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BRO AND THE BEAST

JOEL ABERNATHY WRITING MPREG AS
L.C. DAVIS

BRO AND THE BEAST

PART III

THE WOLF'S MATE



L.C. DAVIS
JOEL ABERNATHY

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Brad finally gets what he wants. He's back in his world, where he's top dog and the only alpha males around are the frat bros who worship him as a legendary party animal.

So why is getting back to Raul and the rest of the characters in the cheesy romance novel he was so eager to escape all he can think about?

When Brad discovers that Constantine, the villain from the Wolf's Mate, has followed him, he's going to need a little help from his bros--literal and figurative--to get back where he belongs.

Oh, and plot twist? Constantine isn't the only part of The Wolf's Mate that's followed him into the real world. In nine months, he's going to be dealing with one hell of a spoiler.

CHAPTER 1



"*R*aul?" I croak, my voice barely a whisper as I open my eyes to the sterile hospital room. The last thing I remember is going to bed being hella emo, but now, suddenly, I'm here. Blinking away the haze, I spot my brother, Devon, dozing in an uncomfortable-looking chair by my bed. It doesn't seem real--like a dream within a dream.

"Devon?" I call, louder this time, and his eyes snap open in disbelief. In a flash, he's at my side, wrapping me in a bear hug that feels equal parts comforting and suffocating. He's built like a twig compared to me, so that's not a great sign. My whole body feels weird and heavy. Like I stacked leg, arm and core day all at once, and dialed it up to eleven.

"Brad!" Devon exclaims, tears streaming down his face. "You're awake. Holy shit, I didn't know if you'd ever wake up. I'm so sorry for that stupid fight..."

"Hey, hey," I say, swallowing back my own tears as I hug him back even though the slightest movement makes everything ache. Nothing compared to getting knotted by a werewolf, though. "I'm the one who should apologize. I was being a grade-A asshole, per usual."

He chuckles and wipes his eyes as he pulls away to get a better look at me. "Maybe you hit your head even harder than they thought."

My gaze drifts around the room, taking in the floral explosion that seems to have overtaken all the otherwise sterile surfaces in the room. And then I spot it—the signature Kappa Nu get-well-soon basket, overflowing with pork rinds and sausages. It's enough to make me smile despite the overwhelming confusion.

"Glad to see they included the essentials," I tease, but my thoughts keep circling back to Raul. Was he just a figment of my imagination? A dream too good to be true?

Everything is still so foggy. I feel like this is the dream I woke up into now, not the other way around.

"Brad, try not to worry about anything right now," Devon says softly, which makes me wonder if I'm as much of a wreck on the outside as I feel on the inside. "Just relax, okay? You're gonna be fine."

"Yeah, sure," I mutter, even though inside, I feel like I'm coming apart. "Devon, how long have I been

out?" I ask, trying to sound a little more together. I'm pretty sure it isn't working.

"A few days," he replies with a gentle smile. "You really scared the shit out of me."

"That's impossible," I say, sitting up. The sound of the heart monitor picks up the pace. "I've been gone for weeks." The certainty in my voice surprises even me.

"Gone?" Devon's brow furrows in confusion. "You've been here the whole time. You went into a coma after that drunk asshole ran you off the road and you hit your head, but they said it was amazing there wasn't even more damage."

Probably more than they think, if I had time to concoct a whole ass life while I was out.

Before I can reply, there's a knock at the door and a doctor in a white coat steps in. At least it's not Dr. Douchebag. Although part of me would be relieved, because it would mean Raul is close by, too.

"You're awake," the doctor says, her voice calm and professional. "Now that's a pleasant surprise."

Why do I get the feeling she wasn't expecting that? Then again, I am all bandaged up and while every part of me hurts like a bitch, it's my head that's really throbbing. Come to think of it, there are wires sticking out of me everywhere. Actually, I'm pretty sure there's even one sticking out of my...

Aw, son of a bitch, they catheterized me.

The doctor walks over to the side of my bed and looks at Devon as she says, "If you don't mind, I'd like to examine him."

"Of course," Devon nods, his eyes still fixed on me. "I'll be right back. I'm going to call Mom and Dad, and... your frat bros too," he adds grudgingly. "They finally left yesterday, so I guess they deserve to know you're awake."

"Thanks, Devon," I murmur, touched that he and everyone else were here. He leaves the room, and I turn my attention to the doctor, who begins her examination.

As the doctor checks my vitals, my mind races. If I've only been unconscious for a few days, that means... Raul and the world I left behind really were just a dream?

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself not to panic.

No, that's not possible. It felt so real, so vivid. Raul's strong arms around me, the way his eyes seemed to see straight into my soul... There's no way it was all fake. Hell, in a lot of ways, it felt more real than this world does.

All I could think about while I was there was getting back here, and now...

"Your vitals look good," the doctor says, oblivious to what was going on inside my head. "If you're awake this soon, you should make a full recovery. Of course, we're going to want to run some tests just to be sure."

"Do what you gotta do," I say, barely able to focus on her words. All I can think about is Raul and the others back home.

No... *This* is home. Even though I desperately wanted to return to my real life, now that I'm here, I can't help but feel like I need to find my way back to him.

"Hey, Doc," I say as she begins to turn toward the door, "I know this sounds crazy, but uh... is it possible to feel like a whole lot more time passed while you're in a coma? Like... weeks?"

She looks at me for a moment, considering my question. "It's not uncommon for people to have vivid dreams while they're unconscious," she explains.

"Vivid, sure, but... what if it felt... real?" I ask. "Like, real-real. Alternate reality real."

She raises an eyebrow. "You hit your head incredibly hard, Brad. The fact that you drive that monster of a truck and were wearing a seatbelt is probably the only reason you're alive. There's no scientific evidence to support the existence of alternate realities, but I'd be surprised if you *didn't* have some strange effects from a TBI like that."

My heart sinks, but I can't help clinging to the hope that Raul and my time with him was more than just a dream. Or a hallucination. There's gotta be some way I can find him again. As relieved as I am to see my brother, now he's the one I'm worried about.

I can't stop thinking about how worried he has to be right now.

Unless...

Unless she's back in my place, where she should have been from the beginning. Catalina. The woman Raul actually loves.

The thought sinks down in my stomach like a stone, or a plate of Reese's Legendary 17-Layer Nachos after they've been sitting out for a day, so I try to push it away.

"Yeah. Thanks, Doc," I say again, forcing a smile. "Any chance of me getting this tube outta my dick anytime soon?"

She purses her lips and I can tell she's trying not to laugh. "When you're able to get up and move around on your own, we'll talk to the nurse about it. Now, get some rest," she advises before leaving the room.

As soon as she's gone, I close my eyes, letting my thoughts drift back to Raul as my head hits the pillow. All I want is to get out of this damn bed, but I'm drained just from sitting up for that little stretch of time. Getting across the room seems like an impossible feat at this point, let alone getting back to another reality.

The most shocking part of all of this is that... I *want* to go back. More than anything, I want to know it was real.

I *need* it to be real.

CHAPTER 2



I stand in the middle of the mansion's living room, surrounded by my pack—Lenore, Curtis, Kyle, Matthew, Hannah, and the others. The tension in the room is palpable, and I can practically taste their anxiety as we try to figure out what happened to Brad.

"Someone explain this to me!" I demand, my voice booming throughout the room. "How could he just disappear?"

"Raul," Dr. Donahue begins cautiously, her voice strained with concern. "I understand you're upset, but the best thing any of us can do for Brad right now is to just calm down."

Yeah. He was right about that being the least productive phrase in the English language. Definitely striking that from my lexicon permanently.

"Calm down?" I snap, my anger flaring. "You were supposed to be helping him, and now he's gone! How could you let this happen?"

"Raul, please," Dr. Wilson interjects, attempting to defuse the situation. "This isn't Dr. Donahue's fault."

"No?" I snarl. "Because he was fine until I let this doctor you convinced me to allow into our home talk to him, and now suddenly he's gone? And you don't think that's at all suspicious?"

He doesn't reply right away, and the room is so silent I can hear the hearts pattering around me like war drums. They're not used to seeing their alpha lose his cool, which is why I sent Mina upstairs, but when it comes to my mate...

"What did you say to him exactly?" I demand, turning on the psychologist. "And don't give me that confidentiality bullshit. My mate is gone, and right now, you're the number one suspect."

For a second, Dr. Donahue's professionalism falters and I'm staring down another alpha shifter rather than a doctor. "Raul," she says, her voice calm and measured despite the tension in her jaw. "I understand that you're worried, but I can assure you that I would never do anything to harm Brad. We briefly discussed his personal history, or at least his version of it."

"And what part of this history had him looking like a ghost when I came into the room?" I press.

I can see her at war with herself, but before any of the other titles we take onto our shoulders, we are wolves first. And alphas. "He mentioned something about his brother," she finally answers. "His parents sent him to a conversion therapist to try to 'fix' his sexuality, and Brad got him out. I could tell it was a traumatic memory for him, so I didn't want to push it too far, but that's all. He never said anything that would lead me to believe he was an active harm to himself, or anyone else," she said, and from the tension in her voice, I could sense she was telling the truth.

Which didn't leave me with any more answers than I'd started with.

"There's still Trent," Lenore spoke up, holding my gaze. "Curtis and I questioned him, but he insists he doesn't know anything. Maybe you'll have better luck."

By luck, she means maybe I can torture it out of him, and that's sounding like a grand idea at the moment.

"Keep looking," I snarl to the others before turning to stalk toward the basement. I can hear footsteps behind me and I don't need to look up to know that Lenore and Curtis are the ones who follow.

It's for the best, I decide. I need witnesses to pull me off our prisoner before I kill him. I descend the stairs, my heart pounding in my chest. My hands clench into fists at my sides as I prepare myself for what's to come. As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I can see Trent sitting on the floor, his back against the cold stone wall. I don't even bother to unlock the door, I just pry it open with my bare hands. His eyes widen as they land on me, and he immediately jumps to his feet, a furious look in his eyes.

"Where is he?" I demand, my voice low and dangerous. "Where's Brad?"

"Raul..." Lenore warns, her hand on my arm, trying to keep me from losing control. I shake it off, my focus solely on Trent.

"I don't know!" Trent exclaims, his voice equal parts desperate and enraged as he walks to the end of the leash afforded by the chain around his ankle. "You're the one who's supposed to be watching him, aren't you? How could you let him just disappear like that?"

Before I can think, I lunge and have him pinned against the wall. For a beta, he's surprisingly strong as he struggles against my grip. "Don't you dare try to put this on me," I snarl, my face inches from his. "You're the one with ties to the pack that wants him back. You must know something."

"Raul!" Curtis shouts, and I feel Lenore's hand on my arm again, trying to pull me away from Trent. "Calm down! This isn't going to help!"

"Get off me!" Trent snarls, pushing back against me, his face flushed red with anger. "I don't know where Brad is, but you'd better hope Blue Fang found him if he really is out there on his own."

I feel a heavy weight settle in my stomach. He's right, of course. There are far worse things that can happen to an omega on his own, no matter how atypical of an omega he is.

"Enough!" Lenore commands, her voice firm and authoritative. I reluctantly release my grip on Trent and step back, the anger in me still boiling just under the surface. Curtis shoots me a warning glance, as if he can see the thoughts racing through my mind. And he's right. We can't lose our only bargaining chip if Blue Fang really does have Brad.

I take a deep breath, trying to regain control over my emotions. "Alright," I say, forcing the words through gritted teeth. "If you really don't know where he is, then where would he go on his own?"

As much as I hate to admit it, Trent knows Brad better than anyone.

Trent returns my glare, and I can tell he's trying to decide whether he wants to tell me anything. Just when I decide I'm more than happy to beat it out of him, he answers, "There is one place he might have gone."

"Where?" I demand gruffly. I'm not sure I believe a word out of his mouth, but what other options do I really have right now?

"Salt Lick," he mutters.

Curtis blinked. "Sorry, did you say Salt Lick?"

"It's a town in Ohio," Trent says in a dry tone. "When we were kids, we used to steal my dad's map and talk bullshit about all the places we were going to go when we were old enough to run away. Brad saw the town, thought it was hilarious, and always said he was gonna go there and start a new life as a mechanic."

"That sounds like Brad, alright," I mutter grudgingly. Maybe I believe him slightly more than I did before. He's definitely the kind of person who would pick a random place on a map because it sounded funny and decide to start his life over there.

But there's also a chance he'd try to find his brother. He thinks he's from another world, and I can't discount that, either. Then there's the very real possibility that Blue Fang—or Constantine—might intercept him before I can get to him, and I don't even know where to start looking.

"You're coming with me," I say, looking over at Trent. He doesn't argue, but if he thinks there's even a chance he's going to escape on my watch, he's dead wrong.

And if he tries shit that compromises my ability to find Brad, he's just plain old dead.

CHAPTER 3



I'm lying on the couch in the frat house, feeling like I've been hit by a truck. Technically, it was a car that hit me, but it feels like a truck.

I wince, rubbing my aching head as the lingering effects of my concussion make it difficult to think straight even though I've been out of the hospital for almost a full week. But even through the fog of pain and exhaustion, one thought keeps barging its way into my mind.

Raul.

I'm home. This is what I've wanted from the beginning, so why do I feel homesick? Is it even possible to be homesick for a person? One who doesn't even exist?

He sure as fuck exists in my head, though.

The last few nights, I keep hoping maybe I'll fall asleep and end up back in his world, even if it's only for a dream, but no dice. I dream about him, sure, but it's not the same. No matter how realistic the dreams are, they're nothing like what I experienced, and that's how I've come to the conclusion, no matter how absolutely fucking bonkers it is, that it was real. At least on some level.

"Hey, bro," Reese says, coming over with a plate of his legendary seventeen-layer nachos. "You look like you could use a pick-me-up. Nothing these bad boys can't cure, even a TBI."

"Your nachos are a modern medical miracle, Reese," I say dryly, forcing a smile. "But I'm just not that hungry right now."

Reese's eyes widen in concern, and he calls over the other guys. "This is serious, boys. Brad doesn't want nachos. We need an intervention!"

"Brad doesn't want nachos?" Steve asks, rubbernecking from the doorway to the lounge where I've set up camp.

I would have just gone back to the apartment, but with Devon having to go to class and work so much—and the doctor only willing to let me go if someone was going to be there around the clock—that just wasn't an option. So here I am, stuck on the couch while my frat bros take turns playing nurse when Devon can't be here.

At least Reese is a good cook. Maybe not healing-a-TBI good like he thinks, but on a scale from shitty rich people restaurants where they serve you one olive seed at a time on fire to TGI Friday's at happy hour, he's a solid Panera Bread.

"I'm fine, dude," I mutter, flipping the channel since the game that's on is boring as hell and I'm having trouble keeping track of the plays anyway. "Stop being dramatic."

Steve gives me a wary once over. "I dunno, man. Maybe you should go back to the hospital. What the fuck are we gonna do if you coma out on us again?"

"We could always have him smell one of your gym socks," Reese retorts. "I'm sure that would bring him out of it."

Steve glares daggers and flips him off. "Fuck you, the doc gave me powder. They smell like roses now."

Somehow, I doubt that and I'd rather eat my own foot than find out.

"Maybe chili nachos weren't a good idea," Reese muses, rubbing the back of his head. "I could try making veggies or something."

"I was in a coma, bro, it's not that serious," I tell him. "I'll eat the nachos in a bit. Promise. I just need to chill."

Reese doesn't seem convinced, but he nods. "Yeah, alright. Just use the horn if you need anything."

I look over at the bullhorn sitting on the coffee table. It's not exactly a Life Alert, but close enough. "Thanks, man. I'll be fine," I insist, checking to make sure he's actually on his way out before I relax.

I close my eyes for what's probably the hundredth time this afternoon. Because apparently, I'm a nap guy now. Even if I am on the mend physically, I feel more drained than ever.

I'm drifting somewhere in that dreamy state between sleep and consciousness, which is usually where I try to conjure up the fantasy world I was so eager to escape from. I'm not even supposed to be on my phone, but I've been Googling whenever I have a minute alone, and it's taken me to some strange places. There's something called "reality shifting" all the theater kids on TikTok are doing, and while I would have seriously doubted their claims that they're able to meditate their way into dating the villain from their favorite anime before all this shit, I'm desperate enough to try anything.

So far, all I've gotten for my troubles is an uncomfortably sensual dream about wearing a banana costume, but that's the Internet for you.

"Brad?" Devon's voice jolts me out of my downward plunge into what was probably going to be another unproductive nap, and I look up to find my twin in the doorway of the lounge, his book bag slung over his shoulder. "Sorry," he whispers. "I didn't realize you were sleeping."

"I wasn't," I assure him, sitting up with a yawn. "Thought you had class?"

"It's just philosophy. I ditched," he says, walking over to drop his book bag by the couch before he sits next to me. "I wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine," I grumble. "You shouldn't ditch class. You're the one Mom and Dad are counting on to take care of them when they retire."

"Don't know why they think I'm gonna do that," he says in wry tone, raising an eyebrow. "Reese says you're dying."

"I'm not dying. I just don't want nachos," I clarify, rolling my eyes.

"It's the same thing!" Reese calls as he walks by.

"He has a point," says Devon, casting a judgmental glance at the TV before he snatches the remote up and turns it off. "You've been off ever since you go home and this shit definitely isn't helping. You heard what the doctor said, no screens for at least two weeks."

"Yeah, yeah," I groan. "She wasn't taking into account what happens if I die of boredom."

Devon rolls his eyes, but I can tell he's worried. "Come on, Brad. Something's going on with you aside from the accident. What is it?"

I hesitate, not sure how to explain what happened without sounding like a complete lunatic. But Devon is my brother, and if anyone would understand, it's him.

"Okay," I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. "You know that book you were reading? *The Wolf's Mate*?"

He nods, looking puzzled. "Yeah, I haven't been able to find it anywhere, actually, now that you mention it."

"Well, that's because I took it," I confess, bracing myself for his reaction.

"Wait, why?" he asks, clearly confused.

"I wanted to read it as an apology, you know? To connect with you or something," I mumble, feeling embarrassed. He seems touched by the gesture, but I can tell he's still concerned.

"Okay, so you took the book. What does that have to do with how you're acting now?"

"Here's the crazy part," I say, taking a deep breath. "When I got into the accident and blacked out, something happened that I... uh, can't explain. I ended up in the book."

Devon blinks, trying to process my words. "You were in a coma, Brad. I'm sure you had some pretty realistic dreams."

"No, this was different," I insist. "It was real. Raul, Mina, Curtis, and the others—they were all so real." I pause, searching for the right words to make him understand. "I know it sounds crazy, but I can't shake this feeling that I was actually there, living in their world."

"Brad, that's kind of what reading does," Devon says with a small laugh. "You feel immersed in another world. That's the point."

"Yeah, but—" I realize I'm not going to get anywhere with this—at least not without him calling the doctor out of concern—so I mumble, "Yeah, I guess." But I know it was more than just a dream.

Devon smiles and says, a bit excitedly, "If you like reading now, I have a ton of recommendations I can share with you. I know you're not really supposed to be reading for too long either, but there are audiobooks, too. It might help you get through recovery faster."

"Sure," I say, not having the heart to tell him I promised myself I'd never read again. That was when I wanted to escape Raul's world, not get back to it.

"Great!" Devon beams, clearly happy to share his love of books with me. But as I nod along, a lightbulb moment strikes me.

"Hey, do you know where the things in my truck were?" I ask, trying to sound casual. "You know, after the accident?"

Devon shrugs. "The guys from the shop are fixing it up for you, so your stuff is probably still there."

"Right," I say, feeling a sudden surge of determination. If I can find that book again, maybe I can find a way back to Raul and the others. To my pack. Because, as crazy as it sounds, that's what they've become. My family. My home.

And this time, I'm taking Devon with me.

He'll have to believe me then, and considering how he prefers to live between the covers of a book anyway, I know he's not gonna complain. At least not once he gets an eyeful of Curtis and the other hunky shifters he's always drooling over in person.

Not Raul, though. He's the one thing I'm not willing to share, even with my twin.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Hey, Dev, do you think you could do me a huge favor?" I ask.

"Anything," he insists. "What is it?"

"I know you hate going down to the shop, but uh, do you think you could grab that book for me?" I ask.

"*The Wolf's Mate*?" He blinks.

"Yeah. I kind of left off at an important part, and uh, I wanna know what happens," I say sheepishly.

He laughs. "Okay... but you know, I've read it. I could just tell you."

"No!" I say quickly. "I mean. I just don't want spoilers."

He tilts his head. "You really did get knocked for a loop, didn't you?" he murmurs. "But alright, I'll stop by the garage today after my last class. You want me to get anything else?"

"No, just the book," I tell him.

That's the only thing that matters.

CHAPTER 4



I squint at the giant ball of yarn in front of us, wondering what kind of twisted mind thought this would be a good tourist attraction. It's been a few days since Trent and I hit the road in search of Brad, and we've ended up in Salt Lick, a town that seems to pride itself on its absurdity.

"Man, this is definitely the kind of place Brad would love," Trent says with a chuckle. "He'd be eating questionable gas station sushi and laughing his ass off at this cheesy yarn ball."

I feel a surge of jealousy at the reminder of their friendship and the connection they share, even if I believe Brad when he says it's always been platonic. At least on his end. There's no doubting the beta has feelings for him, though, which is the only reason I don't believe he's lying to me about not knowing where Brad is. I don't believe he would knowingly put Brad in danger, and he certainly understands enough about his pack to know that's exactly what he's in if I don't find him.

"Yeah, probably," I mutter.

We've searched the entire damn town with no luck. Brad's scent is nowhere to be found. "He must not be here anymore," I say. "We would've caught his scent by now if he was."

Trent sighs. "We should have gone to Blue Fang first."

I glare at him. "The second we call Blue Fang before the Council, I'll have to claim him as my mate in order to search the pack. Once I do *that*, he's going to be on Constantine's radar even more, and it'll be Blue Fang and Grayridge racing against Stone Hollow to find him. You really think that's a good idea?"

"Yeah, whatever," Trent mutters.

"Let's just head back to Stone Hollow," I suggest, trying to keep my frustration in check. Trent grudgingly agrees, and we climb into the car, setting off for the nearest airport, which is far from near this far into the boonies.

As we drive, I can't help but think about how much I miss Brad. His laughter, his wit, even his infuriating stubbornness. The car is silent for a long while, the tension between Trent and me palpable.

After what feels like hours, Trent finally breaks the silence, his voice hesitant. "So... how long do you

think you have?"

"Have?" I ask, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Before you go feral," he clarifies. "You know, like every other alpha whose mate is taken from them."

My grip on the wheel tightens, my knuckles turning white as I force myself to keep my voice steady. "I'll keep it together long enough to find Brad. That's my only option."

"Right," Trent says, staring out the window. "Because that's worked out so well for everyone else who tried."

I grit my teeth, willing myself to stay calm. "I'm not everyone else. And Brad's worth fighting for. So, I'll find him. No matter what."

"Hope you're right," Trent replies quietly.

And for once, I think he means it.

We drive on in silence, the tension between us lessening just a bit as we both focus on our shared goal—finding Brad. The sun begins to set by the time we reach the airport, and I'm relieved a private jet is one of the many resources available to me as a regional alpha, because I really don't feel like being in a tin can full of humans right now.

As night falls, my thoughts turn back to Brad's theory as they do so often as of late—his theory that this world we live in is a work of fiction. It sounds utterly ridiculous.

But how else did Brad just vanish into thin air?

I glance over at Trent, wondering if Brad ever said anything to him about it. "Did Brad ever mention anything to you about... a book?"

"A book?" he echoes, raising an eyebrow. "Brad's not really the reading type."

I snort. "No... But this book was something different. He thought we were characters in some kind of story."

Trent frowns at me, bewildered. "What? No, he never said anything like that. We didn't keep secrets from each other."

His confusion seems genuine. So does his indignation, but that just makes it all the more bizarre.

It's a risk just telling him this, considering it's still a possibility he is somehow still working with his pack, and he's behind Brad's disappearance, or at least aware of it. But it's a risk I have to take, when he knows Brad better than anyone.

"I know how it sounds," I mutter. "And I'm not saying I believe it, but Brad certainly does."

Trent hesitates, and actually seems to be considering my words. "He did say some kind of weird stuff, now that you mention it. I didn't think much of it at the time. He can be weird, and I figured he was just stressed."

"Did he talk about leaving?" I press. When I see his walls go up, I sigh, "I'm not going to take it out on you. And I'm not an idiot. I know he was planning on escaping, at least initially. I'm just trying to figure out if he said anything that might give us a clue as to where he is now."

Trent seems to be considering that, too, to my relief. He finally shakes his head. "I don't think so. He just told me to be patient. That he'd get me out eventually, and I guess he kind of did," he says. "If your basement counts."

I sigh. "That's what I was afraid of."

"You don't seriously think he left to get back to this book or whatever, do you?" Trent asks.

"In his mind, this *is* the book," I correct. "He was so convinced that none of this was real. That he didn't belong here." I swallow hard, hating the ache in my chest at the thought of Brad wanting to leave me behind. To escape into some fantasy world--or rather, the real one--where I don't exist.

"You can't really think he found a way out of reality," Trent says, but there's a note of uncertainty in his voice.

"I don't know what to think anymore," I admit. "None of this makes any sense. He should have been easy to find, but it's like he vanished into thin air. He's an omega, for fuck's sake. *My* omega, and he doesn't even have his wolf form yet. And now..." I trail off, shaking my head.

"Look, Brad is a little weird. He's always walked to the beat of his own drummer," Trent says carefully. "But he's not nuts. He's got a decent head on his shoulders. He was probably just fucking with you. Now *that* definitely sounds like him."

"He wasn't," I growl, sounding more animalistic than I mean to. I take a second to settle myself, worried the whole feral thing is setting in sooner than I feared. "You think I want to believe this? That my mate has somehow transcended reality, or been sucked into another dimension, or whatever the hell is going on? I just want him back. I don't care how."

Trent is silent for a long moment. "You really love him, don't you?" he asks softly, a hint of defeat in his tone.

I keep my eyes fixed on the window of the plane as it slowly descends. "More than anything."

Trent sighs. "For what it's worth...I hope you find him."

I nod stiffly. "Thanks." It's more than I expected to get from Trent. Maybe he's not as bad as I thought. Or maybe we're just both too worried about the same impossible thing to bother fighting right now.

Either way, we lapse into silence for the remainder of the flight. And my mind keeps circling the same thought, refusing to let go.

Wherever Brad is, and however he was taken from me, I *will* get him back.

Even if I have to tear through the pages of reality itself.

CHAPTER 5



I'm pacing the room like a caged animal, which feels ironic since I spent all that time in a damn shifter romance novel and I still don't have a badass wolf form to show for it.

I can't focus on anything else but getting that book back. Devon tried to go yesterday, but the shop was closed by the time he got there, so he promised he'd go after class today. Every minute ticks by slower than the last.

He finally shows up and I practically throw myself off the couch rushing over to take the book from him. "You're a lifesaver," I mutter. I would have just gone myself, but Reese and the others have been hovering since I got back, so there's no way I'd make it past the front door.

I think they're just glad they finally have an excuse to boss me around for a change.

"You really are into that book, huh?" Devon asks with a chuckle, watching as I hastily flip it open, trying to find the spot I was at before. "I've never seen you tear into anything that hungrily that wasn't a stuffed crust supreme pizza."

"Ha ha, very funny," I grumble, not looking up from the book. My heart is pounding in my chest as I open the cover and realize the first page is signed below the title.

*To Devon,
Here's to hoping you find your own HEA soon.
- Luna Daycrest*

OH. So it's a signed copy. Probably shouldn't have run off with it the way I did, then. My bad.

I flip through the pages, trying to figure out if anything has changed. At first glance, it looks like everything is fine. Then I notice the bit of blood smeared on the edge of the gilded pages, and feel a bit queasy at the reminder of the accident.

Double oops.

Other than that, the book is exactly how I left it, and Catalina's name is still in all the scenes, including the steamy one I flip to instinctively, which makes me insanely jealous.

Is she back in the book, or was I imagining the whole thing to begin with? I'm almost not sure which possibility is worse.

"What are you doing?" Devon asks.

"Just trying to figure out where I left off," I answer. I left a piece of a pork rind bag between the pages to mark my spot, but it's gone now.

If only there was some sort of thing you could stick into a book to keep your place.

Like... a place keeper.

Maybe I'll go on Shark Tank with that shit once I figure all this out.

Devon makes a sound of acknowledgment and flops down on the couch next to me, pulling out his phone. As I continue to read, I can feel him glancing over my shoulder. "Ooh, that's a good scene," he remarks as I flip to the scene where I remember leaving off, right before Constantine attacks the pack. "Raul's so hot, getting in between Constantine and Catalina without even thinking about it. Then the way he whisks her and his sisters off to safety," he says with a dreamy look in his eyes I'm pretty sure rivals how dopey I looked while I was in heat.

Probably.

I roll my eyes, trying to remind myself there's no way my brother could possibly know Raul is mine. And I can't exactly explain that without one, coming out as something I'm not even ready to accept myself, and two, making him think I've completely lost it.

"Yeah, sure, he's a real Clint Eastwood," I mutter, turning the page. This is about the part where I left off to go to the party since it was getting good and I didn't wanna risk skimming it.

"And Catalina's so sweet and brave, comforting Mina like that," he continues with a wistful sigh.

"Sweet and brave?" I scoff, unable to contain my annoyance. "Please. And Mina's the last person who needs to be comforted. More like locked in a broom closet and restrained from charging Constantine with her dinner fork."

Devon raises an eyebrow at me, clearly confused by my reaction. "I thought you really liked this book. Why are you hating on the main character all of a sudden?"

I shrug, trying to play it off. "Just think Catalina's a little bland. Like stale Wonderbread."

"If you don't like the main character, why are you so into the story?" Devon presses.

I squirm under his questioning gaze, scrambling for an answer that won't make me sound like a complete lunatic.

"The rest of the characters are fine," I answer, trying not to sound as invested as I am. "If anyone should be the MC, it's Lenore. She's smart. And a badass."

He wrinkles his nose. "I don't know. I never really liked her."

"Why the hell not?" I demand. So much for not being defensive.

"Sheesh, what crawled up your ass and died?" he asks, blinking at me. His face goes completely blank and his skin turns ashen all of a sudden.

"You don't have to be so dramatic," I mutter.

"It's not that," he says, his voice choked a little. "It's... the book. It's changing."

I glance down and my heart leaps into my throat. The text on the page is disappearing before my eyes, the words fading into nothingness. I flip through the book in a panic and find entire passages vanishing, one after the other, until even the last page is blank.

"What the fuck?" I whisper as I stare at the book in disbelief. I flip back to the first page and my eyes grow wide as I realize the text is still there, but it's changing. Rather than the opening line of the book I remember, it begins with something even more familiar, but impossible.

Brad slowly blinked his eyes open and stared in confusion at the cracked pavement beneath him. The overhead lights were obscured by the rain, but a dim glow was coming from the street lamp across the street. He heard the distinct sound of raindrops tapping against the pavement, and blinked again as one landed right in his eye.

"Holy shit," Devon breathed, reminding me of his presence and reassuring me that I wasn't the only one witnessing this.

"You see it, too, right?" I demand, turning to face him as the words continue to reappear until the page is filled, and as I flip through, I realize it's quickly filling in the rest, too, only it's not the original story.

It's mine.

Devon opens his mouth to respond, but he doesn't seem to have any words. He just stares at the book in stunned silence.

I flip through the pages faster and faster, skimming enough to realize this isn't just some strange coincidence. The book has literally become my life story, recounting everything I experienced since I arrived in Raul's world, down to the smallest details.

My heart pounds as I skim faster, taking care to skip over the smutty parts since I'm pretty sure Devon doesn't need any of those mental images—and I don't particularly need him to have them, either—only to find the story cuts off abruptly after I stormed out of Raul's room.

There's nothing else, no more text magically writing itself. Just blank pages waiting to be filled.

"What the hell?" Devon cries, his voice increasingly panicked. "How is that possible? How did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything," I tell him, leaping up from the couch. "It's this book. I don't know how or why but it's... fucking magic or something, and when I went into a coma, I wasn't just asleep. I went here,"

I say, jabbing the pages with my finger. "I went into *The Wolf's Mate*, and I became the main character somehow. Raul and Lenore, Trent and Mina, and all the others—they were there. I met them. Everyone except Catalina."

Devon listens as I speak, and despite what we both just saw with our own eyes, I can see the logical side of his brain—the side that's always been dominant—taking over. He shakes his head. "Brad, listen to yourself. That's insane. It's just a book."

"You think I don't know how it sounds?" I ask. "But it's true. How else do you explain what you just saw? What's right there on the fucking page," I say, holding it out to him.

He winces a little, like he wants to look away, but he can't. "I don't know, but there has to be a rational explanation."

"For fuck's sake, enough with your rational bullshit," I growl, pacing the length of the couch so I don't throw the book. "You know what you saw, and I know what I experienced. I was only out for a few days here, but it was over a month in there. Everything felt real. The passage of time, the people, the food, the weather, everything."

Being knotted by a giant werewolf...

Especially that.

But I'm not about to discuss that with my literal brother.

Devon hesitates, but I can tell he's at least considering my words. Like he has any other choice. "Say I believe any of that is even possible," he says, pressing a hand to his temple like it causes him great pain just to entertain the thought. For a guy who spends all day with his head in a fantasy, he's annoyingly grounded. "You really expect me to believe you, what, replaced Catalina in the story somehow? *You?*"

I shrug. "I'm not saying I understand it, but yeah, that's what happened."

"So where is Catalina?" he demands.

I hesitate, because that's honestly something I hadn't really considered. My bad. "Uh... I don't know. Poof? She was kind of a... what's the word? A Betty Boop?"

"A Mary Sue?" he asks, raising an eyebrow. "You know that's a completely outdated misogynistic term, right?"

"What, like Batman isn't one?" I challenge. "Besides, if anything's misogynistic, it's having a main character with zero personality who exists to think about Raul's abs, shit on the other women in the book for no reason, and get rescued all the time by the dudes."

"Okay, Mr. Tough Guy, and what did you do when Constantine came knocking?" Devon asks, folding his arms. I read this damn book in an attempt to end a fight with him and now we're arguing about it.

"I didn't get to that part yet," I admit with a shrug. "But I got a plan. Pop a few silver bullets into a Glock and load a Super Soaker up with holy water for good measure. Bang bang, squirt squirt, motherfucker's dead and they all lived happily ever after, bitch."

Devon's expression goes blank once more, but this time, it's more irritation than disbelief. "You are such an idiot," he mutters, but I can see the wheels turning behind his eyes. "I just don't get it. I'm the one who's read the book a hundred times over. Why you?"

"Oh, so that's what this is," I scoff. "You do believe it. You're just pissed it was me and not you."

I can tell from the way his nostrils flare and his face turns red hot I struck a nerve. "Fuck you."

"Look, you're the brains here," I reason, trying to diffuse the situation before it turns into another one of our legendary fights. "You help me figure out a way to get back and we can both go. Trust me, Curtis is more your type anyway."

His eyes narrow slightly, and he's watching me with suspicion. "You actually want to go back?"

"So you believe me?" I ask hopefully.

"No!" he snaps with a grimace. "I'm just... Let's pretend for a second I do. Why would you want to go back there? Especially if you're a stand-in for Catalina, which means you were..." He trails off and I don't like the conspiratorial look in his eyes. "Wait, you were an omega?"

Now it's my face that's turning red.

"Wait, what?" Devon asks with a laugh that would make any evil villain wince. "Are you fucking serious? Then that means you and Raul....?"

"We're not having this conversation," I say through my teeth.

"The hell we're not," he says with a firmness I'm not used to from him. At all. "You're asking me to help you do something that's literally impossible, so you're going to give me the full story. All of it."

"You want the full story?" I ask, holding the book out to him. "Here it is. All of it."

Devon hesitates a moment before he takes the book from my hands, and I feel like I'm handing a part of my soul over, but I have to just sit with that uncomfortable feeling as he scans through the pages. He's always been a fast reader, and I can tell when he gets to the sexy parts by the way he grimaces, but he chugs through it just like I do whenever Magic Mike brings the punch to a party.

By the time he reaches the middle of the book, he looks a little paler as he looks up at me, his expression a mixture of disbelief, shock, and resignation. "You... really lived through all that?" he asks, his voice faltering.

"Yeah," I answer. As vulnerable as it feels to have let him read all that, I know I don't have any other choice. "You're the only person I trust. The only person who could possibly understand what all this means to me. What... he means."

His gaze softens slightly, even though I can tell there's a part of him that's still a bit bitter. And I can't say I blame him. I'm the one living his fantasy, after all.

"Are you even bi?" he finally asks.

I hesitate, because I'm not sure what the answer to that is myself. "I... don't know what I am," I admit. "I just know the way he makes me feel. And I know how I've felt ever since I got back here. When I

was in there, all I wanted to do was get back here. To make things right with you, mostly, and now...."

"All you want is to get back to him," Devon says softly.

"Yeah," I sigh, running a hand through my short hair. "Pretty crazy, huh?"

"Oh, that's an understatement," he says in a wry tone. "But I think I actually believe it, so I guess that makes me crazy, too."

I feel the first burst of hope since we started this conversation. Conversation, argument, it's kind of all the same between brothers. Twins, especially. "So you'll help me?"

"I... yeah. I guess I will," he says, like he's questioning his own sanity. And fair enough. "Before you get too excited, I have no fucking idea how to do that."

"Well, you're in the same boat as me, then," I say, looking down at the book in his hands. "But you're right about one thing. If sheer obsession was enough to make this shit happen, you should've been the one to get sucked into the book. Which means the book itself has to be the key to all of this. There's gotta be something about it that made me the one to get trapped inside."

"Okay, so we figure out what's special about the magic book," Devon agrees, taking a deep breath like he always does when he's in over his head but determined to prove the third-grade teacher that put him in the gifted class and me on a "likely to eat glue" watchlist correct. "How hard can that be?"

"That's the spirit," I say even though deep down, I think we're probably screwed. But I've gotta try anyway. No matter what the rest of those blank pages hold in the future, I can't let this be the way our story ends.

CHAPTER 6

RAUL



The scent of tension and worry fills the air as I stand in the front hall of the mansion, filling Lenore and Curtis in on everything I have planned. I can't help the tightness in my chest as I announce that I've called a meeting with the Council and asked for Blue Fang to be present. War looms over our heads like a dark, stormy cloud that's ready to unleash chaos at any moment.

"Raul," Lenore says, even more somber than usual. "Are you sure this is the best idea? We could send scouts to pass the territory lines undercover."

"I've thought of that," I admit. "But if Brad is on Blue Fang territory, he would have been captured by now. And I need to get to the inner pack to be able to pick up his scent. As long as Blue Fang is still pretending to want peace with the Council, they'll have no choice but to accept our invitation to host the meeting."

"Fine," Lenore sighs. "I'll ready a security team. Just in case."

It's more of a likelihood than a possibility once Blue Fang's alpha finds out I'm claiming a Blue Fang omega as my mate, but I decide not to argue the point.

"This is going to be a bloodbath," Curtis mutters, never one to mince words. "But I'm with you, Raul. Brad's part of our pack now. We have to do everything we can to protect him."

"Thank you," I say, grateful for their support.

I just hope it's going to be enough. I'll rip the Blue Fang alpha's throat out in front of the damn Council if I have to, but I'd rather avoid outright war if possible.

Just then, Trent emerges from wherever he's been. I already sent Mina and Hannah away just in case Blue Fang decides to go on the offensive, so he has relatively free roam of the mansion now. If he wanted to escape, he would have done so on our roadtrip, and he knows he's not getting out of here without someone noticing.

"I want to come with you," he says.

"You can't be serious," Lenore scoffs. "As soon as Blue Fang gets their hands on you again, they'll kill you. And if they don't, Constantine will."

"I don't care," Trent says steadily. "If it means getting Brad back, do whatever you want with me. Offer me as a bargaining chip."

I stare at him in stunned silence. For a beta, he's pretty damn ballsy.

"You do understand that's essentially a death sentence," I say slowly. "Blue Fang isn't going to just let you go after this. They'll make an example of you."

"I don't care," Trent says again. "As long as Brad is safe."

I'm floored by his bravery. Or stupidity. Maybe both.

But he's right—if it comes down to it, I can definitely use him as a bargaining chip.

"You have my word," I tell him. "I'll do what I can to protect you. But if it comes down to it..."

He nods in understanding. "Let's go, then. The sooner we find him, the better."



ONCE BLUE FANG agreed to accept our invitation—grudgingly, I'm sure—I find myself standing in the Blue Fang pack hall with Lenore, Curtis, Kyle, Matthew, and Trent, who's bound in handcuffs to make him look like a proper prisoner. Even if he has somewhat elevated his status above that, thanks to the sacrifice he was willing to make in the interest of getting Brad back.

The Council sits before us, seated around a dais, waiting to mediate the matter between packs. Even if I am the regional Alpha, I'm still bound by laws and customs. I'll break every last one of them if I have to in order to get him back.

The Blue Fang alpha, Liam, saunters into the hall, flanked by his betas. He's tall and broad, with icy blue eyes and a perpetual sneer. I haven't seen him in years, but I feel a familiar hatred well within me.

Just like his father, he's a snake who's always playing both sides, never wanting to commit to either.

Evidently, he's finally chosen one.

"Alpha Raul," he says with a mocking bow. "To what do we owe the pleasure?" His gaze slides to Trent, cuffed at my side. "And what's this? You've brought us a gift?"

"Not exactly," I say calmly. Inside, I'm seething. "I've called this meeting to discuss the omega you stole from my territory. I want Brad back, and I'm prepared to go to war to get him if I must."

Liam's eyes widen briefly before his expression smooths over. "Brad?" he asks with a bitter laugh. "If we're speaking of the same omega, he's a Blue Fang wolf, born and raised. And he's been missing for over a month. I suppose now I'm looking at the primary suspect?"

"He's not really a wolf," I counter pointedly. "Is he?"

I can tell from the look on Liam's face that isn't something he's expecting me to know. Let alone express to the Council. He acts as if he's ashamed, which fills me with rage. His eyes narrow and he

takes a step forward, hackles rising.

"What are you implying?" he growls.

"Brad isn't a wolf shifter," I say calmly. "He's human. And he came to my territory terrified, and begging for sanctuary from you and your pack."

That isn't quite the truth, but Blue Fang won't hesitate to lie, so why should I?

"Now, I'm going to ask you again," I continue. "Where is he?"

"Even if I did know, why the hell is it any of your business?" Liam snarls. "He's a Blue Fang omega."

"Because he's my mate," I reply, staring Liam down.

The room goes silent, everyone waiting for the next move in this high-stakes game.

Liam's eyes widen in disbelief. "You liar!"

"Why do you sound so upset, Liam?" I taunted. "Is it because you've already planned on mating him off? To the greatest enemy of the Council you claimed to wish to join as recently as last year, no less?"

The color drains from his face, and I know I have him. The Council whispers amongst themselves, appalled, as Liam looks like he's fumbling for a way to salvage this.

"This is nothing more than lies and hearsay, but who I choose to ally my pack with is none of your concern," he hisses.

"It is when you're marrying my mate off to do it," I reply coolly.

"He doesn't belong to you!" Liam roars.

"Brad is my destined mate," I say, meeting his furious gaze evenly. "I imprinted on him. And as such, I'm calling upon the ancient statute that allows an alpha to search another pack's territory to retrieve their mate if they believe them to be in danger or against their will. Considering your pending application to join the Council lands, you will assent. Unless you wish to rescind your membership and acknowledge your allegiance to the enemy."

Liam sputters in outrage. "You can't do that!"

I turn to the Council, ignoring his little tantrum since he doesn't have a leg to stand on and we both know it. "Will you grant me leave to search the Blue Fang territory for my mate?"

Whether they approve or not, it's happening, but I'd rather take the easy route.

The Council murmurs amongst themselves before turning to Liam. "Do you deny this alpha's claim of his destined mate?" the eldest asks.

Liam hesitates, as if he knows that's going to be as good as a declaration of war. "I do not *deny* it," he says, clearly pained. "Nor do I affirm it. But the fact remains there is a missing omega, and if he truly isn't in either of our custody, then that matter should be resolved before evaluating the merits of such a

claim."

"Then we agree on something," I say pointedly. "And you should have no reason to refuse a search of your pack. In good faith."

"Of course," Liam says through his teeth. "But I must insist on a search of Stone Hollow as well. In the interest of fairness. For all I know, *you* could be hiding him."

The Council looks to me as if expecting me to refuse.

"I have no objection," I answer. "I speak the truth."

"And the prisoner must be returned," Liam says, his gaze turning on Trent, equally cold and calculating. "We require an exchange for the omega, should he be found and your claim proves true."

My eyes find Trent, who stands proud despite his captivity. He's been a thorn in my side since his arrival, but I can't deny the courage it takes to face a potential death sentence for the sake of someone he cares about.

"Fine, if it comes to that," I say reluctantly. "But not yet. Not until we find Brad."

Trent seems surprised, but relieved. I'm not handing him over unless I have no other choice, for Brad's sake. And I'm honor-bound to do that much after everything Trent has done to help me find him.

"It's settled, then," says Nona, the female alpha currently acting as the head of the Council. "Representatives from each pack will be permitted to search the territory of Stone Hollow and Blue Fang. Any findings will be reported directly to myself and to the Council."

Liam nods, though he's clearly furious. I keep my expression neutral. Let him think he's won this round. If he is hiding Brad, all the bluffing in the world won't do him any good.

And if he isn't...

The thought is too troubling to go down that road before it's necessary.

CHAPTER 7



I sit on the floor in the spare room at the frat house, staring at the magic circle Devon set up. It's hard to believe it's been a week since we started trying to get me back into the book, and I'm starting to doubt this whole process.

The Wolf's Mate lies in the center of the circle, taunting me with its glossy depiction of Raul, gleaming golden eyes and all.

God, he's hot. I thought if anything, being back in the real world would help me shake off these feelings, but nope.

They're still there, stubborn and gay as ever.

"Devon," I say, frustration lacing my voice, "are you sure this is going to work? It feels like we've tried a hundred times already."

He glances at me with that nerdy determination he's always had. "We're trying to get you into a book, Brad. There's no exact science here. But I did find a spell that claims to let you shift into another reality, which is what I think you did somehow." He pauses and smirks. "And the only other way to do that is to recreate how you did it the first time and run you over with a truck. You want to try *that* again?"

It was actually a sedan, but no way in hell am I going to remind him of that.

"Alright, alright," I grumble. "Light the fucking candle already."

With a nod, Devon lights the candle in the center of the circle, and we join hands to recite the incantation in the book. As the words leave my mouth, I can tell they're not quite right, and apparently, so can Devon.

"You're mispronouncing it," Devon says.

"How the fuck am I supposed to know how to pronounce this shit when it's all made up?" I snap.

Devon rolls his eyes. "Are you kidding me? Latin is real! Did you think it was just some fantasy language they made up for movies like *Elvish* or something?"

I shrug, feeling my cheeks heat up. "I thought it was like all those Enya songs."

Groaning, Devon says, "At this rate, we're going to summon a demon instead of getting you into that book."

"Well we can't all be geniuses," I mutter.

Devon squeezes my hand. "Just focus, okay? Try to repeat after me, slowly."

I take a deep breath and nod. The candle flickers, casting dancing shadows over the walls. As Devon speaks the words of the incantation again, I do my best to mimic the syllables.

My heart hammers against my ribs and I feel kind of queasy, but that's probably just a side effect of all the magic we've been doing.

That and the chicken-fried steak I ate for breakfast.

We continue through the incantation, my pronunciation getting slightly better, though still far from perfect. The candlelight flickers more intensely now, and I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, this time it will work.

"Et in alteram dimensionem me transferre," Devon finishes with a flourish.

"Et in... uh, alteram di...mensionem me transferre," I echo, stumbling through the last phrase and hoping it's close enough to work.

"Good enough," Devon says, though he doesn't sound very convinced. The candlelight flickers wildly, casting eerie shadows across our faces. My heart pounds even faster, anticipation building in my chest.

This could be it. I might finally get back to Raul.

The flickering intensifies, but then the candle goes out as suddenly as it started, leaving us in darkness.

"Dammit!" I yell, dropping Devon's hand. "This isn't working!"

"Brad, calm down," Devon says. "Like I said, magic isn't an exact science. We just have to keep trying."

"We've been trying for over a week!" I run a hand through my hair, frustration boiling inside me. The anger is a mask for the panic, which is a hell of a lot worse.

What if I'm stuck here forever?

What if I never get to see Raul again?

"Uh, what are you guys doing?"

I look up to find Reese watching us from the open doorway, his eyes wide with curiosity.

To be fair, between the summoning circle Devon set up and the candle, this looks pretty weird. Not the weirdest thing he's ever walked in on in the frat house by a long shot, but weird.

"Ritual magic," I say, because it's easier than coming up with a lie.

"Cool," Reese says without missing a beat. "My sister's a witch."

"No, your sister just shops at Urban Outfitters," Devon says pointedly.

Reese shrugs, unfazed. "Can you guys do a spell to help me pass biology?"

Devon rolls his eyes. "Even magic has its limits."

"Worth a shot." Reese grins. "You guys want snacks or what?"

Devon looks like he's about to say no when my stomach rumbles loudly. I haven't eaten since breakfast in my haste to get back to the spell. "Hell yeah, we want snacks," I say. "Can you bring that mango salsa and the pork rinds?"

Reese looks horrified. "You want to eat those *together*?"

"Hey, don't knock it till you try it."

"Alright, whatever floats your boat, man." Reese shrugs and leaves to fetch the snacks.

"We've gotta be doing something wrong," I say, flipping through one of the billion printouts Devon got from online.

"Clearly," Devon says dryly. "I still can't believe you told Reese we were doing magic."

"What was I supposed to say?" I protest. "He saw the circle and the candle!"

"I don't know, literally anything else?" Devon suggests. "Like we're filming a movie, or it's an art project, or--"

"Reese wouldn't have bought any of that," I say. "He knows I hate art."

"You *hate* art?" Devon asks in a flat tone.

"Yeah, it's just a bunch of rich snobs trying to pass off stacks of empty bean cans as some big statement on humanity," I say, waving my hands around. "That and all those pictures of imaginary apes people are selling for millions of dollars online when you can just right click and download the same shit. BLTs or whatever."

"Pretty sure they're NFTs, but there's no telling with you," Devon says with a sigh.

"My point is, Reese is chill," I tell him. "He's not gonna give a shit if we're trying to bring back the dead."

"If you say so."

Devon wasn't exactly thrilled when he found out I was joining Kappa Nu freshman year, and before my accident, he avoided the frat house like the plague, so I'm not really surprised he's wary.

"You know," he says suddenly, "if even Reese is side-eyeing your food choices, maybe you should reconsider."

"Salsa and pork rinds is a golden combo," I argue.

"Uh-huh," he says, cocking an eyebrow. "That's weird even for you. And you have been looking a little doughy lately."

"Fuck you," I say, lifting up my shirt and staring down at my six pack in indignation. Sure, it's not as shredded as usual, but I've been under a lot of stress. "I'm bulking!"

"Or you're pregnant," Devon reasons.

I feel a cold snap run down my spine. "Okay, double fuck you."

"I'm serious," says Devon. "You said you were an omega in the book, right? And you and Raul fucked. I'm assuming he knotted you, so...."

I look toward the open door in panic. "Would you keep your fucking voice down?" I hiss. "And I'm not pregnant!"

"How do you know?" he demands.

"For one thing, I'm back in the real world," I say, gesturing to the space around us. "And for another thing, I'm just not, so drop it."

"Okay, fine," he says, holding his hands up in surrender. "I'm just saying."

Reese comes back then, handing me the mango salsa and pork rinds. Judging from his chill demeanor, I'm pretty sure he didn't catch any of that.

I thank him and dig in eagerly, the savory and spicy flavors bursting on my tongue. Devon looks mildly disgusted, while Reese seems concerned, which I think is more insulting.

"I'll get outta your hair, then," Reese says, backing toward the door.

"Wait a sec," Devon calls, to both our surprise. "Actually, maybe having a third person would help. Maybe the problem is that we don't have enough energy with just the two of us."

"Uh, sure, as long as we're not summoning any demons or anything." Reese looks a bit wary as he eyes the magic circle on the floor.

Devon waves a hand dismissively. "Probably not."

I can tell that's not exactly comforting to Reese, but he's ride or die, so he sits down between us anyway. "What do I do?"

"Just join hands with us and repeat the incantation after me," Devon instructs.

Reese shrugs before taking both our hands. He actually does a pretty good job repeating the Latin after Devon, and Devon looks impressed.

"Not bad," Devon says. "How'd you learn to pronounce Latin so well?"

Reese shrugs. "Took it in high school. I met a hot girl on a trip to Spain and wanted to impress her."

Devon opens his mouth, probably to say something scathing, but then closes it and just sighs. "Never mind. Let's start the ritual."

We all hold hands, and I try to focus, pushing aside thoughts of Raul and our failed attempts so far as we recite the incantations again. If all the printouts I've skimmed, at least half of magic is about believing it will work. Kind of sucks for me, but I'm giving it my best shot.

The candles flicker a little, and for a second I think maybe it's working, but then nothing else happens.

Right back to where we started.

Reese looks around nervously, but seems to relax when he realizes nothing is going to come of it. We sit there in silence for a long moment before Reese lets go of our hands. "Sorry bros, but I gotta get to class."

"Thanks for trying," I tell him, clapping him on the shoulder. I can't help but feel the weight of disappointment settle down even harder than before.

"Maybe next time," Reese says, trying to be encouraging. "Kill a werewolf for me if the whole book thing works while I'm gone."

"Yeah, will do," I say, waving to him as he leaves.

"That was weird," Devon says, staring at the doorway where Reese just left.

"What, the candles flickering a little?" I ask.

Devon shakes his head. "No, not that. I mean the fact that you're willing to tell Reese you're trying to get into a book with witchcraft, which sounds insane, but not that you might be into a dude."

I feel my face heat up. "It's different, okay?" I mutter.

Devon narrows his eyes at me, clearly not letting it go. "Why is it different? You've always been supportive of me being gay."

"Because it just is!" I snap, frustration bubbling up inside me. "Can we drop it and get back to figuring out how to get back into this cliché fucking book so we can find Raul and rewrite the ending?"

Devon's eyes widen, and he grins. "Brad, you're a genius."

"Definitely the first time I've heard that," I say dryly.

"No, seriously," Devon says, leaning forward excitedly. "Maybe we've been going about this all wrong. We've been blaming the book itself for somehow transporting you into it, but maybe it's not the book. Maybe it's the person who wrote it."

"But this thing's sold what, a million copies?" I ask. "Pretty sure I'm the only person this has happened to."

If not, the idea of a bunch of other people getting their own version of Raul is enough to send me into a jealous rage, so I need to believe that's bullshit.

"Maybe," Devon says with a shrug. "But we need answers, and the best place to look is from the person who wrote the damn thing."

I glance down at the book cover and the name written in small white print beneath the title. Luna Daycrest.

"Something tells me that's not her legal name. How are we supposed to find her? It's not like the publisher is just gonna give her number out to some random dudes who think her characters are real people."

"We'll find her the same place you find every other author who's supposed to be writing," Devon says, taking out his phone. When I don't get it, he adds, "Social media. I already follow her Instagram, and... yep, she's posted six times today since lunch."

He offers me his phone and I scroll through all the pictures of cats, coffee, and quotes from her books. A few of them I recognize as shit Raul has said that's made me roll my eyes hard enough to get a headache, and those are the ones that get all the likes.

Figures.

"Damn, this chick posts a lot," I mumble, clicking on the profile picture. She's just a normal looking thirty-something woman with her dark hair piled up in a messy bun, holding the black cat that's in half her other pictures.

Maybe she is a witch, which would explain a lot. Not the reason she picked a random stranger to retcon her smutty shifter novel, but a lot.

"So what's the plan, you just send her a message and tell her the truth?" I ask.

"Uh, yeah, if we wanna get blocked and put on a blacklist for every book convention ever," Devon scoffs, taking the phone back. "But this post says she's doing a signing in New Haven on the fifteenth. If we can get her to look at this clearly fucked up version of her book, maybe we can convince her to listen."

"Won't she just think we messed with it, though?" I asked.

"Maybe," he agrees. "But I got her to sign it before, and it's a special edition, so I'm hoping that counts for something."

"Yeah," I say, afraid to get my hopes up. "I guess it's worth a shot."

It's not like we have any better options.

CHAPTER 8



The air is thick with the scent of fresh ink and nervous anticipation as Devon and I make our way through the crowded New Haven bookstore. Weaving between the excited fans, we finally reach the signing table for Luna Daycrest's new book series, which seems to be all anyone is talking about, judging from the bright orange banners featuring the cover that are plastered all over the damn store.

"Her publisher is really pushing this new series hard," Devon mutters, eyeing the stacks of shiny covers that read *River of Light and Shadow*. "I wish they'd done the same for *The Wolf's Mate*."

"Hey, look," I say, spotting a small stack of *The Wolf's Mate* books on her signing table. "At least it's here, right?"

"Yeah, but there hasn't been a sequel yet," Devon says with a sigh. "And the fan base for the new series is so much bigger."

"Is it any good?" I ask, trying to gauge if it's worth all the hype.

"Maybe for some people," Devon says with a shrug. "But I'm not a fan. It doesn't have the same heart, you know? *The Wolf's Mate* was special."

"Yeah, tell me about it," I mumble.

"Alright, it's our turn," Devon announces as we approach the signing desk.

Luna looks pretty much like she did in her profile picture. She's a cute if frazzled-looking woman with her hair pulled up in a messy bun on top of her head and glasses perched on her nose.

She definitely looks like someone who might moonlight as a witch.

She greets us with a kind smile. "Hi there! What can I sign for you?"

I wait for Devon to answer, but he's just standing there frozen, clutching *The Wolf's Mate* to his chest as he stares at her in starstruck awe.

I guess it's up to me to take the lead. "Actually," I say, gently nudging Devon with my elbow, "this copy of *The Wolf's Mate* has already been signed. But we were hoping you could take a look inside."

Luna raises an eyebrow, clearly confused but intrigued. "Sure," she says, taking the book from Devon's unresisting hands. As she flips through the pages, her eyes widen. "What's going on? This isn't the book I wrote."

"Uh, yeah, we were hoping you could tell us," I say, trying to keep my voice casual even though my heart is pounding in my chest.

Luna's agent clears her throat impatiently off to the side, obviously wanting her to hurry through the line of people waiting for their books to be signed.

"Sorry, but I really have to move on to the other fans," Luna says, handing the book back to Devon, who still hasn't managed to find his voice.

"Please," I plead. "I know this is weird, but if you can just give us five minutes of your time, I promise it'll be worth it."

Luna hesitates, her eyes flicking between me and my brother, who finally seems to be regaining some semblance of composure. Luna's curiosity seems to win out, though, because after a moment she nods and lowers her voice like she doesn't want the agent to hear.

"Meet me downstairs at the coffee shop after I finish up here."

Devon breathes a sigh of relief as we step away from the signing table. "I can't believe she actually agreed to talk to us," he says, clutching the book to his chest like it's a life preserver and he's struggling in the middle of the ocean as an extra in *Sharknado Ninety-Five*.

"Yeah, no thanks to you," I grumble. "What the hell was that back there?"

Devon flushes, looking away. "I know, I'm sorry. I just... I couldn't believe I was actually meeting her. She's my favorite author."

"Well, get it together," I hiss. "This might be our only chance to get some answers and convince her to help us."

Devon nods, taking a deep breath. "Yeah, you're right. I'll be fine once I get some coffee."

"Better spike it with Bailey's," I add.

He rolls his eyes.

We mill around the store for a bit before heading downstairs to the coffee shop. Getting Devon onto the escalator and away from all the book displays he keeps wandering over to is like herding cats.

We order at the cafe, and I resist the urge to try everything behind the glass counter because even though we grabbed some burgers on the road before we came here, I'm still starving.

Deep down, I keep wondering if Devon is right about the whole pregnancy thing, but I can't even let myself entertain the thought of what's gonna happen if I'm pregnant on this side of reality with no way back. That thought is enough of a constant presence in the back of my mind that I resist the urge to grab a couple of beers, though.

Fuck my life.

Both of them.

I keep my eyes peeled on the escalator as we wait—and wait—but as the crowd begins to dwindle, I find myself wondering if Luna snuck out the backdoor. Not that I could really blame her, and we haven't even gotten to the crazy shit yet.

"There she is!" Devon whispers, his spine stiffening as he looks at me. "Is my hair okay? Do I look chill?"

"Your hair is fine, but you're a little to the left of chill. More like someone shoved a frozen crowbar up your ass," I inform him.

He scowls, but doesn't have time to retort before Luna spots us and approaches the table, looking understandably wary. Her eyes flick between us and the book on the table, and she licks her lips before speaking.

"Hey," she says cautiously as she stands by the empty seat at the table.

I give her a nod and Devon squeaks out a greeting, clearing his throat when his voice comes out an octave too high.

"Thanks for coming," I say, since it's clear I'm gonna have to be the one to do the talking. Again.

Luna slides into the seat across from us, eyeing the book like it might bite. "Sure. I don't have long, but... what's going on here exactly?"

I slide the book over to her, nudging it across the table. "Take a closer look. Just uh, avoid pages thirty-six through forty-eight."

Her brows furrow as she pulls the book closer, flipping through the pages. "Like I said before, this is definitely not the book I wrote."

"No, but it's the book you signed," I say, flipping back to the first page where her signature and note to Devon sits just below the title.

She blinks at the page, then looks up at me sharply. "What is this? Did you rewrite my book?"

"Not exactly," I say, leaning forward. Devon spent the whole drive lecturing me on letting him do all the talking, but he's still staring at her like he's a moth and she's the fucking sun, so we're gonna do things my way. "Look, this is gonna sound crazy, but that book sucked me in."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," she says with an awkward smile.

"No, I mean it *literally* sucked me in," I counter, and Devon snaps out of whatever trance he's in to give me a wide-eyed look, as if to say I'm jumping into the deep end too fast. But I don't have time to tip-toe around the subject. "Like a damn portal, Luna. One minute, I'm driving down the highway listening to Zeppelin and the next, I get creamed by a drunk asshole and wake up in your book."

She stares at me blankly for a few seconds, her jaw kind of slack, and to be fair, I guess I don't really know what she's supposed to say to that.

I was kind of banking on her being responsible for all this directly and hoping she'd fess up, but it's

clear from her stunned reaction she's either got an even better career laid out for her as an actor than an author, or she's just as clueless as we are.

When she finally speaks, her voice is wavering a little and she's giving me the look everyone gives me lately. The one that says they think I've lost my marbles.

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible."

"Is it?" I challenge. "Because I got about a hundred pages that says otherwise."

"You could have just had this printed," she protests, tapping the book cover. "There's no way to prove it's the same book."

"It's a special edition," Devon chimes in, finally. Better late than never, I guess.

Luna blinks at him. "What?"

"The gold foil cover?" Devon prompts. "With the reflective wolf eyes? You only sell those on your website and at signings. And it's personalized. See?" He taps the page, pointing out her loopy signature. "You wrote that at the signing in Boston last year. And all the chapter headings are gilded. It's gotta be one you sold."

Her eyes narrow, but I can see the gears turning in her head. She's not stupid. If she really didn't have anything to do with this, the only other explanation is that we're telling the truth. And that's not exactly an easy pill to swallow.

After a long moment, she lets out a breath and rubs at her temples. "Okay. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that I believe you." Her gaze flicks between us, suspicious. "What exactly do you want from me?"

"Answers," I say bluntly. "How the hell did I end up in your stupid book? And more importantly, how do I get back?"

"I--I have no idea what you're even talking about," she says. There's a note of hesitation in her voice this time that immediately pings my bullshit radar.

She's lying.

I narrow my eyes at her. "Cut the crap. I know you did something. A spell or something."

I can tell Devon is ready to step in and do damage control, but Luna turns a bit paler, and that's all the confirmation I need.

"There's no fucking way," she mumbles, seemingly more to herself than to us. She shakes her head and looks up at us with wide, panicked eyes.

"Yes fucking way," I counter, leaning forward with my arms on the table as I stab the book's pages with my finger. "You know something. Case in point, you not being willing to meet my eyes, which according to you is practically a lie detector test, so fess up, sis."

"Okay, look," she blurts out with a grimace. "I was drunk, and I have this old grimoire, and I thought, you know, maybe it could help boost sales or something. But spells aren't real." She laughs, a bit

hysterically. "They're not real. None of it's real."

There's a bitter edge to those last words I can't quite make sense of, but I don't have time to dwell on it.

"Except I lived it," I say flatly. "Every fucking second of it. Getting claimed by your werewolf wet dream, dealing with all the pack drama, and oh yeah, going into heat."

If possible, Luna's face goes even paler, now tinged with pink. She opens and closes her mouth a few times, clearly at a loss for words. Finally she blurts out, "You're serious."

"Do I look like someone who wants to make this shit up?" I demand, gesturing toward myself up and down.

She hesitates. "I..."

"We know how it sounds," Devon interjects, a little calmer. "But it's the truth. I don't know how, but if you did some kind of spell at the same time Brad had his accident, you have to admit, that's kind of a weird coincidence."

Luna doesn't seem to know what to say to that. She stares down at the table, chewing on her lip. "I never meant for anything to actually happen," she says quietly. "Definitely not *that*."

"This spell," Devon begins. He's clearly having better luck getting through to her, so I decide to just let him talk. "What was it?"

"It's just a spell from my grandmother's grimoire," she answers, like that's something everyone's Nana has laying around up in the attic. "She was into all that stuff, and I used to be too, when I was little, but I haven't done anything like that in years. It never worked before."

"Your grandma has a book of spells that transport random dudes into other worlds to get buttfucked by monster dick?" I ask flatly.

Luna and Devon both stare at me in horror.

"No!" she cries, raking back a few stray hairs that have fallen out of her bun. "No, it was just a stupid love spell! Kind of..."

"A love spell?" Devon asks. "Don't those only work on people?"

She shrugs. "The grimoire just said it was a spell to make something as real to other people as it is to you. A lot of it was in Latin, but that was the gist."

"Fucking Latin," I groan, burying my head in my hands.

Devon gives me a look before turning back to her. "Go on. Tell us why you did the spell, please."

She hesitates. "I was just...upset. After *The Wolf's Mate* flopped, my agent started pushing me to write something more marketable, and she already had me rewrite *The Wolf's Mate*, like, a hundred times to make Catalina 'more relatable.'"

"Well, that explains a lot," I mutter.

Devon gives me a death glare. "What do you mean, *The Wolf's Mate* flopped?" he asks. "People love it!"

"Yeah, the people who read it," she says, leaning back in her chair with a sullen expression. "I still haven't come anywhere close to earning out my advance, and *River of Light and Shadow* did so well right out of the gate that the publisher immediately wanted to lock me into a five-book series."

"That sounds like a good thing, right?" I venture.

She sighs. "Yeah, it... it is. I'm grateful for the book's success, don't get me wrong, I just..."

"*The Wolf's Mate* was special," Devon offers. There's sincerity in his tone that clearly hits the mark, judging from Luna's smile.

"Yeah," she says quietly. "It is. To me, at least. Anyway, I thought maybe I could convince the publisher to do a sequel based on the new series's success, but they decided to shelve it instead because it 'didn't do numbers.'"

"So you turned to witchcraft?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"I was desperate," she says with a defensive note in her voice. "And drunk. Like I said, I haven't done anything like that in a long time and my mom always acted like my grandmother was crazy. Hell, I thought she was, too, until..."

"Until your spell worked," I finish. "Maybe not the way you intended, but oh, it fucking worked."

Luna winces. "Look, I'm sorry for whatever happened to you, but there's no way it could actually be connected to that spell. Magic isn't real."

"You trying to convince yourself or me, lady?" I ask. "Because I already know what I experienced, and no one's telling me otherwise."

"What do you want me to do?" she demands.

"I want to go back," I answer, shocking myself with how easily that answer comes out of my mouth, even now. I look over at Devon and nod. "And I'm taking him with me."

Luna gives a dry, awkward laugh. "You *want* to go back? Why?"

"To clean up your mess, for one thing," I answer, ignoring Devon's face, which is ten times louder than my voice has ever gotten even at my angriest. "I mean, come on, you killed off *Trent*. He's fucking adorable."

"I didn't want to!" she cries. "That wasn't in the first version of the book, but the publisher thought too many people would ship him with Catalina and it would undercut the ending. Same with Lenore and Raul."

"Wait, what?" I blurt out, looking up so fast I get whiplash. "You killed *Lenore* off?"

"He hasn't finished the book yet," Devon says with a grimace.

"Sorry for the spoiler," Luna sighs, folding her arms. "The publisher didn't want any 'romantic

competition' for Catalina, and the original beta readers liked her better."

"Yeah, no shit. *She* actually has a personality," I shoot back. "And she's not a perpetual damsel in distress."

"Hey, Catalina was originally a badass," Luna protests, her eyes flashing with irritation. "She was supposed to be the one who killed Constantine in *my* ending."

"Seriously?" Devon asks, his eyes growing wide.

He's enjoying this way too much.

"Yeah, she had a whole character arc where she challenges Raul's overprotectiveness and tells him she's not going to trade one prison for a gilded cage just because she loves him," Luna says, waving her hand in the air.

"Yeah, we've definitely had that talk," I mumble. When they both stare at me, I clear my throat. "So, you're telling me Catalina was actually interesting before your publisher neutered her into a stereotype?"

Luna winces. "I guess you could put it that way. I tried to push back on some things, but..." She shrugs helplessly. "I thought they were sacrifices I had to make to get my story and the characters I love out into the world. Even if it didn't really feel like my story anymore. But it's not like it mattered anyway. The series is still over."

Devon falls silent, and even I'm starting to feel kind of bad. I was expecting to find some mastermind responsible for both my problems and my inability to return to them. Despite the fact that Luna's a successful author with a lucrative book deal and a metric shit ton of fans, she just seems like someone who's grieving the loss of people who are real to her, even if they aren't to anyone else, and a world she'd rather live in than this one.

And I can relate to that more than I want to.

"Look, Luna," I say, trying to be less of an asshole, considering now I'm pretty sure she didn't do any of this on purpose. "I know this is all a lot to take in, and trust me, it's just as crazy for us. But we're not trying to mess with you or anything. We're just trying to figure this out, same as you. You have to admit that something weird is going on with your book, and maybe we can help each other."

Luna looks between Devon and me, her eyes betraying a mix of fear and curiosity. "I don't know how I can help you," she admits quietly.

"The grimoire, for one thing," I say. "Even if you don't know how I ended up in *The Wolf's Mate*, you're the one who put me there, which means you can do it again."

"But I wasn't trying," she argues. "Clearly, I don't know what I'm doing."

"Maybe not," I agree, getting another filthy look from Devon, Patron Saint of Luna. "But you *are* a witch, and your magic works. That's somewhere to start."

She doesn't say anything at first, and I can tell she's either actually starting to consider my words, or on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Seems like it could go either way, really.

Before she can answer, her phone buzzes and she jolts hard enough to lend more credibility to the nervous breakdown theory. She glances down at her phone and sighs. "My agent is asking where I am. Look, I have to go."

"Wait," Devon pleads, snatching a napkin from the holder on the table and scribbling down his number before offering it to her. "You don't have to decide anything right now, but please, just take this and call us if you change your mind."

She hesitates a few seconds before taking the napkin and reluctantly stuffing it into her messenger bag. "I don't know what I can do, but... I'll think about it." Her gaze travels between me and Devon. "It was nice meeting you."

"Likewise," I say, because even if she is the one that totally fucked up my life, she's also the one who invented the man I love.

And just like that, it hits me like getting creamed by that car all over again.

I love him.

Luna casts one last glance at the book like it's going to reach out and grab her before hurrying away.

As we watch her disappear into the crowd, Devon lets out a heavy sigh beside me. "That could have gone better."

"Yeah, well, it coulda gone worse." I scrub a hand down my face, still reeling from the revelation that had nothing to do with Luna. "How was I supposed to know she'd be so twitchy?"

"I don't know, maybe because she's a writer?" Devon asks pointedly. "They're notoriously neurotic. You have to be gentle."

I just grunt an acknowledgment. "Closest I've ever been is that film prof I banged last semester."

"Let's just get out of here," Devon says with a heavy sigh.

"Sure," I mutter. "Let's go."

I reach for the book and tuck it into the lining of my jacket, because it's become my lifeline to a world I never expected to miss as much as I do.

A world I'd give absolutely fucking anything to get back to.

CHAPTER 9



I find myself scowling as I stand in Brad's childhood bedroom. Lenore, Curtis, and the rest of our search team have been combing through the Blue Fang pack's territory for the last several hours, and I'm sure Stone Hollow will be a wreck by the time we get back, if for no other reason than retribution.

I don't even care. They won't find access to any sensitive information, and I've moved all the vulnerable members of our pack well out of range.

So far, my search hasn't been any more productive than theirs will be. There's no sign of Brad. Trent is with us, his hands still bound to keep up appearances that he's still my prisoner, because he knows this place better than anyone. He's the one who led us to Brad's house, but there's no sign of him here, either.

For the moment, I'm alone in Brad's room. Or at least, I've been told it's his room even though there's a notable lack of evidence. The rest of the house is empty, but this room in particular fills me with a strange sense of unease.

It's too tidy. Too impersonal. Brad somehow managed to turn his room at the mansion into an explosion of laundry and pure chaos within a few days of arriving, but this place looks like it was staged for a magazine spread even though he supposedly left it somewhat recently.

There are no dirty clothes tossed haphazardly in the corner, no half-empty protein shake containers. I suppose his mother could have cleaned the room since he left, but there are still no posters on the wall, no footballs, no sign of his personality or interests anywhere.

The walls are a light shade of *pink*, for fuck's sake.

Is this some kind of joke? The only thing that keeps me from assuming the pack is fucking with us is that Trent insisted it was the right place, and there are photos in the downstairs living room, a few of which have Brad in them. But even the Brad in those photos looks...off, somehow. His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

Just like this room, there's nothing of him in those photographs aside from his physical appearance. It's a bizarre, uncanny thing and despite the fact that I swiped one of the smaller photographs I'm hoping no one misses, I find it hard to look at. It somehow fills me with an even deeper ache than his

absence has already left within me, like a part of my soul has been scooped out.

I walk over to the dresser across the room and sort through stacks of plain white T-shirts and jeans, like he's some cartoon character who only ever wore the same outfit.

What the hell...?

I yank open another drawer and find a single item—a delicate silver necklace with a heart-shaped locket that's clearly designed for a woman.

Brad wouldn't touch this with a ten-foot pole. It's like a remnant left over from when someone cleared out the things that once belonged to the room's original occupant and forgot they left it behind. It doesn't belong here.

Neither does he.

I pocket the necklace, feeling a strange urge to keep it safe. I don't know why, but it feels important. Like I'll convince myself I imagined it by the time I leave this house if I don't keep something as proof that something is very wrong here.

As I turn my attention to the overstuffed bookshelf—another bizarre detail I certainly wasn't expecting to find here—Trent sidles up beside me, his hands still bound in front of him. His eyes dart around the room, taking in the same strange details I've noticed.

"What are you looking for?" he asks, his voice tense and a little suspicious.

I shrug, keeping my eyes on the bookshelf. "I don't know," I admit, scanning the spines of classic novels that seem so out of place in this room. It doesn't make sense. Brad isn't much of a reader, with one notable exception.

I glance around the room again and ask, "This doesn't seem strange to you?"

Trent furrows his brow, clearly confused. "What do you mean?"

"Look around," I say, gesturing to the room. "There's nothing here that suggests Brad lived here. It's so... bland. Where's the football memorabilia? The dirty magazines? Does Brad really seem like the type to spend all his time reading classic novels?"

Trent hesitates, his gaze sweeping over the room once more before landing back on me. "I was never allowed in here since I'm a beta," he admits, looking almost embarrassed by the revelation. "We spent most of our time together outside."

"Still," I insist, my frustration mounting, "this isn't right. This isn't Brad." The more I take in the room, the more it feels like a puzzle with missing pieces. And every piece I find just leads to more questions.

Trent watches me closely, his eyes narrowing as if he's trying to figure out what's going through my head. But at this point, even I'm not sure what I'm thinking. All I know is that something doesn't add up, and the feeling that we're running out of time gnaws at the pit of my stomach.

"What are you getting at?" he asks, a hint of accusation in his tone.

I pull the necklace from my pocket, the silver chain catching the light as I hold it up. "Do you really think Brad would buy jewelry like this? Even if it was a gift for someone else?"

Trent's eyes widen, his mouth opening and closing a few times before he manages a response. "I don't understand."

"Exactly," I say. "None of this makes sense. The books, the necklace, the lack of anything that actually belongs to Brad. It's like this room was staged. Badly, at that. But why?"

He doesn't seem to have a response for that, either.

"You grew up with him," I press, seized by a theory that's been plaguing me ever since Brad's disappearance. "Tell me something you used to do together. Anything."

Trent blinks, and seems surprised by the question. He hesitates, a frown settling on his face as he thinks back. "Like I said, we spent most of our time outside. Running through the woods, swimming in the creek..." A faint smile appears on his face as he says, "I used to turn up rocks and grab earthworms from underneath them to chase him around with."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," I insist. "Brad's the type to swallow a worm on a dare, not be scared of one. None of this makes sense."

Trent's frown deepens. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not sure," I admit. "But I'm sure of one thing. Brad isn't here, and not only that, but I... don't think he ever was."

"That's ridiculous," Trent snaps. "Of course he was here. We grew up together!"

"Did you?" I challenge. "Because so far, you haven't given me a single convincing detail to prove it."

Trent opens his mouth, then closes it again. His eyes dart around the room, landing on various items like he's grasping at the proof he needs as desperately as I want it, but he says nothing.

If I still had any lingering doubts that he was being upfront with me, the distress that comes into his eyes in this moment would erase them.

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "Look, I'm not trying to accuse you of anything. I just want to find Brad. And right now, none of this is adding up."

"I don't know what you want me to say," Trent says helplessly. "We were kids. How am I supposed to remember every little detail? Just because things are a little fuzzy and his room is weird, that doesn't mean none of it was real."

"No," I murmur, unable to believe I find myself actually trying to comfort him. But regardless of whether they really grew up together or not, he's important to Brad, and that's reason enough for him to be important to me. "I'm not saying that."

"Then what are you saying?" he demands.

I look through the window as the sun is beginning to set. There's no point in lingering in this place any longer. Brad isn't here, and I feel like this is, ironically enough, the last place I'm going to find any

way to get to him. "I don't know," I say quietly. "Let's just go."

Trent follows me silently out of the house, and we meet Lenore and Curtis out by the cars. Lenore takes one look at my face and sighs. "No luck, I take it."

I shake my head. "Nothing. This was a waste of time."

"So what now?" Curtis asks. "We've searched everywhere. If he's not here, then where the hell is he?"

"I don't know," I say again, frustration and worry warring inside me. Brad has been gone for days now with no word or sign of where he's gone. I can feel the imprint stretching and thinning between us, like a fraying rope that I'm desperately trying to hold on to. "But there's only one place left to look."

Curtis's eyes widen, and Lenore and Trent both take on a grave demeanor as my words settle in. They know as well as I do what it means.

There's only one place left in this world I can think of where Brad could have gone that I can't reach him. Only one person left who might have taken him.

"Grayridge," Lenore murmurs.

"If you go in there, you'll be declaring war," Trent warns, as if I don't already know that.

"If Brad is in Grayridge—if Constantine has laid a finger on my mate—then war has already been declared," I reply. "It's just a matter of making it official."

And settling the score between us once and for all.

CHAPTER 10



The nauseous feeling in my gut continues to churn as we gather around the makeshift altar in the room we've commandeered upstairs at the frat house for ritual purposes.

Devon and I bicker back and forth over the latest spell we found on some sketchy witchcraft forum, our voices growing more heated with each exchange when Reese interrupts us.

"Dude, the guy in this gay werewolf book has the same name as you."

I turn around to find Reese lounging on the outside of the magic circle, flipping through the pages of *The Wolf's Mate*, and feel a surge of panic in my chest.

I lunge forward and snatch the book out of his hands, clutching it to my chest. "I told you not to touch that!" I growl. "It's a special edition."

Reese holds up his hands in surrender, though his eyes gleam with curiosity. "We've been at this for hours, man, and I let you prick my finger for blood. I deserve to know what we're doing here."

I groan. He has a point. "Alright, what do you want to know?"

He pauses, his eyes narrowing. "I don't want to jump to conclusions or anything, but... I'm starting to think you might be a little gay, bro."

"Oh really?" Devon deadpans, raising an eyebrow. "What gave you that impression?"

"Shut up, Devon," I snap, feeling my face heat up with embarrassment. "I'm not gay."

Reese holds his hands up defensively and says, "Hey, man, I'm not judging. My cousin is half-gay."

"Half-gay?" Devon echoes incredulously. "Do you mean bisexual?"

Reese considers this for a moment before shaking his head. "Nah."

I grit my teeth, clutching *The Wolf's Mate* tighter to my chest. Why did we think inviting Reese to help with a spell was a good idea again? "It's just a coincidence that the guy in the book's name is Brad, okay? Can we please just get back to the witchcraft?"

"Fine," Reese mutters, looking a little hurt. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for snapping at him. Despite his ridiculous comments, he's been surprisingly supportive through this whole ordeal.

"Alright, let's try this again," Devon says, holding up the printed spell from the Internet. "We need to focus on the intention."

"Yeah, I know the drill," I say, trying to push aside the lingering queasiness that's plagued me all week as we arrange the candles and crystals on the floor.

It looks like one of those new age shops on the boardwalk the girl I took to homecoming was always going to. Pretty sure she made me eat a cake with her blood in it once, but it was too good to ask questions. That was the breakup that taught me not to date chicks who wanna know the exact time and place you were born.

And now *I'm* a witch out of sheer desperation to get back to this fucking book.

If only Samantha could see me now.

I can't shake the anxiety that's been building inside me as we try another spell that deep down, I know isn't gonna work any better than the last, but it's been a week since we've heard anything from Luna and I don't have any better ideas.

I place the book back into the center of the circle as Devon and Reese take their places next to me. We join hands and we're about to begin again when the door cracks open and Steve pops his head in, sandwich in hand.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asks, studying the magic circle like it's only the third weirdest thing he's walked in on this week.

And knowing this place, it probably is.

I grit my teeth. "Working on a class project. Do you mind?"

He shrugs and comes in, settling on the couch across the room. "Nah, I got time. This for the econ final?"

Devon just kind of stares at Steve for a minute, looks pointedly at the circle, and then back at him before he asks, "How would this *possibly* be related to the econ final?"

Steve just shrugs again. "Need help?" he offers through a mouthful of sandwich, clearly unbothered by the bizarre scene before him.

Devon pinches the bridge of his nose, but before he can say anything, Reese chimes in with, "We're doing witchcraft. Brad's a gay furry now," he says, as if those thoughts are somehow remotely connected.

And I mean...

"Shut up, Reese!" I snap, my face heating up. "I'm not a fucking furry! Can we just get back to the ritual, please?" I ask, trying to regain some semblance of control over the situation.

"Chill out, dude," Steve says nonchalantly. "You know Reese's cousin is half-gay."

Reese gives me a pointed "I told you so" look.

"Oh my God," Devon mutters, rubbing his forehead. "Whose turn is it with the brain cell today? Maybe we can get him in here instead."

My stomach starts churning again, despite all the antinausea meds I've been downing. "I'm never getting back into this motherfucking book."

"Chill out, dude," Steve says, holding out his half-eaten sandwich. "You look like you're gonna pass out. Want a bite?"

That's it. The mere suggestion of one of his seven-meat grinders is enough to push me over the edge I've been teetering on for the past week. I bolt up from my seat and sprint to the bathroom, barely making it to the sink before I start puking up my guts.

"Brad, are you okay?" Devon calls from the doorway a few seconds later, grimacing in the mirror at the sight and sound of me retching.

I can't respond, too busy heaving into the bowl. Whatever was left of the pizza I had for lunch is now swirling down the drain in a Technicolor mess.

Once my stomach settles enough for me to catch my breath, I groan and grip the sides of the sink to steady myself.

Devon comes up beside me, concern etched into his face. "You realize at some point we're going to have to talk about the very bizarre but very real possibility that you're pregnant, right?"

I grit my teeth, glaring at him. "Not today."

He sighs, holding his hands up in surrender. "Fine. But this isn't going away, Brad."

"Neither is my nausea," I say, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

Steve pops his head in. "Hey, you okay? Are--oh, shit," he says, turning green as he looks at my position over the sink. "You're not puking, are you? Cuz if you puke, I'm gonna... Oh, shit, you're puking," Steve says, covering his mouth with one hand and dashing to the bathtub. The sound of him retching in there only makes my nausea worse.

Just when I thought I'd already spilled all the contents of my stomach, another wave hits me at the sound of *him* puking, and I'm hugging the sink again. It's like a horrible cycle of vomit with no end in sight and I'm having flashbacks to the last party Steve was ever allowed to bring the punch to.

There's a knock at the door and I hear Ethan's voice through the wood. "What the fuck are you guys doing in there?" he demands, opening the door, taking one look at the chaos unfolding before him, and immediately slamming it shut again. "Oh, hell no! I'm not doing this again. Sorry bros, I barely survived beer pong, I can't go down like this."

His rapid footsteps retreat down the hall as I continue to dry heave into the sink, my stomach twisting itself into knots that could win a Boy Scout badge.

I've barely managed to stop puking my guts up when Reese shows up—because why the fuck not?—and leans against the doorframe, looking a mix of concerned and disgusted. "Uh, hey, if you guys are done with the pukathon, there's a hot chick downstairs. Says she's here to see you."

"Great," I mutter. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and grimacing at the sour taste. "If it's a Delta Psi, tell them I've got the plague."

Doesn't feel too far off at the moment.

Reese shakes his head. "Not a Delta Psi. Too nerdy." He pauses, tilting his head as he considers the woman waiting downstairs. "Kind of has a hot librarian milf thing going on. And huge tits."

Devon and I exchange a look.

"Luna!" we cry in unison.

From the bathtub, Steve lets out a weak groan of despair. "I wanna see the milf."

I ignore him, rushing out the door after Devon. I can hear Reese trying to comfort him, saying, "Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, bro."

I follow Devon as we race down the stairs, my stomach doing somersaults, but I force myself to focus.

Sure enough, Luna is downstairs in the entryway, studying the various shit hanging on the walls. She's particularly focused on the Paddle of Shame hanging between the photographs of this and last year's pledges.

"So this is a frat house," she muses, looking around. "It's cleaner than I expected. Smells about how I imagined, though."

"Yeah, well, you've definitely got an active imagination," I say dryly, studying the overstuffed messenger bag hanging off her shoulder that looks like she's packed for a month-long stay.

"What's this for?" she asks curiously, poking the paddle until it swings on the nail it's hanging from.

"Asses, mostly," I answer.

She blanches and yanks her hand back before wiping it off on her jeans.

Devon elbows me sharply in the ribs. "Be nice," he hisses.

I roll my eyes. "How the hell did you find us here?"

Luna shrugs. "It wasn't hard. I looked up Devon's number, found him on Facebook, and then found you. You have frat stuff plastered all over your profile."

"Oh," I say sheepishly. "Yeah, I guess that's pretty straightforward."

"Why didn't you text?" Devon asks, checking his phone like he might have missed something. Considering how obsessively he's been checking, I doubt it.

Luna sighs, walking further into the house. "I wanted the option of talking myself out of it until the last minute," she admits, studying the room leading off the entryway. "Nice sitting room."

"Is that what it's called?" I ask, looking over at the pool table. "We mostly just use it for beer pong and makeout sessions."

Luna blinks at me. "With each other, or...?"

"No," I snap, feeling my face heat up for some reason. "So, since you're here, I take it you didn't manage to talk yourself out of it."

"It's been one of those weeks," she says dryly.

"So you'll help us, then?" Devon asks, a hopeful note in his tone. As resistant to the whole thing as he was at first, I think over time, he's become almost as excited about the idea of going to the world of *The Wolf's Mate* as I am.

Luna takes a deep breath, like she needs to drum up her courage for the answer. "Yeah. After a considerable amount of reflection and mixing copious amounts of alcohol with pills I definitely shouldn't be drinking on, I've come to the conclusion that I'm going to help."

I grin. "You'd make a great honorary Kappa Nu."

She rolls her eyes, patting the bulging bag on her hip. "I brought almost everything we need to try the same ritual I used, but I have no idea if it's going to work."

My heart leaps in my chest. This could be it. The answer we've been searching for.

"I'm willing to give anything a shot," I tell her honestly. "Can't be any worse than the half-baked rituals Devon finds online."

"Hey," he says with a half-hearted glare. "You try it next time, assuming you even know what a Boolean search term is."

"Whatever," I mumble.

"Do you guys have anywhere we can do this?" Luna asks, looking around as a bunch of rowdy freshmen stampede past us and into the kitchen. "Somewhere a little less... chaotic?"

"Yeah, sure," I say, motioning for her to follow me up the stairs.

Maybe it's the fact that there's no trace of pizza left in my system, or maybe it's the fact that I actually have an ounce of hope for the first time in a week, but I'm not feeling sick anymore.

You'd better fucking wait for me, Raul. I'm coming home.

CHAPTER 11



"Uh, we're gonna need a bigger room. Preferably one with no windows," Luna says, scanning the cramped ritual space. Devon glances at me, and I know what he's thinking.

"Basement," I say, though I know I'd better warn her. "It's where we keep the gym equipment, so if you think the upstairs smells bad..."

She raises an eyebrow. "Don't universities have gyms?"

"Sure," I reply, "but it's for working out when you don't feel like walking across the quad. Leg day waits for no man."

Luna rolls her eyes. "Lead the way."

We head downstairs to the basement, where a group of new recruits is watching the game. "Sorry, guys, but you need to clear out for a while," I announce.

The freshmen grumble but grab their stuff and shuffle out, leaving behind empty pizza boxes and beer cans. Typical. I move the couch aside, clearing a space on the hardwood floor.

"Are you sure you should be lifting heavy furniture right now?" Devon asks pointedly.

I shoot him a death glare.

Luna tilts her head, peering between us. "What's he talking about?"

"You should know," I say. "Considering you're the one who decided cis dudes could get pregnant in your book world."

Luna blinks at me. "That's... surprisingly inclusive for a frat bro to specify."

"Kappa Nu is an equal opportunity frat," I reply. "We've got a couple of trans bros, too. They get hazed the same as everyone else."

"How... progressive. Kind of," Luna says, looking around the basement. "But you really think you're pregnant?"

"He mated with an alpha," Devon says pointedly before I can stop him.

Now my face is burning, but there's no point in denying it.

"But you're not even in the book anymore," Luna protests.

"I'm not saying I understand it, but I've been puking up my guts all week and I'm a few beers short of a six-pack," I grudgingly admit, looking down at my stomach, which doesn't look any bigger under my T-shirt, but when my clothes are off, it's a different story.

"Interesting," Luna says, tapping her chin. "Have you taken a test?"

"Sure, I walked right down to the Walgreen's and grabbed one," I say dryly.

She shrugs as she starts taking out the supplies she brought with her, including some kind of white chalk in a ketchup cup that she's using to draw arcane symbols on the floor. "It might work."

"Do male omegas even produce the same hormones?" Devon asks curiously. "It was never mentioned in the book as far as I remember."

Luna looks up from her drawing and seems a bit sheepish. "Uh... I never really... went that far into it," she admits. "Honestly, I forgot I even mentioned there were male omegas in the first book."

So much for all Devon's string-board theories about the genius of her worldbuilding.

"Great," I mutter. "So I'm living out a plot hole."

"Hey, *you* try pumping out books at the rate you have to these days in order to keep publishers happy," Luna protests, waving her hands around in agitation. "Things are gonna slip through the cracks every now and again. Do you know how many emails I get from nineteen-year-olds with Wikipedia edit access telling me 'actually, they had cell phones in the '80s'? Like sure, some tech bro lunkhead may have had a giant cordless brick in his DeLorean, but I grew up in the '90s and I didn't even have a Blackberry, for fuck's sake!"

Devon and I are both just kind of staring at her. "You uh, wanna take a breath there?" I offer. "I could grab you a beer."

"No," she grumbles, going back to drawing an aggressive squiggle on the sigil. "I'm good. It's just been a long week."

While she's still drawing and I'm trying to clean up the trash, the basement door opens and Reese lumbers down the stairs. "Yo, Brad, the frosh are staging a mutiny saying you kicked them out while the game was on."

"They'll live," I say with a snort.

"Oh, the milf is still here," Reese says, stopping short as he looks at Luna, his eyes growing wide as saucers.

Luna squints up at him. "Who is this idiot and someone tell me why I shouldn't turn him into a toad?"

"No reason I can think of," Devon quips.

"Behave yourself around the lady, caveman," I warn, grabbing Reese's shoulder. "Reese, this is Luna

Daycrest. She's the author of the book we're trying to get into."

"You told him about that?" Luna asks, her head snapping up from the circle that admittedly looks a lot more legit than our attempts did.

"I told him what he needs to know," I say with a shrug.

Reese looks between us, clearly confused. "What *don't* I need to know?"

"Everything else," Devon says. "Now get out."

"Hang on," Luna says, pushing herself up off the floor. She reaches into her bag and just when I'm sure she's gonna grab a magic wand to toadify Reese, she pulls out what looks like a shopping list instead and walks over to hand it to him. "I could use someone to run a couple of errands for me. I assume you have a store nearby?"

"Sure, no problem," Reese says, taking the list and giving Luna a once-over. "Need any wolfsbane and mugwort while I'm at it?"

"You know those are real herbs, right?" Luna asks, arching an eyebrow.

"Whatever you say, beautiful," Reese says and winks at her before heading for the door. "I'll BRB. Don't start the ritual sacrifice without me."

With Reese gone, Luna shakes her head. "This is a huge mistake," she mutters.

"Probably," Devon agrees, looking worried. "But we really appreciate you being here."

Curiosity gets the better of me. "What changed your mind about helping us, anyway?" I ask Luna.

She hesitates, fiddling with the edge of her bag. "I couldn't stop thinking about it all week, and if there's even a chance you're not insane, and it's really possible to go into the book world..."

"Wait," Devon interrupts, eyes wide. "You want to go with us?"

Luna shrugs, looking both nervous and excited. "I've spent my whole life creating other worlds to live in. If I actually have a chance to literally go there, I have to take it."

My mind races, unsure how I feel about this development. "Isn't bringing the author of the book into the world gonna create some kind of... bookception or something?"

"Who knows?" Luna asks, her voice determined. "But I'm going, and that's that. My help is conditional on that."

I exchange a glance with Devon. It's not ideal, but what choice do we have? We need her to get back into that book and figure out what the hell is going on. Plus, maybe having the creator of the world with us will give us an advantage.

"Fine," I relent, not bothering to hide my reluctance. There's only so much I can change as the substitute main character. "But don't say we didn't warn you if it's not exactly what you cooked up in your head."

"Trust me," Luna says with a smirk as she gets back to setting up the summoning circle, "it can't be any worse than real life."

"Tell me about it," Devon mutters.

At least they can agree on something. I feel like the odd one out, considering that before, I was perfectly happy with my life. Hell, as far as I was concerned, I was on top of the world, and then I ended up in *The Wolf's Mate* on the very bottom rung of the social ladder.

And yet here I am, willing to do anything to go back. Even if it means giving up the old life I fought so hard to return to, all because I fell in love with a man who still might exist only in my own head.

But I have to try anyway. It's worth it if there's even a chance, not because I want to escape this world, or even because I want to be part of another. Because no matter where I am, being in Raul's arms is the only place that's ever really felt like home.

Luna finishes arranging several white candles around the perimeter of the summoning circle, and a few minutes later, Reese comes back, carrying a paper bag full of supplies. "Got everything on the list, babe. Even grabbed a few extras, just in case."

Luna frowns at him. "I'm not your babe. And this isn't a game, so if you're not taking this seriously, I suggest you leave now."

Reese holds up his hands in surrender, his cocky grin fading. "My bad. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Good," Luna says, turning her attention back to the circle. She starts lighting the candles one by one, the flickering flames casting shadows on the basement walls. The atmosphere grows tense, and I can't help but feel a mixture of excitement and dread.

This is it. We're really going through with this.

"Okay," Luna says, taking a deep breath. "We're ready to begin. Now we just need blood," she says, pulling out a ritual dagger from her bag. The sight of the blade makes my stomach churn, but I try to keep my cool.

Reese groans and hides his hand, clearly not thrilled about the prospect of shedding any more blood for this. I roll my eyes at his theatrics and offer my hand without hesitation.

"We need blood from everyone who's going into the book, anyway," Luna explains, her voice steady and focused. "It's necessary for the ritual to work."

"Fine, but why is blood necessary?" Devon asks, clearly wary, like we haven't been doing this shit all week.

Luna looks up from the circle, her eyes meeting mine. "Blood is powerful. It contains life force, and by offering it, we're symbolically sacrificing a part of ourselves to gain access to the other world. That, and I have a theory."

"And what's that?" I ask, folding my arms.

"Well, I've been trying to figure out how my ritual affected you all week. More specifically, how it

affected only you and not the millions of other people who have copies of the same book. There's only one thing I can think of. When I met you at the coffee shop, I noticed the book had a smudge on one of the pages," Luna explains, her voice low and thoughtful. "From the accident, I assume."

"Oh," I say, blinking. "Yeah, it wasn't there before, so that's definitely my blood."

"So you must have gotten into the accident and gotten blood on the book at the same time I was doing the ritual," Luna says, a spark of excitement in her eyes. "That must be why you were transported into the book when no one else who has a copy was. The blood created a connection between you and the spell. I cast a spell to make the book important to people—to make it as real to them as it is to me—and in some weird way, it worked. It did that for you, so it should be able to do it for all of us this time."

"That makes as much sense as anything," Devon murmurs.

Thinking about the accident, and just how close I came to dying, makes me shudder involuntarily. If it hadn't been for that freak twist of fate, I wouldn't even be standing here today, trying to figure out how to return to a fantastical world where I'm somehow pregnant and attracted to a guy.

Yeah, life's weird like that.

"Alright then," I say, shaking off the memories. "Blood it is."

Luna nods, and one by one, we each prick our fingers with her ritual dagger—everyone except for Reese, who's been giving Luna a wide berth ever since she took out that blade—letting a few drops fall into the ornate bowl she holds.

It doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would, but the sight of my own blood still makes me a little queasy. Devon winces as he does the same, but Luna seems unfazed, her eyes steady and focused.

"Okay," she says once we've all added our blood to the bowl. "Now we just need to add this to the circle, and then we can start the ritual."

As Luna carefully drips our mixed blood onto various points of the summoning circle, I can't help but feel a strange mix of excitement and dread.

This is it.

We're really doing this.

"Are you ready?" Luna asks, looking at each of us in turn.

I nod, and so does Devon.

Luna takes a deep breath, then begins to chant in a strange language I don't recognize.

Probably Latin.

Nothing happens at first, which I'm used to. When a few minutes have passed, with only Luna's fervent chants to fill the silence, the familiar ache of disappointment comes back with full force.

But then the candles flare, their flames rising higher and higher, and a cold wind stirs in the closed

basement, rattling the windows. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as the air around us seems to crackle with energy.

Reese's eyes grow wide and he mutters. "Holy shit," under his breath, clearly entertaining the possibility that this is real for the first time. I can't blame him.

Luna's chants grow louder and more forceful, and the wind in the basement picks up, swirling around us like a tornado. I glance over at Devon, who looks equal parts exhilarated and terrified. I can't say I'm feeling any different.

"Keep holding hands," Luna instructs us, her voice barely audible over the howling wind. "Whatever happens, don't let go."

I grip Devon's hand tighter, determined not to lose him.

Luna's chanting reaches a crescendo, and suddenly, a brilliant blue light appears above the summoning circle. It expands rapidly, opening into a portal that seems to lead directly into a lush forest.

"Is that...?" Devon begins, but his question is cut short as the portal continues to expand, fracturing into multiple facets, like some kind of bizarre kaleidoscope. Each one reveals a different scene from the book world, flickering and shifting before our eyes.

"Yeah," I croak. "I think it is."

The portal's glow intensifies, casting an eerie light on our faces. I glance at Devon and notice his eyes reflecting the blue luminescence, almost as if he's glowing from within. Strangely, it didn't happen last time. Or maybe it did, but I was too out of it to remember.

"Stay focused," Luna commands, her voice strong despite the chaos around us. "We're almost there."

I nod, my heart pounding in my chest as I try to keep my gaze locked on the ever-shifting scenes in front of us. The wind is now so powerful that it threatens to tear us apart, and I feel Devon's grip on my hand slipping. A second later, Luna's chanting breaks off and I feel her hand leave mine, while I barely manage to hang onto Devon's.

"Devon!" I shout, desperately trying to hold on to him. But it's no use—our hands separate, and I watch in horror as he drifts away from me, swallowed by the blinding light.

Shit fuck!

"Devon!" I scream again, but my voice is lost in the chaos.

Now what am I supposed to fucking do?

I look around, trying to orient myself in the light, but I can't see anything. Panic rises in my chest as I struggle to stay afloat in the blinding sea of light.

Did we make a huge mistake?

All of a sudden, I catch a glimpse of something—or someone—through the light. It's a woman I don't recognize at first glance. She's pale with dark brown hair, and she looks confused, like she's as lost

and adrift in this place as I am.

I'm trying to move toward her when her eyes fly open and narrow as they land on me. She looks like she's about to say something, but the light is growing more and more intense around us. Time seems to be running out.

"Catalina?" I shout to be heard over the growing roar of the light, but before I get an answer, the light seems to explode around me, and everything goes black.

CHAPTER 12



The moon hangs heavy in the night sky, its pale glow casting shadows through the forest. My paws crunch on dead leaves and twigs as I race toward Grayridge territory, my heart pounding in my chest.

I'm alone. I have to be alone. If this goes south, if Brad isn't even there, I can't drag my pack into a war they don't deserve. My muscles ache as I push my bipedal monster form to its limits, but I can't afford to slow down.

The wind whispers through the trees, and suddenly, I realize I'm not alone. A low growl escapes me as I spin around, only to find myself surrounded by Lenore, Curtis, and Trent, all in their wolf forms, except for Curtis, who stands tall in his own bipedal monster form.

Raul, we're not letting you run off on your own, Lenore announces, her eyes fierce with determination.

Lenore, what have you done? My voice is a mix of anger and concern. *This could be a suicide mission, and Brad might not even be there.*

Then we'll deal with it then. As a pack, Curtis says, his words echoing my second-in-command's sentiment.

I glance at Trent, surprised he's here too, even though he isn't officially part of my pack. But his eyes hold the same steely resolve as Lenore's and Curtis's.

I clench my jaw, torn between gratitude for their loyalty and frustration at their recklessness. But I know I won't be able to convince them to turn back.

I sigh in resignation. *Let's go then.*

We race through the forest together, our paws pounding the earth in unison as we cross into Grayridge territory. The air itself seems to change, growing heavy with the scent of Constantine and his wolves. My hackles rise in warning, and I bare my fangs.

Sure enough, as we break into a clearing, Constantine and his three enforcers are waiting for us, their eyes glowing in the dark. The others are normal wolves, but Constantine, like me, is a massive bipedal beast. His fur is white as snow, his eyes burning gold. My blood boils at the sight of him.

It's been so long since we last came face to face and fought fang to fang, but the hatred is as fresh as ever. He has killed so many of my kin, and now he wants to take my mate.

Constantine's lips curl back in a sneer. *Well, if it isn't the mighty Alpha of Stone Hollow. To what do I owe the pleasure?*

Cut the bullshit, Constantine, I snarl, taking a few strides closer. *I know your little sycophant from Blue Fang gave you a heads up that we were coming. I'm here for Brad, and I won't leave without him.*

Constantine's laughter booms through the clearing, echoing off the trees. *Brad? Do you mean the omega who was promised to me?*

I bristle at his words. The thought of this cretin laying a hand on my mate fills me with a rage so hot, it threatens to consume me. I grip the ground harder, my claws digging deep into the earth.

Brad is not your property, I growl, struggling to keep my fury in check. *He is my mate, and he doesn't belong to you.*

Is that so? Constantine smirks, his golden eyes filled with malice. *Well then, we'll just have to see about that, won't we?*

Before I can respond, Lenore steps forward, her wolf form tense and bristling. Her loyalty warms my heart, but I can't help the pang of guilt that comes with it. She loves me, but she's willing to risk her life for my mate.

Raul doesn't have to face you alone, she snarls. *We're all here, and we'll fight as a pack.*

Curtis and Trent stand firm beside her, their own determination evident. Also their fear, and it's plenty warranted. The last time Stone Hollow came against our pack, it was a bloodbath. Granted, it was an attack without warning and honor.

We'll see if Constantine is as much of a spineless coward as his father.

Interesting, Constantine says with a mocking drawl. *A united front in defense of your omega. How honorable.* He sneers. *Let's see how far that gets you. I recall the last time you challenged me, it didn't go so well.*

I bristle at his words, even if he's telling the truth. The last time I tried to face Constantine to avenge my fallen pack members, I barely escaped with my life.

I was alone back then, I tell him, taking another step forward. *All I had to fight for was vengeance.*

How touching, Constantine continues, baring his fangs in a nasty grin. *And now you have something much more precious to lose. An omega who belongs to me.*

Rage boils in my veins at his claim on Brad. *He will never belong to you,* I growl.

We'll see about that.

Constantine lunges forward in a flash of white fur and gnashing teeth. I meet him head on, our bodies colliding in a violent clash of muscle and power. I can feel the impact reverberate through my bones,

but I push back with all my strength, determined not to let him gain the upper hand.

I can hear the chaos of Lenore, Curtis and Trent going head to head with Raul's reinforcements, but I have to stay focused on Constantine. We may be the same size now, considering I was hardly more than a pup when I last went against him, but he's still faster and more ruthless.

He tears into my shoulder, and I snarl in pain, swiping my claws across his muzzle in retaliation. Blood spills between his teeth as he bites down harder, shaking his head like a rabid dog.

I refuse to give him the satisfaction of crying out. I slam my forehead into his instead, stunning him long enough to wrench myself free. We circle each other, both panting heavily, blood dripping onto the dirt between us.

You're still weak, Constantine taunts, even though the glint in his eyes suggests he's lying. *You couldn't defeat me then, and you can't now, omega or no omega.*

Then why don't you shut the hell up and prove it? I snarl back, launching myself at him again.

He meets me head on and we tumble to the ground, a mess of claws and teeth. Pain explodes across my senses but I push through it, fueled by rage and the need to protect what's mine. Constantine's pack may have taken everything from me once already, but I *won't* let him take Brad.

I manage to pin one of Constantine's arms, sinking my teeth into the muscle of his shoulder. He howls in fury, bucking wildly beneath me, but I hold on with grim determination. Blood fills my mouth, hot and metallic, and I grind my teeth together, tearing through sinew and bone.

Where is he? I snarl telepathically.

His eyes narrow, but he refuses to answer. I twist hard, shredding more of his shoulder before he manages to throw me off and my body goes tumbling across the dirt. I skid to a stop and scramble back to my feet, panting. Constantine is clutching at his mangled shoulder, blood seeping between his fingers, but his gaze remains defiant.

I glance over at where my pack is fighting Constantine's enforcers, holding their own for now. Curtis has one pinned beneath him, snarling as he tears into its throat. A surge of pride fills me, followed quickly by worry. There are more wolves on the horizon, and in a matter of minutes if not seconds, they'll be here. We're outnumbered and this fight could easily turn against us.

But I can't back down now. Not when my mate's life is on the line.

You really are pathetic, he taunts. *Still just a scared pup desperate for revenge underneath it all.*

Remind me how you got that scar? I challenge, circling him, ready for him to strike again. He's right about one thing. If I act out of desperation and the rage that courses through my veins at the very mention of his name, I'll never defeat him. I have to play it cool. More than just my own life is at stake here.

An inconvenience, he replies, smirking through the pain. *You'll pay for it, though.* His golden eyes lock onto mine, and I can see the madness lurking beneath the surface.

He lunges at me, faster than before. I barely dodge his attack, feeling his claws rake across my

shoulder. Hot blood trickles down my arm as I spin around, barely escaping his next blow.

A roar of rage escapes him and he charges again. I brace myself, waiting until the last second before sidestepping. He crashes into a tree, the wood splintering under his weight.

I pounce before he can recover, pinning him to the ground and clenching my jaw around the back of his neck. He thrashes beneath me, claws digging into the dirt, but I hold fast. One good twist and his spine will snap.

Just as I'm prepared to do it, something catches my eye. It's a blue light in the distance that I can only see out of the corner of my eye at first, and then it grows brighter, impossible to ignore. I hesitate, my grip on Constantine loosening ever so slightly.

As the blue light grows more intense, drawing my attention away from Constantine, I sense a sudden shift in the atmosphere. The air crackles with energy, and I can hear Lenore, Curtis, and Trent growling uneasily behind me.

Even Constantine seems shaken as the blue light stretches and reveals an expanse of shimmering blue, like a rip in the fabric of reality. It looks almost like a portal, but that can't be right.

Namely because portals don't fucking exist.

My hesitation proves costly. With a roar, Constantine throws me off of him and I crash to the ground, the wind knocked from my lungs. He scrambles to his feet and faces the portal warily, golden eyes glowing.

I pull myself up with a snarl, ready to launch myself at him again, but the portal distracts me. It's growing larger and larger, the blue light pulsating like a heartbeat. It forms a gulf between us as he scrambles back, and I can't even see the other alpha on the other side of it.

What the hell is that? Curtis cries from across the clearing, his fur covered in blood. At least it looks like most of it isn't his. I can still see Lenore and Trent from where I'm standing, so at least I know they're alive.

Stay back! I shout to my pack, fear and confusion seeping into my voice. None of us have ever seen something like this before, and I can't shake the feeling that it's dangerous. Or that it's one of Constantine's tricks, but the look on his face from before makes me doubt that.

Is this your doing? Constantine snarls from the other side of the widening portal, his voice barely audible over the hum of energy.

No, I growl back, trying to keep my eyes on him despite the blinding blue light. *I thought it was yours.*

Raul, what do we do? Lenore calls out, her tone urgent and uncharacteristically uncertain. Her gaze flicks between me and the portal, her fur bristling with tension. I can see her trying to come up with a plan, but I'm at a loss myself.

Keep your distance, I command, racking my brain for what to do as the portal looms larger and closer.

Just as I'm prepared to tell the others to flee, there's an explosion of sound and blue light as the portal expands in all directions, and some intense, irresistible force pulls me in.

Raul! Lenore's scream pierces through the chaos, but it's too late.

I feel my body being yanked off the ground and sucked into the vortex. Panic surges through me as I struggle to resist, but it's like trying to swim against a tidal wave.

Lenore! Curtis! Trent! Get back! I shout, my voice strained with effort. I can't see them anymore; all I can see is a whirlwind of blue light and energy surrounding me.

My heart races as I'm pulled further into the portal, and suddenly, everything goes dark.

CHAPTER 13



The blue light dissolves, leaving me sprawled across the cold wooden floor of the basement. I blink rapidly, my heart sinking as I realize I'm still in the frat house—the real world. The familiar musty smells assault my senses, and I can hear the shouts and laughter of my frat brothers upstairs.

Where's Devon?

Panicking a little, I scramble to my feet, stumbling over the remnants of the magic circle as I search the basement. Luna is slumped over in the corner, unconscious, and Reese is out cold beside her.

But Devon is gone.

The fresh screams from upstairs pierce my thoughts, and I rush up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Bursting into the living room, I find Steve clutching a fire poker like it's a fucking katana while a few of the other guys cower behind the couch.

But it's not an intruder that has them terrified.

At least, not in the usual sense.

There's a massive werewolf in the spot where the coffee table used to be, beneath a giant hole that's torn through the ceiling like he fell through it. Black fur covers rippling muscle as the beast rises to his full height, shards of wood and plaster raining down from his broad back.

It's the first time I've seen Raul in his monster form, but somehow, I know it's him immediately.

And for a second, I can only stare up at him in awe mingled with some kind of heart-clenching ache I can only assume is love, because it feels like a fucking gut punch.

Then, a familiar pair of golden eyes meet mine, and recognition flashes in them.

"Raul?" My voice comes out as a strangled croak.

I can see my own relief reflected in his eyes as he comes lumbering toward me, ignoring the shouts and cries of panic from my frat bros. I hold up a hand to stop them from doing anything stupid as Raul leans down, nuzzling at my neck and chest with his huge snout. The gesture is oddly tender and

intimate, and I melt into it, my fingers sinking into the thick fur at his shoulders.

"Don't touch that thing!" Steve shrieks in the background. "It's probably rabid!"

Like that's the biggest concern we have right now.

I ignore Steve and wrap my arms around Raul's neck, pressing my face into his fur. "Holy shit, I can't believe it's you," I mutter, too relieved to see him to even give a shit how this looks to anyone else.

Raul snorts in response, his clawed hand stroking down my face, his touch gentle as he tilts my chin up. There's something in his eyes that looks almost desperate as he gazes down at me, like he's drinking me in, ensuring I'm really here.

I get it. After being torn away from him, I never thought I'd see him again.

The moment doesn't last long before the sound of Steve and Kevin arguing interrupts it, though.

"You can't call 911 for this! What are we gonna say, that there's a werewolf in the living room?" Steve demands.

"Dude, look at that thing!" Kevin shouts back. "It fell through the damn ceiling! We have to call someone!"

"Animal control is better," Nathan offers from behind the other two, scrolling through his phone. "I found a hotline."

I turn on them with a snarl. "No one is calling anyone!"

They gape at me. "Are you fucking kidding?" Steve cries.

"Brad, there's a giant werewolf in the living room and it's not even a mascot! Of course we have to call someone!" Kevin insists, gesturing wildly toward Raul.

I'm about to retort when I notice something. Raul isn't a werewolf anymore. He's shifted back into his human form, standing there dazed and naked.

For the first time, I notice the wound in Raul's shoulder and the blood his fur was hiding. "Holy shit, you're hurt," I mutter, rushing back to his side to inspect the massive wound that looks like someone was trying to rip his fucking shoulder open and damn near succeeded.

"I'm fine," Raul insists, covering my hand with his. "It's already healing."

I hesitate, realizing he's right. The wound is already knitting itself back together around the edges, right in front of my eyes. That in itself would usually be enough to send me into a fucking meltdown, but at this rate, it's barely enough to warrant a second glance.

"Where the fuck did the naked guy come from? It's not even rush week!" Kevin cries.

"Holy shit, his dick is huge," Steve says, his eyes as wide as dinner plates.

"The fuck, bro?" Kevin asks, eyeing Steve warily. "Why're you looking at the naked wolfman's dick?"

"Are you kidding?" Steven snaps. "That thing is huge, it was looking at me first!"

I groan, rubbing my forehead since I have a pounding headache.

This is a disaster.

"Shut the hell up, all of you," I bark, and they fall silent. "If any of you breathes a word about the werewolf to anyone, you're out of the frat. Got it?"

They stare at me, stunned into silence.

Good.

"And get this mess cleaned up," I order, gesturing to the splintered wood and broken glass littering the floor. "Call Bryan's dad. He's a contractor, he can fix the ceiling."

"Isn't that technically the floor?" Kevin mutters, but I don't have the patience for semantics right now.

"Whatever it is, just get him out here to fix it!" I snap. Then I remember my original concern. "Has anyone seen Devon?"

They all look at each other and stare at me in confusion.

"He was with you in the basement," Kevin protests. "As far as I know, he never came upstairs."

That's exactly what I was afraid of.

Luna staggers up the steps and is picking chunks of plaster out of her hair, looking understandably dazed.

I turn to her and Raul. "Basement, now," I mutter.

Without waiting for them to respond, I grab Raul's giant arm and drag him toward the stairs.

Luna and Raul follow me back down into the dimly lit basement. The spell circle is still glowing faintly on the floor, but Devon is nowhere to be seen.

Reese is halfway upright now, groaning as he comes to. "Man, what the fuck happened?"

"The spell worked," I answer gruffly, looking around at the chaos our little interdimensional clusterfuck left behind. "Sort of. You haven't seen Devon?"

"Dude, I haven't seen shit since that bright light," Reese groans, dragging himself onto to his feet. When he notices Raul for the first time, he scrambles back and yells. "Who's the naked dude?"

"That would be Raul," I answer, folding my arms.

Reese stares at him blankly for a few seconds before asking, "Raul as in the werewolf guy who was railing that dude with the same name as you in the book?"

"Idiot," Luna mutters, burying her face in her palm.

"Yeah, that's the one," I say with a sigh, turning to Raul. "Raul, this is Reese, one of my Kappa Nu bros. And this is Luna. Your... creator or whatever."

"My what?" Raul asks, still looking and sounding a little dazed, which I can't say I blame him for.

Luna walks over and extends a hand, looking at him like he's... well, like he's a god come to life, and I can't blame her for that, either.

Sure, she's a neurotic mess who runs on booze and clichés, but her taste in men?

Top fucking notch.

"Hi," she says sheepishly. "I'm a big fan. Sort of."

Raul returns the handshake, a gentleman as always, even though he looks bewildered. "It's nice to meet you. Uh... where are we, anyway?"

"You're in my world," I answer. Keeping track of who knows what is giving me a fucking migraine. Maybe I was a little too hard on Luna, after all.

"Your world?" Raul echoes, those intense golden eyes scanning the room in dismay. "That's not possible..."

"Yeah, well, those words don't mean shit to me these days," I mutter. "Long story short, I got sucked back here somehow and I enlisted some help from the author of *The Wolf's Mate* to help me and Devon get back. Clearly we have some work to do."

"You were right," Raul says, staring at me in disbelief. "This whole time... about all of it."

"Yeah, I'll be cashing in the 'I told you so' check soon, but right now, we've got bigger fish to fry," I tell him, turning to Luna. "Namely, where the fuck is my brother?"

Luna hesitates, shaking her head. "I don't know. I... I wasn't even expecting it to work."

"Lady, you need to decide whether you're in or out with all this magic stuff," I tell her. "This halfway bullshit is gonna end up with us all getting sucked into a wormhole."

"Can that happen?" Reese asks, sounding newly terrified.

I feel for him, considering I'm pretty sure that up until this point, he was just going along with all of this to get into Luna's pants.

"You must have done the spell wrong," I insist. "We were supposed to end up there, Raul wasn't supposed to come here!"

"I know!" Luna says with a grimace. I can tell she's still having a hard time processing all this, but welcome to the party. "I know, I... they must have gotten switched somehow."

"How?" I demand. "We're the ones who did the ritual, not him!"

Luna shakes her head as if she isn't sure, before a look of realization comes into her eyes as she studies Raul. "The blood."

"What about it?" Raul asks, touching his shoulder, which has now mostly healed, even though his hand comes away covered in blood. "I was fighting Constantine."

"You were *what*?" I cry.

"I thought he had taken you," Raul says, his brow furrowed as he looks off into the distance. "The others are still fighting. I can't abandon them. We have to find a way back."

"Trust me, I'm working on it," I mutter, looking desperately at Luna.

I can see the wheels turning behind her eyes as she tries to come up with a solution. Really not too comforting that my fate rests in the hands of a woman I'm pretty sure at this point is just going off vibes and winging it, but she's also our only shot at getting back.

"It has to be the blood," she repeats. "Raul must have shed his at the same time we were doing the ritual."

"That still doesn't explain why he's here," I protest. "Or how Devon ended up there and we didn't."

"I don't know, it's just a theory," she admits. "It could also be..."

"It could also be what?" I ask warily.

"Maybe it isn't the blood. At least, not from Raul's wound," she murmurs. "Maybe it's because a part of him was already here, and that's what pulled him through."

It takes a minute for her words to sink in, and once they do, as if on cue, the nausea that's been plaguing me all week returns with a vengeance.

"What are you talking about?" Raul asks suspiciously, looking between us. "What do you mean a part of me was already here? Brad?"

"Not exactly," Luna says, looking pointedly at me.

I swallow hard. I really wasn't ready to come to terms with this, like, at all, let alone in front of Raul and Reese, but she's right. It's as good of an explanation as any.

"Yeah," I say, turning to Raul. "I, uh, think I'm pregnant."

CHAPTER 14



I stare at Brad, my heart pounding in my chest as his words echo in my mind.
Pregnant?

My mate is *pregnant*?

Ever since that blue light faded and I woke up in this strange place, I've been confused and disoriented, but now, the revelation that Brad might be carrying my child sends a surge of joy through me.

I can't help myself. I stride toward him, wrapping my arms around his waist and lifting him off the ground. Our lips collide in a fierce, passionate kiss, driven by instinct and possession.

"Raul! What the hell?!" Brad exclaims as he squirms in my grip, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. I can tell he's flustered, especially with the others watching us in stunned silence. But I can't contain myself.

"Brad," I whisper against his ear, "you've made me the happiest alpha in the world."

"You'd better hope you succeeded at knocking me up, because if you don't put me down in the next three seconds, you're getting neutered," he grits out.

I reluctantly release Brad, setting him back on his feet but keeping my hands on his waist. My gaze drifts down to his stomach, and I can't help but touch it gently. "I can feel it," I murmur, wonder filling me. "You're soft now."

"I'm *what*? Fuck you!" he bellows.

Now there's the charmingly irate Brad I know and love.

He swings his fist at me, landing a solid punch to my gut before I can stop him, and his face contorts in pain.

"Shit, I think I broke my hand!" Brad groans.

Panic rises in my chest at the thought of him being injured. Especially now that I know he's carrying my pup.

I grasp his wrist gently, examining his knuckles. They're already starting to swell.

"My love, you can't exert yourself like this in your condition," I admonish him softly, pressing my lips to his injured knuckles.

"Snip snip," he hisses in a warning tone, cradling his fist.

"Uh, hold up a sec," Reese chimes in. "Did you just say you're pregnant, bro?"

Brad just groans. "Fuck my life."

"How is that even possible?" Reese presses, staring between us with a mixture of confusion and disbelief etched on his face. "I mean, I know I slept through most of freshman bio, but I didn't sleep through *that* part."

"He's an omega," I say, only trying to help.

The death glare Brad is giving me suggests otherwise.

"It's a long story, Reese," Brad grumbles. "One I don't really feel like getting into right now."

Reese holds up his hands in surrender. "Hey, whatever, man. I didn't even think portals and shit were real until five minutes ago." He turns and gives Luna a newly wary look. "You *were* kidding about that whole frog thing, right?"

"We'll see," she says in a flat tone, walking over to pick a book up from the center of what's left of the ritual circle. As she flips through the pages, her eyes widen. "Uh, guys? You might want to see this."

Brad and I join her, peering over her shoulder.

I stare at the shirtless man on the cover and blink. "Is that supposed to be me?" I take the book from Luna and tilt it, frowning at the pair of glowing golden eyes staring back at me. "Why do the eyes glow?"

Brad snatches the book from my hands. "This is *The Wolf's Mate*, the book I was telling you about. It's our story."

"Or at least, it used to be," Luna adds, her voice filled with uncertainty. "There's more being written after the middle point, where the rewrite left off."

"There's more?" Brad echoes in disbelief, hastily flipping through the pages, his eyes darting over a block of text that's appearing on the page right before our eyes.

"Chapter twenty-three," Brad mutters, his fingers tracing over the name beneath the chapter heading. "Devon?"

I lean in closer to read over his shoulder.

Devon opened his eyes, disoriented and dazed, and found himself in the middle of a clearing. His head spun as if he had just woken up after a night of binge drinking, too soon to be fully hungover and too long for the buzz to have muted the dull ache spreading throughout his body. It took him a minute to remember where he'd been last, but when he did, the world around him made even less

sense.

Moonlight shone down from above, bathing the entire field in an ethereal glow. The basement walls of the frat house were long gone, replaced by a wall of trees that surrounded him in all directions and seemed to stretch on forever. The grass beneath him was coated in a layer of blood, as if it had just served as the battleground for a brutal fight.

When he saw the three wolves standing in the brush up ahead, it hit him.

This was the other world.

He had finally arrived.

But where were Brad and the others? He looked around and realized he was alone, save for the three wolves—one of them a massive, bipedal beast like the kind he'd only heard about in the books he loved so well—and they were all coming right toward him.

"Holy shit, Devon's in the book," Brad cries, flipping the page before I can finish reading. I scan the next page faster, relief filling me as I realize this story—this oracle—is somehow recounting everything that's happening in the world I left behind.

Lenore, Curtis, and Trent are still alive.

I keep reading as the book continues.

The three wolves had him surrounded, and the monstrous one with great claws and fangs who stood like a man and looked like a beast leaned in to sniff him. Devon gave a startled cry and fell onto his backside, which prompted the other two to give him strange looks.

The monstrous wolf shifted into the form of a man first. He had the same dark hair and bronze skin as Raul, and there was no mistaking the similarities between their features, but his hair was shorter.

"Curtis?" Devon croaked. It had to be.

The man's eyes widened slightly, as if in surprise, and he gave the human a curious once over. "How do you know my name, human?" he demanded, his tone firm though not malicious.

Devon hesitated, his voice catching in his throat.

How could he explain any of this? That he knew them from one of his romance novels? That he was somehow inside that very story now, and they were all characters come to life?

Before he could answer, Curtis leaned in again and sniffed him. This time, the gesture made Devon freeze. "An omega," he muttered in disbelief.

The smaller blonde wolf at his side shifted into a woman with pale hair and a bloody gash on her side. "Another one?" she cried in indignation, her hands planted on her hips as she turned to look down at Devon. "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

The third wolf was the last to shift, and the sight shook free any hope Devon had of formulating an answer. He could tell immediately from their appearance who the man and woman both were.

"Lenore and Trent," he murmured in awe.

Was this really happening?

"You sure know a lot about us," Trent said, the suspicion in his voice unmistakable as he studied the smaller man. "How about you give us something?"

"M-my name is Devon," he stammered.

"Devon?" Recognition flashed in Lenore's eyes. "Brad's brother?"

"Yeah," Devon muttered, a hint of bitterness behind his words. "That's what most people call me."

"Ooh, he's spicy," Luna says, leaning over Brad's other shoulder to read. "I like it."

Brad rolls his eyes, turning back to the words as they form on the page before him. "At least they're all okay."

That's one heavy weight lifted off my shoulders.

But that doesn't change the fact that I have to get back to my home, and I'm going to take my mate with me. But there are still plenty of questions left unanswered, so I keep reading.

"You think he has something to do with Raul and Constantine disappearing?" Curtis asked, looking at the others.

"I don't know what to think," Lenore said with a heavy sigh, offering a hand to Devon.

He took it gratefully, surprised by how much stronger she was than she looked as she pulled him to his feet.

"You really are them, aren't you?" Devon asked, studying each of them. He'd read their descriptions countless times, but actually seeing them face to face—touching them—that was another matter entirely. "You're shifters."

"Last time I checked," Curtis said dryly. "Being a weirdo must run in the family."

"You know my brother, then?" Devon asked. "He was really here? You remember him?"

"Of course I was there," Brad grumbles, angrily flipping the page. "Skeptical little shit."

Beneath the mask of irritation—the mask I'm beginning to realize he wears like armor—is the same fear and concern I feel for my brother and the others. I put a hand on his shoulder.

"He'll be fine," I assure him. "Lenore and the others will keep him safe until we can get back."

Brad doesn't seem convinced, but his gaze softens and he nods a little. He looks exhausted. So am I, for that matter. All I want to do is take him somewhere we can be alone and hold him, but there's too much at stake to rest just yet.

Constantine is still out there somewhere, and until I know exactly where he's gone and what he's planning, none of us are safe.

The book says Devon is being taken back to the mansion with the others, but once they arrive and introduce Devon to everyone who wasn't evacuated for Blue Fang's visit, the chapter ends with Devon collapsing on the bed in his room and staring up at the ceiling.

"Aw, come on!" Luna cries. "You can't end a chapter on a boring note like that. Where's the cliffhanger?"

"Don't even start," Brad says, glaring at her. "That's my brother in there, not one of your characters."

"What happens next?" I ask, reaching over Brad's shoulder to flip the page to the next chapter. The page is blank. "Why did it stop?"

"I don't know," Luna says, shaking her head as she stares at the page intently, like she's waiting for something else to happen. When it doesn't, she frowns.

I'm still not sure I buy that this woman is the one who created my entire reality, but if *she's* concerned, that certainly doesn't bode well.

"Maybe the rest just hasn't been written yet," Reese chimes in with a shrug. We all turn to stare at him and he shrinks back a little. "What?"

"The lunkhead brings up a good point," Luna says thoughtfully. "Who the fuck is writing this book?"

"It's gotta be some kind of magic," Brad reasons. "No offense, but I think the story's gotten away from you at this point."

"Tell me something I don't know," Luna scoffs.

"We have to try the ritual again," Brad says suddenly. "We have to go back."

"Absolutely not," I growl before I can stop myself. Brad turns to me, a look of defiance in his eyes I know too well, but I'm not backing down. Not when his safety—and that of our unborn child—are at risk. "I just found you again. I'm not doing anything that could risk separating us."

"He has a point," Luna reasons. "So far, we've done two rituals, each with wildly different results. This magic is too powerful to fuck around with any further until I know what I'm doing, and it's going to take me some time to get everything together for another ritual, anyway."

I can tell Brad wants to argue, but he knows she's right. That just doesn't stop him from wanting to protect his brother, and that's an instinct I know well, considering that wanting to protect him is the only thing keeping me from going back to mine, no matter what the consequences are.

"We'll go back. I swear to you," I say, turning Brad's chin so he has to meet my eyes. "But we have to do it the right way. In the meantime, Devon couldn't be safer. Curtis and the others know who he is to you, and you're my mate. They'll protect him with their lives."

Brad clenches his jaw, but I can feel some of the tension leave his shoulders. He turns back to Luna and asks, "No offense, but I'm not sure the third time is the charm when it comes to magic. Is there anyone who... y'know, knows what they're doing? Maybe that witchy grandma of yours?"

Luna sighs. "Unless I break out a Ouija board, pretty sure Nana's not gonna be of much help. But I

guess I could see if my mom knows anything she hasn't told me. Wouldn't be the first time she's kept a family secret."

Judging from the way she says that, it's not a reunion she's looking forward to.

"What can we do in the meantime?" Brad asks eagerly.

"Just lay low and try not to get the National Guard involved before I can figure something out," Luna says, nodding to the book. "And keep that safe."

Brad holds the book closer to his chest. "You don't have to tell me that," he mutters.

"What about me?" Reese asks, looking between them. "You can't seriously expect me to go back to classes after all this shit."

Luna cocks her head and studies him. "I guess I could use some muscle. I'm gonna need to go through an attic's worth of heavy old boxes. How do you feel about spiders?"

Reese looks a bit pale. "I ain't afraid of no spiders," he says, his voice strained.

"Great," Luna says in a chipper tone, grabbing the bag off the floor and slinging it over her shoulder. "I'll be in touch, then. Come on, Reeve."

"It's Reese," he says, following her up the stairs like a loyal puppy.

Once we're alone, I turn back to Brad. "How are you feeling?"

"Is that a trick question?" he asks dryly.

"Well, it's easy enough for me to answer," I tell him, reaching out to stroke his cheek. He flinches away from my touch and glares at me. "I searched everywhere for you. When I couldn't find you, I thought I lost you forever. And to think, all this time, you were trying to find a way back to me."

Brad's face turns a bit red, and he refuses to meet my eyes, which is usually a sign he's flustered. Or feeling something he doesn't want to feel. "Yeah, well, I wasn't gonna let you get away with knocking me up and going back to shacking up with Thousand Island dressing."

I can't help the smile that tugs on my lips as I slip my arms around him and pull him closer. "There's no one but you, Brad. Not then, not now, not ever."

He breathes a puff of air through his nostrils and looks away. "You know, I gave you the benefit of the doubt before, but you can't blame Luna for those cheesy lines now that you're writing your own stuff."

"I mean every word," I tell him, turning his face toward mine to press my lips to his. The taste of him is sweet and familiar, and I can't help but deepen the kiss. It's like a part of me that's been missing has finally returned, and I need to hold him close to make sure it's real.

As I finally pull back, Brad leans against me like he's unsteady on his feet. "Guess that answers that question."

"What question?" I ask.

"I was still holding out hope I was just gay in book world," he answers.

I chuckle in understanding. "Is it really so bad to want me the way I want you?"

"No," he says with a dramatic sigh. "I guess it's not. Just gonna take some getting used to."

"We have a bit of downtime," I say, realizing I'm not that tired after all. "How about some practice?"

He gives me a look, but there's no mistaking the hunger in his gaze. "Practice, huh?"

"You have a room in this place?" I ask, perfectly ready to take him on the sofa.

Or the floor.

Or up against a wall.

The chaos from all the ritual artifacts littered about the floor looks like it could be a recipe for some splinters in some very unpleasant places, but that's a price I'm willing to pay when he takes me by the hand and leads me down the hall.

"Come on," he says, leading me to a room on the other side of the basement that doesn't look like it's been used in a while. He flicks on the lights, revealing a bed dressed with blankets and pillows covered in the university logo and pauses. "Maybe we'll keep the lights off."

I laugh, pinning him against the door. "I don't care what clothes the bed is wearing," I inform him. "As long as yours come off."

CHAPTER 15



"You are such a cheese ball," I say against Raul's lips as he pins me to the door. "You love it," he accuses, leaning down to kiss my neck just below my earlobe in that spot that makes me shudder.

He's right, of course.

I missed everything about him, from his corny yet somehow completely sincere lines to his simple gestures of affection.

But a part of me was afraid he wouldn't miss me. That his devotion was a spell that would last only as long as I was trapped in his world, and that whatever bond there was connecting us would dissolve as soon as we were back in our own places.

But it hasn't, and after tonight, I won't ever take it for granted again.

Raul presses his forehead against mine. "I missed you, too," he whispers.

"Stop reading my thoughts," I grumble half-heartedly.

He smiles, running his hands down my body. "I don't need to read your mind. It's written all over your face. And in the way you kiss me."

I feel my face grow hot at the reminder of how much he affects me. How easily. This son of a bitch is either going to be the death of me or what's left of my supposed heterosexuality.

His hands slide under my shirt, grazing my stomach. I tense, embarrassed at how soft I've gotten since we were last together.

Raul notices immediately, frowning as he pulls back to examine my body. "What's wrong?" he asks, his brow furrowing in concern.

"Nothing," I lie, but Raul sees right through it. His hands slide up to cup my pecs, thumbs brushing over my nipples. I gasp as arousal wars with my insecurity, heat flooding my body.

"You're perfect," Raul says firmly. "Every inch of you."

He punctuates each word with a kiss, trailing down my neck and chest. By the time he bends down

and takes one of my nipples in his mouth, sucking hard, it's hard to worry about anything but the pleasure building inside me.

"Fuck," I grit out through my teeth, trying not to squirm. "You don't know what it's like to work that hard on your body and watch it getting wrecked right before your eyes. You probably came out of the womb with a six pack."

Raul chuckles, the sound sending vibrations through the nipple he's grazing with his teeth. This is a dangerous position to be in with a guy who turns into a toothy monster—and has some pretty fucking sharp fangs even in this form—but it feels too good to want him to stop.

"I don't see anything wrecked," he says, lowering his hands to my stomach once more before he peels my shirt off the rest of the way. His hands immediately settle back on my waist, and his fingertips brush over the lines of abs that aren't nearly as defined as they were the last time he was groping them. "Just proof you're carrying my baby. Or babies. Which is absurdly hot to an alpha, by the way."

Guess I can file that bit of information in my Werewolf Facts collection.

That other part hits me out of nowhere, though, and I almost get emotional whiplash.

"Wait, did you say *babies*? Plural?" I blurt out.

"It's possible," Raul says, blinking innocently at me. "Twins run in my family. And yours."

"*Twins*? Oh, don't fucking start," I grumble, the thought of carrying not just one, but two babies making me blanch.

But before I can let my brain spiral down a rabbit hole of panic, Raul distracts me by leaning in and kissing me again.

His lips are warm and insistent, and I quickly give in to the moment, letting the worry fade into the background. Our mouths move together as Raul walks us backward toward the bed, stripping off my clothes along the way until I'm naked.

When the backs of my knees hit the edge of the mattress, Raul gives me a little push so I fall onto the bed. I bounce on the softness for a second before Raul is crawling over me, caging me in with his arms.

"So eager," he murmurs, lowering his head to nip at my neck. Heat flushes over my skin at the sensation, and I can't hold back a gasp. "Just like when you were in heat."

"Shut up," I mutter, tilting my head to give him better access. He takes advantage, peppering kisses and bites down to my collarbone.

His hands slide down to pinch at my nipples, and I squirm beneath him, a jolt of pleasure-pain shooting through me. Raul chuckles, rolling one nipple between his fingers. "So sensitive here," he says. "Even more than last time."

I try to glare at him, but it probably comes across as more of a desperate look. "Just get on with it already."

"Patience," Raul chides, but he listens, sliding one hand down between us. I suck in a sharp breath as he circles my entrance, and I realize I'm already wet for him.

"Oh, fuck, that happens here, too?" I groan, turning my face into the pillow.

"You're still very much an omega," he informs me. Before I can protest further, Raul slides two huge fingers into me. I gasp at the stretch, hips bucking to take him deeper.

"That's it," Raul murmurs. He crooks his fingers, searching, and brushes over a spot that sends sparks through my body.

"Fuck!" I cry out, back arching. Raul presses firmly on my prostate, rubbing in slow circles that drive me out of my mind.

My cock is hard and leaking between us, and I'm close already. Just from him touching me a little bit. "Raul," I pant, "please, I need more."

Raul kisses me, deep and claiming. "I've got you," he growls softly against my lips. He slides his fingers from me, and I moan at the loss until I feel the blunt head of his cock pressing into me.

I gasp into the kiss, clutching at his shoulders. Raul pushes in slowly, stretching me open around his thick length. It burns, but in the best possible way, lighting me up from the inside out.

All it takes is him pushing in a couple of inches—and I know he has plenty more where that came from—to make me feel like I'm gonna split in half like a damn log.

I break the kiss with a gasp. "Too much," I grit out. "You're too big."

Raul stills immediately. His eyes search my face, concerned. "Do you need me to stop?"

I shake my head quickly. The stretch burns, but I don't want him to leave me empty again. "Just... go slow. Let me get used to it."

"Of course." Raul kisses my forehead, my cheeks, the corner of my mouth. "We'll go as slow as you need."

He pushes in another inch, and I moan at the delicious ache of it. Raul murmurs encouragement against my skin, his hands stroking over my sides in a soothing rhythm.

"Fuck, I think you got even bigger," I mutter. "Is that portal like a cosmic penis pump or something?"

"A what now?" he asks, cocking an eyebrow.

"Nothing," I say with a sigh, wrapping my arms around his neck to pull him closer. I put my focus on trying to relax, which is easier said than done with half a damn tree trunk inside my ass.

Gradually, the pain fades into pleasure as my body accepts his girth. Groaning, I roll my hips, taking him deeper.

"There you go," Raul says. "You're doing so well for me."

I flush at the praise, clenching around his cock. Raul hisses, hips jerking forward to bury himself

completely in my ass.

We both go still, panting harshly. Being filled by him is always an experience, to put it lightly, but the fact that he's actually here right now, on top of me in my world, is even more surreal.

"More," I gasp out, clutching at his shoulders. "Please, Raul, I need—"

He pulls back and thrusts in again, setting up a brutal pace that has me seeing stars. The headboard bangs against the wall with the force of his thrusts, but I can't bring myself to care. At least we're in the basement, where the others can't hear anything.

Hopefully.

All that matters is the slide of his cock in and out of me, the feel of his lips and teeth on my neck, the stretch and burn of being filled so completely.

"You feel so good," Raul groans against my skin. His nails dig into my hips, his angle shifting to hit that spot inside me that makes me see stars. "So tight and perfect for your alpha, Brad. You were made for this."

He's got that deep, growly voice that makes me want to purr in response to words that would usually make me want to deck someone. Anyone but him.

Hell, sometimes him, too, but we're having a moment here and I worked hard enough for this that I'm gonna enjoy it.

"Harder," I growl, digging my nails into his back. Guess I'm fully in omega mode here, too. That doesn't bother me nearly as much as it should. "I didn't cross dimensions for some half-assed shit. I want your knot, the whole fucking shebang."

"The whole shebang, huh?" he asks, amusement dancing in his eyes as he looks down at me even though his voice is still husky and strained with the same desire I have a hard time reining in. "Are you sure about that? We still haven't gone all the way yet."

"What do you mean?" I ask, repositioning my hips beneath him. It hurts now, but it'll make taking his knot easier in a second, and I can already feel it swelling at the base, stretching my hole open even wider.

The slick from my arousal isn't enough to keep the sharp pain at bay, but the promise of the pleasure and release that comes from his knot filling me up is worth it.

And whether I want to admit it or not, he's right about one thing—my body is clearly primed to respond to his. To crave everything he has to offer.

"You've stuffed a fucking softball inside my ass. If that ain't home base, what the hell is?"

"I haven't marked you yet," he answers.

"Oh, yeah," I say, remembering he mentioned something about that a while back. I was too high on post-sex dopamine to put that much thought into it at the time, though. "How do you do that, exactly?"

"That wasn't in the book?" he asks in a teasing tone.

"I only got so far into the original before I got walloped by that drunk asshole," I protest.

But to be honest, the idea of reading any further than that fills me with jealousy. I don't want to think about Raul with anyone else.

"I have to bite you," he says, trailing his fingers down the side of my throat to the spot where the back of my neck meets my shoulder. It's become an erogenous zone, judging from the way that simple touch makes me shiver and squirm. My ass throbs around his stiff cock as I'm punished for the movement. "Right here. Then you'll bear my mark and everyone will know you're mine. Forever."

"Sounds permanent," I say.

"Very," he answers, approval glowing in his eyes as if the mere thought of marking my flesh turns him on.

And that turns *me* on more than I want to admit.

"You know how hard it is to get through all this time in a frat without getting inked?" I challenge. "You know how many times I came *this close* to ending up with Steve's face on my ass if I'd lost a bet?"

"Consider me infinitely grateful for your good luck," Raul says dryly. "And I do hope you're talking about a tattoo."

I roll my eyes. "What happens if you do mark me?"

I'm tempted to let him, just so we can get on with the whole knotting thing, before my common sense outpaces my libido.

"Well, for one thing, if we were separated again, it would be easier to find you," he answers. "And there wouldn't be the risk of me going feral. Not unless you were..."

He trails off, like he doesn't even want to say it, but the message is clear enough.

Unless I'm dead.

"I guess that's a pretty big advantage," I murmur.

"I have no intention of letting you go again," he says with the kind of confidence only a guy with a foot-long dick and an army of werewolves can muster. "But there are other benefits. Namely, I'm the only one who would respond to your scent when you go into heat."

"You mean the whole house isn't gonna know I turn into a cock-hungry thot every month I'm not knocked up?" I ask, a bit too eagerly.

Raul hesitates, tilting his head in confusion. "I... No...?"

"In that case, sign me up," I say. The truth is, I was already on board even when I thought the only perk was being marked by him.

We're already bonded.

These weeks of separation have made that painfully, excruciatingly clear, and if there's anything that

will lower the chances of losing him again, I'm good with it.

Even if it does mean sporting a brand new neck tat.

"Alright, then," Raul says, lowering his head to brush his lips against my throat. His chest falls against mine, and he gives a low, rumbling growl that spreads through me like wildfire. "We're going to need to readjust."

He pulls out of me before I can protest, and I feel cool air inside my gaping asshole where his cock was, leaving me feeling hollow. Raul rolls me onto my stomach and places his hand on my lower abdomen, giving me a tug so my knees are beneath me with my ass in the air. I prop myself up so I'm at least on my hands and knees, at once irritated and turned on by how easy it is for him to manipulate someone as big as me like I'm a fucking doll.

"You're already mine," he murmurs against my skin, pressing a kiss to the spot between my shoulder and the back of my neck. Just having his lips brush that spot makes a violent shiver run down my spine and my hole throbs with a fresh need for him to fill it. "But I want the whole world to know it."

"Just put it in already," I grit out, digging my fingers into the blanket in preparation. Really starting to wish the U Mass logo wasn't plastered all over this thing, but I'm too keyed up for even that to put a damper on my arousal.

I don't need to see Raul's face to know he's smirking as he lines his monster cock up at my entrance, pushing between my cheeks.

"Good boy," he purrs, which seems to be the werewolf version of dirty talk.

I hate the way my cock throbs in response to it.

All at once, he pushes into me right back to where he was, the base of his knot pushing against my already stretched hole. It's possible for him to go in all at once, since he was fucking me so recently that I still haven't fully closed, but far from easy.

I give a startled cry he muffles by covering my mouth with his hand, and I'm grateful, even if I'm also tempted to bite down on his fingers for not giving me any warning.

When I feel him press into my prostate, though, all is forgiven and I start squirming beneath him for more like I really am in heat.

I wish I had that as an excuse.

Raul wraps one arm around my waist, pulling my ass right up against him as he presses the tip of his knot against me more insistently. As much as I want it, the tight ring of muscle clenches in protest.

"Relax," Raul whispers into my ear, his warm breath making me shiver. His long hair teases my biceps as it falls around me from behind, tickling my sensitive, heated skin. I try to do as he says, focusing on the sensation of his strong arms around me rather than the impossible stretch of his knot breaching me.

I can tell he's pushing in, trying to fill me and be gentle at the same time, but I'm starting to think I'm too tight to take it at all when his tongue runs up along the spot on my neck he intends to mark, and the

pleasure that thrums through me has the effect of relaxing me just enough that it slips in all at once.

I give another cry of pain and pleasure that's only partially muffled by his hand, and this time, I do bite down on him, not out of spite but instinct. I taste blood, but Raul doesn't react. He just pushes his knot into me until I feel my ass seal around it, locking us together, and then he starts to move.

It's slow at first, gentle rocking motions that make me moan and pant into his palm. He keeps that arm banded around my chest, holding me close, while his free hand travels down to grip my aching cock. I'm so hard it hurts, pre-cum leaking from the tip to coat his fingers as he starts to stroke me in time with his thrusts.

The stretch and burn of his knot is fading into a dull ache, and the pleasure is starting to outweigh it. I rock my hips back to meet his, urging him deeper, harder, faster. Raul growls against my neck but obliges, snapping his hips forward in a punishing rhythm that has me seeing stars.

His hand leaves my cock to grip my hip instead, holding me in place as he pounds into me and takes his other hand off my mouth so he can grip the headboard. It still slams against the wall with the force of his thrusts, but he's got enough of a hold to keep it from going through the drywall.

Probably.

Those are all thoughts somewhere in the back of my mind, though. At the forefront is the sensation of his lips on that spot at the crook of my neck again, teasing the tender skin with gentle nips and soothing licks.

"Raul," I moan when the anticipation is too much to handle and it feels like I'm going to black out just from wanting it so fucking much. "Please."

"Please what, love?" His voice is teasing and low, rumbling against my skin as he continues to drive into me at a relentless pace.

I can feel the pressure building inside me, but he's deliberately avoiding touching my cock again. We both know that's going to push me over the edge.

"Please... mark me," I beg, my hips bucking against his as I desperately chase my release. "Make me yours."

I feel him shudder on top of me, as if that's exactly what he's been waiting to hear. With a growl, he sinks his teeth into the spot he's been teasing. The sharp pain of the bite mixes with the blinding bliss flooding my senses, and I come with a shout that's probably loud enough to wake the neighbors, let alone everyone in the frat house.

I'm never going to live this down.

But who fucking cares?

Raul continues to pound into me through it, chasing his own pleasure now. I'm still riding the waves of my orgasm when Raul stiffens above me, hips stuttering as he finds his own release. There's a surge of warmth as he comes inside me, and the base, primal part of my brain thrills at the sensation.

His.

Marked.

Claimed.

Those words seem to write themselves in my soul, painted with the come he spills inside me.

Raul collapses on top of me, both of us panting for breath. I reach back and run my fingers through his long, dark hair, scratching lightly at his scalp the way he likes.

"I fucking missed you," Raul murmurs against my neck, his breath hot on my skin. He laps at the blood still trickling from my neck. "But I'm never letting you go again."

When I first found myself in his world, that would have sounded like a threat, but at this point, it's a promise I'm more than eager for him to keep.

I'm not sure when the after-orgasm bliss of being wrapped up in Raul's arms turns into sleep, or when his knot finally goes down enough for him to ease out of me, but I'm too spent to even wake up for more than a few seconds.

One minute, I'm wrapped up in his arms, listening to the steady rhythm of his breath, and the next, I'm standing in the middle of the woods, buck naked and surrounded by wilderness as far as the eye can see.

What the ever-loving fuck?

CHAPTER 16



I've had enough dreams that started out like this to know I'm dreaming, even if I'm usually standing naked in the middle of economics class rather than the woods. I decide this is probably better, at least until I notice the pair of golden eyes watching me from the darkness between the trees up ahead.

The eyes are familiar in the sense that I recognize that particular, unnatural shade of gold and the height they're at in the darkness as being undeniably wolfy, but not in the sense that I recognize *them*.

"Raul?" I ask anyway, hoping my dream world is just fucking with his wolf's appearance, considering how recently I saw it for the first time.

Rather than respond, the eyes draw closer until the moonlight illuminates the massive white wolf that steps into view. A huge scar stretches over his left eye, and I immediately recognize him. The last time I saw him in my dreams, he was tearing Raul apart.

Fear churns in my stomach as I take a step back.

"Constantine," I say, refusing to let my fear show.

Easier said than done when wolves have heightened senses that let them see with a hell of a lot more than just their eyes, but this is my dream, so theoretically, I still have some control.

And at least I know I'm dreaming, so that has to count for something.

Hello, little lamb, he answers in a voice that seems to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. Way less creepy than a giant bipedal wolf talking out loud, though. *Aren't you going to run?*

"Who the fuck are you calling little?" I demand. My hands curl into fists at my sides. "In case you haven't figured it out, I'm not the five-foot girl you're always trying to kidnap."

Constantine chuckles, a chilling sound that sends shivers down my spine. *Oh, I know exactly who you are, Brad Miller*. He starts listing things off in a mocking tone. *President of the Kappa Nu fraternity. Closet case. Did you really think you could have your little friend do a magic spell and rewrite the world to your liking without any consequences? Did you really think you could write me out so easily?*

He takes a step closer, and I back up instinctively into the thick woods behind me. Thorns slash my arms, and I hiss at the sting. It actually hurts, which is fucking weird considering this isn't real, and you're not supposed to be able to feel pain in a dream at all.

Constantine's eyes glow brighter and he licks his maw in hungry anticipation. *Such delicious blood*, he says, drawing closer as the tree branches around me start stretching and reaching to wrap around my shoulders, intent on restraining me.

While I'm distracted by struggling against the branches that now have me lifted a foot off the ground, Constantine is suddenly right in front of me, his awful teeth showing in a wicked grin.

I'm closer than you think, little lamb. And I am going to eat. You. Up.

His jaws open wide and he lunges like he's planning on swallowing me whole. I scream, but before he can succeed, I jolt awake, panting and covered in a cold sweat.

Raul is instantly awake beside me, pulling me into his arms. "Brad? What is it? What's wrong?"

I can barely get the words out, I'm so panicked. "Constantine," I choke out, gripping his shoulders. "He's here!"

Raul's brow knits together and he watches me in concern. "Here? You mean... in your world?" Raul asks, his voice heavy with worry.

I nod, still unable to form a coherent sentence.

"Brad, it was just a dream," he says, trying to comfort me but not sounding entirely sure himself.

I shake my head, the dread from the nightmare refusing to leave me. "No. He was in my head, taunting me. You don't understand, he's here."

Just as Raul seems like he's about to respond, there's a pounding at the door. We both freeze, and I can see the doubt flash in Raul's eyes.

"Brad?" a familiar voice calls through the door, and I feel a wave of relief wash over me. Steve. "Some chick is at the door for you."

"I'll be up in a minute," I call through the door, hastily collecting my clothes off the floor. By the time we're both dressed, Steve is gone, so I head upstairs with Raul following behind me.

"It's gotta be Luna," I say, reaching for the basement door.

"You think she's back this soon?" Raul asks warily, following me up onto the main level of the frat house.

"Can't be anything good if she is," I say with a sigh, trying to ignore the weird looks we're getting from the guys gathered in the living room playing poker.

Yeah, they definitely heard some shit last night.

Or maybe it's just the fact that I've got an Adonis-looking motherfucker following me around like a lost puppy. Either way, I'm gonna have to explain some shit the moment I can catch a breather.

I fling open the door, fully expecting to find Luna standing on the other side.

Instead, it's a petite, undeniably familiar woman who barely comes up to my shoulder. She has long, wavy brown hair, and she's dressed in flared jeans and an oversized sweatshirt with lime green and neon pink color blocks that makes my eyes burn, complete with way too much eye makeup.

Either this chick is a Delta Psi who got lost on her way to an '80s costume party, or...

I slam the door shut in her face, feeling a wave of dread wash over me that even Constantine's creep factor can't rival.

"Who was that?" Raul asks, blinking at the door in confusion.

Before I can answer, the doorbell starts ringing furiously, followed by simultaneous pounding, like there's a tiny, irate neon poltergeist at the door.

"Open up!" she bellows, her high-pitched voice muffled through the thick wood.

"Aw, son of a bitch," I mutter, reluctantly opening the door before the others can come to see what's up. Now the woman standing on the other side is fuming. Can't really fault her for that, I guess. "What the hell do you want?"

Her golden eyes narrow, filled with spite. "What do I want?" she cries, her voice lifting an octave. "I want my fucking life back!"

Raul steps between us, his brow furrowed as he looks down at the woman who barely even comes up to his chest. I was worried one look at her would turn him into a puddle of lovesick goo at first sight like it does in the book, but instead, he's scowling at her in suspicion, like she's some kind of threat to me. I'm really not sure how to feel about that.

"Brad, who is this?" he asks.

I look between them, tempted to lie, but that flies out the window quickly enough. Instead, I sigh as I tell him the truth. Even if it is going to turn my life upside down for the umpteenth time.

"Raul, this is Catalina," I say, gesturing to her. "Meet your fated mate."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Thank you again for joining me on this journey, and I hope you enjoy your next adventure!

Best,
Joel