loved us."

"He did," Joe said. "With his whole heart."

"I still get mad at him," Kelly said. "For all the secrets he kept. But if Joe is right and it's like being on an island, it makes sense. He must have been lonely. Even with all of us." Then, "The letter."

"What letter?" I asked.

"The one he wrote for Robbie without knowing who Robbie was."

"Oh," I said. He'd told me about it before, but I hadn't read it. It wasn't for me.

"Ox got one," Joe said.

"Did you read it?" Kelly asked.

He shook his head. "No. Ox offered, but I wasn't ready. It still hurt too much." He turned over, his chin right below my rib cage. I lifted my head and

looked into his blue eyes. “There’s one for Gavin.”

“That’s not....” What. Right? True? Real? It was. Of course it was. No matter what happened between us, the letter was meant for him. There wouldn’t be anyone else. “Yeah. I guess there would be.”

“It helped me to understand him better,” Kelly said. “What he was thinking, why he did some of the things he did. But you know what I got from it the most?”

“What?” Joe asked.

“That he loved us. Maybe more than anything in the world. He wasn’t perfect. Far from it. But he tried as hard as he could.” He sighed. “He reminds me of Carter that way.”

I couldn’t speak.

“Yeah,” Joe said. “He was like Carter, wasn’t he?”

I closed my eyes.

“We’ll get through this,” Joe said, and I heard a bird singing somewhere in the trees. “We’ll figure it out. We have to. Everyone is counting on us.” I heard him smiling when he said, “And Carter’s gotta get his act together. Make a man out of Gavin.”

My eyes flashed open. “What?”

Joe and Kelly cackled.

“No. Seriously. *What?*” I sat up, shoving them off me. Kelly rolled on the ground, his hands pressed against his middle. Joe was shaking his head, lips pulled back over his teeth as he bellowed out his laughter. “Guys. Listen to me. What... what do I do with a penis? I mean, how does that work? Am I a power top? And what the hell is a power top and how do I know that?”

“Oh my *god*,” Kelly groaned. “No. We are *not* having this conversation.”

“Does getting fucked hurt?” I wondered aloud. “I’ve never thought about it. I’ve never even *considered* it. How do I do that? Lube, I guess. That makes sense. Can I borrow some lube?”

Joe grimaced. “Dude. Not cool. You never touch another man’s lube. Get your own!”

“I *can’t*. I’m the mayor! Everyone will know what I’m using it for!”

“Jesus Christ,” Kelly said. “Let’s go back to being sad and talking about feelings and shit.”

I grinned at them. “You would think for two guys who’ve chowed down on

some cock, you'd be used to talking about it."

"Chowed *down*?" Kelly said incredulously. "Poor Gavin. Oh man. Someone needs to warn him that he's in for a world of hurt."

"Maybe he'll like it. Maybe he's a pain slut who—wow. That escalated quickly. I take that back."

Joe looked at me, his expression softening. "You don't seem to be too hung up on that whole thing."

"What whole thing?" I asked, pinching Kelly's side. He squawked angrily, batting my hand away.

Joe shrugged. "That Gavin's a guy. That your mate is... you know."

I sighed. "Your gayness is contagious."

He snorted. "That must be it. Seriously, though. It doesn't bother you?"

I squinted at him. "Why would it?"

"You've only ever had sex with women."

"A lot of it too," I said, puffing out my chest. They weren't impressed. I deflated slightly. "Shit like that doesn't matter to me. So I'm bisexual. Or I'm pansexual. Or some other kind of sexual."

"Gavin-sexual," Kelly said.

I rolled my eyes. "Who cares, right? I mean, it's sort of fitting, you know? And even if there wasn't this thing between us, I could..." I shook my head. "Even when he was stuck as a wolf, I felt it. I didn't know what it was. In hindsight, I should have. I hated it at first, but I got used to it. Then he was gone. It hurt more than I ever thought something like that could. And all I could think about was getting to him. I need him to be my shadow because without him, I'm... I felt lost. He's snarly. He's surly. He's a pain in my fucking ass. But there's no one like him. Dad told me once that there could be others, that there wasn't just one person. That we had a *choice*. I think I've made mine, though. If he'll have me. Do you think he'll have me? I'm not perfect. I make mistakes." I shrugged awkwardly. "He sees through that, though. I exasperate him, I annoy him, and he scowls at me like he wants to punch my fucking teeth down my throat. And it all goes away when he says thump, thump, thump. Because he hears my heart and it anchors him. How can I say no to that? Who cares if he's a man or a woman or somewhere in between? It doesn't matter. All I care about is that he sees me. Like, really sees me. And I see him."

I looked at my brothers.

They were gaping at me.

“What?” I said, suddenly self-conscious. I rubbed the back of my neck as my face grew hot.

“Holy shit,” Kelly breathed.

“You love him,” Joe whispered.

I glared at them. “I do not. Shut up.”

“No,” Kelly said, voice growing louder. “You *looooooove* him.”

“Kelly, I will kick your fucking ass!”

Joe fluttered his eyelashes. “Ooh, Gavin. You made my cold, dead heterosexual heart burst with super gay life and now I can’t—*oof!*”

I tackled him. Hard. He was laughing, laughing, laughing, and Kelly pulled on my shoulders, trying to get me off Joe, but I was bigger than they were, and even though Joe probably could have knocked me into next week, he only screamed at me when I shoved dead leaves on his face. Kelly’s knees dug into my sides as I lifted my hands above my head and howled as loud as I could, a song of triumph.

Of brothers.

It echoed throughout the territory.

I collapsed to the ground as it faded. Kelly slid off me, lying on my left. Joe was on my right. I took their hands in mine, squeezing their fingers. Joe was panting, muttering death threats as he spat out bits of leaves. Kelly was chuckling and wiping his eyes.

“Thank you,” I told them, and they quieted. “I never would have made it this far without you.”

“Ditto,” Kelly said.

“Ditto twice,” Joe said.

And I smiled at the sky.

MOM AND MARK WERE SITTING on the porch when we came back, our arms wrapped around each other’s waists. Mark smiled his secret smile, arching an eyebrow. “All right?” he asked.

“All right,” Kelly said.

We stopped in front of them. Mom’s eyes were bright as she looked upon us.

I stepped forward, leaving Joe and Kelly standing where they were. I motioned for Mark to stand up. He did. I hugged him. He seemed surprised, but

then his arms went around me. “What’s this for?” he asked, sounding amused.

“A reminder,” I whispered. “I don’t know what it feels like to lose a brother. And I hope I never have to find out. But I can imagine it. It scares the shit out of me. He loved you, you know that, right? Even when he was breaking your heart, even when you hated him for all that he’d done, he loved you.”

Mark clutched me tighter. He nodded against my head. “I know.”

“We’re not him. We never can be. But we’re here. Remember that.”

He said, “He would be proud of you. All of you.” He pulled away. His eyes were wet, but he was still smiling. “Thank you, Carter.”

“My boys,” Mom said. “My beautiful boys.”

We sat near her feet. I laid my head against her knee as Mark sat back down next to her. I tilted my head back to look up at my mother. She ran her fingers through my hair. She said, “You seem lighter. Happier.”

I took in a deep breath and let it out slow. “I am.”

“Good,” she said.

And it was.

THE OTHERS CAME OUT ONTO THE PORCH. Gordo grunted when he saw us. He sat down next to Mark and kissed him on the cheek.

Jessie and Dominique were next, hands clasped between them. They dragged the chairs over from the corner of the porch and sat behind us.

Bambi came, and we fussed over her and Joshua, bundled warmly in her arms. Gordo cooed over the baby, and we didn’t give him shit for it because we all did it too.

And then Kelly said, “Look.”

We turned to where he was pointing.

Ox was walking down the dirt road toward us, and there was a burst of light in my chest, bigger than it’d been since I’d come home. It warmed me. It calmed me. It made me want to howl again and again.

In my head, I heard his voice.

He said, *BrothersLoveSistersPackHome, i see you i see all of you you are mine and i am yours yours yours.*

It felt like the sun after a long, cloudy day.

He stopped in front of us. He looked at each of us in turn, and I remembered

when he was nothing but a boy, a brave, quiet, lonely boy who didn't talk much because he thought he was going to get shit all his life. How much bigger he'd become. How much greater. His heart was a drumbeat in my head, steady and strong.

He said, "Hello."

And Joe said, "Hello, Ox."

He smiled. "I've been on a walk into town. I've seen some of the most wonderful things. People helping each other. They waved at me. They stopped to wish me merry Christmas, to see what our plans for the holiday were. It was nice. I went to see my mother."

Blue, soft and muted.

He said, "It's been a long time since I've been to see her. I had much to tell her about us. About all we've done. And about what lies ahead. Do you think she heard me?"

"Yeah, Ox," I said. "I think she heard you."

He nodded. "I think so too. Those we love are never truly gone, even if it seems like they are." He looked off into the trees toward the clearing. "Especially here, in this place. It's like... a current. I feel it." He turned back to us, looking at me and Kelly and Joe, and for a moment I thought he could see into our heads, could know what we'd talked about at the bridge. It wouldn't surprise me if he could. A unifier, Joe had said. Making something out of nothing. That was Ox, all right. "I think we would do well to remember that. Even if we're gone, part of us will always remain."

Joe stood then. He went to Ox. He cupped his face before leaning in to kiss him sweetly.

"What was that for?" Ox asked, obviously pleased as Joe pulled away.

"Just because," Joe said.

Ox smiled at him. "I like just because."

WE WERE STILL SITTING ON THE PORCH when they came back. Mom and Jessie had gone inside and come back out with mugs of tea for Gordo and Mark and Bambi, coffee for Dominique and Ox, and hot chocolate for Kelly, Joe, and me.

Ox heard it first. The rumble of an engine in the distance. He raised his head and said, "They're home."

My heart tripped all over itself.

“It’s okay,” Kelly said quietly. He put a hand on my shoulder. “He’s okay.”
I nodded tightly.

I could barely make him out in the back seat, Tanner blocking my view. Rico pulled the truck up in front of the house before he turned it off. The engine ticked. He climbed out of the truck, a grin on his face. Which was good, because that meant no blood had been spilled. Unless it meant *all* the blood had been spilled. Rico could be bloodthirsty.

He said, “Aw, you were all waiting for us.”

Bambi snorted. “Keep telling yourself that.”

He pressed a hand against his chest as he gasped. “You wound me. Joshua, don’t listen to your mother. She’s obviously suffering from—”

“Do you really want to finish that?”

He balked. “Uh. No?”

She smiled sweetly. “Good answer.”

“Woman, I will—”

“He’s obviously pushing to sleep outside again,” Bambi said to Jessie. “Now that he’s a wolf, I don’t feel bad about it.”

Jessie grinned. “And you shouldn’t.”

Chris and Tanner were standing in front of Gavin. I could see the top of his head, but not much more. For a moment I was worried about what they were trying to hide.

I shouldn’t have been.

“Okay,” Rico said, going around the front of the truck. “Now, you should know that he only growled at one person, and it was the hairdresser. But I can’t blame him because she turned on the clippers without warning him. Thankfully I’d bought a squeaky toy for Joshua in the mall, and I squeezed it. Gavin was immediately distracted like a good boy.”

Gavin snarled.

Rico rolled his eyes. “I can say stuff like that now. I’m a werewolf too. It’s not racist.” He frowned. “Speciesist? One of those two. Anyway. Gavin has... interesting? Yes, *interesting* taste in what he wanted to wear, and while I’m not one to stifle how anyone wants to dress—”

“*That’s* a lie,” Tanner said. “You stifle us all the time.”

Rico ignored him. “I still gave my expert advice because that’s what I do. I’m a problem-solver. Babe. Tell them.”

“He tries,” Bambi said. “Unfortunately.”

“Exactly,” Rico said. “I *do* try. And it’s unfortunate when people don’t listen to me. It’s a good thing Gavin did. Well. For the most part. He tried to bite me once, but that was my fault for trying to put a belt on him, and I got a *little* too close to—”

“Are you almost done?” Chris asked. “It’s cold, and I want hot chocolate.”

“There’s plenty for you on the stove,” Mom said.

“Oh, man, I’m going to drink the *shit* out of—”

Rico whirled around. “Don’t. Move. I’m building anticipation, and you’re ruining it.”

“Hurry up, then!”

“Fine,” Rico muttered. He turned back to face us. He must have seen the look on my face, because he said, “I present to you, Gavin Walsh.” He smiled. “He picked the name himself.”

Walsh.

Like his mother.

Chris and Tanner stepped aside, throwing up jazz hands for reasons I didn’t want to guess at.

But it didn’t matter.

Because all I saw was him.

His hair was shorter. The sides had been shaved close to the scalp, and the top had been styled up, flopping over to the right. I didn’t know why I was stuck on the fact that I could see his *ears*, of all things, but that’s how it was.

He scowled, of course. It was his default expression. But I was learning that it didn’t only come from a place of anger or irritation. He did it when he was nervous too, like he was now.

He wore a thick cable-knit sweater, the sleeves too long, as they fell over his hands, the tips of his fingers poking out. I wasn’t surprised it was pink. He’d been so enamored with the DIVA shirt Dominique had given him. It made sense. For him, at least.

His jeans were new too, and slim-fitting. He was still too skinny, but in the short time we’d been back in Green Creek, my mother hadn’t stopped feeding him, and he’d lost the haunted, gaunt look he’d had when I found him.

He looked good.

Real good.

“Gross,” Kelly muttered.

I was up and moving even before I realized it. Gavin looked at me and then away, as if he thought I would rebuke him or judge him harshly.

I said, “You look... nice. I like your sweater.”

His scowl deepened. He lifted his arms, flexing his fingers. “It’s good. Too long. It’s floppy. I never had floppy before. Rico said floppy okay.”

“More than okay,” Rico said. “The best, even. Which is why we got six of them, all in different colors.”

I loved him for it. All of them. Rico and Tanner and Chris. They were roughnecks. Hicks. But they were soft in ways most people didn’t expect.

“Pants,” Gavin said, sounding annoyed. “Lots of pants. I said I only need one. Rico said everyone should have more. I asked him why. He told me to shut up and listen to him. I did.” He shrugged. “Stupid Rico.”

“I’m pretending that was a term of endearment. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to kiss my baby momma and my baby. Bambi, get ready for some sugar.”

Chris and Tanner followed him to the house. I could hear the others talking behind us, but it faded away when I looked at him. Behind him, in the bed of the truck, were a shit-ton of bags. It looked like they’d bought out an entire department store.

“I did okay,” Gavin said. His forehead was lined as his brow furrowed. “Didn’t flash my eyes or anything. Even if I wanted to.”

“That’s probably a good thing.”

“Yeah,” he said. Then he cocked his head. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

He tapped my chest. “Thump, thump, thump. It’s louder. Faster.”

“I just... I’m happy to see you.”

“You are?”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “Very.”

“Oh,” he said. Then he spoke slowly, as if choosing his words with great deliberation. “I am happy to see you too, Carter. I was... I saw things. Stuff. That I wanted to show you. But you were here. I just forgot.”

“Like what? What did you want to show me?”

“Everything,” he said seriously, and when I laughed, he was startled into a smile. It was blinding. “That’s funny?”

I nodded. "It is. You are." I took his hand in mine. He looked down between us before lifting his head again. "Floppy sweaters are good sweaters."

He said, "Yeah. I'll show you. Green. And purple. And blue. And red." His eyes widened as I started toward the truck. He pulled me back, squeezing my hand. "No. No, Carter. Don't. Stay back."

I was confused. "What? Why?"

"I *said* so," he snapped at me. "Always asking questions. Just do what I say."

"Christmas presents," Rico called from the porch. "We worked hard, didn't we, Gavin?"

Gavin nodded furiously. "Can't look."

I was absurdly touched. "You didn't have to get me a present."

He snorted. "Who said I got anything for you? Greedy ass."

I gaped at him.

Mom spoke up. "If you're done fawning over him, I'd like to have a look."

I should have been outraged at her even suggesting such a thing.

I wasn't, because she spoke only truth.

Gavin went to her, and when she twirled her finger, he stretched out his arms and spun around slowly. When he was facing her again, she said, "You're very handsome. Just like your brother."

Gavin glanced up at Gordo, who nodded at him. "Damn right we are."

Mark snorted and bumped his shoulder.

I stood there watching them. These people, my family. They told Gavin he looked good in his new clothes. They asked him to tell them what happened to the lady who cut his hair. They laughed when he snapped his teeth in the middle of his retelling. Every now and then he'd glance back at me, as if just to make sure I was still there. Every time he did, he would smile just a little bit before turning back around and continuing his stories.

He fit.

I could see that now.

He fit. Like he'd always been here.

And later, when the sky was beginning to darken, we stood alone on the porch. The stars were coming out, and the territory thrummed within me, stronger and louder than it'd been these past days.

Healing.

We were healing.

Slowly but surely.

Gavin said, "I had a good day."

I looked over at him. He was staring off at the blue house, the lights on inside though no one was home. "Did you?"

He nodded. "Rico is good. Chris and Tanner too. They helped me."

"Why did you ask them? I'm glad you did," I added quickly. "Just... why?"

"Questions," he mumbled.

"Pretty sure I'm never *not* going to ask questions."

"I know. Annoying." But he touched the back of my hand, as if to show me he didn't mean it. "They're...." He paused, mouth thinning.

I waited, knowing he was trying to put his thoughts in order.

Finally he said, "They're like me. Kind of. Still new to being wolves. Still learning. And I'm new to being like this. Human. Still learning. Easier, though. It's getting easier. They teach me. And I teach them."

"Like pack," I said quietly.

He started to nod but stopped himself. "Yeah. Sure. But I didn't mean like that. Like friends. I never... had that. Friends. People who didn't want anything. From me. Always used. Before I was a wolf. And after." He swallowed thickly. "They wanted to help me. And they didn't need me. To do something for them. It's... different. New. I like it." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "Better, I think. Than it was before."

"When you were a wolf?"

"Yeah." He tapped the side of his head. "I can hear them. Quiet. Livingstone still loud, but not like it was. And now I can tell them. What I'm thinking. Couldn't do that when I was a wolf. I like being a wolf. Less complicated. But I think I like being human more."

"I like it when you're human too."

"Really?"

"Really."

He gnawed on his bottom lip. "I... like it too. When you're human. Or when you're wolf. Or when you're anything. Thump, thump, thump."

"Thump, thump, thump."

"Stupid Carter."

"Stupid Gavin."

He laughed.

I was in awe of him.

for you/fill my lungs

“There’s more of them,” Aileen said. She sounded exhausted through the phone. “More wolves.”

Ox closed his eyes. “Tell me.”

“Santos is still there. But more wolves have joined him. Livingstone came to the border of the wards again. He was human. He didn’t speak. He just stood there. Watching us. But the wolves threw themselves at the barrier again and again and again. Their skin split. Their bones broke, and still they went on. For hours. When they stopped, they all stopped as one. They went back to him. They surrounded him. Bared their throats. He never looked at them. He only had eyes for us.”

“Omegas?” Joe asked, voice hard. He was sitting in his father’s chair in the office.

She hesitated. “Not all. Half, maybe. Ten in total. But....”

“But?” Ox asked.

“One of them. I saw him a few days ago. He was an Omega then. He isn’t anymore. He’s a Beta now. His eyes are orange.”

“Shit,” Gordo muttered. “You’ve got a problem.”

She laughed, but it was without humor. “We’ve got a problem, but yes, I see your point. It’s one of us. It has to be. A witch. Someone is opening the barriers. Letting them in.”

Ox opened his eyes. They swirled red and violet. “Who?”

“I don’t know,” she said. I could hear the frustration in her voice. “I’ve gone over the wards again and again. Whoever it is knows how to cover their tracks. I’ve got a few people in mind, but I don’t want to make unfounded accusations. We’re stretched thin enough as it is. I’d ask that you send wolves to relieve us, but we don’t know if he’d be able to exert any hold over them. Especially those that aren’t....” She trailed off.

“Those that aren’t happy with me as the Alpha,” Joe finished for her.

She sighed. “I mean no disrespect, Alpha Bennett, but I’m told there is unrest in some of the wolves in Caswell. You’ve been gone for weeks. I know you put wolves in charge in your stead that you trust, but it’s not the same as having their Alpha.”

Joe sat back in his chair. “One of the witches is opening the barrier to let wolves in.”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t they just let Livingstone and the others *out*?”

She was quiet. Then, “Twofold, I think. Livingstone is strong, but we have nearly forty witches here. And every now and then, more join our ranks. Carter, I’m told you know one of them. Joe, Kelly, Gordo, you too. She’s from Kentucky.”

I was surprised. The witch in the post office in Bedford had been blunt in the fact that she wanted nothing to do with wolves, not after all she’d been through. “Really?”

“She said she was tired of hiding. That if this spilled over, if we fell, there was nowhere anyone could run that they wouldn’t be affected. I knew her mother. She’s good people. And I think Livingstone knows that. He sees how united we are. We might not be able to take him down, but the wolves that have joined him? They’re vulnerable. Which brings me to my second point.” Her voice was flat. “He’s building an army. The more wolves that join him, the stronger he gets. An Alpha is nothing without a pack. We know he was... feeding off Gavin. There was a blood bond between them. When Gavin left, it weakened him. And he’s pulling these other wolves to him to make up for it. Packs with blood between them are strong. He doesn’t have that, not anymore.”

“But he’s making up for it in numbers,” Ox said grimly.

“Yes. And I hate to be the one to say this, but Gavin is... if Gavin came back, we wouldn’t even be having this discussion. Livingstone would have what he wants.”

I looked out the window. I could see Gavin laughing with Chris and Tanner and Rico as they worked on one of the trucks. Chris shoved Gavin in the shoulder, and he snapped his teeth playfully in response. I could hear Bambi and Jessie on the porch and Joshua’s little sounds as he nursed.

I said, “That’s not gonna happen.”

“But—”

I glared at the phone. “You would... what? Have him sacrifice himself? Give himself to his father? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Mom put her hand over mine. “I don’t think that’s what she’s saying.”

I pulled away from her. “That’s *exactly* what she’s saying. And I’m telling you right now there’s no way in hell I’m going to agree to that.”

“It’s not up to you, though, is it?” Aileen said. “It would be his choice.”

“Oh, fuck you, Aileen—”

Ox flashed his eyes. “Carter.”

I shook my head furiously as I began to pace. “No. There has to be another way. I’m not going to send him back. And anyone that suggests otherwise better be willing to deal with the consequences, because I’ll rain fire down with everything I have.”

“It wouldn’t have to be permanent,” Aileen argued. “Just until we figure out what to do about Livingstone.”

I stopped, arms across my chest. “No. The moment we’re willing to sacrifice one person is the moment we’ve lost.”

“And it has nothing to do with the fact that he’s your mate?”

I went to the desk, leaning over the phone, my hands flat against the wood. “He’s pack. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you use him like that.”

“And if Livingstone gets out?” Aileen asked. “If he hurts innocent people? What then? Would it be worth it to you? People who have nothing to do with this life. Would you tell yourself it was worth it as long as he’s alive? Because that’s what it could come down to. Are you prepared for that, Carter? Are any of you? Is *he*? I noticed he hasn’t said anything. Is he there? What does he think about all this?”

I faltered. “It’s... that’s not...”

Ox squeezed my shoulder, pulling me away from the phone. “I hear you. I promise.”

“Ox,” I said hoarsely. “You... We can’t do this to him. It’s not fair.”

“I know.” He looked down at the phone. “I’ll come down there. Next week. I’ll bring Gordo.”

Gordo sighed. “I thought you were going to say that.” Mark didn’t look happy.

“What about me?” Robbie asked. “I could—”

Ox said, “No. We know how he feels about you. I’m not going to put you

through that again. We don't know if he'll have any hold over you, even if his magic is gone. It might be worse now that he's a wolf. We're not going to take that chance."

Kelly looked relieved, though he tried to hide it.

"I can help," Robbie insisted. "I'm not some little cub—"

"You can come with me," Joe said. "I'll go back to Caswell. You can check in on Tony and Brodie. I'm sure they'd be happy to see you."

Robbie looked like he was going to argue, but he sagged instead. "Yeah. Okay. That works."

Ox nodded. "In the meantime, Aileen, do what you can to shore up the wards. And double up the patrols. I don't want any witch alone. It'll be harder that way for whoever has betrayed us."

"Already on it," Aileen said. "Patrice is coordinating it as we speak."

"Good. We'll be in touch. Let me know if anything else comes up."

"Of course, Alpha Matheson. And happy holidays."

Jesus Christ. The absurdity of it all.

"You too," Ox said quietly. The phone beeped as the call disconnected.

I looked to my Alphas. "I'm not sending him back, so get that idea out of your heads right now."

Mom said, "I think we got it, Carter."

"Do you? Because I don't know if all of you do."

"I know that you've been through a lot," Ox said. "And I can appreciate that. But if you're going to make an accusation, you'd best have evidence to back it up."

My reflex was to cower before him. I didn't. I squared my shoulders. "How would you feel if it was Joe?" I glanced at Kelly. "Or Robbie? Or Gordo? Would you be so willing to let them throw away their lives?"

"No one is suggesting that," Joe said. His mouth was in a thin line.

"Better not," I said coldly. "Because if I hear it again, we're going to have a problem. I get that there's a greater good here. I do. But he's a person, a flesh and blood person, and you don't get to make that decision for him."

"What about what *he* wants?" Gordo asked.

"Of course he would do it," I snarled at him. My heart was pounding, a thin sheen of sweat on my forehead. I curled my hands into fists, the tips of my claws pricking my palms. "He would do anything for us"—for *me*, though the

implication was clear—“even if that meant sacrificing himself. That’s not the point. Hasn’t he already been through enough?”

Gordo threw up his hands. “Haven’t we all?”

“He’s your *brother*.”

Gordo stood from his chair, knocking Mark away when he tried to stop him. He stood before me, his chest bumping mine. His tattoos shone. “I know that,” he growled at me. “And it kills me to even suggest such a thing. But we have to think, Carter. We have to use our heads.”

I shoved him away. “Fuck you. Fuck all of you if you think—”

“*Enough*.”

Ox’s Alpha voice rolled through us. My skin itched. My fangs poked through my gums. I could feel it coming from him. His anger, though it wasn’t directed at us. And the blue. He was so damn blue I could taste it.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere,” Ox said. “And I’ll be damned if I’m going to let us fall apart again. We need to be united. All of us. Gavin’s not going anywhere.”

“Damn right he’s not—”

“For *now*,” Ox said. He held up his hand as I started to sputter. “Carter, you’ve protected him for a long time, even when you didn’t know what he was to you. But you need to have faith. In us. In *him*. He’s not a child. He can speak for himself.”

I hated how my eyes stung, hated how weak it made me look in front of all of them. My chest hitched as I tried to catch my breath. “I know that. But you can’t expect me to just stand aside and let you take him from me.”

Ox softened, the red and violet fading from his eyes. “I don’t expect that at all.” His lips quirked. “I think I’d have a fight on my hands.”

“Fuck yes, you would.”

“Then we’ll find another way. Gordo? Anything?”

He grimaced before shaking his head. “Nothing I could find in Thomas’s or Abel’s books. There might be something in Caswell that I missed, but I wouldn’t count on it. I can’t find any mention of a witch surviving an Alpha bite, even when magic was involved.” He rubbed the scar tissue where the raven had once been. “It’s beyond us, Ox. There’s never been anything like him.”

“He bleeds,” Ox said bluntly. “We’ve seen it. Robbie ripped out his eye. And if he bleeds, he can die.”

“I’ll look again,” Robbie said. “I know those books better than anyone here.”

When we go back to Caswell, I can check to make sure we haven't missed anything." A strange look crossed his face, but it was gone before I could be sure about what I saw. "There might be...."

"What?" Gordo asked.

Robbie shook his head. "I don't know yet. I'll let you know when I find out."

"Good," Ox said. He hesitated before turning to me. "Carter, I'm not trying to put any pressure on you, okay? Remember that when I ask what I'm about to ask."

I hung my head. "I know what you're going to say. I'm... working on it, okay? We both are. But you can't force something this important. Not like this." I wiped my eyes. "I don't even know if he wants... this." *Me.* "Would you? I mean, Christ, Ox. Why the hell would you want to attach yourself to a sinking ship?"

"I often say I don't have idiots for sons, so don't you dare try and prove me wrong now, even if there's already enough evidence of that."

I jerked my head up.

My mother glared at me, her eyes orange.

"Mom, I—"

"Stop," she snapped. "It's my turn to talk, do you understand? I don't want to hear another word out of your mouth until I've had my say."

"Uh-oh," Kelly breathed. "Warpath."

"Shut up," Joe hissed at him. "She'll hear you!"

"We can all hear you," Mark said.

Mom ignored them. She only had eyes for me. I tried to look away, but I couldn't.

She said, "That man out there. That wonderful man followed you for *years*. He put himself between you and harm's way time and time again. And when he thought his father was going to take you away from him, when you were *screaming* as Livingstone's magic was pouring into you, he made his choice. He found it within himself to crawl from the depths of whatever feral hell he was in. For *you*, Carter. How are you so blind to that? I know he's not what you expected. I know you never thought about one such as him—"

"I don't care about that."

Her eyes blazed. "Then it's time you pulled your head from your ass and got your shit together."

“Whoa,” Kelly whispered.

“Hard-core,” Joe whispered back.

My mother’s eyes faded from orange to blue as she took my face in her hands. “I wish things could be different. I wish you had all the time in the world. And if I’d...” She shook her head. “If I’d done my job as your mother, you might have understood what it meant sooner. And I’m sorry for that. And I’m sorry that you find yourself in this position now. But don’t *ever* doubt what Gavin Walsh feels for you. Everything he’s done has been for *you*. Carter, can’t you see? He loves you. So much so that he was willing to sacrifice himself in Caswell just to keep you safe. He chose you over his father. It’s why he left with him. Not because he wanted to. But because he thought it would mean Livingstone could never touch you again.”

“Mom,” I croaked out.

“You deserve this,” she said quietly. “Him. And I couldn’t ask for anyone better for you. We’ll deal with Livingstone. One way or another. Gavin’s not going anywhere.” She raised her voice. “Do you all hear me? He’s not going *anywhere*. And if I hear anyone saying otherwise, you’re going to answer to me. Ox is right. Livingstone bleeds. Which means he can die. And we’re going to be the ones to kill him.”

I WENT OUT ONTO THE PORCH. Bambi and Jessie stopped talking and looked over at me.

“Uh-oh,” Jessie said. “That bad?”

I shook my head. I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing at all. I walked down the steps. Chris and Tanner were bent over the truck, the hood propped up. Gavin was between them, and they were telling him about spark plugs and alternators, pistons and crankshafts. He nodded along as Rico watched over them, looking oddly proud.

Gavin stiffened and turned around as Chris and Tanner trailed off. He looked at me, eyes narrowing. “What?”

“C’mere.”

He did. He had oil under his fingernails. He looked like he belonged with them. “What happened?” he asked. “Bad stuff?”

“No. Don’t worry about it. We’re figuring it out.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not. I promise. Just...."
I did the only thing I could.
I hugged him.
He grunted as if surprised, his arms dangling at his sides.
And then he hugged me back.
"Carter?" he whispered, his cheek against mine.
"It's fine," I said as the guys watched us. "It'll be okay."
"Be okay," he echoed, and I closed my eyes.

IT WAS FRIDAY WHEN HE ASKED.

Christmas Eve.

The moon was fading, though I could still feel its pull.

We were sitting in the living room. Kelly and Joe had cut down a tree in the woods behind the house, a Douglas fir we'd covered in lights and ornaments. I was showing Gavin the little baubles my brothers and I had made as kids, clay handprints and torn paper snowflakes covered in old glitter. Kelly and Joe were in the attic, trying to get the last of the decorations. Gordo sat on the couch, nursing a beer, watching us.

Gavin said, "You made these."

"Yeah, man. We did. Not very good, I know, but I'm not exactly the creative type. Joe and Kelly were better at stuff like that, even if Joe tended to eat the glue."

"I was *three!*" Joe shouted from somewhere above us.

"And now he's the Alpha of all," Gordo muttered. "We're doomed."

Gavin looked down at the box in his lap. He was sitting on the floor next to me, his knee pressed against mine. He was wearing his pink sweater again. It was his favorite. He looked younger than he had since I'd known him. He'd told me he was thirty-two, which put him less than a year older than me, but now that he'd cleaned up, he could pass for years younger.

He said, "Here? You made these here?"

I nodded. "And in Caswell."

"When you had to go back."

"Yeah." I glanced at Gordo. "Though *had to* is probably a little strong."

"Why?"

“Questions,” I muttered as Gordo snorted. “Always questions with you.”

“Ha, ha,” Gavin said. “Answer me.”

I sighed. “Dad was... young when he was made Alpha. His father was murdered, along with most of his pack. Hunters.”

“Ouroboros,” Gordo said, voice hard.

“What’s that?” Gavin asked.

“Snake eating its own tail. Ancient symbol. Supposed to represent infinity.”

I said, “They told him he needed to go back to Caswell. That he was the Alpha of all and that people were depending on him.”

“He left,” Gavin said. “Took all of you.”

“Not all,” I said. “And that wasn’t right.” Gordo’s hand tightened on his beer bottle. “I wasn’t old enough to understand. To do anything about it. But I know now what my father didn’t, even though he thought he was doing the right thing. We don’t leave pack behind. Ever.”

“Ever,” Gavin repeated. “Because pack pack pack.”

“Yeah. Pack pack pack.”

“Why not just stay here?” he asked. “Or bring Caswell here? Why in two different places?”

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Easier, right? All wolves and witches in one place. Everyone now spread out. All over. Far away.”

I didn’t know how to answer.

Thankfully, Gordo did. “You know Caswell. You know Green Creek. Can you tell the difference?”

Gavin frowned before nodding slowly. “Caswell is... strong. Wolves. Witches. Territory is old. Many wolves been there. Could feel them. In the earth. Many different bloodlines.”

Gordo sat forward, dangling the bottle between his legs. Mark appeared in the doorway, but he didn’t speak, his gaze on Gordo. “And here?”

Gavin thought hard. “Big,” he said finally. “Bigger. Wild. More. Territory is stronger. Older. Powerful. All the same, though. All Bennetts.”

“Yeah,” Gordo said. “All Bennetts. In Caswell they’ve had the Alpha of all going back hundreds of years. For a long time, it had nothing to do with the Bennetts. It wasn’t until Abel’s grandfather that it landed in Bennett hands. They divided their time between here and Caswell, though back then it took a hell of a

lot longer to cross the country. I... read. In all those old books. The history is there for anyone who wants to see it. Wolves and witches and hunters, always fighting. The Bennetts. The Livingstones. The Kings. Three families, all intertwined.” He grunted. “Still pretty queer, though, as far as I could tell. How the lines didn’t die out by now, I have no idea.”

Gavin nodded. “Secret. This was a secret place.”

Gordo hesitated. “Not exactly. More like it was... well. I don’t like putting it this way, given my history with people who use religion as a weapon, but Green Creek was considered almost holy. And the Bennetts protected it fiercely.”

Gavin watched him for a long moment. Then, “He’s your father too.”

“He is. But he wasn’t my dad. I had my grandfather for that. And then Marty, the guy who owned the shop before I did.”

“Both gone,” Gavin said.

“Yeah. Both gone.”

“Your mom?”

“A victim,” he said. “Livingstone messed with her head. Used his magic to control her. I don’t know how long it’d been going on for. Maybe as long as he knew her. But it fucked with her, in the end.” He winced. “I think it’s why she did what she did.”

“To my mom.”

“Yeah.”

Gavin gnawed on his bottom lip. “A tree.”

Gordo arched an eyebrow. “What? What tree?”

“Family tree,” Gavin said. “Grows together. Bennetts. Livingstones. Kings. Twisted. Stuck. We’re in Bennett tree too even though you’re Livingstone. I’m Walsh.”

Mark was smiling as if he could see where Gavin was going with this. I wouldn’t put it past him. He had insights into people I never could. The raven on his throat bobbed up and down, almost like it was alive.

“I guess we are,” Gordo said. He snorted. “Though if you’d told me that years ago, I would have probably lit you on fire.”

“Limbs,” Gavin said, unperturbed by Gordo’s threat. “Trees have limbs. Sometimes get sick. Diseased. To save the tree, you cut off limb. It recovers. Grows healthy. New life.”

Gordo had a look of awe on his face. “Damn. I... yeah. I guess that’s right.”

Gavin nodded. "You're Livingstone. But also Bennett. You stay in tree. You're not diseased."

"Gee, thanks. I think. But you know that means you are too, right?"

"Sick," Gavin muttered. "Omega. Not Bennett. Not Livingstone. Walsh."

"You're not—"

"Will you show me?"

Gordo blinked. "Show you what?"

Gavin looked at me before turning back to his brother. "Where they died."

SHE'D LIVED NEAR A PARK in the next town over.

She'd been a librarian.

She had a dog named Milo.

She smiled a lot, Gordo said. And laughed loudly.

She didn't know about witches. About wolves.

And one day she'd disappeared for a long while. When she came back, she wasn't the same. Nothing was.

"It's okay," Mark said as we sat in the truck, watching Gavin and Gordo walk toward a little park with benches and a playground. The equipment was mostly empty. A few kids played on the swings and the monkey bars, their parents sipping from travel mugs as they watched. "Gordo has this."

"I know," I muttered, trying to resist the urge to get out of the truck and run after them. Mark took my hand in his, holding me in place. I didn't know if I was grateful or irritated. Both, probably. "I just worry."

"Of course you do," Mark said. "You were too young to remember what happened here." He pointed out the windshield toward the park. Toward the houses around it. "I came here after. I needed to see for myself. They said it was a gas main explosion. This entire block was gone. Leveled completely. It was still smoldering when I came. People were digging through the rubble."

"Wendy was already dead."

Mark nodded solemnly. "Livingstone was too late to save her. Gordo's mother just... cracked."

"How did you all not see it? How could you just let it go on? You were probably too young, but Dad? Grandad? They had to know something was wrong."

“Maybe,” Mark said. “I know there were times they were sealed away in the office, and even though it was soundproofed back then too, I swore I could still feel the vibrations through the walls and floors as they raged at each other. But Gordo was right. His mother was a victim in all of this. As was Gavin’s mother and all the people who died here when Livingstone came.”

Gavin’s shoulders were hunched, his head bowed as Gordo took him by the elbow, leading him farther into the park.

“Why doesn’t he hate Gavin?” I asked.

Mark shrugged. “I think he did. At least at first, though maybe hate is too strong of a word. Resented? He was shocked. I can’t imagine what it’d be like to think you’re alone only to find out that someone existed who could understand.”

“Did you talk to him? I’ll be honest. I fully expected Gordo to act like an asshole if I ever found Gavin and brought him back.”

My uncle laughed. “I don’t blame you for that. He *is* an asshole. It’s like armor to him. You see through it eventually. But he was one of the first to put plans together to go after the both of you. He and Kelly and Joe.”

“For Gavin.”

He shook his head. “Both of you. You have to know that. Of course he would come after you. For so long he had nothing. And when we came back to Green Creek, he convinced himself he wanted nothing to do with us. I don’t blame him for that.”

“You blamed my dad.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “Yeah. I guess I did. I loved your father. But our relationship was... complicated.”

“That sounds like an understatement.”

He said, “I suppose it does. But you can love someone and hate them all at the same time, so long as you don’t allow hate to rise up and smother everything else. That’s the difference between us and someone like Livingstone. I believe he truly does love Gavin. Gordo. Robbie too, in his own way. But he’s allowed his hatred to overwhelm him. It’s blinded him. Rage often does when it’s all you know.” Then, “It was Robbie who got through to Gordo about his brother.”

My eyes widened. “Really?”

Mark nodded. “After we found out about Gavin, Robbie took Gordo away for a couple of hours. Gordo was fuming. When they came back, he was... resigned. Which is better than being pissed off at a feral wolf, I guess. I don’t know what they talked about, but whatever Robbie said, Gordo listened.”

“Whoa.”

“Whoa,” Mark agreed. “That armor Gordo has, he wore it for so long that he forgot how to take it off. We had to crack it, piece by piece. And it wasn’t just me. It was all of us. We were there to remind him that he didn’t have to be alone. I loved your father, Carter. I loved him more than almost anything else in the world. Which is why I hated him too. Because it hurt me. *He* hurt me. I could never be an Alpha. Can you imagine what that must be like? Having to make choices like that. Ox and Joe, they’re stronger than I could ever be. It seems so thankless.”

Gavin and Gordo were on the opposite side of the park. Their heads were bowed so close together, they were almost touching. Gordo’s lips moved, and if I tried hard enough, I probably could have picked up what he was saying. But it wasn’t for me. I glanced at Mark. “He loved you too.”

Mark hummed a little under his breath. “I know. We found our way back to each other in the end. Brothers often do.” He blinked rapidly. “I just wish... I don’t know. That I had one more moment with him. To tell him I loved him. He knew. We didn’t say it much, but I tell myself he knew in the end.”

“He’s still here,” I whispered.

Mark took his hand away from mine and wrapped it around the back of my neck. He pressed his forehead against my ear. The pack bond between us vibrated. It was stronger now. “I think so too,” he said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Mark said. “Maybe his work isn’t quite finished.” He chuckled. “Or maybe he’s just a stubborn asshole Alpha who doesn’t know how to let things go.”

It wasn’t just him. I remembered the woman. Madam Penelope. And Robbie telling us of his visions in Caswell. How he’d seen other wolves aside from Joe and Ox. Mom’s dream of Dad, and how she’d woken up with her stone wolf in her hand, though she’d buried it long before.

Snow began to drift down from the sky. It was nothing more than flurries, small flakes that spun around in the air. “He’d have liked Gavin.”

“Yeah,” Mark said as he sat back, keeping his hand on the back of my neck. “He would have. Very much, in fact. He would’ve been curious about him. Marveled at him. Told him how proud he was that he’d survived all that he’d been through. And he would have welcomed him with open arms. It pulled at him, I think. Which is why he went to Gavin as he did to tell him the truth.”

“He still should have told Gordo.”

“He should have,” Mark said. “But then he should’ve done many things that he didn’t do. Maybe that’s why we still feel him. Maybe that’s why he’s still here. Or maybe we’re just both out of our minds still. Little residual Omega stuck in our brains.”

“That was a weird time.”

“No shit. Look. Here they come.”

Gavin and Gordo were walking back toward us. Both of them had their hands in their coat pockets, their breath streaming behind them. Their elbows brushed together. I was struck then by just how similar they were. They even walked the same, though it might have been Gavin trying to be like his brother more than anything else. They were both scowling.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. “There are two of them now.”

Mark sounded like he was choking. “I didn’t even think about that. Holy shit. I have someone to talk to now about that motherfucker.”

I was horrified. “No. No. You do *not* get to talk to me about your sex life. I’m already scarred enough as it is. What in the actual fuck?”

Mark stared at me. “Why on earth would you think I was talking about sex?” Then he grinned, and it was evil. “You’ve got something on your mind, Carter?”

“Boundaries!” I yelled, and Gavin and Gordo’s heads snapped up at the same time. “We need boundaries!”

“I’m your uncle, Carter. And also your better. If you need some advice, I’m sure I can give you—”

I threw open the door and got out of the truck. I glared at Gordo. “Your mate is terrible and you should feel bad.”

Gordo shrugged. “I don’t. He’s a big boy. He can handle himself.”

I gagged. “Stop talking about how big he is! I don’t need to know that!”

Gordo rolled his eyes. “Come on, Gavin. Apparently it was a bad idea to leave these two idiots alone.”

“Yeah,” Gavin said. “Those idiots. Did you know Carter is stupid? He almost dies a lot.”

“I know. It’s a Bennett thing. Trust me, you think you can stop them or even get used to it, but then they go and do something ridiculous and you have to save them. Again.”

“And again,” Gavin said, scowling at me. “Don’t know why they can’t see it.”

“Right?” Gordo said. “You’d think they’d learn after the eighth or ninth time.”

I gaped at them.

“What?” Gordo snapped.

“Yeah,” Gavin said, that familiar scowl on his face. “What?”

I turned my face toward the sky. “This is all my fault. I deserve this. I should have seen this coming.”

“What’s he talking about?” Gavin asked his brother.

“I stopped listening a long time ago,” Gordo said, pushing him toward the truck. “If you’re going to stick around, you’d probably best start doing the same.”

“Easier?”

“Completely.”

“Okay,” Gavin said. And he walked right by me without so much as a look in my direction.

Gordo grinned. “I like him.”

“I hate everything,” I mumbled as I followed Gavin back to the truck.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Gavin sat on the edge of my bed. He’d been quiet since we’d gotten back from our little excursion. I wanted to push him, to find out what was going on in his head, but figured it was better to wait.

The sounds of the house moved around us as the pack settled in. Bambi, Joshua, and Rico were staying over in the blue house with Robbie and Kelly. Ox and Joe had turned Ox’s old room into a nursery for them as a gift. They had their own place, Rico having moved in with Bambi last year, but the Alphas wanted them to have space here too, if they ever needed it.

Chris and Tanner were bunking up in one of the rooms down the hall. I’d heard them laughing through their closed door as I passed by from the bathroom. I shook my head, wondering at them and the decisions they’d made. They seemed happy. That was the most important thing.

Gavin looked up at me from the bed. Usually by now, he’d shifted to his wolf. Most nights he’d sleep on the bed, stretching out until I was hanging off the side, trying to protect the little corner I’d made for myself. I’d tried pointing out that the floor was readily available, but he’d just yawn at me and turn his

head away.

But here he was, still human.

I was nervous for reasons I didn't want to focus on.

I threw my clothes in the laundry bin, looking down to see a pink sweater sitting on the top. The scent of the old-growth forest was thick. I tried to breathe it in without him noticing.

Which was apparently not the best idea I'd ever had.

"You smell me," he said.

I stiffened. "What?"

"You smell me," he said again, as if that explained everything.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He snorted. "Yeah, okay."

I shook my head. "You need to stop hanging out with Gordo. You're starting to talk like him."

"He's my brother."

I sighed. "Yeah. I guess he is."

"What does it smell like? Me. To you."

Shit. "We really don't need to talk about this."

"Why not?"

"It's late."

"Tomorrow's Christmas."

"It is."

"I haven't had Christmas in a long time."

I turned around. He was looking down at his hands. He was wearing a pair of sleep shorts. They belonged to Joe. Rico had bought him new sleep clothes along with everything else, but Gavin had yet to wear them. I didn't ask because I understood. They smelled like an Alpha. Like pack. It was comforting. "Well, you can have one here. Tomorrow. I don't know how big it's going to be. Ox and Gordo are leaving in a couple of days. Joe and Robbie too."

"Kelly going."

I blinked. "What?"

"Kelly," he said. "Going to Caswell with Joe and Robbie."

I hadn't known that. I scratched the back of my neck. "Makes sense. Robbie doesn't have the best history with Caswell. Kelly wouldn't want to let him out of

his sight. We're... weird that way."

Gavin watched me, a curious look on his face. "Because they're mates."

I shrugged awkwardly. "Yeah. That's part of it. A big part, even. But it's also probably for Joe. Wanting to make sure someone has his back."

"Joe is Alpha."

"Your observational skills are exceptional."

He sneered at me. "Alpha of all."

"He is," I agreed, wondering where he was going with this while also trying to figure out why the bed looked much smaller than it had this morning.

"Powerful," Gavin said. "But I don't know if he likes it."

That startled me. "Why do you think that?"

"My observational skills are exceptional."

I groaned. "You're such an asshole."

He grinned at me. "Your words." The smile faded slightly. "Why does he do something he doesn't like?"

It was too late for this. I was exhausted, but he wasn't moving. I leaned against my desk. "Because he has to."

"Why?"

"Because it's who he's supposed to be."

He nodded slowly. "But you said I could be whoever I wanted."

"You can."

"Then why can't he?"

"I... It's blood, Gavin. It's in our blood. We're Bennetts."

"What would you be?"

"What do you mean?"

He frowned in concentration. "If you... trying to find words." He hit the side of his head.

"Hey, don't do that. Just take your time, man. It'll come to you."

He said, "If you could be. Anyone else. Would you?"

"No," I said, surprising even myself. "I don't think I would."

"Why?"

I chewed on the inside of my cheek before answering. "There's this... history. Here, in Green Creek. And it's not always a good history. A lot of shit has happened here."

“But?”

The house creaked around us. I could hear my mother singing as she got ready for bed. Ox laughed downstairs at something Joe said. Jessie and Dominique were in the kitchen, drinking tea and talking quietly. Gordo and Mark were on the porch, close together and wrapped in blankets, sipping beer from cans. “But this is our home,” I said quietly. “It’s not perfect. I don’t think it ever will be. There’s always going to be *something*. And yet, even when I was gone, even when I was slipping, I thought of this place. Kelly and Joe. Mom. The others. They’re here. They’re home.”

“You came after me,” he whispered.

“I did.”

“Like Kelly went after Robbie.”

I swallowed with an audible click. “I suppose it’s kind of like that.”

And then he said, “What do I smell like to you?”

“Do we really need to—”

He said, “Grass. Lake water. Sunshine. That’s what Robbie says Kelly smells like to him.”

“When did you—”

“Kelly says Robbie smells like home.”

“I don’t—”

He pushed on. “And Mark said it’s dirt and leaves and rain for Gordo. Joe says it’s candy canes and pinecones. Epic and awesome. I don’t know what that means.”

“No one does. It’s just—”

“And Ox told me Joe smells like lightning.”

“You *asked* him?”

He squinted at me. “I didn’t know. So I asked. That’s how you find out what you don’t know.”

“You can’t just go around asking people what others *smell* like.”

“You can,” he said. “I did. It’s not hard. They have that. You think we have that. What do I smell like to you?”

I was cornered. I thought about leaving. Going downstairs. Getting away from him. From this.

I didn’t.

I said, “One of the first memories I have is being in the forest with my dad.

Deep in the forest. I was on his shoulders. His hands were wrapped around my calves. I was... two? I think. I don't remember what he was talking about. I just remember what the trees smelled like. How old it was. How much bigger it was than me. I felt... small. But safe. I was with my dad. And I knew nothing could ever hurt me."

He arched an eyebrow. "I smell like you sitting on your dad?"

I groaned. "No. Christ, that's not what I'm—it was the forest, okay? I was happy. Above all else, I remember being happy. My dad was smiling and laughing, and the forest just felt so... alive. So green."

"Green is relief."

"Yeah. But that's not all. It's more than that. Grander. It's strong. And all-encompassing. There's nothing like it in all the world." I couldn't look at him. It was too much.

"That's what I smell like?"

I nodded.

"Oh," he said. "Okay."

And then he climbed up onto the bed and slid over close to the wall. He pulled the covers back and then over him, laying his head on the pillow. He rested his hands on his chest as he stared at the ceiling.

"What are you doing?"

"Sleeping," he said. "It's what beds are for."

I almost said *not always*, but managed to avoid it by the skin of my teeth. "You're not going to shift?"

"Nope."

"O... kay."

"Problem?"

"No," I said hastily. "No problem."

"You sound like a problem. Thump, thump, thump. Fast."

I pressed my hands against my chest as if that could block the sound. "You don't always have to listen to my heart."

"Loud," he grumbled. "Never goes away."

I was a Bennett. A second to a powerful Alpha. I wasn't as big as I used to be, but I was still strong. I could do this. I stood from the desk. I walked over to the light switch, flipped it off. The only light came from my phone charging on the desk and the remains of the moon through the window.

And Gavin's eyes, glittering in the dark, watching every step I took toward the bed.

I didn't allow myself to think as I lay down beside him. He yelped when my feet brushed against his legs. "Cold," he said. "Stupid Carter."

"Yeah, yeah. Move over."

"I need room."

"Not *that* much—are you *laughing* at me?"

"Yes. You're so weird."

"Fuck you."

He yawned. "Maybe later."

"*What?*"

"Shh. Sleeping." But then he rolled over on his side, facing me. I tried not to look at him, but I was helpless not to. His face was inches from mine. His breath smelled like my toothpaste. Which meant he probably had used my toothbrush again, the fucking monster. "Hey."

I rolled my eyes. "Hey."

"Gordo told me about stuff."

"At the park?"

He nodded. "Said it was okay if I hated him. Because of what his mom did to my mom."

"Do you?"

He paused, considering. Then, "No. His mom hurt by Livingstone. In her head. I know what that feels like. In my head too."

Shards of ice embedded into my skin. "Is it... loud, still?"

"Sometimes."

"You can't listen to it."

"I know."

"You stay here. You stay here with me."

"With you," he whispered. He reached up and poked my cheek. My forehead. The tip of my nose. "I found you. You found me. We find each other." He said, "I was little. Human. Thomas came. Big man. Biggest man. He said hullo Gavin. My name is Thomas. And I have something to tell you. I listened. I believed him. He said find me, Gavin. If you ever need me. Find me. I asked him why. Why I was here. Why I couldn't go with him. He said I have to be safe. That it was better for me to be safe. I yelled at him. He said hush, Gavin, it's

okay. You're okay. I promise. I didn't believe him. He said he had sons. Three of them. Good boys, he said. Good, good boys. I asked him to show me. To show me wolves. He did. He shifted. White wolf. Big white wolf. He pressed his nose against me. I said *oh*. It was... a feeling. I don't know. Bright. Like sun. Warm. I remembered that. After he left. After I was bitten. After I turned. I tried to hold on to it. Like anchor. Like tether. Too hard. Lost. But then I come here and thump, thump, thump." He pressed his hand flat against my chest, right above my heart. "Real. It was real. Didn't know what to do. Tried to drag you away. Almost bit Kelly because he tried to stop me. Didn't, though. But you. You were like Thomas. Big man. Biggest man. But you didn't smell like him."

I felt like I was dreaming. "What—what did I smell like?"

His eyes glowed violet in the dark. "It's... hard. To put into words. When you go outside and it's cold. You take a deep breath. It stings. It hurts, but not like bad. Lungs fill. It burns. Good burn. It's clean. It's wild. That's you. You fill my lungs and you burn me on the inside." He closed his eyes. "Don't hate Gordo. Don't hate Thomas. Don't hate anyone. I did for a long time. But hate is hard to hold on to. You have to want it. I don't want it."

"Gavin."

"Shh," he said. "Sleeping."

And then he did.

Just like that.

I stayed awake for a long time after, watching the light from the moon move across the wall.

SNOW

Christmas was quiet. Not subdued, but close. We knew what was hanging over us, knew there were others fighting in our name in the cold of a Minnesota winter. Gavin was already downstairs by the time I awoke. My bedroom door was open, and I could hear him talking with Jessie and my mother in the kitchen.

I tried not to think about where I was a year ago, but I couldn't escape it. Last Christmas I'd slept in my truck in a field in the middle of nowhere. I'd only been on the road for a couple of weeks, and everything inside me had been screaming that I'd made a mistake, that I needed to turn around and go home.

Don't. Touch. Him.

I'd continued on along the secret highways.

I looked over at the space where Gavin had been. There was a short black hair on the pillow.

I got out of bed and went downstairs, following the Christmas music playing on the radio. Judy Garland was singing a cover of "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas." I always thought it was the saddest song.

I stopped in the entryway to the kitchen.

Bambi sat at the table, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. Jessie was next to her, cooing over Joshua, who rested in Dominique's arms.

But it all fell away when I saw my mother dancing with Gavin.

He was still in his sleep shorts. He wore a shirt that was too big for him. He had on pink socks, one sliding all the way down to his ankle, the other halfway up his calf. My mother was in a robe, her hair pulled back, her face makeup-free. They had to know I was there, but they didn't look my way.

"There," my mother said. "That's it. Side to side. Shuffle. You don't need to lift your feet. Listen to the music. Feel the beat. Slow. Slow." His hands were on her hips, hers on his shoulders. She laughed. "There you go. That's it. You're a natural."

You love him, Joe whispered in my head.

He swayed with my mother as Judy sang that someday we'd all be together, if the fates allowed.

Until then, we'd have to muddle through.

Somehow.

The song ended.

My mother, my ridiculous and wonderful mother, curtsied in front of him.

Gavin, not to be outdone, bowed awkwardly.

Jessie and Bambi clapped.

Dominique laughed.

Joshua held up his tiny little hand.

And Gavin smiled. It was blinding.

WE WERE HAPPY.

We weren't fooling ourselves. We knew what was to come.

But we allowed ourselves to have this moment, this one day where we could pretend all was well and we were just like every other family celebrating the holiday.

We stayed in our pajamas for most of the day.

We ate until we could eat no more. And then we did anyway.

We told stories. So many stories.

There were tears, but they were happy. They came from a good place.

Joe and Ox stayed close together. Mark and Gordo did too. They knew time was short, that they'd soon be apart.

Gifts were exchanged. No one seemed to care that I hadn't gotten anyone anything. I hadn't had time. I'd been distracted. They told me being here was more than any gift I could have ever gotten them.

That didn't stop them from showering Gavin with presents.

He looked shocked as he received gift after gift. Clothes from the guys at the shop. There was a lot of pink. Jessie and Dominique gave him books. Bambi gave him a voucher she'd made by hand that promised him he could drink whatever he wanted for free at the Lighthouse. Rico and Tanner and Chris were outraged until they remembered that none of them—Gavin included—could get drunk.

Gavin was weirdly shy when he shoved a package in my lap. He glowered at me when I thanked him. “Open it first,” he muttered. “Stupid Carter.”

I did. Everyone pretended to be distracted by something else, giving us the illusion of privacy. I opened the box carefully, wondering what the hell he could have found to give me. I should have known.

Inside the box was a book.

The title read *1001 Ways to Cook Rabbit: The Complete Domestic Rabbit Cook Book*.

I looked up at him, almost annoyed with how touched I was.

He puffed out his chest. “So you can be better at it.”

My voice was hoarse when I said, “You ate it just fine. You dick. Thank you.”

He grinned at me.

One gift remained. Gordo handed Gavin a terribly wrapped present. There was too much tape. The wrapping paper had clowns on it. He thrust it at Gavin, muttering that it wasn’t much, and he didn’t have to accept it if he didn’t want to.

We all stopped to watch him open it. I didn’t know what it was.

I should have.

Gavin tore through the paper, and the moment he saw what was inside, he froze.

Gordo said, “You’ll have a lot to learn. But Chris and Rico and Tanner can show you how. And then forget everything they tell you and listen to Ox and me. Whatever you do, never, *ever* ask Robbie about *anything*. My insurance rates are already high enough as it is because of him.”

Gavin jerked his head up and down before pulling the gift out of the wrapping paper.

It was a work shirt. Like the ones the guys wore at the garage. Except it was pink because of course it was. Across the back, in stylized letters, it said GORDO’S.

And on the front, on a patch on the top right, was a name stitched in with black lettering.

Gavin.

“We talked about it,” Gordo said, filling the silence. “Me and the guys. Everyone agreed we should bring you on. If you want, of course. You don’t have

to. It's hard work, and you'll get dirty. Your back will hurt even though you're a wolf. And just because you're my brother doesn't mean I won't still be your boss. I run things a certain way."

"Actually, *I* run things a certain way," Robbie said. "I just let Gordo think he does."

Gordo sighed. "Yeah. That sounds about right." He shook his head. "It's just an idea. But I think you'd do okay. I'd pay you, and—"

"Yes," Gavin said, already putting on the shirt. It fit him well.

Gordo looked shocked. "Yeah?"

"Yes. Please. Thank you."

Gordo looked relieved. "All right, then. That's... that's good."

"Told you," Mark said.

"Yeah, yeah. Shut up." But he was smiling.

LATER IN THE AFTERNOON, as the sky was beginning to darken, my mother said, "Carter. Gavin. Would you come with me, please?"

Gavin was wearing his work shirt over his shorts. He'd refused to take it off since he'd first put it on. He looked ridiculous and happy because of it.

The others barely noticed when we left, all wrapped up in their conversations and each other. We followed my mother down the hall toward the office. She motioned for us to close the door behind her. I did. She sat behind the desk. She nodded toward the chairs on the other side. We sat down. For a moment it was weirdly like I was a kid again and in trouble. I'd been in that position a time or two before. Gavin seemed to feel the same way, sinking down in his chair.

My mother said, "I made a mistake once. Oh, I've made many mistakes in my life. But this one... this one stays with me, especially on sleepless nights. Among other things, of course. I have much to think about. This mistake, however, I go over in my mind again and again. I was blinded by hope. And I allowed something to happen that should not have, at least not then. Can I tell you what I did?"

She wasn't looking at me.

Gavin nodded.

She folded her hands on her desk. "Once upon a time, Joe was taken by a monster. I know some people try and blame themselves for what happened, but

they shouldn't. It was beyond their control.”

I gripped the armrests of the chair, claws digging in.

“This monster—this *man* was someone my husband trusted. Thomas, for all his faults, was desperate to see the good in people. But we had no reason not to trust this man. I will not say his name here. He has occupied enough of my thoughts and doesn't deserve to have his name spoken aloud. In the end, he paid for his crimes.” Her eyes flashed. “If I had been his executioner, I would have drawn it out much longer than it was.”

A chill ran down my spine.

“Joe was returned to us. He came home. But he was.... He'd left. The light was gone from his eyes. I begged him to see me. I cried over him. I carried his limp little body, and it was like he was filled with sand.”

“Mom, you don't have to do this.”

She ignored me. “Thomas howled at him, eyes red and bright. The call of the Alpha. There was a flicker in Joe, a reverberation, but nothing more. It gave me hope. It would take time, but when it's your child, you give all the time in the world. We made the decision to return to Green Creek. To leave Michelle Hughes in charge of Caswell while we came home. It was Thomas's idea, and I think he was relieved, in the end. That his crown was passed to another so that he could focus on his son. We came home, and Joe was still... still as he was. I worried what would happen to him. How we would explain to our new neighbors that our son didn't talk. You see, a boy and his mother lived in the blue house. I'd heard of this boy from Mark. He said he'd met someone unlike anyone else he'd ever known in his life. Special, is what he said. Quiet, but there was something about him that Mark couldn't quite put his finger on. I barely paid attention. I had enough to worry about.”

“Ox,” Gavin said.

“Yes. Ox. Upon our arrival, I was distracted. Busy. Trying to make this place a home once again. When I turned around, Joe was gone.” She flexed her hands on the desk. “The *terror* I felt at that moment. It consumed me. I thought that he'd been taken from me again. But then, in the distance, I heard something I hadn't heard in a long time. He was speaking again. I thought I was dreaming while awake. Have you ever had that feeling, Gavin?”

He glanced at me, then looked back at my mother. “More than once.”

“We went outside onto the porch. And there, like a little monkey, was my son, sitting on the back of a boy I'd never seen before. There was something about that moment I can't quite explain. It was as Mark said. This boy was

special. And it had nothing to do with the fact that my son was speaking to him, although that played a part. This boy, Ox, he.... Have you ever been to the ocean?"

He shook his head.

"That's okay. There's this sensation, when you're standing on the beach, your toes in the sand. The tide pulls at you as the waves rush back and forth. You're standing in place, but it feels like you're moving. And you are, in a sense. You're sinking, the sand covering your feet. That's what it felt like to me. I was immobile. And I was sinking, but it felt so right." She cleared her throat as she sniffled. "Ox had this... presence about him, even then. He was the ocean. We were the sand. And Joe had seen it, seen fit to speak of it. Oh, he didn't know what it meant. I don't know what went through his head when he decided to gift Ox his voice after hiding it away for so long."

"Candy canes and pinecones," Gavin said. "Epic and awesome."

Mom was startled into a laugh. "Yes. There was that. He's told you?"

"I asked."

"Did you?" She smiled at him, though it trembled. "How wonderful." I loved her for not asking *why* he'd gone to Joe. I had a feeling she already knew. "I never wanted my son to stop speaking again. Which is why when he came to me and his father and asked if he could give Ox his little stone wolf, I was...." Her chest hitched. "I couldn't say no. I wanted to. I should have. I should have told him that it wasn't the right time. That he needed to wait. That it wasn't fair to Ox to bind him in such a way without knowing what it truly meant. Joe was young. Ox was a teenager. We had time. But I was so scared that if I said no, that Joe would just... vanish within himself. That the fire that'd been rekindled within him would be snuffed out. So I made a terrible mistake. I told him yes. I told him he could."

"But Ox still here," Gavin said, brow furrowed. "Still with Joe. Always with Joe."

Mom wiped her eyes. "He is, yes. But he should have been given a choice. First the wolf and then the tether. Ox only found out about what we were when Joe needed him the most. Under a full moon, caught somewhere in his shift. And I put this weight upon Ox because I didn't know what else to do. Do you think that's fair?"

"I don't know."

"It wasn't," she said, not unkindly. "And yet he didn't hesitate. I did nothing to stop him. They came together, in the end. They found their way back to each

other. But there were times we were no better than Ox's father. We used him."

"Mom, that's not—"

She held up her hand. "We loved him, but our actions seen from a different perspective could suggest otherwise. That's the power of hindsight. It shows just how selfish one can be when they think there's no other choice. Do you understand that, Gavin? Do you understand choice?"

He said, "I do. I know I talk strange. But I'm not stupid."

"I didn't think you were. Never once. I just want to make sure you understand what I'm saying. Because what I have to say next is important. We were wrong in what we did to Ox."

"You told him that?" Gavin asked.

"Yes," she said. "I have. And if you want to know what was said, ask him. If he thinks it's something to be shared, he will. Gavin, I want you to listen to me, okay? Really listen."

He sat forward in his chair. He never looked away from her. He barely even blinked.

She said, "You are here. You are pack. There is always a place for you, no matter what happens in the future. You staying here is not dependent on what you might mean to my son or what he means to you. Do you understand that?"

Oh my god. I did *not* want to hear what she was going to say.

"Yes," Gavin said.

"Carter is turning a bright shade of red," Mom said, sounding amused. "So I will get to my point."

"You do that," I choked out.

"Do you know the significance of the stone wolf?"

Kill me. Kill me now.

Gavin said, "Yes. Special. Unique. Gift. None like it in all the world. I learned. Heard stories. Saw Mark's that he gave to Gordo. And Robbie's and Kelly's." He frowned. "I don't have one."

"I know," she said quietly. "You were bitten. I often wondered how you survived, given the blood in your veins. Would you like to know what I think?"

He nodded eagerly.

"I think it was because of your mother. Whatever genetics you received from Livingstone, whatever magic was in his blood, it was diluted because of her. I don't think she was anything but human. But here you sit. Alive, and as a wolf.

This is my first gift to you. This is your mother.”

She reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a photograph. It was a Polaroid, and the edges were curled. She slid it across the desk toward Gavin.

He picked it up, holding it close to his face as he studied it. His hands shook.

“I found it,” Mom said. “At the library she used to work at. I asked them for anything of hers they still had. It was in a box in storage. As far as I can tell, it’s the only one that remained.”

“When?” Gavin whispered.

“When did I ask for it?”

He nodded.

“Last summer while you both were gone. I know my son very well, perhaps better than anyone else. I knew, even though my heart was broken, that he’d find you. And if you had any sense in that head of yours, you’d listen to him.”

“More sense than him,” Gavin muttered. He handed me the photo. A young woman smiled up at me, standing in front of a card catalogue drawer. She was wearing jeans and a black shirt with a skull and crossbones on the front. She looked so young.

I handed it back to him. He looked at it again before setting it back on the desk. “I look like her?”

“A little bit,” Mom said. “Especially your eyes. You can see her in your eyes.”

“I like that.”

“I thought you might.” She took a deep breath and let it out slow. “I have two more gifts for you. And remember, you always have a choice. Whatever happens between you and—”

“Jesus Christ, Mom, we get it.”

“Oh, hush,” she said. “I saw that poor raccoon you slaughtered and brought to him at the full moon. You looked so proud of yourself.”

“*Mom!*”

“I ate it,” Gavin said solemnly. “All of it. Even the tail.”

“I saw,” Mom said, fighting back her laughter. “Carter was prancing around you.”

I groaned into my hands. “I wasn’t prancing.”

“Skipping, then. On four legs.”

“I’m leaving.”

“You’re staying right where you are.”

“Yeah,” Gavin said. “Stay there.”

“Fuck you both very much,” I muttered under my breath.

She said, “Gavin. Do you know why you’re still an Omega?”

I couldn’t speak. But she didn’t even look at me.

Gavin looked down at his hands. He shook his head, though it seemed forced.

Her voice was soft. “It’s not an admonition. I can’t imagine all that you’ve been through. Your life hasn’t been easy. Believe me when I say I know what that’s like. Maybe not the particulars, but our paths are more intertwined than even you may know. I’m not just speaking about Livingstones and Bennetts. Set that aside for a moment.” She smiled, and it was a quiet blue. “If you’re anything like me, you wonder sometimes how any of this could be real. It feels... too good, sometimes. Yes, we’ve known the limitless depths of grief. But we’re still standing. You can have this, if you want. This pack. These last two gifts are not meant to sway you one way or another. You are free, Gavin. I know it may not seem like it with all that’s hanging over us. But you are *free*. Do you understand?”

He nodded, shoulders stiff.

She reached into the drawer again. She pulled out an envelope. My mouth went dry. She set it on the desk before sliding it over to Gavin. On the front of the envelope, I could see three words written in a familiar hand.

FOR CARTER’S FUTURE

“Mom,” I croaked out. “Is that....”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s a letter your father wrote. And I think he wrote it for Gavin.”

Gavin jerked his head up. “Me?”

She nodded. “Not specifically. But yes, you. I don’t know anyone else it’s meant for more than you. Would you like to read it?”

He reached out as if in awe, fingers shaking. He touched the envelope in reverence, tracing the words, stopping on my name. He pulled his hand back, and my stomach twisted harshly.

He said, “My eyes. They don’t... work. Like they used to. Words are hard. Getting better, but hard to read.” He glanced at me, flushing. “I’m not stupid. I know how to read. Just gets jumbled up. Not there yet.”

“Oh,” my mother said. “I know what that’s like. After Thomas left us and I

only knew the wolf for months, the first time I shifted back, my head was jumbled too. It was confusing.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. The air burned with his shame. “I guess like that.”

“It’ll get easier,” she said. “I promise. Be patient. You don’t have to read it now. It’ll be there when you’re ready. It’s—”

“Can you read it for me?”

My mother looked startled. “Are you sure?”

He nodded tightly. “I want to hear it.”

She said, “I’m sure Carter would like to—”

“Please.”

She looked to me. I shrugged helplessly. I was hungry. Greedy. I wanted to tear through the envelope and read what it had to say, to hear what my father thought of me. I was scared. It was like the moon was full once again and calling for me.

I fought. It was harder than I thought it would be.

She said, “If that’s what you want.”

And Gavin said, “Yes.”

She lifted the envelope. She opened it carefully before pulling out the folded paper inside. Her eyes were wet when she opened the pages, and I marveled at her. This woman. This wolf mother. All that she’d done. All that she’d seen. All that she’d lived through. If I could have half the strength she did, I would be better for it.

I could see it on her face. Wanting to read ahead, eyes darting back and forth. I didn’t blame her for that. I would have done the same.

But she stopped.

She cleared her throat.

And then she began to read.

“Hello. It snowed last night.” As she went on, her voice grew stronger. “We weren’t expecting it. Surprise snow is my favorite snow. It always has been. I woke early, before everyone else. The compound was quiet, daybreak still an hour or two away. There’s something magnificently strange about snowfall at night. The air feels charged. The light is odd. It’s this faint peach color. I am entranced by it. I walked outside, and while most of the snowfall had passed, there were still flurries, moving statically. It was because of this I decided it was time to write this letter. I can’t explain *why*, exactly, I felt this was a sign.

Sometimes there isn't a rational explanation, even if we want there to be one. It just feels right. So here I am, pen in hand, thinking of my oldest son."

I closed my eyes, listening to my father's words. I heard the voice of my mother, but overlaid with it, I could hear him as if he were speaking. As if he was here with us and reading it instead of her.

Carter is fifteen years old. And like most boys his age, he's brash and awkward. He's growing into himself but still apt to trip over his own feet. It makes me smile, but not because he tends to be a little graceless. No, I think it's because he simply exists at all. I was fortunate enough to be gifted three sons. They have made me a father. But it's Carter who made me a dad in the first place, and I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that. When one becomes a dad for the first time, it's terrifying. It's enthralling. It's unlike anything else in the world. Elizabeth will tell you I worried. That I fretted. That I was sure I was going to break him. I wish I could say that's an embellishment, but it wouldn't be. I worried and fretted and was convinced I would drop my child the first moment I held him in my arms.

Have you ever loved someone at first sight? I have. Four times, in fact. Elizabeth was the first, though she will probably say it was more hormones than anything else. But I know what I know. When I saw her, I knew there was no one else for me. I was lost to her, and I never wanted to be found.

The second time I fell in love was when Carter Bennett was born. He was so tiny. So fragile. So loud. Oh, he cried. He wailed. I thought there was something wrong with him. But then he was placed in my arms, and he just... stopped. He blinked. And even though it's just projection on my part, I would have sworn he knew me, that he recognized me. He stopped crying. He stopped moving. He just stared at me. And I knew then that no matter what happened in this life, no matter what we would face, my wife and I had made something so profound that it defied explanation. Love is strange that way. You think you know what to expect, but when it hits you, it's forceful enough to shatter your entire world. I wasn't ready for him and all that he would entail. I thought I was. But as I looked down at him, I knew that it was more than I ever thought possible. He was more.

His brothers, my third and fourth loves, followed him, and though I love them all equally, I look back at the moment Carter came into the world as

a culmination. He was born in a moment of great strife and loss, and I was tethered by him. He gave me purpose. He gave me strength. I would like to tell you, whoever you are, about Carter.

Here is what I know:

He was never going to be Alpha. I never cared about that.

He's more like me than his brothers are. That worries me. I've made mistakes. I've hurt people, though I didn't intend to. I hope he takes the better parts of me and leaves the rest behind.

He is brave to a fault. Reckless, though he's quick to apologize if he steps on anyone. He's also kind, and when he laughs, it's like the sun rising, warm and filled with life. Once, when he was five years old, I found him on the roof of our house. He'd taped paper to his arms that he'd cut out in the shape of wings. I managed to pull him back before he could jump. I demanded to know what he was doing, my heart in my throat. He looked up at me, a quizzical expression on his face, and said, 'Daddy, I just wanted to fly like the birds. Why are you mad?' I didn't know how to tell him that I'd never been more scared in my life. So instead I just hugged him close and made him promise that he'd never do anything like that again. Two days later I found him on the roof once more. We put locks on the windows after that.

Carter is protective of those he considers his. No one touches his brothers and gets away with it. He'll put himself between them and danger without regard for his own well-being. He takes the role of the oldest seriously. When Joe was born, he wanted to take him everywhere. When we found him trying to lift Joe from his crib, we asked him what he was doing. He told us that he wanted Joe to sleep in his bed. When we reminded him that babies need to be safe and that the crib was the best place for him, we thought that had resolved the matter. The next night we found Carter and Kelly in the crib with Joe, all three of them asleep, Joe between his brothers. We asked Carter the next morning why it was important for him. He said that he was the oldest, which meant Joe and Kelly needed him to keep them safe.

This is who Carter is. He will stand on a roof because he wants to be a bird. He will snap and snarl at anyone who looks at his brothers the wrong way. He's funny (well I think he's funny; Elizabeth doesn't quite always see it that way). He's smart too, smarter than people sometimes

give him credit for. I'm sure all fathers think that of their children, but there's an intelligence in him, an undying spark of life that I hope is never extinguished. He's lovely, every piece and part of him. I often find myself watching him, wondering about what goes through his head. He's not unknown to me, but there is a secret heart to him that not many get to see.

Which brings me to you. I don't know who you are. I probably (hopefully) won't have to find out for a long time. And not because of you. I know that whoever you are, if my son has chosen you, and you have chosen him back, you've seen through all the noise and bluster to that secret heart that beats thunderously in his chest. If he has let you in, if he's dropped the façade of the cocky boy that he is, you are worthy, completely and fully. Never doubt that. The road ahead won't always be easy. There will be the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. But so long as you remember that he is a gift, then I know you will see the light that burns within him. He loves so big that it takes my breath away. There is no one like him in all the world, and he needs to be treasured. I don't know if he hears that enough. I try, as does his mother, but how can we even begin to bring words to life to describe all that he entails?

I hope you've figured that out because he needs to know. He carries the weight of everything on his shoulders, to his detriment. And I don't want him to carry that burden alone.

Whoever you are, know this: love him, and you will never have to be alone again. You will know joy. You will know happiness. You'll know what it means to be loved unconditionally. I know this because I know him. I know joy. I know happiness. I know what it's like to struggle to breathe when his face lights up at the very sight of me.

He is one of my great loves. And if he is yours, then you know what I mean. Take his heart and hold it close. You will be rewarded far beyond anything you've ever known.

And when you've finished reading this, when you've taken in my words and absorbed them, come find me. I have more to tell you about him. So much more that I can't put it all down here. Nuances would be lost, and I want you to hear it from me.

Who are you?

Someone special, I think.

I take that back.

I know you're special. Because Carter Bennett thinks so too.

Yours, Thomas Bennett.

I opened my eyes.

My mother was smiling through her tears.

My own face was wet, and I did nothing to hide it.

Gavin was looking at me, a strange expression on his face.

"What?" I asked him.

He said, "He loved you."

"Yeah."

"A lot."

"Yeah."

He said, "Did you know that? Just how much?"

I started to nod but then stopped. "I don't think I did."

He looked back at my mother. She folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. She left it on the desk as she wiped her eyes. "You funny man," she whispered. "You funny, extraordinary man." She tapped the envelope. "It's true. All of it. Every word."

"He saw me," I whispered.

"Of course he did," my mother said. "Always. Which brings me to my last gift. Gavin, do you still understand you have a choice?"

"Yes."

She said, "When a wolf is born, their Alpha carves them a wolf of stone. It's a gift. A sign. For a future. To one day be given as a sign of trust. Of love. Before Carter was born, Thomas fretted over it, convinced it would never be good enough. He started over and over, wanting it to be perfect. And it was, even if it was a bit clumsy. He got better at it for Joe and Kelly, but even though Carter's was imperfect, it's still to this day my favorite out of the three."

It was hidden away in the back of my closet. It was quartz. One of the ears was twice as big as the other. The wolf was howling, head tilted back, its tail curled around its legs. The last time I'd looked at it had been the night before I'd left to search for Gavin. I hadn't given it much thought since then.

Gavin frowned, sinking low in his seat. "I don't have one."

"I know," Mom said gently. "Which is why I want to give you the one

Thomas Bennett gave to me.”

I felt gut-punched as she pulled it from the drawer. It was carved from black stone by a deft hand. It was so lifelike, I almost expected it to stretch, head toward the ground, tail rising up behind it. She set it on the desk on top of the envelope before sliding both of them toward Gavin.

He stared at it before looking up at her. “Why?”

She said, “Because he’d want you to have it. Remember, you always have a choice. And no matter what you choose, you will have a place in this pack. But I can’t think of anyone who this should go to more than you.”

“It’s yours,” he said, voice trembling. “From Thomas. To remember him.”

“I don’t need this to remember him,” she said. “I will never forget him. But this? This is for you. Because you deserve it, Gavin. Can’t you see that? You deserve this and so much more.”

She stood and walked around the desk. She stopped next to his chair, and he turned his face into her stomach. She put her hands in his hair, holding him close as he breathed her in. I couldn’t move, stunned into inaction.

Eventually he pulled away.

She came to me then. She leaned down and pressed a kiss to the side of my head. She whispered, “He loved you. More than you could ever know.”

She left, closing the door to the office behind her.

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. My father’s words rang loudly in my head. I was lost to them, and I couldn’t focus. I wanted to pick up the envelope and read through it again and again, but I couldn’t get my arms to work.

It was Gavin who broke through the whirlwind. He said, “I’m pack.”

“Yeah.”

“Scary.”

I looked over at him. “Is it?”

“I think so.”

“Gavin, you don’t have to—”

“He’s right.”

“About what?”

“Everything he wrote. About you.”

“You think so?”

He shrugged. “I think so.”

“Oh.”

“Carter?”

“Yeah?”

He said, “I like you.” That was it. So simple. So devastating. As if he hadn’t knocked me flat. As if he hadn’t changed everything I’d ever known. Three simple words, his heart steady and true, and I’d never felt so alive. It was at once an ending and a beginning.

So I said, “I like you too.” And I never meant it more than I did in this moment.

He smiled. It was coming easier these days. “You do?”

“Yeah, dude. I do.”

“Don’t call me that.”

I laughed until I cried.

page seventy-six/fuck some shit up

They left on a cold day toward the end of December. It was the Sunday after Christmas. They'd considered waiting until after tradition to go, but Ox thought it was best to get to Minnesota sooner rather than later. "I left a message for Aileen this morning to let her know we were on our way," Joe said as he stood on the porch next to Gordo, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

Mark looked uneasy. "She didn't pick up?"

"No."

"That ever happen before?"

"A couple of times. It could be nothing."

"Or it could be everything," Joe muttered. He shook his head. "I don't like this. Splitting up. It feels wrong."

Rico groaned. "Don't say that, *alfa*. You're inviting trouble in." Randomly, he made the sign of the cross over his chest.

Kelly rolled his eyes. "We'll be fine. Joe will put in face time with the people in Caswell, and Robbie can do what he needs to with the library. It's probably nothing. Aileen and Patrice have their hands full. They're distracted." He didn't sound like he believed his own words.

"At least we're flying," Gordo said. He was clutching Mark's hand and had been for the last hour. "It'll be quicker this way, so long as none of the wolves lose their fucking minds and try to eat everyone."

Robbie paled. "I've never been on a plane before. Do they really have vomit bags, or is that just a made-up thing? If they do, I'm probably going to need all of them."

"You'll be fine," Mom said. "Kelly will be there with you. And Joe. It'll be over before you know it. I promise."

Chris and Tanner came back to the porch after having loaded up the other bags. "Just don't eat the pilots," Chris said. "Especially since you don't know

how to fly a plane.”

Robbie was horrified. “I don’t *eat* people—”

“Knock it off,” Jessie scolded her brother. Dominique laughed quietly as Rico took Joshua from Bambi, making funny faces at his son. “Don’t scare him any more than he already is.”

“I’m not scared!”

“We’ll be fine,” Ox said. “We’re on the first leg of the trip together. You have nothing to worry about.” He shot a glare at Chris, who had the decency to look contrite. “We need to get going.” He went to Rico and Joshua and leaned over to breathe the baby in. Joshua squealed as he reached up and tugged on Ox’s hair.

Joe squeezed Gavin’s shoulder before turning to me and jerking his head toward the SUV they were taking to the airport in Eugene. I told Gavin I’d be right back and followed my brother off the porch. Kelly came too.

“What’s wrong?” I asked in a low voice, knowing the others could still hear us.

Joe shook his head. “Nothing. Well, okay. *Everything*, but that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“Okay? What’s up?”

He hugged me. It took me a moment to hug him back, worried about what was going on, but I wrapped my arms around him. I laughed quietly when Kelly pressed against our sides, his arms around both our necks. Joe’s forehead was against mine, and Kelly leaned his on the sides of our heads.

“I’m scared,” Joe whispered. “I don’t like this. Being apart after finally being back together again.”

I shook him gently. “Duty calls. It won’t be for long. You’ll be back by the end of the week.”

“I know.”

“Joe?”

He sighed. “Just... watch them, okay? Don’t take chances. If something happens, do what you can, but don’t try to play the hero.”

“I’m not going to—”

Kelly said, “Carter.”

“The wards are strong,” I said, chiding them gently. “Gordo and Ox saw to it last night. We’ll be fine. And I’m meeting with Will later to put the word out for

the people in town. We've got this. If anything, you guys are the ones I'm worried about."

"I know," Joe whispered. "But duty calls."

"Exactly. You've got this, okay? I know you do. You'll have Robbie and Kelly, and I'm only a phone call away if you need me. Say the word and I'll be there."

He laughed. "You'd get on a plane for us?"

"I'd do anything for you. You know that."

Kelly nodded. "We know."

I pulled away from them both only to put my hands on the backs of their necks. They looked at me. I said, "We're going to finish this, you hear me? One way or another, we're going to finish this. And then nothing will hurt us again."

"You promise?" Kelly asked.

"Yeah. I do. And since I'm your big brother, you know I'm right. I'm right about pretty much everything."

Joe snorted, but he looked more relaxed. "I'm not even going to argue with you on that."

"Good. Because you'd lose."

He said, "I love you. The both of you. I don't say that enough, but I need you to know."

I didn't like how he sounded. "We love you too. Stop acting like this is goodbye."

"Isn't it?"

I shook my head. "No, it's not. Because you're going to come home. All of you will. And we'll be together."

"Forever," Kelly said.

"Forever," I agreed, because I wished for nothing more.

Joe nodded and stepped back. I dropped my hands, fighting the urge to drag them both inside to keep them from leaving.

We rejoined the others. Ox looked at the three of us. "All right?"

"All right," Joe agreed.

I went back up to the porch. Mark kissed Gordo fiercely, whispering to him not to do anything stupid. "It's like you don't even know me," Gordo said.

"Yeah," Mark said. "Like I don't even know you at all."

And then he let Gordo go. Gordo walked down the porch, and we all pretended not to see the slump of his shoulders. He stood next to Ox, leaning against him. Kelly and Joe were on the other side. Robbie hugged each of us in turn before going to the others.

We stood there, watching each other. Joe was right. This felt wrong.

Ox said, "We'll keep in touch. Every day, by phone. You'll hear our voices. I swear it."

"You better," Rico said. "If you don't, I'll kick your ass. I'm a pretty great wolf, in case you couldn't tell."

"And I'll help him," Bambi said, glaring down at the men gathered before us. "I've got Rico's guns now. You heal, but it'll still hurt. I'll make sure of it."

"I love you so much," Rico said fiercely. "You don't even know."

"Oh, I know. You're welcome."

"Straight people are so weird," Kelly whispered to Robbie.

Ox said, "Stay together. No one goes off alone, even in town. Carter, make sure Green Creek's ready, just in case."

"I will."

And then he turned around, heading for the SUV. Gordo looked at Mark once more before following Ox, grabbing Robbie by the arm and pulling him along. Kelly and Joe were about to do the same but stopped when I called to them.

They looked at me.

"A phone call away," I said. "No matter what. You hear me?"

They both nodded.

"Good. Go on. The sooner you leave, the sooner you can come back home."

Joe took Kelly's hand in his and pulled him toward the SUV. "Carter," he called over his shoulder. "Kelly and I left something for you on your bed. Take a look, okay?"

"I will."

They waved as they climbed inside the SUV. Mark held Mom close, her head on his shoulder. Rico whispered to his son, and Bambi smiled at the both of them. Jessie stood behind Dominique, leaning against her. I looked down when I felt someone grab my hand. Gavin. He was holding on tight. I didn't try to pull away.

Ox honked the horn once, twice as he backed up, turning the SUV around

before pointing it down the dirt road. There was something in my head and chest, something that felt like lightning, that sounded like thunder.

It was the bonds that stretched between us all.

Vibrant and wild.

They whispered *pack* and *pack* and *pack*.

And if I listened hard enough, if I really dug in and pulled the threads apart, there was a quiet voice buried underneath.

I looked at Gavin.

He was watching me.

I heard him.

He said, *i think i think i think i'm home.*

I WAS CURIOUS about what my brothers had left for me. After making sure Gavin was okay in the kitchen with Mom, I took the stairs two at a time, heart thudding in my chest. I hoped it wasn't anything big. It would feel too much like they thought they weren't coming back. I hated it.

I shouldn't have worried.

In fact, when I saw what it was, I hoped they'd *never* come back.

Those fucking assholes.

A flat square sat on my bed, wrapped in shiny paper with Christmas trees on it. It was heavier than I expected when I picked it up. It was either a framed photograph or a—

A book.

It was a book wrapped in tissue paper.

I pulled it out.

A sticky note stuck to the top of the tissue paper. It said, *Hope this helps! It's from the seventies (??), but it's pretty much on point. Ignore the hair. Study hard! (Really hard.) Love, Kelly + Joe.*

I smiled, confused. Ignore the hair? What the hell were they talking about?

That smile faded as I set the tissue paper aside.

There, on the cover, were five words that I never wanted to see again for as long as I lived.

The Joy of Gay Sex.

I said, “What,” to the empty room.

Little colored tabs stuck out from the side. Not believing what I was seeing, I opened to one of the pages with an orange tab. Inside was another sticky note, this time written by Joe.

This move is a little more practiced. Make sure to stretch before trying. Like, stretch everywhere. Trust me on that. My gaze fell to the page underneath the note to see a man with an ecstatic look on his face as another man who apparently had shrubbery instead of a bush shoved his dick in—

“No,” I said. “No, no, no.”

The entire fucking book was *annotated* with dozens of tabs.

I dropped it back on the bed as if scalded. I was going to end them. No. Worse. I was going to ask Gordo if there was a resurrection spell he knew, and then I was going to murder them, bring them back to life, and then murder them again. They would know my wrath. I would destroy them.

“Never,” I swore. “I will *never* pick up that book again. What the fuck.”

I STARTLED WHEN I HEARD Jessie say, “There you are. You’ve been up here for almost an hour. Your mom is showing Gavin how to—”

I threw the book against the wall. “I’m not doing anything weird!”

Jessie blinked, looking between me and the book that fell to the floor on the opposite side of my room. “Uh. Okay. You don’t have to shout at me.” Her eyes narrowed. “But now I think you’re doing something weird.”

The first thing I realized was that my face was on fire.

This was followed by the fact that I was very, very sweaty.

And possibly a little aroused.

Much to my dismay and horror.

I couldn’t have been more thankful that Jessie wasn’t a wolf. My room must have smelled like a brothel. I tried to act nonchalant. I started to lean back on my bed but slipped off the edge and fell to the floor, almost biting my tongue clean in half.

Jessie stared at me. “What the fuck.”

“What are you doing in my room!”

“Your door was open,” she said slowly. “Why are you yelling?” She glanced at the book on the floor. Thankfully, it’d fallen with the cover facedown. So long

as she didn't try to pick it up, she probably wouldn't be able to tell what it was.

Which meant, of course, that she immediately went toward the book.

I stood quickly, tripping over my own feet as I surged toward the book, trying to beat her there. I should have won. She was a human. I was a wolf. I was a killing machine capable of great power with my fangs and claws. Yes, she was deadly, but I was a creature of the night. I was the monster in the dark. I was—

Falling face-first onto the floor.

I grabbed her ankle, trying to stop her from getting to the book.

“Oh no,” she said, pulling her foot away from my sweat-slick palm. “Now I have to see what this is about.”

“It's nothing!” I cried. “Don't look!”

She crouched down above the book. “What? Jesus, Carter. It's probably nothing I haven't seen before. I'm surrounded by men. Nothing you do will surprise—oh my god.”

I rolled over onto my back and closed my eyes, praying for death.

God must not have heard me, because I was still alive when Jessie said, “There are so many *notes*. How the hell did they—holy shit. *That's* something men can do together? I didn't think that was possible. How do you fit that in—oh. *Oh*. I see. Huh. I wonder if that works on women too.”

I covered my face with my hands and moaned. I could hear her flipping through the pages. I blamed Chris for bringing her to Green Creek all those years before. Granted, their mother had just died and she was a teenager with nowhere else to go, but still. He could have put her up for adoption.

“Joe and Kelly were very thorough,” she said.

I sighed as I dropped my hands to the floor. “I hate you.”

She laughed. “Man up, Bennett. You're gonna need to, especially if you're thinking about attempting some of the stuff in this book.” She came over to me and sat down next to me, her back against the bed. She still held the book in her hands. Once she gave it back, I was going to have to burn it.

Maybe.

She nudged my shoulder with her foot. I glared at her. She smiled sweetly. I flashed my eyes at her in warning. Her smile widened.

“You can't tell anyone.”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

“Really?” That was easier than I thought it would be.

“Really. Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah. Because *that’s* easy to do.”

“Why are you so freaked out about this?”

I looked back at the ceiling. “I... have no idea.”

“Is it because Gavin’s a guy?”

“No. Yes.” Then, “No.”

She snorted. “Succinct as usual. I don’t know why I expected anything else.”

“It’s not funny.”

“It is,” she assured me. “And one day you’ll laugh about it. I promise.” She hesitated for a long moment. I knew she was building up to something. What, I didn’t know, but it probably wasn’t anything good. “Is it such a bad thing?”

“No,” I said. And it was true. “I just don’t have any idea what I’m doing.”

“Do we ever?”

“We say we do.”

She nudged my shoulder again. “We’re also full of shit half the time.”

“It’s stupid,” I muttered. “Worrying about stuff like this with everything else going on.”

“Nah. We always seem to have some sort of death and destruction hanging over our heads. You get used to it after a while.”

That was chilling. “We shouldn’t have to.”

Her smile faded. “Worth it, though.”

“Is it?”

She kicked me harder. “Of course it is, you idiot. Stop being a little bitch. Sit up.”

“I’d rather die, thanks. It’s—would you stop kicking me!” I knocked her foot away as I sat up. She patted the carpet next to her. I looked longingly at the door, planning an escape. But this was Jessie Alexander. If I tried to run, she’d chase after me and kick my ass. I crawled toward her, sitting against my bed next to her. I refused to look at the book in her lap.

She said, “Gavin’s pretty great.”

“He’s all right, I guess.”

“Glad you think so. Want some advice?”

“If I say no, you’re going to tell me anyway, aren’t you.”

“You know me so well. Say yes. After all, who else do you know who dated

the opposite sex for a long time before going queer?”

“Ox,” I said promptly. “And didn’t Mark have a girlfriend or something at one point? And I think my mother had a bit of a crush on Ox’s mom. Chris and Tanner. Sort of. I have no idea what they’re actually doing.”

“No one does. But it works for them, so who cares. And none of those people are sitting next to you, so let’s pretend I’m the only one who can help you.”

I laid my head on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “I will pay you any amount of money to not have this conversation.”

“I’m a Bennett,” she said dryly. “I have more money than I know what to do with.”

I loved her. Even though she was currently pissing me off, I loved her. “Bennett, huh?”

“Yup. You’re overthinking this.”

“How can I *not*? Did you see page seventy-six?”

“No. Why? What’s on page seventy-six?” She opened the book again until she found the right page. “Wow. Okay. Holy crap. Don’t try that for at least six months. And make sure you drink plenty of water beforehand.”

I moaned again.

She closed the book and tossed it over her head. It landed on the bed out of sight. “You know how I don’t like bullshit?”

“You picked the wrong pack if that’s the case.”

She ignored me. “I prefer being blunt. Obfuscating is pointless. Say what you mean. Don’t dance around it. You care about him.”

I blinked. “Well, yeah. I wouldn’t have gone after him like I did. Is that it? Oh man, that was easier than I thought. Thanks. You can go—”

“You *more* than care about him. And remember what I said about bullshit.”

Goddammit. “Yeah. I... guess I do.”

She was quiet. Then, “Do you love him?”

“I think so,” I whispered. “I don’t know how it happened. Or why. Or even when.”

She pulled my hand into her lap and traced the lines on my palm with her fingernail. “I saw it, you know.”

“Saw what?”

“The look on your face in Caswell. When Gavin left with Livingstone. You

were devastated.”

I tried hard not to think about that moment. How lost I was. How quickly my heart had been torn from my chest. It’d only taken minutes. “I didn’t know what was happening. He was a wolf. He was a man. Then he was gone.”

“It hurt.”

I grunted. “Yeah. It did.”

“We had our fun,” she said softly, “knowing something you didn’t. And looking back, I hate that we did that to you. It wasn’t fair.”

“I don’t blame you for that,” I told her. “Any of you.”

“I know you don’t,” she said. “You should, but that’s not who you are. I... okay. So, Dominique, right?”

“She’s pretty great.”

Jessie smiled. It was beautiful. “The greatest even. And I wasn’t looking for her. It just... happened. Sometimes these things do. One moment you’re sure about the order of the world. How things work. And then your ex-boyfriend turns out to be a human Alpha, and there are werewolves and witches and people who want to kill werewolves and witches. It makes you think.”

“About?”

She shrugged. “How much time we waste being stuck in our own heads. This life, it’s difficult. I’ve known more heartache than I ever thought possible. But I wouldn’t change that for anything in the world.”

“You wouldn’t?”

She shook her head. “I was scared coming back to Green Creek. We left when I was little. I didn’t know anyone here aside from Chris. And the idea of moving back to a little town in the middle of nowhere wasn’t exactly something a teenage girl looked forward to. But you know what I found?”

“What?”

“A home,” she said, and I laid my head on her shoulder. “People who would do anything for me because they knew I would do anything for them. And isn’t that what we’re fighting for? Fuck everything else. Fuck Caswell. Fuck Livingstone and Elijah and Michelle and Richard Collins. Hell, fuck all the other wolves and witches and everyone else. This, here. Us. This is what we’re all about.”

“Some might think that’s selfish.”

“I don’t care,” she said fiercely. “We’ve spent so long worrying about everyone else. It’s time we focus on ourselves and what makes us happy. I

wasn't looking for someone like Dominique. But now that I've found her, I'll be damned if I'm going to let her go. It's not about the fact that we're queer. What matters is holding on to something that doesn't belong to anyone else but us. We've earned that, Carter. After all this shit, we're allowed to be happy. And fuck anyone who thinks otherwise. Does Gavin make you happy?"

"He drives me up the wall and makes me want to tear my hair out."

She chuckled. "That's how you know it's good. Think, Carter. Think about all you've done to bring him back. To make him understand he has a place here with us. We all try to show him in our own ways, but he looks to you. Not your mother. Not the Alphas. You."

"And Gordo."

She nodded. "There's blood between them. They're the last they have, aside from their father. And Gordo knows that. He loves his brother. He doesn't have to say it out loud for it to be true."

"The shirt."

She leaned her head on top of mine. "What?"

"The work shirt for the garage. Ox told me once that's how he knew he belonged and Gordo loved him. He gave Ox a shirt with his name stitched on the front. I didn't understand then. I thought it was such a little thing. But then Gordo did the same for Robbie. And now Gavin. He made his own pack."

"Huh," Jessie said, sounding amused. "I never thought about it that way. You're right, though. He showed how he felt in his own way. Keep that in mind, okay? Because you've done the same for Gavin. And he's done the same for you."

"I don't understand. All I did was—"

"When was the last time someone gave a damn about him enough to hunt him down? I don't think he's ever had that before in his life. Thomas...." She sighed. "Thomas dangled something in front of him and then took it away. I know he thought he was doing the right thing, telling him the truth, but I can't help but think it was cruel." She paused. "No offense."

I hated that she was right. "I don't know if he meant it like that. At least not outright."

"Maybe. But Gavin has been running for a long time. And finally he has someone willing to chase after him. He sacrificed himself to save you. He didn't know Gordo then. Not like he does now. But he knew you, even stuck as a wolf."

“My shadow.”

“You’ve given more than anyone should have to. And you still gave more. It’s your turn, Carter. It’s your turn to finally be happy, to find something to hold on to in the middle of this storm. Gavin would do anything for you. I know you would do anything for him. If that’s not love, then I don’t know what is. Don’t worry about all the other shit. It’ll work itself out. You’d be surprised how quickly you can adapt. Trust me on that. I had no idea how to go down on a woman, but I learned really fast. And I’m pretty great at it now, if the look on Dominique’s face is—”

“Jesus fucking Christ. Why are you *like* this?”

She laughed again, clutching my hand. “He’s lucky to have you.”

And as if it were some great secret, I whispered, “I think I’m the lucky one.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “You both are. All of us, really.” Then, “We’re going to win.”

“You think?”

She nodded. “I know. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let it end after everything we’ve done. Fuck Robert Livingstone. Fuck the wolves who’ve gathered around him.” She grinned, razor-sharp. “We’re gonna make sure they regret every single moment of their miserable lives.”

GORDO TEXTED FIRST in the early afternoon.

Landed. We’ll let you know what we find.

Kelly texted a couple of hours later. *In Maine. Made Robbie wear sunglasses on plane because his eyes wouldn’t stop glowing. Joe almost ate a flight attendant, but I stopped him. Love you.*

“YOU’LL BE RIGHT HERE?” Gavin asked me, looking weirdly nervous.

I nodded. “Yeah, man. Right here. I’ll meet with Will and some others to let them know what’s going on. Go. They’re waiting for you. I’ll come over when I finish up.”

We stood in front of the diner in town. Across the street, Rico, Chris, and Tanner were heading toward the garage. They wanted to bring Gavin in to help him learn about what he’d be doing while working at Gordo’s. They’d made him

wear his work shirt, promising him that he was going to get dirty. The idea had apparently appealed to him, as he'd run up the stairs to go change after making sure I'd be going too.

"Don't go anywhere else," he told me. "I will find you if you do."

I rolled my eyes. "That's fucking creepy."

"Not creepy. Truth."

"Yeah, yeah. Go. You don't want to be late on your first day."

He looked like he wanted to say something else but shook his head instead. "Okay. You go to diner with Will. I go to garage." He nodded, more to himself than anything. "I can do this."

"You can," I told him. "I know it."

He scowled at me. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Not dying."

And then he did the damndest thing.

He kissed me on the cheek.

Like it was the easiest thing in the world.

He turned on his heels and stalked across the street, leaving me to stare after him.

AND SINCE HE'D DONE THAT in front of the diner, everyone inside had seen it.

The diner that was packed with people.

The only sound I heard when I walked in was the bell over the door and Dominique laughing behind the counter.

I glared at her before turning it toward everyone else. "Is there a problem?"

"Question." A man. One of Will's friends. "Is everyone in the pack gay?"

"So what if they are?" I snapped.

The man shrugged. "I don't give two shits either way. I just didn't know if that was, like, a prerequisite for being a shape-shifter or whatever."

"You're just jealous no one wants on your junk, Grant," Dominique said.

Grant sighed. "Ain't that the truth." He grinned at me. "Looks like our mayor found himself some mystical moon magic."

I hated Jessie with every fiber of my being. "New law," I announced. "No

one is allowed to say mystical moon magic ever again. If they do, they will be executed publicly.”

“That’s not how laws work,” Will said. “And I don’t think we’ve had a public execution in Green Creek since... oh. Well. I suppose since Elijah. But she killed herself, so I don’t think that counts. Her hunters died, though. All over the place.”

The people in the diner crowded around me as I walked toward the booth Will sat in. They were eager to hear what was going on. This town was nuts. I hoped it would stay that way.

“The Alphas?” Will asked as I sat across from him. People stood around the table or turned their chairs toward us. Most of them were carrying, and I smelled the sharp sting of silver. That would have alarmed me if I’d been anywhere else.

“Ox and Gordo are in Minnesota,” I said. “Joe, Robbie, and Kelly are in Maine.”

Will rubbed his jaw. “With the other wolves. In that compound.”

“Yeah.”

“Something happen?”

I started to shake my head but stopped. “I... don’t know. Last we heard from our contacts in Minnesota, Livingstone had gathered wolves to him.”

“How?” someone asked. “Ox said he was trapped. How did anyone get in?”

“A witch,” I said begrudgingly. “Someone who was supposed to be helping us.”

“That’s why you don’t trust anyone you don’t know well,” Will said. “Stab you in the back as much as look at you.” He was solemn when he said, “And if they can get in, it means they can probably get out.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But if that happens, there’s a chance they’ll come here.”

“Because of your boy.”

I glared at Will. “He’s not my—”

Will snorted. “Keep telling yourself that, Mayor Bennett. Everyone can see the stars in your eyes.”

And because my life was terrible, the people in the diner murmured their agreement.

“Leave it,” I growled at him. “It doesn’t matter right now. You need to be ready. If something happens, you’re all in danger. Pack your bags. Get out of

town. Don't come back until it's safe."

No one moved.

I raised my voice. "Did you hear what I just said? Get your asses in gear. Now."

"Don't know if we're gonna do that," Will said.

I was incredulous. "What? Why the hell not?"

"Thank you, darlin'," he said as Dominique appeared at the table to pour coffee into his mug. "Your packmate here looks like he's going to explode."

"They do that," she said. "Bennett thing." She glanced at me. "Listen to them, Carter." And then she melted back into the crowd.

Will leaned forward, wrapping his hands around his mug. "Way I see it, this town is ours just as much as it is yours."

"I know that. I wasn't saying it's not. We're not trying to take anything from —"

"Didn't think you were," Will said mildly. "But this is our home. And when a man's home is threatened, he does everything he can to keep it safe."

"Not just men," a woman said. She tapped the obscenely large gun in the holster on her hip. "Better shot than you, Will."

Will chuckled. "That you are. And you're right. Not just men." He looked back at me. "What was I saying?"

"Something stupid," I snarled at him.

"That's right. Never knew anywhere else, really. Born here. My daddy owned the motel before I did and handed it off to me when he retired. And this is where I'll die. You think I'd just pack up and run?"

"If you were smart, yes. I do."

He squinted at me. "What about you?"

I was exasperated. "What *about* me?" There was a strange pressure in my head. I pressed my fingers against the sides of my skull.

"You could leave." He nodded toward the window. "Take your pack and run. Hide out. Let us deal with whatever comes."

I dropped my hands. "Are you out of your goddamn mind? Why the hell would we do that?"

"Exactly," he said. "Because you love this place just as much as we do. This is our home. This is where we belong. And you're part of this town, which means you belong to us too. Do you really think we'd just pack up and leave you

to fight on your own?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I think.” I looked around to the others, sure I’d find a friendly face, someone who agreed with me. I would latch on to them and get them to help me change some minds.

I was met with a wall of silence and blank stares.

“What is *wrong* with all of you?” I demanded. “You could die. You remember what it was like when the hunters came. We got lucky then. I can’t promise we’ll get lucky again. For fuck’s sake. Some of you have children. Why the hell would you take that chance?”

“Don’t you worry about the kiddies,” Will said, and I jerked my head back toward him. “We’ve got a plan in place. We knew this could happen. Your Alphas prepared us.”

“*What?*”

Will was smug when he said, “After what happened to your pack in Caswell, Ox and Joe wanted to make sure the children could never be harmed again, or worse, be used against your pack or us. We built a bunker on Bennett land. Concrete walls inlaid with silver and some magical hinky-dink that Gordo and that woman witch made up. Aileen, I think her name was. First sign of trouble, those with kids know to bring ’em to the bunker, as well as the elderly. Enough food and water in there for at least three months.” He chuckled. “Cost a pretty penny, but your ma assured us there was no cost too high for the safety of the people who can’t fight for themselves. Made some other alterations to the town too.”

“A fallout shelter,” I said in wonder. “You built a fallout shelter.”

He sat back against the booth, looking proud of himself. Everyone else in the diner looked the same. “We sure did. Kept it off the books. The people we brought in to build it just thought we were small-town kooks planning for the end of the world.” His face hardened. “Might as well think that’s the case. We’re with you, Carter. We’ve got your back. And the sooner you realize that, the better off we’ll be. We’re in this together.”

“You’re all fucking crazy,” I said faintly.

He arched an eyebrow. “And you’re a shape-shifter. We all have something, I guess.”

I lowered my head to the table, pressing my forehead against the surface, struggling to breathe. I was overwhelmed by these ridiculous people who had so blindly put their faith in us. Normal people would have run screaming the moment they’d seen me shift in the Lighthouse when a massive timber wolf was

chasing after my pack. And to be fair, some *had* left Green Creek behind. But most had stayed *and* kept our secret.

“Why?” I muttered into the table. “Why are you doing this?”

I felt Will’s hand on the back of my head. It was a gentle touch. He said, “I told you once I knew your daddy. Didn’t always understand him, but I knew a good man when I saw one. He was kind to me when no one else was. Never you mind about what, but I never forgot it. And once my eyes were opened to what was really going on, I knew then what a great man he was. He ain’t here no more. We are. And we’ll fight until our last breath. You’re not alone, Carter. You never have been.”

I blinked against the sting of tears. I shuddered when people murmured around us, reaching out to touch my shoulders, the back of my neck, my hair. Their voices sounded like the wind, and though they weren’t pack, it sounded like they were in my head. They said, “We’re here” and “We’ve got your back” and “No one messes with our wolves” and, randomly, “I’m gonna fuck some shit up, you better believe it, you just watch me, I swear to god.”

I laughed wetly. These ridiculous people. Humans all, but how they sounded like wolves.

Eventually they subsided and stepped back.

I lifted my head as I wiped my eyes.

Will had a soft look on his face, craggy and wonderful. He said, “You see? Now. Let me tell you what else we’ve done to this town while you were gone. Might have a trick or two up our sleeves yet. I asked Ox to let me be the one to tell you so I could see the look on your face. Don’t let me down.”

I listened.

And in the end, I didn’t let him down.

What the *fuck*.

I LEFT THE DINER BEHIND a half hour later, dazed. The bell rang overhead as I pushed through the door out into the shocking cold. I turned my face toward the sky, the blue-black that only seemed to exist in the dead of winter. I breathed in and out. That odd pressure in my head grew, and I didn’t know why.

I took a step, meaning to cross the street toward the garage.

The pressure increased sharply.

I stumbled.

I barely managed to stay upright.

I gripped the sides of my head. The blue-black sky was in my skull, and it *burned*, it burned, it hurt it hurt it *hurt*—

From across the street came the howl of a wolf.

I raised my head as I panted through the storm.

Gavin was running toward me, eyes violet and bright. His arms pumped as he ran, claws and fangs flashing in the winter sunlight. Chris and Tanner and Rico followed him, their eyes narrowed.

Gavin skidded to a stop in front of me. He gripped my shoulders, violet eyes searching mine. “What is it?” he growled. “I feel it. I feel it. I *feel* it.”

“Something’s wrong,” I whispered.

The guys reached us, looking around wildly as if they could find whatever the hell was wrong and destroy it.

Chris was spooked. I could hear it in his voice when he said, “Ox. Gordo and Ox. What happened? Carter, what *happened*?”

“We need to get home,” I said with a grimace as the pressure increased again. “Now.”

Gavin nodded and started pulling me toward the truck we’d taken into town. I looked over my shoulder at the diner. The people inside were looking out the window. Will came to the door, a frown on his face. “Carter?”

“Be ready,” I snapped at him. “Wait for my call. You wanted a fight? I think you’re gonna get one.”

“You got it. Keep me in the loop.” He grunted as Dominique shoved by him, eyes orange, fangs dropping. “The sirens?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. It might be nothing.”

I prayed I was right.

safe

Mom and Mark were standing on the porch by the time we pulled up, rocks and dirt kicking up around us as Rico screeched to a halt. I was out of the truck even before he stopped.

Mark was pale, and Mom had a determined look on her face. “You felt it.”

“Gordo,” Mark whispered, swallowing thickly. “He’s....”

“Alive,” I said. “We would know if he wasn’t. Did you get ahold of them?”

Mom shook her head. “We tried. Bambi’s calling again. Jessie’s on the phone with your brothers and Robbie.”

Dominique headed into the house. We followed her through the open door. I could hear Jessie talking quickly in the kitchen. She looked relieved when she saw us. “Hold on. The others are here.” She held out the phone to me.

I grabbed it and turned around, heading toward the office. “Joe? Kelly?”

“Yeah,” Joe said, the line crackling. He sounded angry. “We’re here. Robbie too. You’re on speakerphone. What happened?”

“I don’t know,” I said, opening the door to the office. The others followed me inside. Dominique was holding Joshua as Bambi disconnected her phone call and tried again. I could hear it ringing and ringing before Gordo’s voicemail picked up, his voice gruff.

“It’s Ox,” Joe said roughly. “Something happened to them.”

“We don’t know that yet,” I told him, even though it felt like a lie. “We’re still trying to get them on the line. Caswell?”

“The same as it always is,” Robbie said bitterly. “You would think Michelle Hughes was still in charge for all the bullshit that goes on here.”

I blinked. “What the hell does *that* mean?”

Kelly said, “They’re scared. Someone’s been talking. They’ve convinced half the people here that Livingstone is on a warpath and on his way to Caswell. There’s panic.”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. I pulled the phone away from my ear and set it on the desk, switching it to speakerphone. “Do you have it under control?”

“Mostly,” Joe said. “I think me just being here helped.”

“Who’s been spreading shit around?”

“I don’t know,” Joe said, sounding frustrated. “We’re trying to find out, but it’s chasing a rumor. Everyone is saying they heard it from someone else.” He sighed. “They... they think it has something to do with Gavin.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

Kelly was pissed. “They’re so full of shit. They know you found him, that we brought him back to Green Creek. They think it’s his fault somehow. A few of them told Joe that if he cared about Caswell at all, he’d hand over Gavin to Livingstone and end this. They remember, Carter. What Livingstone did to them and why. They blame him for Michelle’s death and everything that came before it.”

Gavin grunted as if punched. It pissed me off. I slammed my fist into the desk. The phone rattled on the surface. “Fuck them,” I growled. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“We know,” Joe said. “And I told them the same thing. Gavin’s one of us. I don’t give a shit what they say. He’s staying with us.”

“That’s good, Joe,” Mark said. “But you need to be careful. You can’t forget they look to you. You’re their Alpha. Don’t burn bridges that you can’t rebuild.”

“I know,” Joe said. “But they’re not making it easy.”

Mom pushed by me as she rounded the desk. She jiggled the mouse next to the computer. The monitor lit up, bathing her face in blue. I hated how it looked. It felt too literal. Jessie was pacing back and forth in front of Bambi, who was shaking her head. Dominique too. Tanner, Chris, and Rico had surrounded Gavin, their arms crossed as if they were guarding him. I felt a savage pride at the sight of them, even as my heart twisted at the miserable look on Gavin’s face. Suddenly I wished I was in Caswell, daring anyone to say to my face what they’d said to my brother.

The TV on the wall lit up after Mom hit the keyboard a few times. Bambi shoved her phone back in her pocket as Ox’s name appeared on the screen. She connected a video call. A circle spun under Ox’s name as the monitor beeped over and over.

“Come on,” I muttered. “Come on. Pick up.”

The call disconnected with no answer.

“Do it again,” Mark said. “Try Gordo too.”

She did.

“Did Robbie find anything?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Robbie said. His voice was thin and wavery. “Maybe? It’s....”

“What did it say?” I asked, watching the circle spin on the screen again and again.

“A manifestation of rage. Fury so profound it causes a wolf to become something grotesque. It doesn’t say anything about a witch losing his magic and turning into a wolf or surviving a bite from an Alpha. But there’s something else.”

We all looked at the phone. “What?” Mark asked.

“Tell them,” Kelly said quietly.

“Elizabeth?” Robbie asked.

“I’m here.”

“Did... did Thomas ever come back to Caswell? After you left for Green Creek.”

She blinked. “Several times. He knew he needed to at least show his face so the wolves would know he hadn’t forgotten them. Anything big, decisions or punishments, he was there, working in tandem with Michelle. Why?”

“I... In one of the books. It’s one of the oldest. There are dates listed going back to the 1600s. It describes a wolf, one who has lost everything. Tether, mate, pack. I thought at first it was describing an Omega. But there were annotations, notes written in the margins. Newer. Much newer.” He took a deep breath. “I found this book when I was in Caswell... before. I’d forgotten about it until Gordo said he hadn’t found anything when he’d come here. He wouldn’t have found it. It slipped behind the bookshelf, and I just... left it there because things were getting weird. I recognized the handwriting. It was the same in a letter you gave me once. And the journal I gave to you.”

“Thomas,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” Robbie said. He sounded uncomfortable. “I think so. Kelly and Joe do too, and they’d probably know better than I would.”

“It’s him,” Joe said firmly. “We know it.”

“What did it say?” Mark asked, leaning over the phone, eyes narrowed.

“It wasn’t much,” Kelly said. “But we think we know what it means.”

“Read it,” Joe said, voice crackling through the line.

And Robbie said, “Is this what he could become? Should we have killed him when we had the chance? I don’t know. They assure me he’s trapped forever.” And then Robbie said something else that we couldn’t quite make out.

“Say that again, Robbie,” Mom said. “We missed that last part.”

“Ox,” Joe said, and the world tilted on its axis. “He said he thinks it’s Ox. He wrote that Ox is something more than we ever thought. The last notes say *he’s an Alpha. I don’t know how. I don’t know why. But if this is true, if the beast can rise, then an equal and opposite must also rise. Ox. Ox. Ox.*”

We stared at the phone, thunderstruck.

Jessie stepped forward. “Thomas was dead long before Ox ever became a wolf. How could he know—”

“Alpha,” Mom said. She was staring off into nothing.

“Lizzie?” Mark asked.

She shook her head. “He knew. Even before we did. When those Omegas came. When they took Jessie. Ox was...” She raised her head. At first I thought she was staring at Rico and Tanner and Chris. She wasn’t. She rounded the desk, motioning for them to move. They did. Gavin stood there, wringing his hands. She cupped his face, brushing her thumbs over his cheeks. “Gavin? You were there too with the Omegas.”

He nodded miserably.

“Did you feel it?” she asked quietly. “All that he could be?”

Gavin’s gaze darted over to me before settling back on my mother. “Bright. It scared me. Big. Bigger than anything. I felt him. He pulled. All of us. He let some of us go. We ran. But we felt it. Human. But more. Wolf. Alpha.”

Mom dropped her hands, looking dazed.

“He knew, Mom,” Joe said. “He knew, even then. He knew and he didn’t tell us.”

“We don’t know that,” Rico said. “He could be talking about—”

“There’s something else,” Robbie said. “Not from Thomas. From the book. I don’t know what it means. The rest of it is gone or illegible. But I can read this last thing.”

“What?” Mark asked as he tried to connect the call again.

“A single word,” Kelly said. “Sacrifice.”

The screen on the wall beeped twice quickly.

The call connected via video link.

We turned toward the monitor.

It was dark. The image was fuzzy, the pixels blurred and stuck. I thought I heard the wind. It took me a moment to realize it was someone breathing heavily.

“I got you,” a voice said offscreen. “Come on. Come *on*.”

I recognized the voice immediately. “Aileen?”

The picture spun dizzily. And then Aileen’s face filled the screen. She was bleeding from a wound on her head. Blood covered the right side of her face. Her skin was pale, and she coughed roughly. “Hey,” she said. She looked away from the screen, eyes narrowing. “Bring him here. Goddammit, Patrice. Is there anyone else?”

“No,” we heard Patrice say. “Dis is all dat’s left.”

“Your arm, it’s—”

“Don’t worry about dat,” Patrice said through gritted teeth. He was hurt, but we couldn’t see how bad. “I warded da cabin. It’s—Gordo. *Gordo*.”

And then another voice spoke. “Give me the phone.”

Ox.

The screen froze before jumping. Ox’s face appeared. His eyes were red and violet. He had blood on his teeth. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Mom said. “Ox, we’re here.”

“Listen,” he said. “We were too late. The wards were destroyed. You need to be ready. He’s coming. He’s *coming*.”

My skin felt electrified. My blood rushed in my ears, and my heart felt like it was going to burst from my chest. “The witches?”

“Dead,” Ox muttered. “All dead. Patrice and Aileen, they’ve—” Ox grimaced, hand going to his side. He was shirtless, and a jut of bone pressed out from his skin. We heard the audible *snap* as it healed back into place. “He has a witch. A kid. I don’t—”

“Give me the damn phone,” Aileen growled. “You need to sit your ass down and rest.” The screen grew fuzzy again as she took the phone from Ox. Her face once more filled the screen. “His name is Gregory. Came to me after Caswell. Said he wanted to help.”

“Gregory?” Joe demanded. “I met him. I *know* him. He’s a fucking *teenager*.”

Robbie was equally incensed. “I know that name. Livingstone said it once. Back in Caswell when I thought he was Ezra. Said he was helping him, that Gregory was... eager to learn.”

“Fucking teenagers,” Aileen snapped. “And he’s stronger than I gave him credit for. He must have been hiding it from me. He’s the one who let the wolves in. And he’s the one who has let them out.” She choked on her words. “They killed them. All of them. It was a slaughter. Ox was able to kill a couple of the wolves, but Gregory caught him off guard. Knocked him through that old house.”

“Gordo?” Mark asked. He was pleading. “Where is he? Is he....”

“He’s here,” Aileen said. She reached up and touched the wound on her head. She winced, the tips of her fingers bloody. “Unconscious, but here. We have him. We’re holed up in the cabin. Don’t worry about us. We’re safe for now. But Ox is right, you need to be ready. Livingstone is coming. We tried to stop him, but...” She shook her head. “He was stronger than we were.”

“Dere gone,” Patrice said. “I tink dere all gone. Wolves. Gregory. We’ll wait here until we can be sure, and den—”

“No,” Ox said. “We’re leaving. Now. We have to get back to Green Creek.”

Aileen sighed. “How did I know you were going to say that?”

“Because we have no other choice. Carter.”

“I’m here, Ox.”

“You need to warn the town. You—” He groaned somewhere offscreen. Then, “Will knows what to do. Raise the alarms. We’re coming for you, okay? I swear it. Hide. You hear me? I want you all to hide. You can’t do this on your own.”

Chris stepped forward. He looked at all of us before turning toward the screen. “You know we can’t do that, Ox. We have to help Green Creek. As many people as we can. It’s our job, man. It’s what you’ve been training us for. This moment.” He laughed, though it was shaky. “I mean, why else would you make us get up at the crack of dawn to punch each other over and over?”

Ox’s face appeared on the screen again. He looked furious. “No. Don’t. He’s stronger than you. *Hide*. Don’t make me tell you again.”

And Chris said, “We love you, okay?” as Ox’s face crumpled. “We’ll do what we can to hold them off until you get here.”

“Please,” Ox whispered. “I can’t lose you too.”

“You won’t,” Tanner said, stepping up next to Chris, standing shoulder to

shoulder. “You’re our Alpha. You’ve taught us well. You and Joe both. We always knew it could come to this. Trust us, okay? Have the faith we have in you.”

“I’m coming,” Ox said, and we felt the pull of our Alpha. “I’m coming for all of you. Do what you can. But if it’s too much, you run. I don’t care what happens to the town. You take the people and you *run*.”

The screen went dark.

“*Fuck*,” Joe snarled. “Kelly, get on the—yes. Now. Robbie, go outside. Get as many people together as you can. And if anyone gives you shit, you tell them you’re speaking for me. I’ll be out there in a minute.”

“But—”

“*Go*.”

We heard them running.

Joe said, “Mom.”

“I’m here,” she said quietly.

“I can’t lose him,” he whispered. He sounded like a little boy again, telling us about a boy he’d found on a dirt road in the middle of the woods.

“You won’t,” she said. “Get home.”

“I love you.”

“We love you too. We’ll see you soon.” She disconnected the call. She stared down at the screen a moment before shaking her head. When she looked up at us, her eyes were orange. “We’re not going to let this happen. Whatever comes, we face it, and we face it together. We—” She stopped.

“What?” I asked.

Mom looked from the door back to me. “Where’s Gavin?”

I whirled around.

He was gone.

I TORE THROUGH THE HOUSE, shouting his name.

He didn’t answer.

I flew into our room, the door slamming against the wall. On the bed underneath a stone wolf that had once belonged to my mother was a note written in familiar block letters, two words that screamed at me.

I'M SORRY.

I whirled around, running from the room and back down the stairs.

Mark was on the first floor, eyes wide. "What's wrong now?"

I ignored him, bursting from the house. I jumped off the porch and landed on the ground, looking around, listening to the sounds of the forest. "Come on," I muttered. "Come on. Come on."

There. Behind the blue house. A rapid heartbeat.

I ran toward it.

I rounded the house and skidded to a stop.

In the trees near the blue house, I saw a flash of color.

A timber wolf running through the trees.

My fangs descended.

My claws grew.

A powerful beat thundered in my head, urging me to *chase* and *hunt* and *bite*.

My clothing tore as I

i

i

i am wolf

run

run fast

stop him

gavin

gavin

gavin

hear me

hear me i need you to hear

me you can't do this

you can't leave

not

there you

are i see you

you're fast

but i'm faster

i

I shifted back as I tackled him, sliding along the ground. I ended up on top of him. He was on his back, paws kicking up into me, scratching my skin. He tried to snap at me. I gripped his snout with my hand, holding his mouth closed before turning his face into the ground. I roared at him, eyes flashing as I lowered my face to his.

He stopped struggling. He whined, eyes violet and scared.

“Shift back,” I bit out.

He didn't.

“Shift. *Back.*”

I felt the muscle and bone grinding against me. The hair receded, and all that remained was the man I'd come to know. He scowled as he shoved me off him. I fell to the ground at his side but was up on my feet before he could move again.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Stupid Carter,” he muttered, pushing himself up. “Stupid, stupid Carter.”

“Fuck you.” I shoved his chest. He took a stumbling step back. “Where are you going?”

“Not your business,” he snapped. “You don't own me. I go where I want.”

I could barely think straight. I was so goddamn angry. Bile rose at the back of my throat, and I choked it down. But hidden under the fury like a great, lumbering beast was something bigger.

Fear.

I was *scared*.

Not of him, but of what he was doing. Of whatever was going on in his head.

I'M SORRY the note said.

“Running away?” I asked, a nasty curl in my voice. “That it? First sign of trouble and you're running?”

He glared at me but didn't speak.

“Fucking coward.” I grabbed him by the arm and started pulling him back toward the houses.

“I'm *not* a coward,” he growled at me, struggling to pull free. My grip was too strong. “Shut up.”

“I don't want to hear it. What the hell is wrong with you? How could you think this was ever okay? You can't just—”

“I’m going to him!”

I stopped.

Closed my eyes.

The winter birds sang from the trees. It sounded like a song of sorrow.

I whispered, “What?”

He said, “I’m going to him.”

He said, “Never should have come here.”

He said, “I can stop this.”

He said, “I can stop *him*.”

He said, “Sacrifice. In the book. It was *sacrifice*.”

He said, “Doesn’t have to be Ox. Ox is Alpha. Pack needs Alpha.”

He said, “Pack doesn’t need me.”

I turned to look at him. His eyes were wet. His bottom lip was trembling. I said, “No.”

He shook his head. “Carter. Listen, okay? Listen. I can do this. I can end this. I... I can save pack. Good wolf. I can be good wolf. Big and bad but good.”

“No, no, no—”

“Shh,” he said, taking a step toward me. He pressed his finger against my lips. “Shh, Carter. It’s okay. I promise.” He tried to smile, but it broke into pieces. “You know I’m right. You know it. I help pack. Make it better.”

I jerked my head back and whirled around, pulling him toward the houses again.

“Carter, *stop*.”

“Fuck you,” I snarled at him over my shoulder. “You really think I’m just going to... what? Let you go? Let you do this? And you think *I’m* the stupid one? Oh, buddy, have I got news for you.”

“You don’t *need* me,” he said, struggling to pull away. I held on tight. “You don’t. You live. You can live. He doesn’t want you. Or Alphas. Or pack. He wants me.”

“What then?” The blue house came into view. “What the fuck is going to happen then? You let him suck the life out of you? Let him kill you? What if it’s not enough? What if he tears away all that you are and leaves you nothing but a fucking wolf again? He won’t stop, Gavin. You know he won’t.”

“He *will*. I can do it.” He said, “I hear him. He’s getting louder. He’s my *father*. He—”

“He is *nothing* to you.” The fear in me pushed through the rage, rearing its ugly head. I could barely breathe as it clawed at my chest, the panic fierce and bright. “He never has been. Why can’t you see that? You don’t get to do this. I won’t let you.”

“Why?” he shouted, and the force of it startled me. My grip on his arm loosened, and he pulled away before pushing me. I crashed into the side of the blue house, the siding cracking. “I never asked for this. Any of this. I never asked for *you*.”

I laughed bitterly. “Then why did you stay?”

He flinched. “What?”

I took a step toward him. He didn’t move. “You came here. You stayed. You didn’t have to. You knew who you were. You knew what would happen if we found out. And still you stayed. Why?”

“Questions,” he growled. “Always questions. You never stop, even when you should.”

I ignored him. I couldn’t stop. Not now. Not when everything was crumbling around us. “And then you leave because you’re a self-sacrificing asshole. I chased after you, and *oh*, did you put up a good fight. No, Carter, no. I don’t want to go with you. I don’t want to be with you. Go away, Carter. Go away. Stupid Carter.” I curled my hands into fists to keep from lashing out. “And you still came back. You still made yourself part of this pack. You made yourself a home. If it’s so easy for you to leave again, then why the *fuck* did you even come back here at all?”

He slumped, the fight draining out of him. His voice was hoarse when he said, “You’re the only place I’ve ever felt safe. You, Carter. You make me feel safe.” He tapped his fist against his chest. “Thump. Thump. Thump.”

I kissed him.

He exhaled explosively as his lips pressed back against his teeth. His mouth was warm and wet, and I felt the scratch of stubble against my hands as I cupped his face. He made a wounded noise, and then I was being shoved back against the house again. Only this time, he was pressed up against me, the long line of his body hot against my own. My brain was misfiring at the thought that we were both naked, but then it fell away when he bit my bottom lip, tugging on it gently.

I groaned into his mouth as he gripped my biceps, claws digging into my skin.

“Stupid Carter,” he muttered against me. “It’s you. It’s you. Always you.”

I tilted my head back against the house as he latched his teeth on to my throat, inhaling deeply. Any question I'd had on whether I was into this went right out the window. I was into this. I was definitely into this.

He was still talking, still saying my name like a prayer, and I said, "Shut up, shut up, get in the house, we're not going to do this here," and *he* said, "*You* shut up, always talking, you never stop." I laughed wildly. I felt crazed, the edges of the world a haze. It was like I was slipping again, but this time I didn't want it to stop.

He stepped back, chest heaving. He grabbed me by the hand and pulled me through the back door of the blue house. I didn't know what I was doing, didn't know how to do any of this, but I was beyond caring. I stumbled into the house, my head bumping against his back. Randomly, I said, "I'm not ready for page seventy-six."

"You make no sense," he said. "Stop talking."

"I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to—"

And he said, "I do," and my blood ran hot. I did my best not to stare at his ass as he pulled me up the stairs, but I failed miserably.

He took me to a room at the end of the hall, a spare bedroom we'd used for Omegas. He closed the door behind us, and in the distance, the sounds of sirens began to wail in Green Creek, signaling the townspeople to action.

"We don't have time," I told him, and he said, "I know. I know. I know."

He shoved me down onto the bed. I bounced once before he pressed me into the mattress as he settled on top of me. He was heavy, and I could barely breathe, but I'd never felt more awake. I wasn't dreaming. This was real. All of this was real.

He kissed me again, grinding his hips against mine. His cock was thick and heavy against my own, our skin already slick with sweat. His tongue rolled in my mouth artlessly, but I didn't care. He felt feral, the thrum of the wolf trembling between us. I opened my eyes to find all I could see was violet.

His hands tugged my hair, pulling my head back. He found my throat again, nipping at my skin. "That's good," I gasped. "Keep doing that."

He growled, and I couldn't keep from laughing. I tried to wrap my arms around him, but he captured my wrists with one hand, holding them tight, pressing them into the mattress above my head. His eyes glittered as he rose up above me. He looked down at me, head cocked. "This," he said. "This is what you want."

And I said, “Yes. You. You’re what I want.”

There was relief there, green like nothing I’d ever felt before. It poured off him, and in my head, a whisper broke through the haze, saying *carter carter carter*, and it was *him*, I knew it was him. I’d heard it before. Maybe I’d ignored it. Maybe I hadn’t recognized it. I did now. This was us.

“Keep your hands there,” he said. “Don’t move.”

“Of course you’d be bossy here too,” I muttered, and then I yelped when he bit my nipple before kissing his way down my chest. “I don’t know why I thought otherwise.”

He looked up at me, chin on my stomach. “You thought about this.”

Because it was him, I said, “Yes. All the fucking time.”

He grinned, and I swore I saw the hint of fangs. It shouldn’t have thrilled me as much as it did, especially since he was so close to my dick. But there it was, regardless, and I didn’t do anything to stop it.

He pressed his face into my groin, inhaling deeply, my cock pressing to his cheek.

“Dude, that’s probably not—”

“Don’t call me dude.”

“This is so stupid, this is so—*fuck!*” My hips arched off the bed as he swallowed me whole, gagging as the tip of his nose brushed against my pubes. I felt his throat working around my dick, and I started to reach for his head, either to pull him off or hold him in place, I didn’t know. His eyes opened. They were wet as they flashed violet in warning. My hands stilled just above his head.

He pulled off my cock slowly, swirling his tongue around the head. He must have seen the look on my face, because he said, “What?”

“Nothing,” I managed to say.

I didn’t know how to tell him.

Violet. His eyes had been violet.

But for a moment, there’d been a flicker of orange.

He knocked my hands away before he went down on me again. He was better at this than I thought he’d be, and I felt an insane twist of jealousy at how he’d learned. Of course he wasn’t a virgin. I wasn’t either. But that did nothing to quell the urge to find whoever else he’d been with and tear their fucking heads off.

He tugged on my balls and I closed my eyes, breathing through my nose.

“You keep that up, I’m not gonna last. It’s been a long time.”

“I know,” he said, letting my dick slap wetly against my stomach. “Could smell them on you. When I first got here. All those women. I hated them.”

“Nothing since. You know that.”

He gripped my dick, slowly sliding his hand up and down. “Cockblock.”

I gaped at him. “What the hell?”

He shrugged, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. “Followed you around. Shadow. Cockblock.”

Motherfucker. I was laughing again, unable to stop. He frowned at me, and I sat up on the bed, pulling him up by the armpits. I kissed him again, and there it was, that old-growth scent that belonged to him and him alone.

I chased after it as I twisted, laying him flat against the bed. I looked down between us, our dicks rubbing together. I moved my hips slowly, marveling at the sensation. My skin felt like it was on fire, sweat dripping from my brow into the hollow of his throat. His stomach and chest were covered in a fine layer of dark hair, his hip bones jutting out in sharp relief.

I said, “I’m going to suck your dick.”

And he said, “Thank you for announcing instead of just doing.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’ve never done it before.”

He snorted. “Obviously.”

“I might not be very good.”

“Stupid Carter,” he muttered. “Watch your teeth.”

It was inelegant, though that was probably putting it mildly. I gagged almost immediately, the heady taste of him foreign. He was careful with me, moving his hips in shallow thrusts, his hands on the sides of my head, holding me in place. He growled at me when my teeth scraped against the head of his dick, but he said, “Do that again.”

I did.

“Good,” he panted. “That’s good.”

His cock was hot against my tongue. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe through my nose as spit ran down my chin, my eyes watering. He said my name again and again, and I didn’t know if it was out loud or in my head. I thought *i feel you i’m here and i feel you*, and the bond between us, the thread that tied us together, went taut as it vibrated.

carter carter carter

i know let me just let me i

He was kissing me again, my lips swollen, throat sore. He gripped my chin, and it hurt, but it was oh so good. He pressed his forehead against mine, and we stared at each other in disbelief. He hummed quietly under his breath.

He said, "This. Me. You."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Together."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "You want this. With me."

And I said, "Yes."

He flipped us over, and I found myself on my back again. He was stronger than I expected, and I felt a deep pride I could have someone such as him. He settled himself on my hips again, my dick rubbing against the crack of his ass. He reached over to the nightstand next to the bed. He opened the drawer and pulled out—

My eyes bulged. "Is that lube? What the hell? How did that get there?" Then, "Wait. How did you *know* it was there?"

He shrugged as he popped the cap. "Kelly and Joe."

I said, "What."

"Gave it to me."

"What."

He scowled. "It's not hard to understand."

"Oh, *excuse* me for wondering why my fucking *brothers* gave you a bottle of lube."

"You're excused." He poured a generous amount onto his palm before reaching behind him. I tensed when he slid his hand along my cock, coating it with slick. "Stop talking about your brothers. We're busy."

My eyes bulged, whether because of his words or grip, I didn't know. "You're the one who—"

And then he *groaned*, and it took me a moment to realize it was because his fingers were *in* him. His eyes fluttered shut, the back of his hand rubbing against my dick as he stretched himself open. I could do nothing but watch his face, the subtle wince, the way his mouth dropped open as he twisted his hand. He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth, hissing quietly before he dropped the bottle onto the bed next to us.

He rose on his knees to get a better angle. I reached between us, my hand going to his. He gasped when I pressed against his hand, pushing him farther into himself. He nodded, and I pushed again. He was three fingers deep, and my thumb hooked around his, pulling it back and then pushing it up again.

“Ready,” he whispered, and I pulled my hand back. I heard his own hand slide from his body, and I swallowed thickly. “Ready, ready, ready.” He leaned over me, brushing his nose against mine.

“Are you sure?” I whispered.

He said, “Yes. You. I’m sure. You, Carter.”

“There’s no going back after this.”

“I know.”

“We’re going to be—”

“Carter. Shut your mouth before I fuck it again.”

“Oh, look who’s got all the words now. You asshole.”

“I’m trying to get you in *my* asshole.”

“Yes,” I said. “That. Do that.”

He sat back up, looking pleased with himself. He reached behind him again as he raised his hips. He held on to my dick before he lowered himself slowly as the sirens continued to bray. The pressure was immense, and I was lost to it, to *him*, and all the while the specter of what lay ahead hung over us both. It was heavy, but my hands were on his thighs, his muscles quivering underneath my fingers. He put his hands flat against my chest as he grimaced, baring his teeth and hissing out a breath.

“Slow,” I told him. “Slow.”

He said, “I know, Carter. I know.”

He settled onto my lap and bent over, his head hanging above mine. He blinked rapidly, and there was green, and then violet, and then it was orange, orange, orange, and I didn’t think it was possible. I didn’t think it could be like this.

He began to move, rolling his hips. He gasped as he rose up and slid back down. I was too scared to move, not wanting to hurt him and not wanting to end this before it even began.

He said, “Carter, Carter,” and across my vision, little flashes of light, the room growing brighter, the haze receding into sharp clarity.

I reached up and held on to the back of his neck. “It’s all right,” I whispered.

“I’ve got you.”

He said, “Please” and “Don’t let him have me” and “Don’t let him take me” and “It hurts, Carter, I can feel him in my head and it hurts.”

I rose up and kissed the words away, the angle awkward, my stomach straining. He breathed into my mouth as I dared to move, fucking up into him with a quick snap of my hips. His mouth fell open as I did it again and again. He was shaking, a full-body tremor that I couldn’t stop. He pulled away, putting his hands on my knees behind him, arching his back. His dick slapped against his stomach. I reached for it, but he growled at me, knocking my hand away before stroking himself.

I said, “Do you want this? With me?”

He said, “Yes.”

I said, “Me and you. Nothing else matters.”

He said, “Yes.”

I said, “Gavin.”

His mouth dropped open, the cords on his neck thick as he groaned. An urge roared through me, a primal instinct at the sight of his throat. My fangs dropped, and I knew, I *knew* this was it. This was an ending. Whatever followed, whatever would happen next, we’d gotten to this moment, and I said, “Fuck him. Hear me. Hear me. I’m the voice in your head. I’m your pack.”

The sirens screamed.

A low rumble crawled up from his chest and through his throat.

I saw the flash of fangs.

He leaned forward again. “Mine,” he said, and it came from the wolf. “Mine.”

“Bite,” I snarled at him. “I’m close. Do it. Do it now.”

He didn’t hesitate.

I felt the bright wave of *pleasurepain* the moment he bit down, but it was lost in the hot slick of blood that filled my own mouth as my fangs sank into his skin between his shoulder and neck.

I

I

i

am

*strong
brave
scared
wolf
i am wolf i am wolf i am wolf
i am carter
(gavin)
i hurt
my head hurts
my brain hurts
it's on fire
everything is on fire
bitch woman bitch woman hunter
says she'll cut me says she'll take knife and put it into my skin
says it's because god wants it
god demands it
fuck your god
fuck you
chain around neck
silver
she pulls it
hard
she says
she says don't show me your teeth
do it again
do it again and i'll pull them out one by one
find them she says find them find them
kill them
kill them all
i hunt
there's
man*

witch man raven witch man kill him kill him but
there's
smells like
????
what is
that what is that in him
that smell
that scent
that stench it's like it's like
familiar
it's i know it i know it
can't
hurt him
humans
he is with humans
scary woman with crowbar
witch man says jessie no
but she says fuck this and crowbar
fucking crowbar it burns it burns
they run they run and i follow
i follow them hunt them stalk them hide hide hide
big wolf bad wolf big bad wolf
witch man raven man i follow you why do
why do you smell like that
who are you they say gordo gordo gordo
and i know that
name
i know that name brain in brain on fire where where where do i
know that name this place i know this place
trees i smell the trees they smell like
man alpha big alpha comes to me
child i am child and alpha says there are wolves gavin there are wolves and
witches gavin there is magic and monsters

*you are not
you are not a monster gavin your father is
you are safe here alpha man says i tell you this
i tell you this not to hurt you but to
make you know you are never alone
i looked for him i remember now dead he's dead he's dead
follow gordo
follow ???? brother ????
is that who witch man raven man is is is
and i
i attack i kill them make smell go away
don't need him don't need this don't want this place
but then
but then
he comes
out
he's yelling
wolf stupid wolf big stupid wolf
he is
not
???
others see him
don't
don't touch him
that's mine
that's mine
he's mine and i will take him away into woods
i will hunt for him
i will keep him warm
and safe
he yells at me tells me to stop dragging him
stupid wolf man
not dragging you saving you stupid man stupid wolf*

it's
thump
it's
thump
it's
thump thump thump and i
i can breathe
i can breathe
i can

I OPENED MY EYES.

Gavin stared down at me.

Blood dripped down his chest and onto mine.

I said, "Gavin," as I looked to the mark on his shoulder, the perfect impression of fangs already scarring over.

Gavin said, "Carter? It's.... Carter. I can... I can."

I reached up and cupped his face. He turned and kissed my palm.

"Show me," I whispered. "Show me your eyes."

He shook his head furiously. "I don't know. I don't know. If I can. If it's real."

And because I had a part to play, I said the words he'd told me once in the snow stained with blood. "What do you want?"

He knew. Of course he did. He said, "To feel like I'm awake."

"Show me, then. Show me your eyes."

He did.

Oh, he did.

He opened his eyes, and for a moment nothing happened. But then the tangle of threads in my chest burst to life, writhing and wild, and it stretched between us. It connected us. It was strong and true and I *heard* him, loud and clear even though he didn't speak aloud.

carter carter carter

His eyes filled with the brightest orange I'd ever seen.

A tear trickled down his cheek.

I brushed it away.

“Awake,” he whispered. “Awake. Carter, I’m awake. *I’m awake.*”

THEY WERE WAITING FOR US.

We walked toward them, hands clasped between us.

The sirens blared, cracking the cold air like it was glass.

Chris and Tanner and Rico were grinning. They looked almost feral.

Rico said, “This is some goddamn Disney shit right here.”

Jessie rolled her eyes. “Mystical moon magic.”

Dominique shook her head fondly.

Bambi laughed, and it was sweet and kind. Joshua looked up at her from her arms, blinking slowly at the sight of his mother so carefree.

But it was my own mother I turned to.

She was smiling quietly.

She said, “Gavin. To me, if you please.”

He stiffened, but it didn’t last. He squared his shoulders. He dropped my hand and walked slowly to her. She stood on the steps above him, looking down.

She said, “Did you make your choice?”

He said, “Yes.”

“What did you choose?”

And Gavin said, “Carter.”

She started to nod, but then he spoke again.

“And family. I chose family. Pack. Pack. Pack.”

She took his face in her hands. She leaned forward and kissed his forehead. He shuddered at the press of her lips. She pulled away, but only just.

She whispered, “This is where you belong. This is where you’re supposed to be. No one else can have you. No one else can take you. I love you, I love you, I love you.”

He stepped forward, pressing his face against her stomach. She was startled, but then she chuckled and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She looked to me. Her eyes flashed. “It’s time to show the world why we’re the goddamn Bennett pack.”

like this/little god

Green Creek had transformed.

Will had told me as much when we'd met in the diner, told me what they'd done, but hearing about it was one thing. Seeing it was something else entirely.

I knew about the metal grates that had been installed after Elijah. On the businesses. The houses. We'd paid for everything, wanting to make sure the people of our town were safe, come what may. No wolf could get in.

But they'd also been warded. The stench of magic was thick. Gordo. Aileen. Patrice. A handful of other trusted witches. Wolves couldn't enter, but anything else would have a bitch of a time too. They weren't meant to last, merely a stopgap.

I'd known about these.

I hadn't known about everything else.

In the year I'd been gone, Green Creek had prepared for the worst.

On either side of the main thoroughfare, men and women stood on the roofs. Slats of metal had been built into the roofs on hinges. They'd pushed them up and locked them in place along the edges. They were four feet high and surrounded the roofs on all sides. The slats were interlocked and thick, inlaid with silver.

In the distance, along the one main road into Green Creek, barriers had been placed in the streets, along with signs saying the road was under construction and that entrance to the town was closed. It'd be fine for now, but not for the long term. Eventually someone would ask questions. We needed this to be over before that happened.

"Careful," Will called down, sounding amused. He was standing on top of the hardware store. "Silver powder on the sidewalk."

I looked up at him. He had a shotgun against his shoulder, and in his hand was a small circular bag that he tossed up and down. "And that?"

He shrugged. “Something Robbie came up with. Gordo helped. More silver powder. Very fine. Explodes into a cloud when it hits the ground. Can’t imagine what that feels like if a wolf inhales it.”

“Let’s not find out,” I muttered.

“You all right?”

“Why?”

He laughed. “Got a little spring in your step. And you’re not letting that boy of yours go.”

“He’s not my—”

“We’re mates,” Gavin told him. “We fucked and I bit him and he bit me and now we’re mates.” He sounded very proud of this fact.

The people on the roofs burst into laughter.

“Jesus Christ,” I groaned, trying to stop Gavin from stretching out the collar of his shirt to show them all the mark on his skin. He growled at me and did it anyway.

“Very nice,” Will said. “I should question your timing, but hey. Love is love, I guess. Might as well get it while you can.”

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to let this town be overrun.

But then Will’s expression softened. “Good on you, Carter. It’s about time you pulled your head out of your ass. Granted, not much you could have done about it when he was wolflike for all those years.” He frowned. “Unless that’s a thing. I don’t pretend to understand all there is to know about shape-shifters, but I don’t think I want to hear if you do the deed while shifted.”

I groaned as everyone looked toward us, obviously interested in hearing if that was true.

The woman next to Will said, “Furries. I learned about it on the internet.”

Will nodded as if that made sense. “Yeah. Ain’t much you can’t find on the internet. Well, I’ll tell you what. Furries, werewolves, whatever. We’re pretty accepting in Green Creek.” He paused, considering. “Except for the bad wolves that want to try to take from us. Then we shoot first and ask questions later. Ain’t that right?”

The people cheered in response.

“The kids?” I asked, desperate to get them back to the matters at hand.

“All in the bunker,” the woman said. Her name was Hillary, and though she looked like a sweet older woman, she was actually pretty fucking terrifying.

After Elijah, she'd demanded to be included in protecting the town. Will had laughed in her face at the diner, until she picked up a steak knife off the table and hurled it. It'd flipped end over end before piercing the far wall, the handle quivering. "Made sure of it myself. Hung up Christmas decorations and everything. Even put presents down there for the little ones. They'll be all right. We've got good people protecting them."

I nodded before looking down the road. "Anything?"

"Hey, Grant!" Will called across the street. "What do you see?"

A man on top of the garage lowered a pair of high-powered binoculars. "Nothing but the wind."

Will looked down at me again. "We sure they're coming?"

I looked at Gavin, who nodded tightly. "Yeah. We're sure."

Will spat over the side of the building. "How many?"

"Quite a few."

He tapped the barrel of the shotgun against his shoulder. "Gonna get ugly."

"I know."

"Ox? The others? They all right?"

"Yeah," I said, because it was easier than to say otherwise. I hoped they were. "On their way."

He whistled lowly. "Probably won't get here before. We'll be in the thick of it by the time they show up. Think the wards will hold?"

"They better," I said grimly. "If not, we'll be ready."

"That we will," he said. "Carter?"

"Yeah?"

"Your daddy would be proud of you."

I looked up at him again.

He said, "It might not be my place to say as much. But I know it's true. You're a good man, Carter Bennett. Proud to know you. We'll do what we can. Ain't that right?"

The men and women of Green Creek raised their weapons and cheered.

Will tilted his head back and howled.

"Let them come," I whispered as the others followed Will's lead. The sounds of humans singing the songs of wolves echoed up and down the street.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Rico stood with Bambi, Joshua in his arms. He kissed his son's forehead, muttering sweetly in Spanish. Bambi touched his arm. "You better not do anything stupid. I'll do what I have to in the bunker, but I swear to god, Rico, if you get yourself killed, it'll be the last thing you ever do."

"Uh. That's pretty much the point—"

"*Rico.*"

He winced. "Sorry. I'll do my best not to die."

"Damn right you will," she snapped at him.

And then he said, "I don't say this often enough. I know I don't. I swear I'll get better at it. But I need you to know I love you. You and Joshua both, more than anything in the world. You gave me life. You gave me purpose. I would be nothing without you. I don't know why you decided to hitch yourself with an old redneck, but I won't question it. Thank you for putting up with all my shit."

She sniffled. "You're lucky to have me."

"I am," he agreed.

"And you're a daddy now."

"I am that too."

She said, "And when this is all over, you're going to marry me."

He gaped at her. "Did... did you just propose?"

"You were dragging your feet, you motherfucker. One of us had to do it."

"I love you so goddamn much," he whispered fiercely, and Joshua let out a little squawk as his father bent over to kiss his mother.

When she pulled away, she reached up and touched his face. "Come back to us," she said quietly. She took Joshua from him and turned away, following a group of women to their truck in front of the house. They'd take her and Joshua to the bunker.

Rico stared after them as they drove away.

I put my hand on his shoulder.

"They're the best thing that's ever happened to me," he said.

"I know."

He looked over at me, eyes filling with orange. "Let's kill as many of these fuckers as we can."

I grinned at him.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Chris and Tanner standing in front, facing each other, their foreheads pressed together.

Chris said, "You stay by me."

Tanner said, "I'll never leave your side."

Chris said, "Except when I tell you to run."

Tanner said, "Fuck you. I'm not leaving you."

Chris said, "You dumbass. Why are you like this?"

Tanner said, "You and me, all right? You and me. Platonic mates for life."

Chris said, "We're so goddamn weird."

Tanner said, "I know. Could be worse, though."

Chris said, "Hell yes it could."

I shook my head. Those fucking dorks. I loved them so.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Jessie hummed a quiet song, sitting on the porch in front of Dominique. Jessie was cleaning her guns as Dominique braided her hair.

I watched them through the window.

Dominique said, "I've been thinking."

Jessie snorted. "Uh-oh."

"Hush, you. Listen to me."

"I always do."

"You'd think so. But I've got a list a mile long that says otherwise. Gavin. Carter."

Jessie sighed. "Yeah."

"I want that. With you."

Jessie set her gun on the steps between her feet. She tilted her head back to look up at Dominique. "Is that right? I had no idea."

"Don't sass me," Dominique chided gently. "I want that. Don't you?"

"You want to be tied to me like that?"

"Yes."

Jessie shrugged. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

Dominique kissed her.

I stepped away from the window.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

“We’re getting on the plane now,” Kelly said, the sounds of an airport filtering in through the phone. “We’re coming for you. I swear it. Carter, wait for us. We’ve got backup. More than I thought we would. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I laughed. “When have you known me to do anything stupid?”

He wasn’t amused. “Please.” His voice cracked when he said, “I can’t... not again.” Then, “It’s bad, Carter. Joe’s not talking. It’s like it was before, when we were going after Richard Collins. He’s shutting down.”

I said, “Put him on the phone.”

“Joe. Joe. Here. It’s for you. Would you just fucking take it? Don’t do this to me.”

I heard him breathing. He didn’t speak.

I said, “He’s okay. Ox is okay. So is Gordo. So are we. We’re here. We’re waiting for you.”

He breathed and breathed.

I said, “Once, when you were... three? Maybe four. You were this chubby little kid. And you talked and talked and talked. About everything you could see. Look, here’s a *leaf*. Look, here’s a *bug*. Look, here’s a *rock*. And one day you were in my room. You were reading a book about wild things. Or at least you were pretending to. You were making up your own story since you couldn’t read the words. You were sitting on my bed next to me. I remembered something Dad had said to me. He said that I was your big brother. That even though you were the Alpha, my job was just as important. He told me that I had to keep you safe. I remember being *floored* by that. I was just a Beta. What could I do for a future Alpha? Dad said I’d know when the time came. So I listened to your story.” I cleared my throat. “And then you were taken. I—I was so lost. You came back, but it wasn’t the same. I carried you around everywhere I went, begging you to talk. I took you to my room. I set you on my bed. I went to the closet in the hall

and found the little book about wild things. And I told you the same story you told me. It wasn't what was written in the book because your story was better. You didn't talk, but when I finished, I swore you were looking at me like you knew me. Like you remembered."

"I did," Joe whispered. "I remembered everything."

"Good. That's real good, Joe. Hold on to that. I have. And I always will."

"I'm scared, Carter."

My heart broke. "I know. Me too. But we're strong. You've made us strong. And it has nothing to do with you being an Alpha. It's because you exist in the first place."

"Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." His voice was stronger. "Thanks, Carter."

"It's what I'm here for. You and Kelly. Always."

"And Gavin." His voice was warmer now. Filling with life. "Mom texted us. Said you did what you should have done a long time ago. Book helped, huh?"

I laughed and laughed.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

She was in the kitchen, singing along with the radio.

Johnny and his guitar again.

Of course it was.

She swayed side to side.

I went to her.

She laughed when I bowed low, my arm across my chest.

She took my hand in hers, the other coming to my shoulder.

We danced.

She said, "I'm proud of you. Do you know that?"

I nodded. "I do. Every day."

She said, "When you left, I was so angry, even though I knew in my heart you were following yours. Sometimes we have to let the ones we love go so that they may learn the world for themselves."

"I came back," I told her. "I'll always come back."

Her eyes were wet. “Will you? Why?”

“Because this is my home. You’re my home.”

She said, “You are your father’s son. I see it now more than ever. He’s here.”

My hands shook. “Is he?”

She never looked away from me. “We’re never alone. It may feel like we are, but here, in this place, the moon gives back for all we’ve sacrificed to her. I believe that with all my heart. He’s watching. He knows. We’ll hear his song before the end.”

We danced on.

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

Gavin was sitting on our bed in our room. He looked up at me as I entered. I froze in the doorway when I saw what was in his hands.

My mother’s stone wolf, now his.

He said, “I want this. You. Me.”

“I hope so. Otherwise we’re pretty much screwed already.”

He scowled at me. “Not funny.”

“A little funny.”

He sighed. “I changed my mind.”

Oh, how his heart betrayed him. “Liar,” I said hoarsely.

He stood from the bed. He had a determined look on his face. He stalked toward me before thrusting his hand out, shoving the wolf against my chest. “I don’t know how to do this,” he muttered. “Take it.”

“Wow, romantic. Thanks. I’ll remember this moment for—”

“Stupid Carter. Take it.” He poked it against my chest again. “Now.”

I took it.

He frowned. “That’s it?”

I shrugged. “That’s it.”

“Huh. That was dumb. Why do we have to do that? Don’t need wolf. Have scar. That’s enough.”

“Tradition,” I told him. “It’s tradition.”

He blinked. “Like Sundays?”

I nodded.

“Oh.” Then, “Where’s mine? Give it to me. Tradition.”

I sighed. “It’s in the nightstand drawer. Go get it.”

“No. You have to give it to me. Tradition.”

“Pain in my ass,” I muttered, and I stumbled when he said, “Not yet I’m not. Time for that later.”

I opened the bottom drawer. There, lying in the back on its side, was my own wolf of stone. I said, “My father gave this to me. He said I’d know in my heart who it would belong to. I didn’t understand then what he meant. I got older, and I never met anyone who made me feel that way. I watched Joe find his own path. Kelly. Gordo. And even when you were there, right in front of me, I still didn’t know. But I figured it out eventually.”

“When?” he asked.

I stood up. “When you left to save us all. I knew in my heart because my heart was breaking.” I turned around and showed him the wolf. It wasn’t as nice as his. This had been my father’s first. It was clumsy, more a lump of quartz than an actual wolf, but the intent was there.

“I won’t leave,” he said.

“Never?” I teased him. “Even when I piss you off?”

“You always piss me off,” he retorted. “Still here.”

And I said, “Promise me.” It wasn’t fair of me to ask, but I was beyond caring.

He didn’t hesitate. “I promise.”

I gave him the wolf.

He held it as if it were something precious. He inspected it closely, turning it around to see all sides. He looked back at the wolf in my hands. “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” I said, my heart beating rapidly.

“Oh.” Then he grinned.

And tackled me.

We fell onto the bed and he kissed me like he was never going to stop.

I never wanted him to.

I had never felt more awake.

I allowed myself to have this. To have it last as long as it could. To pretend that there was nothing out there coming for us.

It didn’t last, of course.

A bright light arced through my head, like a comet.

I stiffened.

He did too. “I felt that. Is it...?”

I said, “The wards. Something just hit the wards.”

IT WENT LIKE THIS:

The sky was dark, stars like ice.

The moon was a sliver as the year hurtled toward its end.

They moved around me. My mother. Gavin. Mark. Jessie. Rico. Chris. Tanner. Dominique.

It was at the covered bridge that we found them.

Wolves all.

Betas. Their eyes were orange in the dark.

I counted twenty.

I recognized half from Caswell.

They would be the first. I would make sure of it.

One of the wolves said, “Where’s the king?”

I said, “I know you.”

He grinned. “Do you? Quite an honor to be known by a prince. It’s—”

“You’re Santos. Robbie told me about you. Always in charge of the prisoner you kept locked away like a good little lapdog.”

His smile twisted into something toxic and dark. “Yeah, I guess I was.” He looked back at the others gathered around him before he turned once again to us. “Got a bit of a promotion. And a new Alpha.”

I nodded slowly. “I heard.”

“I don’t see Robbie.” The wolves behind him laughed. “Where is he? Poor little lost boy. You don’t know how hard it was for me to keep from killing him every time he stood before me.” He spat onto the ground. “Thought we could take care of that now.”

I shrugged. “Don’t think you’ll get that chance.”

He didn’t like that. He looked to my mother and said, “I’m going to kill your sons. Green Creek will have a new Alpha. We’ll spare Gavin because that’s what our Alpha wants. But I’m going to save you for last. I’m going to take

everything from you. And while they bleed out in front of you, begging for you to help them, Mommy, please, please, Mommy, I'm going to—”

Jessie said, “Bored now.” The crack of gunfire was loud in the dark. Santos stared at us with wide eyes as blood trickled down his face from the hole in his forehead. He fell to his knees. His eyes flickered orange and then went dark. He was already dead when he landed face-first on the ground. Jessie turned her gun on the others, a lock of her hair falling onto her forehead. “Anyone else want to threaten her?”

The wolves snarled in anger.

“Yeah,” Jessie said. “I thought so.”

Another man stepped forward. He looked impossibly young. A teenager. His light hair was cut short. He was tall and thin, and I didn't like the look in his eyes, cold and knowing. He reminded me of Dale. He glanced down at the dead man between us before shrugging. The stench of magic was thick around him, even through the wards.

Gregory.

The witch who'd betrayed Aileen, Patrice, and the others. He stepped over Santos and stood just before the wards. He clasped his hands behind him, looking at each of us in turn.

He said, “Santos always did talk too much. Pity, though. I liked him. This will be easy. Give us Gavin. Hell, I'll even let you keep Robbie, though he doesn't seem to be here. Hiding somewhere?”

I said, “Gavin, huh? So we'll give you Gavin, and you'll... what. Go? Leave us be?”

“Eh,” he said. “Sort of. A little more to it, but we can start there.” He waved his hand airily. “Give up the territory, Green Creek will be ours, blah, blah, blah.” He chuckled. “I would make threats, but that woman seems to be a little trigger-happy.”

“Men,” Jessie grumbled. “Don't know when to keep their mouths shut.”

My mother snorted but didn't speak. She was watching. Waiting. Taking these wolves in. Looking for weaknesses. We all were.

I stepped forward. The wolves behind Gregory flinched, though they recovered quickly. To his credit, Gregory barely blinked. If anything, he seemed curious. I didn't like that. He wasn't scared of me. Fucking teenagers. “He out there?”

“Who?”

I snorted. “Yeah, okay. Can he hear me?”

He narrowed his eyes. “He hears all. He knows all.”

“Yikes,” I said. “That’s a little too cult-y for me. I have a counteroffer for you. Think hard about it before you answer. Can you do that?”

He stared at me.

I whirled my finger in a little circle. “Turn around. Head west as far as you can go. You’ll find the ocean. Keep walking until the water is over your head. Open your mouth. Take the water into your lungs. Don’t fight it. It’ll be better for you. Easier. I can promise you that.”

Gregory cocked his head. “Can you?”

“Yes.”

“How so?”

I nodded at the wolves behind him. “You outnumber us.”

“I see that.”

“You know how many times that’s happened to us?”

“Tell me.”

I grinned at him. “Every time. Wolves. Hunters. Witches. Doesn’t matter. You all come here with your numbers and your threats and we tell you to leave. But for whatever reason, people like you just don’t listen. You think in your tiny little brains that numbers matter. You, like everyone who has come before, forget one important thing. And it will be the end of you.”

“What have I’ve forgotten?” Gregory asked, and there was a twitch just underneath his right eye. He was hearing me, really hearing me. Oh, he didn’t believe a word coming out of my mouth, but he was listening.

“We’re the goddamn Bennett pack,” I said coldly. “And you’re in our territory. You come for us, it’ll be the last thing you do.”

Gregory looked at the others behind me again. His eyes narrowed when his gaze settled on Gavin. I had to stop myself from crossing the wards and tearing out his throat. “It doesn’t have to be this way. You know that, right, Gavin? Your father only wants what belongs to him. You fight it. I get that. I may not know *why*, but I don’t blame you. Finding out about all of this must have been... trying.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tanner said. “Why the hell do they all talk the same?”

“It’s like they practice in the mirror,” Chris said, sounding bored. He puffed out his chest, deepening his voice as he mocked them. “I am death, destroyer of

worlds. Bow before me or we'll spill your blood upon the land." He sighed. "You'd think they'd learn new material. We've heard all this before."

"It makes them feel better," Rico said. "Gotta give them props for that. Kid looks barely old enough to drive. Remember when we were his age? Beer and boobs. That's all it was." He shook his head. "Millennials. Always trying to kill everything."

Mark sighed as if he couldn't believe the pack he stood with. I didn't blame him.

"Gavin," Gregory said again. "You have my word that if you stand down, the bloodshed will be minimal."

Gavin moved until he stood next to me. The back of his hand brushed against mine. They seemed in awe of him. I wondered what Livingstone had told them. I wasn't worried. I knew where his loyalty lay. He was a Bennett in all but name. Livingstone would never have him again.

He said, "Minimal."

Gregory nodded. "Yes. Your father knows how... important these wolves are. Convince them. Show them the error of their ways. You know what he'll do if you don't."

And Gavin said, "No."

Gregory's jaw tightened. "No?"

"No. I belong. Pack. This is my pack. Leave. Do what Carter said. Find ocean. Drown yourselves."

"He won't stop," Gregory said. "You know that. All those innocent people in the town. You're willing to risk them all for these wolves?"

Gavin flashed his eyes, orange and strong. Gregory's expression stuttered as Gavin said, "I'm with them. Now. Forever. Carter is my mate. Pack is my pack. Touch them and I'll eat you. I promise."

The wolves on the other side of the wards began to mutter among themselves. Gregory curled his hands into fists. "Mate," he said incredulously. "You've *mated* with—"

It came then. From everywhere. It rolled over us, the roar of anger from a great and terrible beast. I winced against it as the wolves before us cowered.

I felt the strength of my father. Of my Alphas. Of my pack. Of Gavin. It was bigger than any fear. Bigger than any worry. They, like the others before them, had made a mistake. They'd come here, underestimating what they'd find. Ouroboros, like Gordo had said. A circle. A snake eating itself. They were

already dead; they just didn't know it yet.

Which is why I was surprised when Gregory said, "I see," as the sound of the beast echoed throughout the territory. "If that's how it is, then so be it." He turned around, and for a moment I thought they were going to leave. They couldn't get past the wards. They were in foreign territory. We'd already killed one of their own.

I should have known better.

Gregory stopped.

The wolves before him snapped and snarled.

He said, "Oh, but there *is* one more thing. You see, once, before your pack came to be as you are now, there were others. Wolves. Witches. Thomas. Abel. Richard. And Livingstone. He was the witch of this place, and he never forgot what it was, even when his magic was ripped from him. Even when he came back to himself. Even when he was bitten by an Alpha and died, only to become something more. A little god. And gods always remember." He pulled back the sleeves of his jacket. Tattoos covered his arms. They began to glow brightly. "He gave me these marks himself. Told me one day I would know what they meant. He put everything into them. His history. They were his. And now they're mine."

The wards lit up in front of us as Gregory turned back around.

He raised his hands, fingers twitching.

He said, "Once a witch of Green Creek, always a witch of Green Creek. Even if the vessel has changed."

Jessie was quick. Always. The gun was out again almost faster than I could follow.

She fired.

Her aim was true.

Or at least it *would* have been had the bullet not stopped right in front of Gregory's face, inches from his right eye.

It spun in a lazy circle before it fell to the ground.

"Well, fuck," Jessie said flatly.

There was a sharp *crack* as the wards shuddered.

The ground rolled beneath our feet.

I took a stumbling step back.

A sharp lance of pain ripped through my head. Chris and Rico cried out as

the wards flickered and snapped as if electrified.

Far behind us, in the town through the trees, I heard shouts of warning. They sounded alarmed. Frightened.

Gregory gritted his teeth, flexing his fingers as his tattoos burned brightly. Sweat trickled down his brow as the wolves began to roil around him, snapping their jaws in our direction.

“Oh shit,” I breathed.

And my mother said, “*Run.*”

We did.

As the wards splintered apart behind us, we ran.

We hit the tree line as the first ward broke, shattering like so much glass.

One of their wolves howled.

A song of war.

my mother/soap bubble

By the time we hit the paved road, gunfire was steadily erupting from in town. The wards had broken almost completely, and the wolves would soon be coming.

Chris and Tanner and Rico shifted, their clothes tearing as their paws hit the earth. They stood before me as I pulled little blinking lights from my pocket. I put one light against the inside of one of their ears and a magnet on the other side, holding it in place. I did the same for Dominique before she broke off from the group and headed toward the bunker. She growled over her shoulder at Jessie, and in my head, I heard her song of *safe safe LoveJessieBeautiful stay safe stay* before she was gone through the trees.

Mom turned her face toward the star-filled sky, the sliver of the moon shining down upon her. Her eyes flashed as she dropped to the ground, her shawl fluttering in the wind. When she looked back up, she was the wolf mother, fangs bared. She nosed my hand before growling at Jessie, who affixed the same blinking light in my mother's ear. She did the same for the large brown wolf who stood next to my mother. He licked the back of her hand.

Jessie looked to me. Her eyes were bright in the dark. She had a twisted smile on her face, and I knew she was ready to hunt. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, lips smacking. "We can do this. It's time to end it."

"And we'll be free," I told her.

"Damn right we will."

She followed my mother and uncle into the woods, running full tilt, arms pumping. Chris and Tanner and Rico crossed the road and entered the woods on the other side. The last I saw of them was their tails before they too were gone.

Gavin stood beside me on the empty road.

Behind us, the wolves howled.

In front of us, the people of Green Creek showed why no one fucked with

our town.

Gavin said, "You and me."

I looked at him. "You and me."

His eyes were orange. "Mates."

I kissed him. "Mates," I mumbled against his mouth. He was smiling. I could taste it.

He pulled away, gripping my arms. "Stay by my side."

"Always."

"Don't leave me."

"Never."

And he said, "I love you. I know it's hard. This. Us. Wolf brain and human brain are still together. But I love you. For a long time. Even when I was wolf."

I said, "You fucking asshole. What the hell? Why would you—"

He kissed me again. "Stupid Carter. Questions. Always questions. Just know it. Keep it. It's yours. From me to you."

"Thump, thump, thump."

He grinned at me. It was dazzling.

"I love you too."

He rolled his eyes. "I know. You came for me."

"When this is over, we're going to have a long talk about—"

"Talk, talk, talk," he muttered. "That's all you do."

He lifted his shirt over his head.

The scar between his shoulder and neck was on full display.

I trailed my fingers along it, feeling the bumpy ridge, the mark of my fangs.

He turned his face and kissed the back of my hand. He took a deep breath, and his muscles and bones began to move underneath his skin. It came quicker than it had before, and it was only a moment before a large timber wolf stood before me.

He pressed his snout against my chest, right above my heart. I pressed the blinking light in his ear, snapping it in place with a magnet on the other side. The people of Green Creek would know who we were, even in the face of battle.

He said, *MateLovePack with me you stay with me together we'll be together and nothing will stop us you are mine and i i i am yours.*

"Yes," I told him. "Yes."

He tilted his head back and howled. It was a song of rage and hope, and although he was a feral wolf no longer, his howl was a terrifying thing. I knew his father would hear it, and I hoped it tore at him, knowing all he'd lost.

I followed Gavin.

THE WOLVES AT THE BRIDGE hadn't been the only ones.

There were others. They must have been on the opposite end of Green Creek.

The moment the wards broke completely, they entered the town. And though their numbers were fewer than had been with Gregory, they were closer to the town, and enraged.

And it was their downfall.

As we hit the first buildings in town, I heard the sharp *snap* as one of the wolves hit a thin rope stretched between two trees. I didn't need to see it to know what had happened. An animal screamed in extraordinary pain as the rope broke, the rigging that had been wrapped around the tree snapping, a pallet with large silver railroad spikes embedded through it swinging around the tree and into flesh.

Behind us, other wolves fell into similar traps, boards breaking, bodies pierced by spikes of wood and silver. If it didn't kill them, it would at least injure them enough to take some of the fight out of them. Will had been rightly proud. "Saw it in a movie once," he'd said. "Figured it'd work here too."

It did, at least in part.

It wouldn't stop all of them. They'd be more careful as the wolves around them fell prey to what Will had done.

The people on top of the buildings were firing under Will's orders. On the other side of Green Creek, I could see a couple of wolves running toward us. Hillary, the woman standing on a roof next to Will, took aim through the scope on her rifle. I watched as she breathed in and then out slowly. She fired, knocking one of the wolves off its feet, blood arcing as it hit the ground roughly and skidded off the side of the road. It didn't rise.

"Got 'im!" Grant cried from atop the roof of Gordo's. He lowered his binoculars and grinned across the street. "Motherfucker went down *hard*."

Gavin growled, pacing in front of me.

Will looked down at me. "Got through, did they?"

I nodded. "Just like we thought they would. They're coming behind us too."

All of us are lit up. Make sure you don't hit the wrong wolves."

The people on the buildings closest to us immediately turned around, facing the way we'd come from. The wolves that hadn't fallen to Will's traps hurtled toward us through the trees. They hadn't hit the road yet. If they were smart, they'd circle around through the back. Jessie and Mom would be waiting for them to the north, Chris and Tanner and Rico to the south. I looked to the alleys on either side of the building. Men and women stood just out of sight, all of them armed.

Gavin yelped as he got too close to the sidewalk, the silver powder burning his front paws. He jumped back, shaking his head.

"Idiot," I muttered. Then, "Any sign of Livingstone?"

"Big wolf, right?"

"Right. You'll know when you see him."

"Not yet. Hillary, on your left." It was said almost conversationally. Hillary raised her rifle again and fired. I looked back in time to see a wolf fall in the road and skid to a stop, eyes wide and unseeing as it bled out onto the pavement.

"That's three," she said savagely. "Think I can get ten?"

Will said, "I bet you—*look out!*"

I whirled around, crouching low. A wolf leapt from between the buildings. It sailed over me, jaws snapping inches from the top of my head. It landed on its side but was already up and moving even before it came to a stop. I half-shifted, my vision filtering with sharp clarity. I roared at the wolf as it stalked toward me, head held low to the ground. It coiled its muscles, preparing to jump again. Before it could, Gavin crashed into it, fangs embedded in the back of its neck. He jerked his head viciously from side to side, and I heard the sharp crack of bone as its neck broke. Its legs skittered along the ground as the orange light faded in its eyes.

Gavin rose above it, blood dripping from his fangs.

Jessie shouted in warning from behind the buildings to my left. My mother snarled in anger, and another wolf whined before its voice cut off. I felt her fury, her savageness toward these wolves who would dare to come here.

I grimaced at another flash in my head. It was painful, coming from Chris. Something had hurt him, but Rico and Tanner were there, and whatever had harmed him would never do it again.

"There!" Will shouted. "Coming up from the rear!"

I turned again and saw Gregory standing in the middle of the road into town.

Wolves gathered around him. He had blood on his face, but it didn't look like it was his. He raised his hands, his tattoos bright in the dark.

The road in front of him split, the rumble heavy and loud. The windows on either side of us blew out, glass raining down onto the road. The metal grates shook but held. I covered my face as I lowered my head, the glass cutting into my arms. A piece nicked my ear, the skin immediately going numb. Gunfire exploded around us even as the buildings shook. Grant was knocked off his feet, almost falling off the side of the garage. He pulled himself back up and raised his gun again.

I looked back at Gregory and the wolves. The bullets that should have killed them fell uselessly to the ground in front of him.

"Carter," Will called. I looked up, and he tossed a small bag down at me. I caught it and, without stopping, spun around, the palm of my hand burning as I hurled the bag toward the wolves.

It exploded upon impact. The contents rained down upon them.

At first nothing happened.

Gregory said, "Is that all you've—"

The wolves began to scream. He was startled as he took a step back. The wolves pawed furiously at their faces, drawing blood in their effort to rid themselves of the silver powder. It didn't hit all of them, but the ones it *did* hit were blinded, snapping at nothing as their mouths started to froth bloody foam. The ones that had gotten the biggest dose fell to the ground, convulsing. One vomited a black mess, its eyes rolling back in its head.

Hillary raised her gun, pointing it directly at Gregory, who was distracted by the wolves dying around him. "Shouldn't have come here," she muttered.

Her finger tightened around the trigger.

She never got the shot.

"Get *down!*" Will screamed at her. He reached up, grabbed the front of her coat, and pulled her flat, the rifle falling from her hands.

The air shifted.

A terrible tremble rolled through my body.

The stars and crescent moon above were blotted out as if a great darkness had descended.

The ground shook beneath my feet as a beast landed on the street with a furious crash. He hit the sidewalk, and the silver powder began to burn his paws, thin tendrils of smoke rising up around them.

He paid it no attention.

His one red eye stared balefully at me as he rose to his back legs, the hair covering him swaying in the cold wind. He was almost as tall as the building behind him, and Grant raised his gun, aiming for Livingston's head. He fired. I heard the bullet hit.

Livingstone grunted, turning his head toward Grant.

"Oh shit," Grant breathed.

Livingstone roared at him. Grant took a stumbling step back toward the other side of the roof.

"Here!" I shouted. "We're right here!"

Livingstone ignored me. He lunged toward the garage, smashing into the dark sign above it. The metal shrieked as the pole snapped, falling down toward the roof. Grant turned and ran toward the other side, jumping off the edge of the roof just as Livingstone hit the building, the brickwork cracking. Livingstone crawled up the side of the garage, claws punching through stone. The skylights on the roof shattered as he reached the top, glass raining down inside.

Livingstone pulled himself to his full height. He tilted his head back and howled.

It echoed throughout Green Creek. I covered my ears as Gavin whined next to me, curling himself around me, his head against my chest, tail wrapped around my legs.

By the time the howl faded away, Livingstone was looking down at the two of us.

"*You*," he growled, his one eye flashing red, and even *I* felt it, the pull of the Alpha. It was as if claws were raking against my head and chest, the bonds of my pack writhing.

Gavin pulled away, moving until he stood in front of me. He crowded against me, pushing me away from his father. He was growling lowly, and I felt his anger, his fear. But he wasn't scared of his father. He wasn't scared for himself.

He was *terrified* for me.

I put my hand against his back, digging my fingers in, his hair fluttering against my skin.

"*Take*," Livingstone snarled. "*You take. From me. No more.*"

I looked to my right.

Gregory had recovered. The wolves that hadn't been hit by the silver

gathered around him.

I looked left.

Wolves walked slowly down the street, eyes orange and trained on us.

And Livingstone said, "*Kill them. Kill them all.*"

Gregory ran toward us, surrounded by wolves.

The wolves at the other end of the street hurtled forward.

Livingstone raised his claws high above his head, his misshapen hands curling into fists. He brought them down onto the roof. The building shook, mortar raining down. He did it again and again, and the moment before the garage roof gave way, he jumped. He landed on the street as Gordo's collapsed behind him with a crash, smoke and dust billowing up toward the stars.

Gavin jerked his head side to side.

There was nowhere to run.

Livingstone took a step toward us.

He stopped when a wolf jumped onto his back, claws and fangs tearing over and over.

He roared in anger, reaching behind him, wrapping his claws around Rico's back. Rico yelped before Livingstone threw him across the street. Rico disappeared into the diner, the windows shattering, the silver grates breaking as he landed inside.

Chris and Tanner shot through the alley, moving swiftly around Livingstone. He reached for them, but they darted out of the way, striking quickly, like a snake. They bit his ankles, the backs of his legs, drawing blood as they moved in tandem. Livingstone managed to clip Tanner's hindquarters, knocking him to the ground.

The people on the roofs rose and began firing at him and the wolves running toward us.

I turned and saw Mom and Jessie burst out onto the street. They turned toward Gregory and his wolves. Jessie fired four shots in quick succession, each shot hitting a wolf and killing them instantly. Gregory zigzagged, tattoos glowing fiercely. His magic was building, eyes wide and wet. He raised a hand, fingers flexing.

"*Mom!*" I screamed.

But she didn't stop. She ran toward him, and as a burst of light grew around Gregory's hand, she crouched low, preparing to jump.

I was too late.

My mother jumped.

And stopped almost immediately, hung suspended in the air.

She made a terrible sound, a low whine that she never should've been capable of making. Her body jerked in the air as Gregory closed his fist, her paws kicking out into nothing.

I ran toward them, ignoring the glassy voice in my head saying, *carter no please carter no no NO NONONO*—

A white wolf ran next to me.

It had black on its chest and back.

Its eyes were red.

It said, *SonLovePack believe in me for i i i believe in you.*

I reached over and pressed my hand against its back even as we ran toward my mother.

A powerful surge burst up my arm, rolling through my body.

The wind whistled around me.

I lowered my shoulder, crashing into the wolves that had moved in front of Gregory. The impact caused my fangs to rattle but I barely felt it. I reached out for Gregory, digging my claws into his chest, raking up his shoulder to his neck as I used him to stop my momentum. My arm jerked as I latched on, blood spilling over my hand as I spun around to his back. He barely had time to turn his head when I growled, "You shouldn't have touched my mother."

I drew my claws across his throat.

Blood sprayed out onto my mother's stomach.

Gregory made a gurgling noise, dropping my mother to the ground. She landed on her feet, shaking her head before she darted in, fangs flashing in the starlight. Gregory's ribs crunched as she bit down.

Gregory said, "Oh."

He collapsed to the ground.

He took one breath. And then another.

And then he stopped moving.

I pulled my hand back. It was coated with blood. Gavin moved, snarling furiously, tearing into everything that dared come at me. The wolves whined and yelped as his jaws snapped closed around them, flesh tearing, matted hair falling to the ground.

My mother pressed her snout against my chest.

I said, "I know, I know, I—"

A large hand covered my face. I kicked as I was lifted off the ground, claws prickling the back of my head. I reached up and grabbed the thick forearm. Hot, rank breath blew over my body as Livingstone brought me close to his face. His one red eye flashed brightly. "*Carter,*" he growled.

Below us, Gavin shifted back to human, surrounded by the bodies of dead wolves. My mother was at his side. He shouted, "Put him down!"

Livingstone jerked his head toward his son. "*Betrayed. You betrayed me. Like all the others.*"

"I'm not yours," Gavin snarled at him. "I never was. I am *pack*. I am *mate*. I am *Bennett*."

The grip around my head tightened. I could hear the quiet whisper of my skull groaning under the pressure.

"*You take from me,*" Livingstone rumbled. "*I will take everything from you.*"

The pressure increased. I felt like I was floating away even as my eyes bulged from their sockets. The skin on the back of my head split and blood poured down my back.

And then it all faded away as another voice rang out.

It growled, "Let him go."

And I knew it.

I knew it very well.

The bonds that stretched between us all vibrated.

The hand around my head opened.

I fell to the ground, legs buckling underneath me.

Gavin knelt next to me, saying, "Carter, Carter, look at me, *look at me.*"

My mother stood above me, her legs on either side of me as she growled at Livingstone.

But he paid us no mind.

His attention was elsewhere.

I turned my head.

There, standing on the road above the bodies of dead wolves, was Oxnard Matheson.

He dropped the wolf he'd been holding by the throat. It landed on the ground

and did not rise.

Ox, eyes red and violet, took a step toward Livingstone.

Three wolves appeared at his side.

Kelly.

Joe.

Robbie.

Behind them stood more wolves, all their ears blinking with lights. Dozens of them. They gathered behind Ox, hackles raised.

Caswell.

Joe's pack.

They'd come.

Livingstone roared at them. I grimaced as Gavin bent over me, covering my ears.

Ox cocked his head.

He said, "You were never going to win."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jessie pulling Rico out of the remains of the diner. Chris and Tanner moved quickly, joining them, helping Rico toward our Alphas. Rico was limping but otherwise appeared whole. Without looking away from Livingstone, Ox put his hand on Rico's head, running a finger down his snout between his eyes.

And through us all, his voice was thunderous.

He said, *be ready PackLoveBrothersSisters be ready to move move move the house we need to get to the house.*

"End," Livingstone said, his voice deep and harsh. "*You will end.*"

"Come, then," Ox said.

Livingstone leapt toward him.

And crashed into a barrier of wild magic.

Gordo Livingstone stepped from the shadows of an alley, eyes narrowed, tattoos alight and vibrant. Aileen and Patrice were with him, their hands raised. Mark stood next to Gordo, his tail curling around Gordo's waist, eyes orange as he growled at Livingstone.

The beast crashed back to the ground. He rose just as quick. He bashed against the barrier again and again, the bones in his face breaking and reforming, breaking and reforming. Gavin pulled me away from Livingstone, his hands under my arms and gripping my biceps. My mother backed away from

Livingstone slowly.

While keeping his hand pointed toward his father, Gordo lowered his other arm toward Mark, the stump preternaturally white. Mark bit down, spilling blood. Gordo grunted as Mark let go. He flung his stump toward Livingstone, blood spraying out onto the barrier, which crackled as it lit up.

But it wasn't enough.

I could see the moment they realized.

Aileen paled.

Patrice's eyes widened.

Gordo said, "Oh god no."

Livingstone broke through the barrier, the magic breaking apart with an electrical snap. He took a step forward, the pavement cracking beneath his feet.

"Hey!" Will shouted.

Livingstone jerked his head toward the man standing on the roof.

Will had a knife in his hand. He wielded it deftly, flipping it until he caught it by the tip of the silver blade. He brought his arm back and hurled it toward Livingstone, the knife flipping end over end.

Livingstone moved, but not quickly enough.

The knife struck Livingstone, sinking to the hilt in his empty eye socket.

The beast roared.

"Fucking shape-shifters," Will said, and he was *smiling*, he was *smiling* like he knew what was coming. I screamed for him as he held his arms away from him like wings. He said, "You don't fuck with our town, you hear me? You don't *fuck with our—*"

Livingstone was on him before we could stop him.

Will didn't scream, didn't even make a sound as Livingstone sank his claws into his chest. There was a horrible sound, wet and thick. Hillary shouted for Will, but it was too late. A bubble of blood burst from Will's mouth. He blinked slowly as the beast pulled his arm back, his claws covered in gore.

Will said, "I mattered. I mattered. I... I...."

He fell to his knees just as Hillary caught him. She was saying his name over and over, but I heard his heart above all the din and noise. It stuttered in his chest.

And then it stopped.

"No!" I shouted, struggling against Gavin, needing to get to my friend,

needing to help him, needing to *save*—

“Stop,” Gavin whispered harshly in my ear. “Stop. It’s too late. We can’t help him. Carter. *Carter.*”

I was angry.

So fucking angry.

I shoved Gavin away.

I rose to my feet.

I was moving even before I thought about it.

I shifted, clothes tearing as I launched myself toward Livingstone.

I

am

death

i am

destroyer

i am

wolf

i am wolf wolf wolf

kill him kill him kill him

fucking bastard

fucking asshole

kill you i will

kill you spill your blood spill it onto the ground

tear off your goddamn head

i am going to tear you

apart

and i bite

bite

bite

and i

Livingstone reached over his shoulder onto his back. He grabbed me and hurled me toward Ox. I crashed into him, my shift breaking as I landed on top of him.

Joe and Kelly were already pulling me up, trying to stop me from going after

Livingstone again. “*Don’t,*” Kelly panted in my ear. “We need to get him out of town. Away from the people. Patrice and Aileen will stay with the wolves here and keep the people safe, but we have to finish this. Do you hear me? We have to *finish this.*”

Ox pushed himself up off the ground, claws dragging against the pavement. His fury rolled through us, a fire that only grew larger. He pulled himself to his full height, and we

We were

We were standing

WE WERE STANDING IN THE CLEARING.

All of us. Our pack.

Ox was before us.

He smiled.

Behind him were doors, so many doors, an *infinite* number of doors. They stretched on as far as I could see. Some were wood. Some were metal. Some were glass. They all shook and shuddered in their frames, the vibrations reverberating through the ground.

Ox said, “My daddy told me I was slow. So slow, in fact, that I was gonna get shit all my life. I believed him. For a long time, his voice was the only voice I heard. Oh, I loved him because he was my father. What else could I have done? He was the only one I had. And when I stood in the kitchen, seeing his suitcase by the door, I was confused.”

Wolves moved around us in the trees, between the doors. They were faint and blurry, but I saw the flash of orange and red and violet in their eyes. One of the wolves howled, and in its song came a voice I hadn’t heard since I was a cub. It said *my sons my grandchildren my loves my pack you are strong you are stronger than you know we are here and we will be with you until the end end end.*

Abel Bennett’s howl echoed throughout the doors and trees.

The other wolves began to sing.

It was a symphony.

Ox said, “We were alone, my mother and me. And I told myself it was enough. I told myself that it was all we needed. She had me. I was going to protect her from the teeth of the world. I thought....” He tilted his head back

toward the sky. The light of the full moon bathed his face. “I thought we didn’t need anyone else. Because having someone meant letting them in. And if we let them in, they could find our secret hearts. They could use it against us. Hurt us. It was easier to be alone than to be hurt again.”

The symphony rose.

Ox said, “But you found me. All of you. You found me and made me realize just how wrong I was. There was this... light. In each of you. It burned so bright, and it was like staring into the sun. There was a tornado of fingers and words and I was cracked open, everything I’d kept hidden away spilling forth. I was helpless against it. I knew, I think. Somewhere deep inside. I knew what you were. You sang to me, and I felt it in my bones. All that I am, all that I’ve become, is because of you. I’ve never forgotten that. What you gave me.” He closed his eyes. “Hope. You gave me hope.”

The wolves in the trees sang louder and louder.

The doors quaked.

Ox opened his eyes. They were red and violet. The bonds thrummed. “This life hasn’t been what I expected. We’ve hurt. We’ve bled. We’ve lost those we loved. But through it all, we’ve been together, even when we thought ourselves alone. I am so lucky to be your Alpha.”

“Ox,” Joe said, voice cracking. “What is this? What are you—”

He said, “I love you. Joe, I have never loved anyone as much as I love you.”

“No,” Gordo muttered. “Ox, no, stop, you can’t do this, you can’t—”

He said, “Are you my father? Are you my brother? Both, I think. Do you remember the wrapping paper? Little snowmen. And it was so precious to me, the shirt. It had my name on it. And I never felt more awake than I did then. I dreamed and sometimes got lost when I did. But with you, I was awake.”

Bright lights flashed, blinding me. I was Carter, but then I was Ox, I was Ox, and I was seeing what he saw, what he saw in all of us.

I was watching my mother paint, and she was muttering to herself about today, today, today as she splashed color against the canvas, a bit of green on the tip of her nose.

I was walking with my father through the trees, and I was in *awe* of him.

I was with Gordo behind the garage and smoking a cigarette. It burned my lungs, and he shook his head.

I was with Mark, asking if we could be friends, and he smiled his secret smile.

I was with Kelly, telling him that we would do all we could to find Robbie, I promise you, I promise you we'll find him.

I was with Joe, and he smiled, and *oh*, how my heart felt like it would burst from my chest.

I was with Robbie, and he didn't know who I was, but part of him burned and burned and burned because he wanted to, he wanted it so badly.

I was with Tanner and Chris and Rico, and they were jumping on me, patting my back, talking about mystical moon magic, saying we knew you had it in you, we *knew*.

I was with Jessie, and she laid her head on my shoulder, my nose in her hair.

I was with Dominique, and she was scared, oh she was scared, but I took her face in my hands, my eyes red and violet, and she *trembled*.

I was with Bambi, and she was pale and tired, dark circles under her eyes, but she was holding a child in her arms, and I kissed his forehead, telling her that he would be loved beyond all else.

I was with a timber wolf, and he snapped and snarled but stopped when I flicked his ear.

Me, me, I was with *me*, how he saw me, how he *loved* me, how strong he thought I was, how foolish I could be sometimes, but it didn't matter to him. He trusted me, he called me his brother, he called me his *friend*, he said Carter, Carter, they'll need you, more than you know.

And here, at the end, I was with her.

We were standing in front of the sink, dishes piled high. She laughed and popped a soap bubble in my ear. I (Ox) said, "Mom, I've done my best. I've done all I can."

And she said, "I know. I know you have. Just a little more to go. Just a little more and I promise you that you will know peace. I'm so proud of you. There is no one such as you in all the world, and Ox, Ox, Ox, remember? What do you call a lost wolf?" She laughed. "A *where*-wolf. Oh, that makes me laugh. Oh, that makes me smile." I took her by the hand and spun her in a circle as the music soared. Her eyes were bright, and she said, "You're going to make someone very happy someday. And I can't wait to see it happen."

"I did," I told her. "I think I did."

"Did you? How lovely. How wonderful."

"You fought. Even at the end."

"I did. Because I would have done anything for you."

And there was more, so much more, the images moving quicker and quicker. We were together on Sunday because it was tradition. We were fighting for our lives. We were howling under the full moon. We grieved over those we lost. A pyre burned in the night. A baby was born. Joe and Ox. Gordo and Mark. Robbie and Kelly, and me and Gavin, Dominique and Jessie, Chris and Tanner, Rico and Bambi and Joshua. My mother and my father standing on the porch, watching the tornado spin out on the back of a large, quiet boy.

He said, “A gift. Each of you is a gift. This is what you’ve given me. And I will never forget it.”

The wolves stopped howling.

The doors stopped vibrating.

Silence fell across the clearing.

Oxnard Matheson said, “Just a little farther. Just a little longer. Hold on to me. Hold on to each other. I will see us home.”

We tilted our heads back as one toward the star-struck sky, and the moon pulsed, and I felt it calling to me, singing my name and I—

wolfsong/ravensong/ heartsong/brothersong

I whispered, "Sacrifice."

I opened my eyes.

We stood near the house. In front of us, the blue house was dark and quiet.

My pack surrounded me.

We were together.

The forest was silent.

Ox said, "It's almost time."

Joe blinked slowly, as if waking from a dream. "Was that—"

Ox kissed him fiercely. My brother gripped his arms.

Gordo said, "No. You can't—Ox. I don't know what the fuck you're thinking of doing, but you better get that shit out of your head right now."

Ox pulled away from Joe. "We all have a part to play. I've known that for a long time. I'm ready."

Gordo's eyes were wet. "What the hell are you—"

A roar filled the forest.

Ox stepped away from Joe.

We parted as he walked in front of us.

The dark cancer was spreading toward us as a beast moved down the dirt road toward the house at the end of the lane.

Ox took a deep breath and let it out slow. "We—"

Two figures emerged from behind the house.

Dominique and Bambi.

Rico rushed toward them. "Joshua?" he demanded.

“Safe,” she said. “In the bunker. And we’re here, where we’re supposed to be.”

Rico shook his head furiously. “Please. Please don’t do this. Leave. Go back. Run while you still can.”

Bambi said, “And leave you to get your ass kicked? Never in your life. We’re going to finish this, and then we’re going back to our son. Together.” She pulled Rico’s old guns from the holsters at her sides before glancing at Ox. “Thanks for the trippy mind fuck. But if that was your sorry attempt at saying goodbye, then you can go fuck yourself, Oxnard.”

“I love you so goddamn much,” Rico breathed.

Ox opened his mouth but then closed it before shaking his head. “You don’t —”

Gavin said, “He’s here.”

We turned.

Robert Livingstone stood on the road.

He’d removed the knife from his empty socket, though the wound still bled.

He was human, his bare skin pale. His face was twisted, his mouth turning down. He looked older, far older than he had when I’d seen him last, surrounded by witches. His skin sagged, and his remaining eye was sunken and burning. He had a tremor in his hands. His pack had been torn from him, and if they weren’t all dead yet, they soon would be. I hoped it felt like a thousand knives in his heart.

He said, “I lived here once. With the wolves.” He glanced at the blue house, shaking his head slowly. “I like to think I was happy, though that feels like a lie.” He frowned. “It’s strange, really. How easy it is to deceive oneself. I had power. I had control. I thought it was enough. I was wrong.”

“You killed my mother,” Gavin growled.

Livingstone nodded slowly. “I suppose I did, in the end. I took more than I gave, and... I can see that now. It may not have been by my hand, but it was because of my actions. But I did not act alone. The wolves. It always comes back to the wolves. The Bennetts.” His eye filled with red. “You made me this way. You took from me. My wife. My tether. My magic. My *sons*. All that I am is because of *you*. I never wanted it to come to this. All I wanted was what was mine to begin with. And you just couldn’t leave *well enough alone*.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bambi muttered. “Less talking, more killing.” She raised one of the guns and fired.

Livingstone jerked his head to the side. The bullet embedded itself into a tree behind him.

“You missed,” he said, and it sounded as if his heart was breaking. A tear trickled down his cheek.

And then he moved.

The façade of an old man melted away, skin tearing as the beast burst forward, fangs glistening, claws outstretched as black hair sprouted along his arms and legs.

Ox was quicker than the rest of us. He met Livingstone head-on, a black wolf colliding with a black beast. Joe screamed for Ox, and then chaos descended.

We fought.

Bambi stayed by Rico’s side, pulling the trigger again and again. There were moments when she was *behind* Livingstone, pressing the barrel of the gun into the base of his spine and firing over and over. Anytime Livingstone started to whirl on her, Rico was there, snapping his fangs.

Kelly and Robbie moved in tandem, bodies pressed together before parting as Livingstone slammed a fist into the earth where they’d been standing.

Mark and Mom ran *between* his legs, sinking their fangs into his heels, tearing at his tendons, snapping them wetly.

Chris and Tanner clawed their way up his back. As they bit down hard, he roared in anger, reaching back for them, but Gordo was there, mouth bloodied from where he’d bitten down into the scar tissue that had once been a raven. He spat the blood into his hand as the marks his father had carved into his skin glowed furiously. The roses bloomed upward, thick vines bursting from the ground, wrapping themselves around Livingstone’s legs, huge thorns piercing his flesh.

Jessie ran up behind Dominique, who was crouched low. She stepped onto Dominique’s back, and when Jessie reached her shoulders, she pushed herself up from the ground, launching Jessie into the air. Jessie raised the crowbar over her head. She’d laughed once, long ago, about how the original crowbar had broken in Caswell, though we had seen it in her eyes how much the loss of such a simple thing had affected her. Gordo had made her another at Ox’s request, and the look on her face when he’d given it to her had pulled at my heart, even though I was still reeling from the loss of Gavin. And it was this crowbar, now, that she thrust down with all her might.

Livingstone was distracted. He didn’t see her flying above him until it was

too late. The end of the crowbar pierced the tough skin between his neck and shoulder. She kicked off his shoulder as he roared. She landed roughly on the ground behind him, rolling and up on her feet even as Livingstone tried to reach for the metal sticking out of him.

But Ox and Joe wouldn't let him, biting into his arms, keeping him from pulling it out. They were in a drag-out fight, forgoing speed for brutal attacks, blood dripping from their mouths, coating their fur.

Gavin stayed by my side, both of us running on four legs. Livingstone went for his son, and I closed my jaws around one of his misshapen fingers. I jerked my head as hard as I could, and the beast screamed when the digit was torn loose. I spat it onto the ground, the taste of his blood heavy on my tongue.

And then things turned for the worse.

Livingstone grabbed hold of Rico and squeezed him tightly. Rico yelped as his ribs splintered. Chris and Tanner didn't have time to move when the beast hurled Rico at them, knocking them all off their feet.

Jessie shouted for her brother, and Livingstone turned toward her, the vines around his legs tearing apart. He swatted at her, black claws like hooks. Dominique jumped between them, and the claws raked down her side. Jessie fell over Dominique, covering the wolf's body with her own. Livingstone tore into her back. Jessie cried out, holding on to Dominique as hard as she could.

My mother landed on his back, trying to pull him away. She bit again and again, and as she neared the crowbar jutting out of him, she managed to get one more hit in before he reached back, grabbed her by the neck, and threw her over his shoulder. She flew toward the house and crashed into the porch, the frame shuddering as she slammed into it.

Gordo grunted as the air filled with the sharp sting of magic. His arms shook, and the tattoos were almost too bright to look at. Columns of rock burst from the earth, rising up beneath Livingstone, causing him to stumble forward, head lowering toward the ground. Mark was waiting for him, and he closed his jaws around Livingstone's snout. There was an audible *crunch*. Livingstone jerked his head back, bringing Mark up with him. Livingstone raised his claws on either side of Mark. He let go at the last second, dropping down onto the ground.

Kelly snarled in fury and went for Livingstone. He wasn't fast enough. The beast reared back, lashing out and kicking Kelly. I heard the sounds of my brother's bones as they broke. He landed near Bambi. She stood over him, gun raised as he tried to get to his feet. He collapsed again, whining lowly in his throat.

Livingstone turned toward them, taking a heavy step that caused the ground to shake. Robbie growled, and before he could launch himself at Livingstone, Gavin appeared at his side, tail twitching, eyes orange, fangs bared.

Livingstone faltered. “*Whyyy? Why do you do thissss?*” He was bleeding heavily, but the wounds were closing, though it was taking longer than it had before.

“Because fuck you, that’s why,” Bambi snapped as Kelly rose to his feet, as my mother crawled from the ruins of the porch. Bambi pulled the trigger again, but the gun was empty. The dry click was as loud as anything else.

Livingstone took another step toward them.

Dominique pulled herself up. Jessie grimaced as she used Dominique’s back to help her stand.

Joe and Ox circled around Livingstone, standing in front of Rico and Chris and Tanner.

Gordo and Mark stood behind him. Gordo was panting, his face slick with blood and sweat. He put his hand on Mark’s back, fingers curling into the brown fur.

Jessie spat out a wad of blood. Her face was puffy, her skin bruised. She said, “It’s always the same. This circle. Just like all the others. You think yourself different. You think yourself more. But hear me, motherfucker. Hear me very well. You are *nothing*.” And remarkably, she laughed.

Livingstone roared again.

And then Ox was there, in our heads, and he said *now now now finish this it’s time to finish this this is how it ends for him here now fight fight with all you can fight for family for brothers and sisters for our mothers and fathers and for packpackpack*.

We attacked him from all sides, all at once.

He was fast.

But we were faster.

Vines rose from the ground again, wrapping around Livingstone’s legs and arms, pulling him down. As soon as he was on all fours, the vines tightened as black stone rose from the ground, covering them and holding him in place.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw beams of light moving swiftly. I swore other wolves stood with us, a brown wolf with a white star on his chest, and my mother gasped in my head as she whispered *abel abel abel*, and there was *another* wolf, white with black on his back and chest, and I heard him, I *heard*

him as he said *my sons my loves my pack*. He was there and then gone, there and then gone, each time he reappeared, more blood spilled.

I jumped onto the beast's back. He tried to shake me off, but I dug my claws in, burying my fangs into his skin.

He slumped closer to the ground, the rock and vines rising higher up his arms and legs. He tried to pull himself free. The rock cracked.

Chris and Tanner landed on either side of me. They pressed against me and lowered their heads, tearing into his back.

The sound Livingstone made then was one I would remember forever. It was rage and loss, betrayal and *fear*, fear so strong I could taste it.

He was afraid.

I bit down harder.

All of us were on him.

All of us except for one.

He shifted in front of Livingstone. He stood tall. His chest heaved. His eyes filled with red and violet.

And Oxnard Matheson said, "I'm sorry. For all that you've become."

"*This isn't over*," Livingstone hissed at him.

"It is," Ox said. "At last. At long last. Father, I remember what you said. Help me. Please help me."

Ox ran toward the beast.

At his side, the glowing white wolf ran with him. Right before Ox jumped, they *merged*, the white wolf bursting into shards of light like glass, embedding themselves into Ox's skin.

And through the bonds, Joe howled *no no no NONONO OX OX OX*—

Livingstone pulled his right arm free. The stone shattered. The vines broke.

His arm shot out, claws extended.

They punched into Ox's stomach.

Through Ox's stomach.

Out his back.

Time slowed around us as the bonds burned in blue fire.

We all held on as our Alpha said, "Oh. Oh. Oh."

Gordo screamed for all of us. "Ox, *no!*"

But Ox didn't stop. Even mortally wounded, even with a hand through him,

the claws on the other side dripping with his life blood, he sank his own claws into Livingstone's arm and *pulled* himself closer. His eyes fluttered closed as he grunted. The white light along his skin flickered.

And went out.

Ox opened his eyes.

He said, "Your song. I hear your song. Of wolves. Of ravens. Of hearts. Of brothers. I hear them all."

The white lights returned in full force, burning brightly.

Ox pulled himself closer and closer.

Livingstone raised his arm, jaws open wide.

He bit down.

Or at least he tried.

Ox caught the upper jaw with his right hand and the lower jaw with his left. The fangs pierced his palms, and the flare of pain through the bonds was almost too much to take. We were all Ox, and we all felt the ravaging his body had taken, the stutter of his heart.

But through it all, we heard him.

He said, *this life this life it's not one i expected*

it's not one i imagined

worth it

can't you see

all of this was worth it

because of you

all of you

We were there, we were there, we were *with* him as he showed us what he meant. They were quick, these thoughts, but filled with so much life it was a wonder all of this could come from just one person.

Here was Ox, a large and quiet boy, staring in wonder at the family before him, a tornado on his back.

Here was Ox, sitting behind the garage, surrounded by Rico and Tanner and Chris and Gordo, snowman wrapping paper in his lap holding a shirt with his name on it.

Here was Ox, running with me and Kelly under the light of the full moon, and he was laughing, laughing, laughing.

Here was Ox, heart tripping at the sight of a girl named Jessie, dropping tools and walking into a wall.

Here was Ox, and he was watching our mother sing an old Dinah Shore song, that she didn't mind being lonely when her heart knew he was lonely too.

Here was Ox, asking a man with a secret smile if they could be friends.

Here was Ox, pressing his palm against Bambi's sweaty forehead, a newborn Joshua wailing in her arms.

Here was Ox, his forehead against Dominique's, telling her that she had a place with us, that she could stay as long as she wanted to.

Here was Ox and me, sitting in a car, and he was saying he's never kissed a guy, and then I kissed him, and *oh*.

Here was Ox, taking Gavin in his arms and saying that this was the place he belonged.

And here, here, *here* was Ox, and his heart was full. Joe was smiling at him. It was such a tiny thing, but it meant more to Ox than almost anything else in the world. Joe was smiling, and Ox loved him fiercely.

this, Ox whispered, *this is what you have made me into this this this is what i have become because of you thank you thank you for loving me for holding me for making me whole.*

Everything.

We gave him everything we could with the last of our strength.

His eyes were blazing.

Livingstone snarled.

And then Ox pushed *up*, and Ox pushed *down*, and Livingstone tried to pull away, tried to stop him, but his fangs were caught in Ox's hands, and his jaws creaked and groaned as his mouth opened wider and wider, tongue snaking out.

Ox said, "Go to hell."

He pulled the jaws apart as wide as they would go, and then widened them *further* until they *snapped*, bones breaking. While the beast's lower jaw hung uselessly, Ox pulled his bloody hands from the fangs and grabbed him by the snout.

He twisted Livingstone's head as hard as he could.

The beast's neck broke.

His one remaining eye dimmed.

He collapsed to the ground, his shift melting away.

His arm slid from Ox with a wet squelch.

We all hit the ground.

Ox stood before us, skin pale as he swayed.

I could see through the massive hole in his stomach to the trees behind him.

He said, "Mom?"

And then he too fell.

Joe broke his shift, screaming Ox's name. He ran to him, pulled his head into his lap. He tilted his head back and howled a song of horror.

I hit the ground on human hands and knees.

"No," Gordo said in a choked voice. "Ox? Ox!"

I turned my head to see Gavin standing above his father.

Livingstone's neck was at an odd angle. His jaw had been broken, and he made a gurgling sound, blood pouring from his mouth. His arm twitched as if he were trying to reach for his son.

His heart stuttered.

And then it stopped.

Gavin turned away.

Joe was screaming Ox's name over and over, and Gordo knelt beside them, muttering under his breath, holding his hand out over Ox's stomach. His fingers shook as his tattoos glowed, but the hole in Ox's stomach wasn't healing. It was too great.

"Help him," Joe sobbed, looking up at all of us. Tears streaked down his cheeks. "You have to help him. You have to fix him. You have to make him better, please, oh please don't leave me, Ox. You can't. You *can't*."

Our mother settled behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She leaned her forehead against the back of his neck. She was crying.

Gordo gasped and pulled his hand back, his tattoos going dark. "No," he muttered, shaking his head. "No. This isn't how it's supposed to be." He leaned over Ox's face. Ox's eyes were open. He tried to smile, but it twisted into a grimace. "We're going to fix you," Gordo promised him. "I can do this. I can do this. Ox, you have to hold on, you hear me? You have to hold on."

Ox reached up and touched his face, mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

Gordo's whole body shook. He turned his face in Ox's hand, kissing his palm.

We all gathered around him. Rico and Tanner and Chris looked shell-

shocked. Jessie was crying, Dominique's arms wrapped around her shoulders. Mark put his hand in Gordo's hair. Kelly and Robbie knelt beside Ox, their hands clasped between them, tears falling from their eyes. Bambi sat at Ox's feet, her head pressed against her knees as she rocked back and forth.

I laid my hands on Ox's legs, trying to hold on to the bond that stretched between us. It was fraying, the threads snapping. No matter what I did, I couldn't stop it. Gavin put his hand on my shoulder, squeezing tightly.

Joe curled over Ox's head.

Ox's chest heaved. He said, "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Please," Joe begged. "Please don't leave me."

Ox said, "Never. I'll always...." Then, "Hello. I see you. I lost you, but now I found you again. Mom, I did it. I was brave. I was—" His face twisted as his body seized. He screamed as we struggled to hold down his arms and legs. The cords in his neck stood out, his eyes red and violet.

And then, in the distance, came the thunderous howl of a wolf.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

Kelly whispered, "That... that sounded like—"

"It was," another voice said.

We looked up.

There, standing on the dirt road, were the people of Green Creek, Aileen and Patrice at the front. We hadn't even heard them approach. The wolves of Caswell were mixed in with the crowd, and their eyes were glowing.

But it was all the others that I looked to. The people of this town. *Our* people. They held each other up, some more injured than others. Their eyes were wide. Some of them were crying. But they stood true, even if their numbers had dwindled. Will should have been there, at the forefront.

Aileen said, "We must get to the clearing. Quickly now."

"Why?" Joe asked in a broken voice, Ox muttering deliriously in his lap.

"Because of all dat you've done," Patrice said quietly. "You've given everything. It's time for your territory to give you something in return."

We were weak. We were battered and bruised and broken. Rico could barely stand on his own. Chris and Tanner propped him up. Jessie's back was shredded, but Dominique was there to hold her close. Mark pulled Gordo to his feet, his knees buckling. Joe tried to lift Ox on his own, but Ox screamed in pain. "I know," Joe whispered. "I know. I'm trying. I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you."

He looked to me. "I can't do this. I can't do this on my own."

I didn't know how we were going to carry Ox. I was having a hard enough time just standing up. I gathered the last of my strength because Ox needed us. He needed all of us. We'd make it work.

I couldn't speak when the people of Green Creek gently pushed us aside. They came forward, men and women surrounding Ox. They crouched next to him as Mom pulled Joe away.

One of the men said, "Keep him as even as you can. On three. One. Two. Three."

They lifted him onto their shoulders.

Ox cried out for his mother, for his father.

His arms hung, spread wide from his body.

Blood dripped onto their arms. Their necks. Their faces.

They didn't let him go.

The others took each of us by the hand, tugging us after our fallen Alpha. I looked over when someone took mine. Hillary. The woman who'd been standing with Will before he died. I asked, "Why are you doing this?"

And she said, "Because you're our wolves."

THEY LED US TOWARD THE CLEARING. Ox kept speaking, talking to ghosts that only he could see. Once, he laughed, a quiet chuckle that caused my eyes to burn.

He said, "Daddy, where are you going?"

He said, "There's new people next door. A family."

He said, "This is a dream. Ah god. This is a dream."

He said, "You're wearing a bow tie."

He said, "You can't have them. They're mine."

And on and on it went.

We reached the clearing. The stars were infinite. And though the moon was but a sliver, I felt it pulling at me.

They laid him down in the center of the clearing. He barely reacted, too caught up in the conversation he was having with those we couldn't see. He was telling his mother that he missed her, that it was so nice to see her again, and wouldn't she please say his name.

Gordo's face hardened as he knelt next to Ox. Joe did the same on the other side. They both looked to Aileen and Patrice. "Can you help him?" Gordo asked hoarsely.

Aileen hesitated before shaking her head. "It's not something we can do. Or rather, not *just* us. It will take all of you. But a price must be paid."

Mom was staring at her. "Will it work?"

Patrice said, "You know da stories."

"What are you talking about?" Kelly demanded, Robbie barely able to hold him back. "We don't have time for this bullshit. He's dying *now*. We can't just —"

Mom touched his arm. "Do you remember what I told you? When Alpha Shannon Wells passed? What happens to the power of the Alpha when there's no one else to take their place?"

"It returns to the moon," Joe whispered.

She nodded. "And there was more. The sacrifice was never about Ox. It was about you, Joe."

And I understood. I remembered the words she'd spoken as Alpha Wells burned.

An Alpha, strong of heart and mind, mated to one they love most, can give their power away in order to save a life. To a Beta they return, never again to hold the power of an Alpha. Just a story, of course. Wolves pass along the Alpha power to their successors constantly, though usually not under the threat of death. I've never heard of bringing someone back from the brink in such a way. Regardless, it was too late for her. And stories are just that—stories.

"Do you love him?" Aileen asked gently.

Joe said, "Yes."

"Do you understand what it means?" Patrice asked.

Joe said, "Yes."

Our mother put her hand in his hair. "You would no longer be the Alpha of all."

He wiped his eyes. "I don't care. Someone else can lead. Anyone else." He looked down at Ox, and his chest hitched at the sight of the grass underneath him through the hole in his stomach. "I would give anything."

"And you will," Aileen said. "All of you will, one last time. Bennett pack, gather the strength you have. We'll do what we can, but it'll be up to you and you alone. He needs to hear your song. Howl him home."

“They’re not alone,” a voice said, and I turned my head.

The people of Green Creek had gathered around us, faces solemn but determined. It was Grant who’d spoken, the man who’d narrowly avoided death on the roof of the garage. He stepped forward and spoke again. “We’re here. We may not be wolves, but we fight for this town. And for them.” The people nodded.

Aileen smiled. “Of course they’re not alone. I shouldn’t have said otherwise.”

We sat around Ox. Gavin was on my left, his shoulder pressed against mine. Kelly was on my right, his hand on my knee. His other hand was on Joe. Our mother sat behind him again, laying her head on his back. Bambi, Jessie, and Dominique sat at his feet, their hands on his bare ankles. Rico, Tanner, and Chris were on the other side of him, sitting behind Gordo and Mark, knees pressed against their backs. Gordo hung his head as Mark whispered songs of love and hope in his ear.

And the others.

All the others.

They stood behind us. The ones closest to us put their hands on our necks, our backs. Our shoulders and hair. There were too many of them to get too close, but they held on to each other instead, all of us connected. I felt them. Each of them. Not one person wanted to be elsewhere. They were here because they wanted to be, to see this through to the end.

“Gordo,” Aileen said, “you saw him for who he was before anyone else here. It must begin with you.”

A tremor rolled through him. “I don’t... I don’t know what to do.”

“You know,” she said quietly. “I promise you do. There’s a reason you chose him. Let him hear your song.”

He nodded.

He took a breath.

He held out his stump over the open wound in Ox’s middle. The tattoos burst to life, the roses blooming, the vines crawling along the scar where the raven had once been. Mark’s own raven, the mark on his throat, fluttered its wings.

Ox said, “Light. All I see is light.”

“Look,” Gavin whispered.

The ground underneath Ox was moving. Grass shifted through the ragged wound. The earth split apart, and a shiny black curve appeared through the soil.

It pushed through the dirt.

A beak.

A raven.

It blinked as it pulled itself out of the ground. It shook its head and wings. It eyed each of us, head cocked. And then it lowered its beak back to the earth. It jerked its head back up. A vine with thorns pulled free. The raven let it go, and as we watched, a rose bloomed through Ox's stomach.

The raven croaked as it spread its wings. Then, almost quicker than we could follow, it shot up into the air and hung suspended above us, wings wide, feathers ruffling.

Joe lifted Ox's hand and pressed it against his chest, just above his heart.

He turned his face toward the sky.

And howled.

Each of us joined him in turn, adding our voices to his.

We sang with everything we had.

But it wasn't just the wolves. It was everyone. All the people, witches and wolves and humans alike.

We all sang for him.

The rose opened.

At its center was a light.

And before it exploded, I saw my father standing in the trees.

He was smiling.

Then everything went white.

WE STOOD IN THE CLEARING.

The moon was full.

Doors. So many doors. Doors that went on forever.

But it was different than it'd been before.

Every single door was open.

"What is this?" Joe whispered.

I looked over my shoulder. The people of Green Creek were gone, but in their places were little balls of light. Dozens of them.

Gordo moved first. He walked toward the closest door. It was made of old

wood, symbols carved into the frame. Vines and roses in such detail, they almost seemed real.

On top of this door sat the raven.

It bobbed its head up and down as Gordo approached.

The doorway was black. It looked like empty, vast space.

But as Gordo got closer, the blackness faded.

Voices came from just inside the doorway.

Gordo's chest hitched.

He said, "Is this...."

A woman laughed. A child squealed in joy. And then Robert Livingstone said, "Oh where, oh where can he be? Has anyone seen my son? His hiding place is so good that I'm worried he'll be lost forever!"

He sounded different.

Younger.

Lighter.

Happier.

Gordo's hand shook as he reached toward the door.

Gavin stopped him. One moment he was by my side, and the next he was pulling Gordo away from the door. Gordo struggled, but Gavin was stronger, and he was saying, "No, Gordo, no. It's not real. Don't." He wrapped his arms around Gordo's waist, holding him in place even as Gordo tried to break free. "*It's not real.*"

"I have to see," Gordo snapped. "I have to—"

"*There you are,*" Livingstone said, and the child (Gordo?) burst out laughing. "I thought you were gone forever! I was so worried."

"Never," Gordo said from somewhere inside the door. And in the clearing, still in the grip of his brother, he said, "Never, never, nevermore."

Mark went to them. Gordo stopped trying to pull away, hanging his head. Mark stood in front of him, blocking the doorway.

He said, "I remember this. You were... six? Seven? You would always hide. Your mom knew where you were, but she'd never tell. And he would find you. He would always find you. Memory. It's a memory."

"It's not real," Gavin said. "It's past. It's ghosts. Distraction. Slipping. It's slipping."

I felt cold.

“I want to see her,” Gordo whispered.

“I know you do,” Mark said quietly. “But she’s not here. She’s gone. Gavin’s right. This isn’t real.”

From the doorway, Gordo’s mother said, “What a lovely day. I feel better. My headache is gone. I can think clearly. Isn’t that funny?”

“I’m glad,” Livingstone said, and his heart *stuttered*. “I knew it would just take time.”

“He’s lying,” Gavin said. “Gordo, he’s *lying*. Stay here. With us.”

“Yes,” Gordo said. “Yes. Yes.”

The door slammed closed.

The roses in the wood of the door, only seconds before vibrant and wild, looked dead.

The raven was gone.

“Glamour,” Robbie said, reaching up to touch the mark between his neck and shoulder. “It’s a glamour.”

Kelly took his hand, holding on as tight as he could.

We moved as one past the doors. I tried as hard as I could to stare straight ahead, not to let myself become distracted. But I could feel the pull, the urge to go to one of the doors and look inside, to see what I could see.

Robbie said, “Mom?” and it crumbled and cracked.

He stood in front of another door. A pair of glasses sat on the top of it. They looked like the ones he wore.

“I’ll eat you up, I love you so,” a voice crooned from somewhere inside. “I’m not crying. I promise. We’re all right. West, Robbie. We’ll go west. Where the wolves run with humans and nothing can hurt us ever again.”

He took a step toward it, but Kelly pulled him back.

He blinked as if waking from a heavy sleep.

He said, “Kelly, I...”

“I know,” my brother said. He kissed Robbie sweetly. “It hurts. It makes us bleed. But we’re together.”

The door closed.

The glasses resting on the top disintegrated, the motes of dust caught in a soft breeze. They swirled up into the air and were gone.

So many doors.

So many voices.

They called to us.

They said, “Candy canes and pinecones. Epic and awesome.”

They said, “I popped your coming-out cherry. That didn’t sound any better.”

They said, “Choose me, Mark. Pick me. Love *me*.”

They said, “Jessie, this is Dominique. She’s going to be staying with us for a while.”

They said, “You got weird white-boy arms? My dad says that you must have weird white-boy arms. That’s why you wear sweatshirts all the time.”

They said, “Hey, Tanner? Okay, stick with me here. This is going to sound ridiculous. But what if we.... I love you, you know? You’re my best friend. What if we did what the others have done? We could just... you know. Bite each other. Mates. You don’t have to say yes. But there’s no one else I trust more.”

They said, “Lizzie? What’s wrong? Is Carter kicking again? Here, let me rub your back.”

We wanted to see what was inside almost more than anything.

But we always had someone there to pull us back. To keep us from getting lost.

“Ox,” Joe muttered, looking stricken as the voice of our father called to him from a red door, telling him that he was going to be the Alpha. “We have to find Ox.”

“Yes,” my mother said dreamily. She shook her head. “We must hurry.”

We pushed on.

Each door we passed slammed shut.

We held on to each other. Gavin was at my side, and when he heard me from inside a door, telling him he was too fucking big to get on the bed, to get *off*, he turned his head toward me. “You love me.”

“Yes.”

“Ghosts.”

“Yes.”

The door closed.

The clearing was bigger than it was in real life. It felt like we traveled miles. Hours passed. Each door was a little piece of memory, a map of the road taken. Dad was there. Grandad was there. Elijah was there. Richard Collins was there. Osmond growled, and Pappas said he could feel his tether shredding into pieces.

David King said, “Not yet,” and a witch who lived in a house by the sea overturned his cup, bones spilling out and rattling on the table. “Fairbanks,” he said. “What you seek is in Fairbanks.”

When we reached the other side of the clearing, we were all shattered. I could barely breathe, but Chris was there, his hand on my shoulder. Tanner tapped my hip with his fingers. Rico linked his arm through Bambi’s, and she held hands with Dominique. Jessie was pale, but my mother whispered in her ear, telling her that she was loved, that she was *packpackpack*, even as a younger version of Jessie demanded to know why she wasn’t good enough for Ox, why he couldn’t see what Joe wanted from him.

Kelly said, “It hurts. All of this.”

Mom said, “I know.”

And Joe shouted, “Ox? Ox!”

His voice echoed around us.

I held my breath.

Then, in the distance, Oxnard Matheson said, “Here. I’m here.”

Joe ran.

We followed.

The doors thundered as they closed around us, their frames rattling as the voices began to shriek. They screamed *why* and *please* and *sing you need to sing the song of wolves*.

Joe howled as he ran.

We joined in.

It was a wolfsong.

A ravensong.

A lovesong.

A heartsong.

A feralsong.

A brothersong.

In the trees along the edges of the clearing, wolves howled in response. Their songs bowled over us, and the ground below shook, the moon above pulsing brightly.

We reached the edge of the clearing.

There, sitting in front of a small door, was a man.

His hands were on his knees.

He was nude, and his skin was unmarked.

He turned his head.

And he smiled when he saw us.

Ox said, "There you are. My loves. My pack. I was looking for you. I was lost. But see what I've found."

He laughed when Joe crashed into him, knocking him over. The laughter faded when he saw that Joe was sobbing. "Hey. Hey, Joe. It's okay. I promise." He held him close, running his hands over his back. "I'm here."

We crowded around him, each of us reaching out to touch some part of him, as if we couldn't believe he was real. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.

He said, "Listen."

He said, "Listen well."

He said, "Our pack is howling us home."

The door before us was blue. The paint was chipped, the frame cracked, but it looked strong, the wood old.

The infinite blackness inside melted away.

And there, just inside, was a boy.

A big boy.

A quiet boy.

A lonely boy, and he thought he was going to get shit all his life.

This boy said, "What's that for?"

A man appeared. He looked like Ox. He said, "When did you get home?"

"A while ago."

"Later than I thought. Look, Ox...." He shook his head. "I know you're not the smartest boy."

"Yes, sir."

"Dumb as an Ox," and I *hated* him, hated this man I'd never met, hated him for all that he was, but I loved him too, a little bit. Because he'd played a part in giving us the man who sat before the door. Without him, there'd be no Ox.

He said, "You're gonna get shit. For most of your life."

"I'm bigger than most," the boy said, and the wolves in the trees sang louder.

"Moments," our Ox said. "These little things that shaped us. Watch."

"People won't understand you," the man said.

“Oh.”

“They won’t get you.”

“I don’t need them to,” but ah, god, how he *lied*. He wanted it more than anything.

“I have to go.”

“Where?” the boy asked.

“Away. Look—”

“Does Mom know?”

The man laughed, and it was such a terrible sound. “Sure. Maybe. She knew what was going to happen. Probably has for a while.”

“When are you coming back?”

The man balked, and it looked as if he were breaking down. “Ox. People are going to be mean. You just ignore them. Keep your head down.”

“People aren’t mean. Not always.”

“You’re not going to see me for a while. Maybe a long while.”

“What about the shop?” the boy asked as Gordo made a wounded noise. Ox hushed him gently.

“Gordo doesn’t care.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t regret you. But I regret everything else.”

The boy looked unsure. Scared. “Is this about...?”

“I regret being here,” Ox’s father said. “I can’t take it.”

“Well, that’s okay,” the boy said. “We can fix that.”

“There’s no fixing, Ox.”

But the boy didn’t listen because he was just that: a boy. He said, “Did you charge your phone? Don’t forget to charge your phone so I can call you. I got new math that I don’t understand. Mr. Howse said I could ask you for help.”

The man’s face twisted. “Don’t you fucking get it?”

The boy in the door flinched. “No.”

“Ox. There’s going to be no math. No phone calls. Don’t make me regret you too.”

“Oh.”

“You have to be a man now. That’s why I’m trying to teach you this stuff. Shit’s gonna get slung on you. You brush it off and keep going.”

“I can be a man,” the boy said.

“I know.”

The boy smiled.

“I have to go.”

“When are you coming back?”

But he was never coming back.

He picked up his suitcase and was gone.

The boy watched the door for a long time.

Ox said, “He was my father. But he didn’t know me. He didn’t know who I was. *What* I was. And I don’t blame him for that. He wasn’t like me. He wasn’t like my mother. We were stronger than he was. We never ran because we knew if we did, we’d always be looking over our shoulders and wondering *what if?*” Ox stood slowly. He brushed us off as we tried to pull him back. He went toward the door, watching the boy inside.

Joe pleaded with him to stop, but Ox reached up and touched the empty doorway.

It rippled as if it was the surface of a lake.

And then he stepped back.

The doorway filled with light, warm and sweet.

She was there, standing just on the other side.

Ox smiled at her, a tear trailing down his cheek.

“Maggie?” Mom whispered.

Ox said, “Before you, before all of you, I only had her. I was very lucky, don’t you think?” He never looked away from the woman in front of him. “She believed in me. She told me I was special. That one day people would see just how much. I didn’t know what that meant. Not then. I do now. And it’s because of her. She was my beginning.” He looked back at us over his shoulder. “And you’re my ending.”

From the doorway, Maggie Calloway said, “One you deserve.”

Ox turned back toward her.

She said, “My son. I’m so proud of you. Look at all you’ve become.”

Ox said, “I tried so hard to save you.”

“I know,” Maggie said. “But it was a circle. Ouroboros. It was always going to happen. Nothing you could have done would have changed that.”

“And now?” Ox asked.

“And now the circle is broken. Not yet, Ox. It’s not time yet. One day I will see you again. One day we’ll be together. But not today. And not for a long, long time to come. There is still much for you to see, much for you to do. I’ll be waiting, no matter how long it takes. Listen, Ox. Can you do that for me?”

Ox said, “I love you.”

She raised her hand and pressed it against the barrier in the doorway. It rippled, and Ox pressed his hand against hers. She smiled. And then she tilted her head back and howled.

It sounded like a wolf.

And then she was gone.

Around us, one by one, the doors disappeared.

Ox slowly lowered his hand.

He rolled his shoulders.

He took in a deep breath, then let it out slow.

He said, “Thomas? I know you’re there.”

Kelly gasped. Joe trembled. Mark took a stuttering step forward. Mom covered her mouth with her hand. Gordo closed his eyes.

I saw him first.

He stepped out from the trees. A white wolf with a smattering of black on his chest and back.

I said, “Dad?”

Each step the wolf took was slow and deliberate. The moment his paws touched the ground, green grasses shot up from the earth. The territory vibrated at the weight of its king.

He stopped before us, eyes red.

And in my head, I heard him.

He said, *there you are i see you i see you all my heart is full my heart is singing PackLoveWifeSonsDaughtersBrothersSisters i sing i sing for you because i love you i love you i love you*

He said, *OxSonAlpha i knew i knew even then even when you were a child i knew because of the immensity of your heart*

He said, *CarterSonLove you are my love my first my boy you taught me courage*

He said, *KellySonLove my child my sweet child look at what you’ve made for*

yourself you taught me strength

He said, JoeSonLove you are brave and true and you you you taught me selflessness

He said, MarkBrotherLove all that i am is because you showed me how to be a man

He said, GordoBrotherLove you i love you you you made me humble

He said, LizzieWifeLove a promise is a promise i will love you forever

He said, listen and hear me and it's time to move on time to move forward this this this is a gift from our territory for all that we've endured this moment here now this is what you've fought for this is what you've bled for you did this because you have each other because you love each other because you know that pack is nothing without trust and hope and the people who make us whole

He said, i am a father because you made me so

He said, i am a husband because i needed light in my soul

He said, i am a brother because i could not walk alone

He said, and i am alpha because of you because of all of you my wolves my humans my witch my packpackpack

He said, we will find each other after you have finished after you lay your head down for the last time and until then until we're together again you must live for yourselves and each other live because you all have the hearts of wolves live love live and love and this is what we have here now this moment see me see me and remember i will always be with you

The wolf was gone.

In its place stood a man. A wonderful man. A beautiful man. And when he smiled, I felt it down to my bones. He said, "Chase me, I love you, chase me."

And then he ran, the white wolf bursting from his skin.

We did the only thing we could.

We ran after him.

Through the trees.

Under the full moon.

We were wolves and humans and we ran.

My father ran ahead. When he looked back at us, his eyes were red, and my mother sang for him, my brothers sang for him, and I howled, howled, howled so that he would know everything in my head and heart. It was a love song, and the territory thrummed beneath our paws. Other wolves ran with us, wolves that felt

familiar, and they nipped at our heels, yipping loudly. Abel Bennett weaved in and out of the trees, running next to Mark, brushing against his side, and I caught bright bursts of light from him when he said, *SonMarkLove* and *thank you for all that you are* and *faster faster faster*.

We ran because we were loved.

We ran because we were family.

We ran because we were pack.

We were pack.

But this moment could not last forever.

Eventually my father slowed.

Eventually the wolves melted back into the trees, though we could still hear their songs.

The white wolf turned to face us.

The red left his eyes.

He whispered, *stay stay you must stay this is where we part this is where we say goodbye the doors the doors are closed and you can rest rest knowing i have never been prouder of you*

Joe's shift receded. He said, "Dad?"

The wolf tilted his head.

Joe took a step toward him. "I..."

Our father leaned forward, pressing his snout against Joe's forehead.

Joe said, "*Oh.*"

Green, like relief.

Blue, like sadness.

And white. The white, pure light of peace.

I OPENED MY EYES.

I turned my head.

Joe held Ox's hand.

His eyes filled with red.

Ox's claws were pressed against his skin.

"Now," I heard Aileen say. "You must do it now."

Joe said, "I love you."

And pierced his own heart.
His head rocked back as blood began to drip down his chest.
Ox arched off the ground, the rose through his stomach in full bloom.
The petals began to fall.
Ox opened his mouth, fangs descending.
He screamed.
The color in Joe's eyes flickered.
Red.
Blue.
Red.
Blue.
Orange.
Orange.
Orange.
One last petal remained on the rose.
Joe jerked Ox's hand from his chest.
The wounds began to close.
Ox stopped moving.
Joe whispered, "Please. Please don't leave me."
Our mother said, "Come back."
Gordo said, "We need you."
Tanner said, "Alpha."
Chris said, "You're our Alpha."
Mark said, "Our friend."
Kelly said, "Our brother."
Robbie said, "Our light."
Jessie said, "Our hope."
Dominique said, "Our past."
Bambi said, "Our future."
Rico said, "Our home."
I said, "Our love."
And Gavin said, "Our savior."
Ox breathed.

In. Out. In. Out.

The last petal fell. It landed on the ruins of Ox's stomach, soaking in the blood.

And then the ragged hole began to close.

Bone and muscle and organs reformed.

Skin grew.

The rose stem sank slowly back into the earth.

A raven circled overhead.

The wound healed completely.

His heartbeat slowed.

Joe said, "I've loved you from the moment I met you. I was lost in the dark, and you were the sun finally coming out again. I found my way back because of you. Now you have to do the same for me. Come back. *Come back to me.*"

For a moment, nothing happened.

Gavin clutched my hands.

And then Oxnard Matheson sucked in a great breath.

The pack bonds vibrated wildly.

He opened his eyes.

Red. They were red.

He blinked once. Twice.

He turned his head to look at all of us crowded around him.

Our Alpha smiled and said, "It is finished."

home

My mother said, "Will deserves it."

I looked to her. "Really?"

She nodded, touching the back of my hand. "He was one of us. A wolf."

I built the pyre myself. The others wanted to help, but I told them no. Gavin stayed with me, watching me with a knowing gaze. He sat with his back against a tree, his breath streaming out from his nose and mouth in a white cloud.

Will didn't have family. He was the last of his line.

But that didn't matter.

He had us.

He had me.

Once the pyre was finished, I was sweating. My back hurt, as did my heart.

Gavin came to me then.

He said, "Good man. Will."

I wiped my eyes. "He was."

He nodded toward the pyre. "This is for important people."

"Yes."

"Kings and queens. Alphas. Shannon. She had one too."

"Yes."

He said, "Will not a wolf. Not a king. Not a queen. Not an Alpha. But still important." He wrapped his arms around me as I started shaking. I told myself it was from the cold.

"Is it enough?" I croaked out.

"Think so," Gavin whispered. "Send him back to the moon. Run with wolves." He laughed quietly. "Shape-shifters. That's what he always said."

I carried Will. He was wrapped in a white blanket. The clouds were gray, and snow was coming. I led the procession through the forest to the clearing. My

pack was behind me. The people of Green Creek followed, their heads bowed.

I laid him on the pyre as gently as I could, taking care with his head.

I stood above him for a long time, trying to find the words. It felt too big, too important.

Eventually I said, "He was my friend. And he was pack. He gave himself to protect those he loved. I will never forget him." I leaned down and kissed his cheek through the sheet.

Joe lit the fire. I couldn't do it.

The wood was a little wet, but it caught.

I stepped back.

The pyre burned.

Will burned.

And as the fire reached up toward the sky, it began to snow. I told myself it was a sign.

I turned my face toward the sky.

I howled.

The others joined in.

As our voices rose, as the smoke mingled with the falling snow, we sang our friend home.

ROBERT LIVINGSTONE WASN'T GIVEN the same honor.

He didn't deserve it.

And yet....

"He was our father," Gordo said. He looked as exhausted as we all felt, but he seemed lighter somehow, even more so than after he and Mark found each other again. He was unshackled. Free. "Regardless of what else he did, I can't ignore that." He looked to the only other person who should have had any say in the matter.

Gavin looked down at his hands. "I can't forget. Or forgive."

"I know," Gordo said. He squeezed his brother's shoulder. "And I don't know that you have to. I could have...." He shook his head. "I could have been like him. Followed the same path."

Gavin jerked his head up, eyes flashing orange. "You're not. You're not bad.

Not like him. Good Gordo.” Then, “Mostly.”

Gordo snorted. “Thanks. I think.” He sighed. “What do you want to do?”

In the end, it was simple. Deep in the forest, they found one of the oldest trees that grew in our territory. They dug the hole themselves. It wasn’t like it was with Will. There were no pretty words, no songs to be sung. It was dirt and sweat. No one cried. As Livingstone was lowered into the ground, the rest of us stood at a distance, watching Gavin and Gordo stand above their father’s body.

Gavin bent over, scooping up a handful of dirt from the ground. He held it over the open grave, let it sprinkle down onto his father’s body. He kissed Gordo on the cheek but didn’t leave him. He waited.

Gordo stood above his father for a long time.

Then he said, “You tried. You really tried, didn’t you? But you failed.” His chest hitched. Mark started forward, but Mom stopped him, shaking her head. “You failed,” Gordo said again, voice hoarse.

We let the brothers go. They walked away through the trees, side by side.

Rico and Chris and Tanner filled in the grave.

Later, much later, when the events of that winter were nothing but memories, I went back.

I stopped in front of the tree and stared down at where Livingstone lay.

From the earth, wild roses had bloomed, covering his final resting place.

The petals were thick, the vines tough.

The thorns sharp.

CASWELL WAS IN AN UPROAR.

They’d felt the moment their Alpha had left them.

They thought he’d died.

They were confused. Scared. I couldn’t fault them for that.

They looked to Joe. “Show us,” they begged. “Show us.”

He did. His orange eyes. And he said, “It was always supposed to be me. Ever since I was born, I was told I was going to be this person. This figure. This Alpha. I’m sorry if you think I’ve failed you. I’m sorry if you don’t understand. I don’t expect you to. But you are never alone. You will never *be* alone. This line of kings and queens, of wolves and men, it was never the be-all and end-all. There will be others. I promise. I am here for you. We all are.”

“We don’t have an Alpha!” a man in the crowd shouted. “What are we supposed to do now?”

Joe nodded. “This is a new future, and one you can decide for yourselves. In my time as the Alpha of all, I learned more than I had in all the years before. We’ll find someone to take my place. Someone who loves you as much as I do. My father told me something once. He said that the measure of an Alpha is not the power they wield, but the strength of their pack behind them. And you are strong. I know that now more than ever.”

IT WAS SPRING WHEN the garage reopened.

We all gathered on Main Street, the scent of new brickwork and paint strong and pungent. The buildings that had been damaged in the fight against Livingstone and his wolves had all been repaired, but it’d taken longer for the garage.

I found Gavin in our room beforehand, standing in front of the mirror, scowling at his reflection. His hair was a little longer, and he was starting to fill out, losing the gaunt, haunted look on his face. But the scowl was familiar. I hoped it always would be.

“There you are,” I said. “We gotta get going. Can’t be late.”

“I know,” he muttered. “I’m almost done.”

I went behind him, settling my hands on his hips, hooking my chin over his shoulder. He leaned his head back and sighed. I bit back a growl at the sight of my mark on his skin.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him, watching him in the mirror.

He was quiet for a moment. Then, “Big. Today feels big.” Words were coming easier to him. He was still prickly and blunt, but more and more of him was coming out. I couldn’t wait to see all that he was.

I shrugged. “That’s because it is. Your first day on the job. Gainful employment and all that. I’m a city employee, so my salary sucks. You’ll need to support me. Fair warning, I have very expensive tastes.”

He rolled his eyes. “You sure don’t dress like it.”

What a dick. Of course he’d be mine. “You really need to stop listening to Rico. I’m a humble man.”

“Bullshit. You’re a stupid man.”

“Stupid Carter,” I teased him.

“Exactly. Stupid Carter.”

I waited, giving him time to say what he needed to. I wasn’t usually a patient person, but I was learning to be because of him.

He said, “Gordo wants me there.”

“He does.”

“And so do the guys.”

“They do.”

He said, “I... I’m scared. That it’s not real. That I’m still in the cave with him. That he’s taking from me, making me see what I want to see in my secret heart just to keep me docile.”

This was a gift. A dark one, to be sure, but a gift all the same. He rarely talked about what happened with him and Livingstone in the year they were gone. I didn’t want to push too hard, but I thought he needed to get it out. “Is that what it was? Like a dream?”

He nodded. “Hazy. The edges were blurred. You were there. Ghost. Haunting me. I wished you were real. Always.”

“I am,” I told him roughly. “I swear it. Listen, Gavin. Listen.”

He turned around. I raised his hands to my chest, settling them above my heart.

He was in awe of me. I wanted more than anything to deserve it.

I said, “Thump, thump, thump.”

And oh, how he smiled. “Thump, thump, thump.”

He kissed me.

It felt green.

He laughed when I pinched his bare hip. “Good?”

“Better,” he said. He pulled his pink work shirt over his shoulders, fumbling with the buttons on the front. He batted my hands away when I tried to help. He got it eventually. “How do I look?”

Five letters were stitched in black across his chest.

Gavin.

I looked in the mirror to see the reflection of his back. My eyes widened at the name. “Is that...?”

“Gordo’s idea,” he said. “She doesn’t know.”

Meaning my mother. “Why?”

He said, “Because it’s who we are.”

When we arrived at the garage, a crowd had gathered, filling the streets. Excitement filled the air, and people were laughing as they milled about. A ribbon stretched across the front doors of the garage. Someone had found a pair of comically oversize scissors, and as the mayor of Green Creek, I was expected to give a speech about reunification and prosperity and blah, blah, blah. I didn’t care about that. I only had eyes for my mother.

She seemed surprised when Gordo took her by the hand, pulling her toward the front of the garage. The people cheered, her pack the loudest of them all, and she blushed as she ducked her head. “What’s this?” she asked.

Gordo said, “I love you.”

She touched his cheek. “I know. I love you too.”

He took a deep breath. “Do you trust me?”

“Always.”

He led her to the sign above the garage. It was covered with a tarp, a long rope dangling onto the ground. He told her she should be the one to pull the tarp down.

She looked at him for a long moment before nodding. She pulled the rope as hard as she could. The tarp slid off the new sign and fluttered toward the ground.

Silence fell over Green Creek as we waited.

The queen looked up toward the sign.

The garage had been renamed.

The sign read: BENNETTS’.

She gasped, her hands covering her mouth as her eyes filled.

Gordo looked uncharacteristically nervous. He said, “For a long time I was angry. Lost. Confused. I didn’t understand. But I am what I am because of you. All that I have, everything that I can call mine, it’s because of the wolves. We fought. We bled. We raged. And in the end, we found our way back to each other. I’m not a great man. I make mistakes. I’ve hurt more people than I care to remember. But this is what I want. It’s not much, I know. And if you want me to change it, I—”

Whatever else he would have said was lost when my mother launched herself at him. He caught her, eyes widening. She was crying, she was laughing, and though there was a tinge of blue that I thought would never leave, her happiness was bright and vital.

She said, “Gordo, don’t you see? It’s everything. It’s *everything*.”

Gordo relaxed, a look of relief on his face. “Really?”

“Yes. You silly man. You silly, wonderful man. How I cherish you.” She laughed again. It sounded like bells.

I watched as the guys from the shop approached her, all turning away from her so she could see our name on the backs of their work shirts. She exclaimed over all of them, Gavin most of all. He grinned at her in that squinty way he had.

Gordo grumbled when I handed him the scissors. “This is dumb.”

“Probably. But give them what they want anyway.”

He did. The crowd cheered when he cut the ribbon.

Bennetts’ was open for business.

AT THE BEGINNING OF SUMMER, I walked with my brothers through the forest. It was just the three of us. Gavin had left with Mom earlier that morning, refusing to tell me where they were going. No matter what I did, he kept his mouth shut, glaring at me each time I asked. Mom was the same way, telling me I’d know when it was time. “You worry too much,” she told me. “Trust me. Trust *him*.”

I did.

So I let them go.

Kelly and Joe found me. Kelly said I was moping. I told him to shut up. Joe laughed at me, and I tackled him. He managed to get away, and I chased after him through the trees. I caught up with him eventually, Kelly close behind us. He yelped when I put him in a headlock, demanding he respect me because I was the oldest.

“That’s not how it *works!*” he growled at me.

Fucking liar. Of course it was.

But I let him go.

He scowled at me.

I ignored him.

Kelly said, “It’s different.”

We looked over at him.

He was pressing his hand against the trunk of an old elm.

“What is?” Joe asked.

“The territory. Can you feel it?”

We went to him. We both put our hands on the tree. It felt... lighter, somehow. Bigger. *More*. I pulled my hand back, and my brothers turned to me.

“It knows,” I said finally. “What we’ve done. All that we’ve given.”

“Is it enough?” Kelly asked.

“I hope so.” Then, “Do you think he’s still here?”

They knew who I meant. “I don’t think they’re ever truly gone,” Joe said quietly. “Not completely.”

We went deeper into the forest.

Joe told us about an Alpha, a woman who was kind and just. Her name was Sophie, which Ox said meant wisdom. We’d met her and her pack years before in Glacier National Park when we’d been chasing after a monster who’d taken from us. Joe and Ox had gone to her, told her all that had happened. She’d already known bits and pieces, and she listened to Joe and his proposal.

When he’d finished, Sophie said, “Are you sure?”

Joe nodded. “It’s not easy. I won’t lie to you about that. But it’s worth it. You don’t have to say yes. You don’t have to do this. Think about it. Talk it over with your pack. We have time.”

She looked out to Ox, who was talking with her wolves. “You’re not as you once were. You came to me as a child. You were so angry.”

“I was,” Joe agreed. “I didn’t know what I was doing, and I had just lost much of what I’d loved.”

“What changed?”

“I found my way home.”

She nodded. “Don’t you miss it? Being the Alpha of all? Or even just being an Alpha.”

Joe took his time with his answer. “No. I don’t.”

She blinked. “You’re telling the truth.”

“I know where I come from,” he told her. “I know what my name means. I’ve carried the weight of it all my life. But I’ve made my choice. And I would do it again if I had to.”

“He’s very lucky,” Sophie said quietly. “Oxnard. To have someone such as you.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Joe said.

She was quiet for a long time before saying, “I’m not like you. I don’t

believe in kings and queens. Just because someone has a name that carries weight doesn't give them the automatic right to lead. If I were to do this, if I were to agree, things would be different. Everyone would have a voice."

"I know," Joe said. "Which is why I'm asking you and not someone else. It's time for a change."

She told him she'd think about it. Joe believed her.

"Will she do it?" Kelly asked him as we walked through the trees.

"I think so," Joe said. "It helps that she wouldn't have to give up the Glacier territory. And that Aileen and Patrice have already pledged to help whoever took my place. Aileen knew her father from way back. The Glacier wolves don't have a witch, and now they could potentially have two. But if not her, there will be others. Someone will lead the pack."

"What about Ox?" Kelly asked.

Joe shook his head. "He's.... It's not something he wants. I don't think he ever has. He's happy where he's at, being our Alpha. Sophie was right. It can't be about a name anymore. The time for kings and queens is over."

"And you?" I asked.

Joe smiled. "I'm happy too. It's.... I guess it's like the territory. I feel lighter. More at ease." His smile faded. "I don't know what he'd think about all of this. Dad."

I settled my arm around his shoulders, pulling him close. "He'd tell you that he's proud of you. For making this choice, for doing what you did. I know it."

Joe laughed wetly. "You think so?"

"I know so. Scars and all."

"Thanks, Carter." He laid his head on my shoulder. "Though I'll admit I'm kind of annoyed I can't tell you all what to do anymore."

Kelly snorted. "Like we ever listened to you to begin with, Alpha or not."

We found a spot where the sun filtered through the leaves. We lay down on the ground, the grass tickling our skin. Kelly rested his head on my stomach, and Joe put his face in my neck, breathing me in. I watched the clouds go by above us. A dragonfly buzzed around us, its translucent wings flashing in the sunlight.

We were quiet for a time, each of us lost in our own thoughts. It was a good place to be.

Kelly spoke after a while. "We're always going to be together."

I put my hand in his hair. "Yeah. We are. No matter what."

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

My heart remained steady.

Joe started snoring only a moment later, his breath warm on my neck.

There was nowhere else I wanted to be.

GAVIN AND MOM WERE BACK at the house by the time we returned. Kelly headed into town to go meet Robbie for lunch before he had to go to work. Joe went with him, saying he'd promised Ox he'd bring him food. I watched them as they got into the truck, dust kicking up as they drove down the dirt road, taillights flashing briefly before they disappeared.

I went into the house. Gavin and Mom were in the kitchen. They sang along with the radio. Mom was dancing, Gavin sitting on the counter, bouncing his head in time with the music.

They turned to me when I leaned against the doorway. Mom reached over and turned down the music. I arched an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Well what?” Mom asked, as if she didn't know.

I rolled my eyes. “Are you going to share what the hell you two were up to that was so secret you couldn't tell me?”

“Not if you continue with that tone, we won't.”

“Yeah,” Gavin said. “Lose the tone.”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered.

Mom nodded toward me. “Do you want to show him? You might as well. He'll be insufferable otherwise. You know how he gets.”

“I do,” Gavin said. He gnawed on his bottom lip. “You... think it's okay?”

“I know it is,” Mom said warmly. “He'll think so too. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm feeling creative. I have a new painting I've been working on. I'd hit a roadblock, but I think I've found a way beyond it.” She kissed me on the cheek before disappearing up the stairs.

I turned back to Gavin. His hands were curled into fists in his lap. I was starting to get concerned. I walked toward him slowly. He spread his legs, letting me step between them. I pressed my forehead against his. “You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.”

“Like you'd let it go,” he mumbled.

“I would if you asked me to.”

“It’s....”

“Important?”

He nodded.

“Big?”

He nodded again. “It was... my idea. And I asked Mom first, and she said it was good.”

I forced down my reaction at him saying *Mom*. It was something he’d started a few weeks ago, and the smile she’d given him when he’d said it the first time had been blinding. “If she said it’s good, then it is.”

He sighed. “I think so too. I didn’t.... I wanted it to be a surprise.” His eyes widened. “If you don’t like it, I can change it back and—”

“Gavin.”

He scowled at me.

“Just tell me.”

“Not tell,” he muttered. “Show.”

He lifted his hips from the counter and reached back to pull out his wallet. It had a picture of a wolf on it. Jessie had given it to him. He adored it for some weird reason. He opened it up and pulled out a plastic card from one of the sleeves. He set the wallet on the counter, holding the card against his chest.

“It’s big,” he whispered. “It’s important. And it’s mine. Because you gave it to me. I asked you a question once. What you wanted. Do you remember what you told me?”

My skin was buzzing. “I said I wanted to feel like I’m awake.”

He nodded. “I feel that way now. I’m awake because of you. And a name is a name is a name. I have it now. I know who I am.”

“Who are you?”

He turned the plastic card over.

It was a driver’s license. Such a tiny thing in the grand scheme of things.

He was scowling in the picture. Of course he was.

But it wasn’t important.

All that mattered was the name in black letters.

Gavin Walsh Bennett.

I stared at it in wonder. I said, “This....”

“This,” he said.

I kissed him with all I had. He grunted in surprise, but then he was laughing, laughing, laughing against my mouth, and I swallowed it down, made it a part of me. It was frantic, it was *real*, it was *mine*, and I lifted him off the counter. He wrapped his legs around my waist, the driver’s license forgotten on the floor. I carried him up the stairs, and even though he bitched about it, I knew he didn’t mean it.

I showed him then, in that warm summer afternoon, the sunlight catching motes of dust that hung suspended in our room.

I showed him what he meant to me.

I showed how I loved him so.

Every piece.

Every part.

I said his name again and again, like a prayer.

As my body shuddered and shook, he whispered in my ear that this was real, that we were awake, and Carter, Carter, can you feel it? Can you hear it?

I could.

A drumbeat of a heart at peace.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

ON A SUNDAY IN THE FALL, we gathered as we always did. It was tradition.

Jessie was in the kitchen with Mom, standing over the sink, peeling potatoes. Dominique leaned against the counter beside her, reaching out to touch the new scar on Jessie’s shoulder as if she couldn’t believe it was real.

Mom stood at the stove, telling Joe to take the cutlery to the table outside. He told her just because he wasn’t an Alpha anymore that didn’t mean she could tell him what to do. She smacked him upside the head. He immediately started gathering the cutlery.

The window above the sink was open. Just outside, Chris and Tanner were setting the table in the backyard. They were bickering, but when they thought no one was looking, they smiled quietly at each other.

Bambi sat at the table, Joshua in her lap, trying to shove everything he could

reach into his mouth. Rico cheered him on, even though Bambi was glaring at him.

Robbie and Kelly stood in front of the grill, pretending they knew what they were doing. Robbie pushed his glasses back on his nose and looked relieved when Gordo and Mark shoved between them, telling him in no uncertain terms that he wasn't allowed to be around fire at any point.

Joe sat on the back porch with Gavin, listening to him talk about how he'd learned how to take apart the engine of a motorcycle and put it back together all on his own.

"Where's Ox?" I asked.

Mom nodded toward the front of the house. "Why don't you go get him? It's almost time." Then she leaned over Jessie toward the open window. "Gordo! Make sure you don't let Robbie touch the lighter fluid. I like his eyebrows as they are."

Robbie threw up his hands in defeat.

I walked through the house to the front door. It was wide open. The leaves on the trees were gold and red, autumn in full swing. The air had a bite to it. Soon we would be in the grips of winter again. The moon was fat and full, hanging suspended in a deep blue sky. Tonight we'd run as a pack.

I found Ox standing in front of the blue house, hands clasped behind him. He turned his head slightly as I approached, a small smile on his face.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

"Dinner's almost ready."

He nodded but didn't reply. I stood shoulder to shoulder with him, the bonds between us plucking like a string. It felt warm and sweet.

Birds sang in the trees.

A herd of deer moved off in the distance. I wanted to chase them. Hunt them. There'd be time for that later.

Ox said, "I was thinking."

"About?"

He shrugged. "Everything. And nothing, I suppose."

I sighed. "Werewolf Jesus like always, then."

He chuckled. "Something like that. Can I tell you what I'm thinking about?"

"Yeah, man. Of course."

He said, "I'm thinking about this life of ours."

"What about it?"

"It's beautiful. It stings. It's astonishing. It hurts. And I often wonder what the point of it all is. Do you know what I decided?"

I shook my head slowly.

"This," he said, taking my hand. "You. Me. The pack. This place. The people of Green Creek. That's the point, I think. We love because we can. We live because we've fought too hard to ever stop. And here we are, you and me. Together. In a moment, we'll go inside and join the others. We'll eat. We'll laugh. We'll tell stories about our day, inconsequential things that mean little to anyone but us. That's the point, I think."

I nodded, unable to speak through the lump in my throat.

He looked at the blue house. "Once upon a time, my mother sat at the table in the kitchen of that house, papers spread out before her. They were for a divorce, though I didn't know it then. I watched as she signed her name over and over again. And when she finished, she looked up at me, and I remember thinking how bright she was. Like she'd been transformed. She said, 'And that's that.' It was so profound, though I didn't understand just how much. Not then. I do now. Three words. And that's that. We danced, after. It was a good day."

I squeezed his hand. "And that's that."

He grinned. "Exactly. I knew you'd get it."

I looked at him. "What if something else comes?"

"Then we face it like we always have. Together. Come on. They're waiting for us. It's tradition."

I followed him back inside the house.

Before I walked through the door, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

I whirled around.

For a moment I thought I saw a white wolf in the trees.

But before I could call out to it, it was gone.

"And that's that," I whispered.

WE ATE UNTIL our bellies were full.

We laughed until we had tears in our eyes.

But most of all, we lived. And that was the point.

It was in the way that Gavin held my hand under the table while he talked with his brother about their work in the garage.

It was in the way Mark smiled his secret smile, gaze never far from Gordo.

It was in the way Rico said that Joshua would make an excellent wolf when he was old enough, and how Bambi said in no uncertain terms that he was *not* allowed to pressure their son into *anything*.

It was in the way Chris and Tanner surprised absolutely no one when they announced they were going to move in together.

It was in the way Jessie waved her arms around wildly as she told us a story about the evils of her teenage students, accidentally hitting Dominique with the back of her hand.

It was in the way Robbie and Kelly held a whispered conversation that we all pretended we couldn't hear.

It was in the way Joe groaned when I recounted the story of the french fry walrus yet again, because that shit *never* got old.

It was in the way Gavin and Mom were already making plans for the Thanksgiving menu, even though it was over a month away.

And it was in the way Ox sat, taking it all in with that Zen Alpha bullshit he did so well. He was quiet, watching each of us in turn as the table was cleared. He didn't speak, but he didn't have to. We could all hear him anyway.

As the sky darkened, the moon bright in a growing field of stars, he rose from the table.

We all quieted as we looked to him.

He said, "Thank you. For everything. For letting me be here with all of you. There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

"What do we do now?" Joe asked him.

Ox closed his eyes. "Now? We run. Come. Let us see what we'll see. I have a good feeling about it."

He turned, stripping his shirt off over his head. Black hair sprouted up along his back and shoulders, muscle and bone beginning to grind.

The others followed suit, Jessie and Bambi trailing after them.

Gavin and I were the last.

I looked over at him as our wolves began to howl. "Ready?"

He kissed me on the cheek with a loud smack. "Ready."

And I
I am
wolf
i am wolf
forest i can smell the
forest and it's you and it's me
run GavinMateLove run with me
run
hunt
feel the moon
feel it pull
it's ours all of this is ours
because we are
we are the goddamn bennett pack
and our song
our song
will
always
be
heard

TO JOE'S FUTURE

Hello, Ox—

Today is a good day, as good as any to put my thoughts down into words. But before I say what I need to say about my son Joe, I need to tell you a story. Please forgive a father for his meandering thoughts. I am finding this harder than I expected it to be.

I wrote you a letter once.

Oh, not you specifically. It was meant for the idea of you, the one who Joe would choose to love, would choose to spend his life with. I have done the same for Carter and Kelly, though theirs will be less specific as I don't know what the future holds for them. The letter I wrote originally for whoever you would be now seems... lacking. And that simply will not do.

I am writing this second letter because I know you now.

You are eighteen years old today. Soon, you and Carter will be graduating high school and beginning the next stage of your life. And soon I will travel to Caswell to store this letter with the others I've written for Carter and Kelly's future until there comes a day—far from now—when it will be time for my words to be read. It seems as safe a place as any and is strangely fitting with all Joe will become.

I worry about that.

I worry that I haven't been the best father I could be to him.

Expectation has a weight to it, heavy and cumbersome.

Joe, as you are aware, will be Alpha. I remember what that was like for me, being told by my father at a very young age who I would become and what it would mean for me. For my family. For all the wolves. While I know this is the way of things, I can't help but think I'd take this burden from him if I could. The mark of a good parent is that they always want the best for their children, putting their needs above all others. Am I doing the right thing? I wrestle with that thought constantly. Lizzie says I underestimate him. She may be right. She usually is.

Still....

There are days when I wonder if this life, this purpose, is something Joe truly wants. He says he does, but I think it's because I'm his father and he wants to make me proud. Does he know I would be proud of him regardless? I hope so. I tell him as much as often as I can, as I do my other sons.

Here is what I know about Joe:

He was born, and I was terrified. I didn't know how it was possible for me to make more room in my heart for him. I thought I'd have to lose the parts meant for Carter and Kelly, especially when we realized that Joe was different than his brothers. I needn't have worried, not about that at least. There was, much to my surprise and joy, more than enough room for him. He carved himself a place within me, tucked neatly between my wife, my brother, and Carter and Kelly.

He didn't cry when I held him for the first time.

(Lizzie will tell you I was frantic about it; I could scoff and tell you I most certainly wasn't, but that would be a lie.)

He watched me with those big eyes of his.

And I was lost to him.

As you know, he was taken from us.

I blame myself for that. I was blinded by the belief that I could see the good in the people I chose to surround myself with. People I trusted. That was a mistake, and not my first, nor my last.

I cannot begin to describe the terror that filled those weeks. It would take a much greater man than I to ever put all those feelings into words, so I will say the bare minimum. The man who dared to touch my son deserves no more than that.

Joe was returned to us, and he was a shell of who he used to be.

I tried everything: begging, crying, shouting, holding him, loving him, whispering little things into his ear. Nothing worked.

As a last-ditch effort, I gave up all that I'd worked for.

It was the easiest decision I've ever made.

We returned to Green Creek, the home I'd loved and cherished. I hoped the territory would allow Joe to heal. I should have known that it wouldn't be enough. It didn't need to be, because the most remarkable thing happened.

You came into our world.

You know what happened next. There is no need to rehash that here. I have much to tell you, and the hour grows late.

Joe made his choice. I should have stopped him. But I couldn't, and for that, I'm sorry. You didn't know what it meant, the gifting of a wolf of stone, and how could you? For all you knew, we were just a normal family, and there was something so terribly wonderful about that. We did not do right by you. In fact, it could be argued we took advantage of you. I don't know if that makes me any better than the man who hurt my son in the first place. I'm sorry.

Joe is kind. His empathy for all things is staggering. Once, when he was four years old, he found a wounded bird in the forest surrounding Caswell. He came to me in tears, asking me why the bird couldn't fly away and be with its friends. I told him that was sometimes the way of things, that for all the beauty in the world, there were harsh lessons to be learned. The bird would most likely not survive. I tried to take it from him, from the shoebox he'd put it in, but he wouldn't let me. He said he would help it heal, that he would take care of it until it could return to the sky.

And he did. He did just that.

For weeks he was diligent in its care: he fed it, he gave it water. His mother helped him weave a little nest of twigs and bits of string. I prepared for the day the bird died, ready to impart on my son the cruel but necessary lesson of death and all that it entails.

The bird healed.

It gained strength, and on a sunny day, he took it outside. He set the box on the ground and told it that it was free, that it could go home.

It did.

It flew away.

Joe watched it until it disappeared into the trees.

Then he turned to me and said, "See, Daddy? See? It just takes time."

How momentous that moment was. How humbling.

It just takes time. I've never forgotten the lesson my son taught me.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Joe is sarcastic, a byproduct of his brothers. If God exists, he or she must have a sharp sense of humor to give me such mouthy children. They are aggravating and make me want to pull my hair out at times. But then

they'll look at me with the same eyes as their mother, and I'll know they are our greatest creation.

He's quick and smart, more so than I gave him credit for.

He will make a good Alpha.

And I wish he could be anything else.

I often wondered who would see him for who he truly was. Who would see beyond the title, beyond the crown to the very heart of him.

I could never have expected it would be someone like you.

I know you, Oxnard Matheson.

I know you.

But there are times I still wonder who you are. How did you become the man I saw just this morning? How did you prevail over all life threw in your path? I won't be so self-centered to think we played a major part in any of it. No, that honor goes to your mother. She, like you, like Joe, weathered all that was flung upon her and still made it through to the other side. And what's more, she did it because she knew you were counting on her to do so. I hope you realize that. Once you finish this letter, and if you haven't done so today, tell her you love her. We never know when it could be the last time we can say such things.

Whatever you decide, I know you'll be part of Joe's life, and he will be grateful for it. You are your own man, and the world is a wild and wonderful place. I just hope you remember that no matter where your travels take you, we'll be waiting here for you if you ever decide to come back.

Who are you?

How are you the way you are?

There is no magic in your blood, no wolf underneath your skin.

And yet I see you, and I think only one thing: Alpha.

Is it the immensity of your heart? The strength of your humanity? I know not, but I don't think it matters, even if it's a mystery I wish to solve. Beyond that, I am struck by a simple yet powerful desire: I would have you call me father, if you could. For you are my son, just as Carter is. Just as Kelly is. Just as Joe is. It would be a great privilege. I understand if that's not something you can do. It's a lot for anyone to ask. But know that

this desire is not contingent upon whatever decision you make, be it Joe or whoever you choose. I will always be here, ready and waiting.

Which is why I must say this last:

I dream of a future where everything is joy and nothing hurts. Life doesn't work that way; if all we knew was joy, we would lose appreciation for the quiet moments whose profundity can be overlooked. Oh, but I dream of such a day regardless.

I don't know what the future holds for us. Much is hidden from me. There are people who would take all that I have built. They've tried before and almost succeeded. I have seen destruction in its many forms. I held my father as he took his last breath, my claws in his heart to accept a gift I wasn't ready to receive. I looked into the eyes of a beast as he promised me his loyalty. I stood by a witch whose heart and mind were twisted as he embedded marks into the skin of his son. And it was this same son that I failed when I took everything away from him, worried that he was more like his father than I thought. Destruction in its many forms. It comes for us when we least expect it, from a direction we never thought possible.

You have a part to play, though I hope I'm wrong. And I would keep it from you as long as I am able. You don't deserve to suffer from the mistakes of others. None of you do. I've thought (more than once) of keeping you from this. To shun you. To send you away. What does that make me? I don't know. What does it mean that I can't find the strength to do so? I don't know that either. Damned? That sounds like it could be right. Damned either way.

I will do what I can to prepare you for whatever may come. I will give you my everything, because that is what a father must do. You've heard me say that an Alpha puts the needs of his pack above all others. You are my pack, Ox. You have been from the beginning.

I was wrong earlier, when I said there was no magic in your blood.

I was wrong when I said there was no wolf underneath your skin.

You are magic. You are wolf. More than I ever thought possible.

Joe saw that before the rest of us. Whatever light burns within you, it burns bright, and I can't help but want to bask in it. One day I hope you'll see what the rest of us do. You are light, my son, my wondrous child. And I am so very happy to know you.

I expect when you finally read this letter, I'll be waiting nervously to hear your thoughts. I'll wonder if you'll think I'm just a silly old man writing pretty words. Maybe you'll laugh at me, though it won't be cruel. Maybe you won't be ready to see what I see. And that's okay. We have time.

Or maybe you'll come to me on a sunny day much like today, and you'll look upon me in that quiet way you do. You'll take my hand in yours and you'll call me father. Oh, what a wonderful day that would be.

It's getting late. The sun is setting. The door to my office is open, and I can hear Lizzie singing in the kitchen. Mark is on the front porch, drinking from a mug of spicy tea. Carter and Kelly are in the backyard. They're laughing, laughing, laughing.

And just now, I looked out the window to see you and Joe walking down the dirt road toward the house at the end of the lane. You are smiling. And Joe is looking at you as if you are the moon itself.

I can't think of a more perfect moment.

It's time to bring my rambling to an end.

I'll finish by saying this: I don't know what the future holds, what sacrifices we must make, but I believe with all my heart and soul that my dream of joy is within our grasp, so long as we are brave enough to reach for it.

I love you all more than anything.

And I always will.

Eternally yours,

Thomas Bennett

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Until You
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STANDALONES

Burn

Olive Juice

Murmuration

Into This River I Drown

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