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BRO AND THE BEAST

JOEL ABERNATHY WRITING MPREG AS
L.C. DAVIS

BRO AND THE BEAST

PART IV

THE WOLF'S MATE



L.C. DAVIS
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CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

Raul

[Chapter 2](#)

Brad

[Chapter 3](#)

Brad

[Chapter 4](#)

Raul

[Chapter 5](#)

Brad

[Chapter 6](#)

Brad

[Chapter 7](#)

Brad

[Chapter 8](#)

Raul

[Chapter 9](#)

Brad

[Chapter 10](#)

Brad

[Chapter 11](#)

Raul

[Chapter 12](#)

Brad

[Chapter 13](#)

Raul

[Chapter 14](#)

Brad

[Chapter 15](#)

Brad

[Chapter 16](#)

Raul

[Chapter 17](#)

Brad

[Dear Reader](#)

Finally reunited with Raul, but now separated from his twin brother, Devon, Brad has learned the hard way that magic is far from an exact science.

Not that his grades in actual science were all that stellar to begin with.

Now he has to find a way to get back into The Wolf's Mate with Raul, hope the threatening visions he's having of Constantine following him into the real world are just dreams rather than premonitions, and deal with a heroine who's furious Brad has usurped her role, all while fending off morning sickness.

That's just the price he has to pay for trading in his playbook for a grimoire, but Constantine is going to do whatever it takes to make sure Brad and Raul never reach their Happily Ever After.

CHAPTER 1



RAUL

I stare at the woman standing in the landing, her dark hair framing a face that holds both anger and desperation. It takes me a second to process Brad's assertion that she's Catalina, the woman he's been insisting is my destined mate from the beginning.

"Brad, I've never seen this woman in my life," I tell him.

And it's the truth. I don't recognize her, and I don't feel anything.

Certainly not the earth-shifting pull I felt the moment I met him. The moment I touched him for the first time and knew he was mine.

"Of course you don't recognize me!" she snaps, pointing an accusing finger at Brad. "Because *he* fucked everything up!"

Catalina storms into the landing, fury blazing in her eyes. I back up instinctively, because even if her presence here is the last damn thing any of us needs, she's clearly an omega.

One who looks ready to fight.

"Look, Miss, you need to calm down," I say, trying to defuse the situation.

"Raul, don't..." Brad says, but it's too late.

Catalina's face contorts with rage, and I sense the impending storm about to crash over us.

"Calm down? Seriously?" Her voice is a deathly whisper, and I realize I've made a mistake—a big one.

"Bro, how many times do I have to tell you not to say that?" Brad grumbles, his own frustration evident.

"I don't know what's happening," I confess, my gaze shifting between Catalina and Brad. "I don't recognize you at all, but even if it's true, even if you really are my fated mate... it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter?" Catalina cries. "Of course it matters! You imprinted on me! We're destined!"

I shake my head, refusing to back down. "I don't care what destiny says. I choose Brad." My gaze finds his, and the warmth in his eyes chases away the chill trying to settle in my bones. "I'll choose

Brad in this universe, and every other."

Brad's eyes shine with emotion, and for a moment, it's just the two of us.

Then Catalina makes a strangled sound in her throat, shattering the moment.

She looks equal parts crushed and furious, and I feel a twinge of sympathy for her, but before I can say anything, someone else enters the foyer.

"Yo, what's going on out here?" Steve asks his gaze flickering between the three of us. "Who's Rainbow Brite?"

"She's, uh, my cousin," Brad says after a beat.

He's a terrible liar. His guilelessness is one of the many things I love about him. All the more reason to want to protect him.

Steve frowns, eyeing Catalina with open skepticism. "You never told us you had any cousins. You know we share all our cousins. It's like, frat policy, bro."

Brad rolls his eyes. "Yeah, well, we don't really talk. But Catalina's gonna crash here for a bit."

I feel a surge of panic at the suggestion. The last thing I want is this woman staying here, especially when Brad is still convinced she's my mate. And after everything else he believed turned out to be true, I'm going to have a damn hard time convincing him otherwise.

But this is his den, and these strange fools are his pack.

A pack he's clearly the alpha of, so I'm not going to challenge him openly in front of the others.

Brad turns back to Steve. "Do me a favor and show her to one of the guest rooms, alright?"

"Sure," Steve says, looking down at Catalina. "You like foosball?"

She blinks at him, nonplussed. "Do I like what?"

Steve just gestures for her to follow him upstairs, and after another venomous look in our direction, she does. The weight of her gaze lingers even after she disappears from view.

This is going to be a long damn week.

Once they're gone, I turn to Brad with a frown. "Are you sure about this? Having her stay here?"

"What else was I supposed to do?" Brad spreads his hands helplessly. "She's stuck in another universe with no idea what the hell's going on. I was in the same boat when I got sucked into your world. If you hadn't found me, I'd have been fucked." He grimaces at the thought. "I don't want to do that to her. Especially since it is technically my fault she's in this situation."

"It's not your fault." I pull Brad into my arms, breathing in his scent. He relaxes against me, tension bleeding from his muscles. "But I still don't trust her."

"You don't have to." Brad tilts his head up, eyes earnest as he looks at me. "You just have to trust me."

I sigh, running a hand through his short hair. "Alright. But only until we figure out how to get us all home."

A smile flickers across Brad's lips. "You really meant all that shit about choosing me in every universe, huh?"

"Of course I meant it," I say. "I don't care whether my entire world really was some fantasy concocted by that strange woman, or if this is all just a dream. As long as I have you, it doesn't matter to me."

"And what about Catalina?" he asks, his brow furrowing. "You really don't recognize her at all? You didn't feel *anything* when you saw her?"

"Nothing," I answer honestly, hoping desperately he'll believe me. "I certainly didn't imprint on her. I imprinted on *you*, Brad. I love you. Nothing—and no one—is ever going to change that."

He lets out a slow, shaky breath.

I can tell how heavily this has all been weighing on him. I wish I could make him understand the way I feel about him.

I wish I could make him see himself the way I do.

"You know, when all this started, all I wanted was to put things back the way they were supposed to be," he says, his voice low as he leans in, his hands resting on my biceps. The warmth of him in my arms feels so right. Like everything I've been missing. "To get Catalina back to her world, maybe fix a few things for my favorite characters, and then get back to mine."

"And now?" I ask.

Brad looks up at me, more vulnerability in his eyes than I've ever seen before. "They're not just... people in a book anymore. They're people I care about. People I love. And you... you're my world now." He looks away, his face turning red. "God, I'm starting to sound like you."

I chuckle, reaching down to tilt his chin toward me. "You're my world, too, Brad. And I love you. More than anything."

I duck down, kissing him slow and deep. Brad melts into it, parting his lips with a soft moan. I slip my arms around his waist to pull him closer to me. His slightly rounder stomach is a welcome reminder that he's carrying my pup.

Proof that what we've shared is real, no matter what anyone else has to say about it.

We break apart at the sound of a cough behind us. Brad whips around, cheeks flaming as Kevin stands in the doorway, football in hand, with Nathan behind him.

Judging from the looks on their faces, this wasn't what they were expecting to walk in on. And I find myself afraid of just what Brad's response to being caught is going to be.

CHAPTER 2



BRAD

All of a sudden, Steve and Kevin bust into the landing, startling me and Raul into breaking the kiss. My instinct is to jerk away, to deny what they just saw, but I steel myself instead. If Raul can ignore Catalina throwing herself at him, then I can face two of my best friends knowing I'm gay.

Steve looks everywhere but at us. "Soooo, I guess you're not in the mood to go throw around the pigskin?"

I clear my throat. "Maybe later," I say, noticing Raul has stepped back from me, and I know it's just for my benefit. I grip Raul's hand, taking strength from his solid presence beside me.

"Why didn't you tell us you were gay?" Steve finally meets my eyes, and I'm shocked to see the hurt there. "Did you really think we wouldn't support you?"

Guilt washes over me in a nauseating wave. "I... wasn't sure."

Hell, my own parents wouldn't. I already know that from how they reacted to Devon being gay.

"That's bullshit." Kevin steps up beside Steve, his usual easygoing expression twisted into a frown. "You should know us better than that. We're bros, man, and bros accept each other no matter what. Even if they're getting boned by a gay werewolf."

"Especially then," Steve says in a matter-of-fact tone.

I can't help but laugh, even though my eyes are burning with unshed tears. Fucking pregnancy hormones, man. "Thanks. I think."

Raul squeezes my hand in reassurance, and his closeness and warmth are more comforting than I want to admit. "I like your friends."

"Guys," I say, taking a deep breath, since I decide it's time to officially introduce them. "This is Raul. He's my, uh..."

"Mate," Raul offers proudly.

I gulp. "Yeah. Mate."

Coming out as gay is one thing, but all the werewolf shit is another. Of course, they've literally seen him in his beastly wolf form, so there's no putting that seven-hundred-pound cat back into the bag.

"Your mate?" Kevin asks, blinking.

"Cool," Steve says, processing that in record time. "Do *you* wanna throw around the pigskin?"

"Uh... sure?" Raul asks, looking between us. "I'm not really sure how to do that."

"Dude, where did you find this guy?" Kevin asks, even though they're already pushing Raul out the door.

"Let's just say we met through a mutual love of books," I say dryly, following them outside onto the lawn outside the frat house. The sun is so bright it makes me squint, and I realize I've more or less become a fucking vampire this last week or so, holed up inside with Devon as we tried desperately to perfect the ritual.

Turns out we still have a long way to go.

As I watch my friends trying to teach Raul the basics of the game, though, all I can really feel at the moment is grateful. Devon and the others are safe, and Raul is right. I know Lenore and the rest of the pack will take care of him and protect him with their lives. And now that Raul and I are back together, I feel like I can handle pretty much anything.

I just hope a real-world Constantine isn't on the menu, and I still can't shake that dream and how real it felt.

And now we have Catalina to contend with.

Yeah, it's gonna be a long week.

Pretty sure I have a test or two to worry about, but unless I can convince Luna to write me a body double, that shit's gonna have to take a backburner.

Not that I could really do that much worse in chem by not showing up at all than I already am. Pretty sure the TBI *saved* my GPA, if anything.

As I watch Kevin and Nathan try to teach Raul the intricacies of football, I glance down at my phone and decide it's time for an update from Luna.

<Any progress?> I text her, trying to sound casual even though I'm desperate for an escape plan.

<**Luna:** Nothing yet,> she replies almost instantly. <But is Reese really this much of a dumbass?>

<Hey, he's a good guy,> I defend my friend. <He may not be the brightest bulb in the box, but he's the man you want in your corner when shit goes down.>

<**Luna:** Fine. Anyway, we're at my mom's house. I came clean about the witch stuff. It's...complicated.>

<Complicated how?> I ask, my thumb flying across the screen.

<**Luna:** Let's just say she doesn't do magic because a spell backfired once upon a time. But I explained our situation, and she's going to try to help.>

Great. None of these people know what they're doing.

I'm never going to get back to *The Wolf's Mate* at this rate.

I sigh and look back up at the game, only to find Catalina watching me through one of the windows, her eyes cold and menacing. My heart skips a beat, but when I meet her gaze, she vanishes from view.

"Hey, Brad!" Kevin yells, pulling me back into the moment. "Get over here and help us teach this big guy how to catch!"

"Give me a second," I tell them, forcing a smile onto my face. "Gotta take a piss."

It's not entirely a lie. Ever since I got pregnant, I've been having to pee constantly even though the baby can't be that far along.

Probably.

I actually have no idea, considering I never thought I'd need to know about the stages of pregnancy. At least not from this side of the equation.

I head inside and go straight upstairs, pausing outside Catalina's door to psych myself up before knocking.

"Who is it?" Her voice is sharp and filled with annoyance as she answers.

"Brad. I wanted to talk."

She opens the door, her eyes narrowed and suspicious. "What do you want?"

"Can I come in?" I ask, trying to keep my tone neutral.

Catalina steps back, and I figure that's as much of an invitation as I'm going to get.

"Look, I just wanted to talk to you," I repeat.

"About what?" she demands, folding her arms.

I hesitate, deciding I should try to get on the same page.

Bad metaphor.

"How, uh, much do you know about how and why you're here?" I ask. That seems like as good a place to start as any.

She raises an eyebrow. "You mean how I got sucked out of my world and trapped in a horrible liminal space, where I've had to watch you fucking up my life ever since?"

I grimace. So she knows a lot. Enough that I'm really not sure how much she's seen, or if I want to know how much she's seen. "Oh. Uh. I guess I just thought you sort of... disappeared."

Judging from her narrowed eyes, that admission hasn't helped her think any better of me.

Fair enough.

"Of course you did," she hisses. "You really thought you could just slip into my world and live *my* life, and there wouldn't be any consequences?"

I grimace. "Hey, if you've been watching, you know I had no control over that. It's not like I asked to get in that accident. It's not like I made Luna do that spell."

She frowns. "Yeah, I know about that bitch. What I still don't get is, why you?"

"I've asked myself that plenty of times," I mumble. Something keeps me from admitting the blood on the pages is what sucked me in. Especially since if I tell her anything else, she's going to want answers I don't have, like where she ended up and how. "The question is, how did *you* get out of there?"

"A portal," she says with a shrug. "That place where I was is filled with them. That's how I've been watching you fuck everything up this last couple of months. At least as much as I could stomach."

"Huh," I say, not sure how I feel about the idea of my life being some sort of cosmic TV show. "So you... read your own book?"

"It's not a book," she snaps. "It's just one of a shit ton of worlds, and in *your* world, it's a book. Do you want to know what this world is?" she asks with a menacing grin.

My throat gets tight, and I kind of feel like how I did when I was a kid and I saw the guy in the Easter Bunny costume take his head off for a smoke break five minutes after I'd been sitting on his lap.

"No," I croak. "Not really."

Catalina just smirks. "Of course not. Your little walnut brain would explode if you'd seen half the shit I have."

As much as I want to argue that point, she's probably not wrong. "So these... portals. You said that's how you got here?"

"When the one I was watching closed up, another opened, and there you were," she answers with a shrug. "I followed you in and here I am."

"So that *was* you I saw during the ritual," I murmur.

"No shit, Sherlock," she quips.

"I don't get it. If that worked, why didn't you just go through the portal to get back into *The Wolf's Mate*?" I ask.

"You don't think I tried that? So far, all the portals I've tried have been viewing only. Whatever ritual your friend did, must have opened the one we came through for a second."

I take a minute to process that, but then I realize it would take a century and I decide not to even bother. "Look, I get why you're pissed off. Trust me. You didn't ask for all this shit anymore than I did, and I know what it feels like to have your whole world turned upside down."

"Do you?" she asks, not hiding an ounce of her anger. "You don't understand. You're just some brickheaded frat bro who wouldn't know anything about love if it bit him in the ass."

I wince at her words, but also can't help feeling like what she's saying is partly true.

Or maybe it *was* true. Before.

"Maybe you would've been right before, but I've changed," I say, swallowing my pride. "So has Raul. Hell, everything in the *Wolf's Mate* has changed. It's not the same story it was before, and you're not the same character—the same person," I correct, "as you were before."

She frowns, but she doesn't tell me to fuck off and die, so I continue.

"I know you hate me, and I can't really blame you for that, all things considered. But I'm not your enemy. And if I'm right, you're not the only part of *The Wolf's Mate* who followed me here."

"What do you mean?" she asks doubtfully.

It's a risk to tell her, but one I decide is worth it if it means getting her on my side. Or at least making her a little less contentious. "Constantine," I answer. "Did you... ever see him? In dreams, I mean?"

"Dreams?" She squints at me like I'm crazy, just like everyone else in this world and the other one. I'm getting used to it at this point. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," I say with a sigh. "Look, what I'm trying to say is, there's no going back to the way things were at this point. For any of us. Your world and mine? They're all mixed up. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing. Don't you want the chance to live your own life? To be your own person, not just a cardboard cutout some neurotic writer and a bunch of suits in the publishing industry dreamed up for 'marketability'?"

Irritation flashes in her eyes, and I realize that was probably the wrong approach. "You really don't get it, do you?" she challenges, her voice laced with spite.

I blink. "Don't get what?"

"You think all this is real," she says, gesturing to the room around us. "You think your world is any less of a construct than mine?" She takes a step toward me and I actually back up a little, because she may be pint-sized, but this bitch is a solid five feet of menacing. "Newsflash, Brad. We're all just stories dreamed up in someone else's head. And judging from what I've seen of yours, it's a comedy," she sneers.

I'm about to reply when the door opens.

I can tell just from the look on Catalina's face—mingled longing and rage—it's Raul standing there on the other side.

"Brad?" he calls warily, looking between us. "Is everything alright?"

All at once, Catalina snaps back to her innocent, doe-eyed appearance that I'm starting to realize is a fucking Halloween mask. "Everything is fine."

Raul doesn't answer. He just looks at me like he's waiting for a response. And I know from that protective glint in his eyes that I need to defuse the situation fast. I know he wouldn't hurt an omega, but I'm pretty sure he's not above locking her in a closet if she gets out of hand, and I decide this

conversation isn't going anywhere.

"We're good," I say, brushing past him as I walk out of the room. Maybe it's too soon to try to reason with her.

But what the hell did she mean about the whole comedy thing?

I decide she's just trying to get under my skin and brush it off, stopping a bit further down the hall as Raul catches up with me.

"What was that about?" he asks, looking me over, like Ms. Curvy in All the Right Places is capable of hurting me.

He's a fucking idiot. A cute idiot, but an idiot nonetheless.

"Just trying to smooth things out with Catalina," I admit.

"I take it that didn't go well," he says, giving me a knowing look.

"She just needs time," I mumble.

"You're too trusting," he accuses, slipping his arms around my waist.

I look up at him, snorting. "I'd rather that than be paranoid. Besides, what's she gonna do?"

"I don't know," Raul says, answering what I meant as a rhetorical question. I can tell from the troubled look in his eyes he's far from reassured. "But I'm not going to give her the chance to find out. I don't want you alone with her."

"Seriously?" I ask.

"Just humor me," Raul pleads. "I'm already trusting you by letting her stay here."

I sigh heavily. "Yeah, whatever."

I decide not to challenge him on the whole "letting" her stay thing, since that's ultimately my decision.

The truth is, after that conversation, I'm not all that sure I want to be alone with her myself.

CHAPTER 3



BRAD

I flex my biceps, sweat dripping down my forehead as I try to lift the barbell one more time. It's been two weeks since Luna left to try to fix all this magical bullshit and get us back into *The Wolf's Mate*, and my once-enviable six-pack is already more of a four-pack, and that's being generous.

She sent Reese back a few days in, and given the fact that her updates have tapered off from daily texts to me having to prod her every now and again, things aren't going great with her mom.

To make matters worse, I've had no choice but to go back to class. I kind of have to keep up the whole student thing if I want to stay in the frat house, and since my doctor gave me the medical all-clear over a week ago, I don't have many options.

At least it's good to feel some semblance of normal. Even if it means suffering through my clinically boring econ professor's droning lectures.

Two semesters in and I still don't know what the fucking economy even is. Is it money? Is it stocks? Is it old dudes in a meeting room saying shit like "irregardless"?

Pretty sure if I manage to get my degree by some miracle, I'm *still* not gonna know.

Raul insists on shadowing me to class, of course, and so far, no one's noticed he's out of place. Or at least, no one's had the balls to call him on it, considering he looks like he could bench the admin building.

The only time he ever leaves my side is when he has to go for a run in the woods surrounding campus, and considering that he lives in a frat house with few opportunities to shift, that's a necessity.

It's also the only chance I have to get in a workout without his overprotective ass watching my every move.

"Hey, Nathan," I grunt, my arms trembling as I strain to keep them straight. "Tap in, man. I'm feeling weak."

"Uh-huh, that's nice, bro," he replies distractedly.

When I look up, his gaze is locked onto Catalina, who's confidently striding on the treadmill in her tight, skimpy workout outfit.

Neon colors, as usual.

I'm not even sure where she's finding that shit.

"Focus!" I snap at him.

Nathan jumps, sheepish, and quickly moves to help me with the weights. As he does, I can't help but wonder if this newfound weakness is another side effect of being an omega. Am I losing my strength, too?

Catalina smirks, catching my eye, and waves at me with a coy smile.

It's obvious she's been enjoying torturing me ever since she showed up in my life. Her charm has the other guys practically waiting on her hand and foot. One of them even rushes over to offer her a water bottle without her having to ask.

I shake it off and resolve to ignore her. I can deal with her bullshit—for now, at any rate. I'd feel too guilty to kick her out, and besides, as long as she's here, I can keep an eye on her. That's one thing I can control, unlike the dreams of Constantine that have haunted me nearly every night since the first one.

Man, I *hope* they're just fucking dreams.

But if he was going to show up, he would have already, wouldn't he?

"You wanna go again?" Nathan offers.

"That depends," I say through my teeth. "Are you actually gonna spot me this time? Or are you just going to ogle my cousin?"

He gives me a sheepish grin. "Sorry, man. I got you, I swear."

I take a deep breath and lay back on the bench, steeling myself for another set. I've barely got the bar lifted off the set when the gym doors burst open, making Nathan and me jump in surprise.

In strides Raul, his imposing figure drawing everyone's attention. He barely glances at Catalina as she tries to catch his eye, her smirk fading for a moment. Instead, he rushes over to me, easily lifting the chest press off me with one hand as if it weighs nothing.

"What do you think you're doing?" Raul demands, his eyes filled with concern.

"Even pregnant people are allowed to lift weights," I retort, trying not to let my frustration show as I sit up.

"Pregnant people?" Nathan interjects in confusion, but I ignore him.

"Brad, you need to be more careful," Raul scolds me, worry evident in his voice. That's the one and only reason his overprotective BS isn't driving me insane.

"Stop babying me," I snap. "I can handle myself."

"It's not about handling yourself, it's about overexerting yourself," Raul shoots back, his gaze traveling

over me. "You're clearly not feeling well. You were throwing up all night."

"Bro, are you sick?" Nathan asks, turning pale as he backs up. His voice lilts an octave in panic. "You know I can't get sick. I don't handle being sick well."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, we all know about your legendary man flu, Nathan. No one wants that, but I'm fine. It's not contagious."

"You sure about that?" he asks doubtfully, looking at me like I'm the guy who just got bit in a zombie movie and isn't planning on telling the group.

As we argue, a group of freshmen who were just fawning over Catalina approaches Raul. One of them pipes up. "Hey, man, can you teach us how to get your gains? You're fucking huge."

Raul blinks at them. "I'm a werewolf."

"Can you bite me, bro?" Adam counters, clearly excited by the prospect.

Only a handful of my Kappa Nu bros have even seen Raul shift, but despite my best efforts, word has traveled fast.

Fortunately for me, they're pretty unquestioningly loyal, so no one's called the Dean or anything. They're also a bunch of drunk idiots and there's no way he would believe them if they did, but still.

Adam's friend nudges him and says, "That's vampires, not werewolves, dumbass."

"Like I told your other friends on several occasions, that's... really not how any of this works," Raul explains awkwardly.

They just stare at him, but I can tell from the blank looks on their faces it's all going in one ear and out the other.

"So do you use whey or creatine?" Adam asks.

"Alright, frosh, beat it," I grunt, snapping my sweaty towel at the three of them. "The grownups need to talk."

"It's not fair. If your boyfriend's gonna be shacking up here for free, he should at least be training us," Lee grumbles, slinking off with the others.

I glance over to where Catalina had been on the treadmill, only to find her stalking off toward the exit. She gets pissy whenever she's not the center of attention, which is rare enough.

Definitely main character syndrome.

Nathan perks up like a prairie dog peeking out of its hole and rubs his hands together. "You guys mind if I uh...?"

"Never gonna happen, but knock yourself out," I say dryly.

He wastes no time wandering after her like a lost puppy.

"Your friends seem to have adapted well," Raul says once we're alone.

"That's one of the perks of not being that deep. You kind of roll with shit," I admitted.

Raul smirks. "You felt pretty deep last night."

"Okay, that was your worst one yet," I tell him. "So cheesy even Reese wouldn't eat it if it was melted and poured over a plate of nachos."

Raul chuckles, but he grows serious. "You really need to be more careful. You're not used to being pregnant, and you can't afford to push yourself too hard."

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter. This workout was an unfortunate reminder that I'm not up to my old standards, even if I hate to admit it. I hesitate, knowing I'm probably going to regret asking him the question that's been nagging at me, but it's not like there's anyone else who would know the answer. "Am I getting weaker?"

Raul hesitates, like he knows I'm not going to like his response.

"Just be honest with me," I say with a sigh. "I need to know if that's an omega thing, a pregnancy thing, or a me thing."

"Probably a combination of the first two," he admits. "Omegas are physically weaker, regardless of stature. Especially during heat. Or pregnancy. Nature's way of making sure you don't exert yourself too much."

"Great," I say through my teeth. "Remind me to tell nature to fuck off."

Raul sits next to me on the bench, reaching out to stroke his fingers down the back of my neck. He hits one of those spots that makes my spine tingle and my back stiffens automatically.

"There are benefits, too," he reminds me, his breath tickling the back of my neck and making me shiver.

"Not in the gym, man," I say halfheartedly.

He just chuckles, leaning in to nuzzle me before he pulls away. "I take it you haven't heard anything from Luna?"

"Nah, not since she was burning through her mom's witchy contacts," I say, glancing down at the last text I sent that she still hasn't responded to. Hopefully she's not just gonna ghost me, but given how much she wants to go into *The Wolf's Mate*, I somehow doubt it. "I guess there's a coven."

"A coven?" Raul asks. "That sounds good."

"Yeah, except Luna's mom is the Karen of the coven," I inform him. "She got kicked out for some HOA-tier bullshit and it's been hard going trying to find anyone willing to help her out."

Raul grimaces. "Oh. So probably nothing this week."

"Probably not," I agree, feeling a familiar weight settle on my shoulders that's heavier than that damn barbell ever could be. Fear wiggles in alongside it. "What if Luna can't get us back? What if I end up having this baby here? Dude, I don't even know what hole this thing is gonna come out of!"

Raul winces a little at whatever mental image he's conjuring up, which isn't a great sign. "We've still got plenty of time before we have to worry about that, so try not to stress, all right?" he asks, putting a hand on my shoulder and kneading the tense muscle there.

A relaxing warmth spreads through me, melting every muscle in my body and making it impossible to be as anxious as I am.

Even if that anxiety is one hundred percent justified given the circumstances.

"Easy for you to say," I grumble. "You're not the one that's gonna be pushing a human out of your... ass?" I ask hopefully.

And I really can't believe that's the best-case scenario here.

Raul nods. "Yeah. Uh. That. I've been doing some research, and there's kind of a secondary passage where—"

I hold a hand up to stop him, grimacing. "Nope. No. I'm good. Don't need an omega biology lesson."

"Fair enough," Raul says, standing and offering his hand to help me up. "Come on. Let's get you something to eat and relax a little."

"Fine." I sigh, allowing him to lead me away.

As we leave the gym, I can't help but feel a pang of longing for my old life, where everything was simple and straightforward. But then I look at Raul, steady and strong at my side, and I know there's at least one thing in this bizarre, mashed-up universe I wouldn't trade for anything.

CHAPTER 4



RAUL

The chips clatter across the table as I rake in my winnings after putting down a full house. I haven't played poker since the last time I cleaned Curtis and the others out, but it's apparently a weekly Kappa Nu tradition.

One I'm starting to think they regret inviting me in on.

Adam slams his cards face down, growling in frustration. "Dammit, Raul, how are you so lucky?"

I shrug, stacking red and blue chips into tidy piles. "Just am, I guess." My gaze slides to Brad, who grins at me from the seat at the table next to me.

Brad cracks a beer and slides it over to me. "To the victor go the spoils," he says dryly.

I take a long swig since I know he's living vicariously through me right now—and beer is pretty much the equivalent of water in this place. Not that it's capable of doing anything for me, as fast as a shifter's metabolism is.

And the beer here tastes like shit.

"I still think you're cheating," Adam mutters, but there's no real heat behind the accusation.

"Cheating is dishonorable," I inform him. "An alpha would never stoop so low."

"Dude, you're like the Knight's Temples or something," Dave muses from across the table.

"It's Templar, dumbass," Adam snaps.

Nathan claps Adam on the back. "Face it, man, Raul's just better at this than you."

Adam glowers at his cards like they've personally offended him. I almost feel bad taking so much of his money, but not quite. "It's just because he's a werewolf. They're all lucky."

"That's leprechauns," Nathan says, rolling his eyes.

"I think they prefer to be called elves," Steve says with unearned confidence.

Brad shakes his head. "You're all idiots."

"Says the guy who can't even get Catalina's name right," Nathan retorts.

Brad flips him off. "Speaking of which, where is she?" he asks, glancing around the frat house. "Have any of you seen her?"

Reese frowns. "Not for a while, no."

"She's out on a date with Bryan," Steve says unhappily.

"The rich one, or the one with the nice hair?" Brad asks.

"Hair, obviously," Steve mumbles. This is clearly a sore subject for him.

"I told you to stay away from her," Brad says. "She's burned through half the frat already and she's a cold-blooded psychopath."

"Yeah, but she's hot," Steve protests. "And the sex is fucking insane." He leans in and whispers, his eyes glowing with excitement, "She *bites*."

Brad groans, running a hand down his face. "I really don't wanna hear about your kinky bullshit. I'm already nauseous."

He's been sick all the time lately, and I can't help but worry. At this rate, he's hardly able to focus on his classes.

To be fair, I'm not sure how much of that is morning sickness and how much of that is just Brad. But I'm glad he's got some semblance of normalcy to focus on until we can get back to the real world.

Well, to *my* world, at any rate. I'm not sure I put much stock into the idea of what is and isn't real at this point.

Steve shrugs. "Just saying. She's a great lay, psychotic or not."

"One day she's gonna cut your dick off," Brad warns.

"Promises, promises," Steve says with a leer.

Nathan scoots his chair away from him warily.

Brad reaches for the pork rinds bag on the table, nested in a sea of chips and cards, and dips a rind into the open can of salsa in front of him. I can't help but grimace at the sight of him popping the abominable combo into his mouth, and judging from the looks on the others' faces, they're having the same problem.

"Dude, that is so nasty," Nathan whines.

Brad shoots him a glare, cheeks puffed out around his snack. He swallows dramatically. "Stop yucking my yum, bro."

Nathan shakes his head. "Seriously though, how are you not sick all the time eating shit like that?"

"It's a gift," Brad says. "Besides, I'm not gonna take shit from a guy who eats moldy cheese."

"I didn't know it was moldy!" Nathan cries. "I thought it was just spicy..."

As they continue to bicker over various food combinations that all sound perfectly horrible to me, I excuse myself for a moment and head downstairs to the apartment Brad and I have been sharing ever since I got here. He has an apartment not far from campus that he shares with Devon, but he hasn't been back there, and I don't want to push him even if it would give us more privacy than the frat house does. I can tell he doesn't want to be surrounded by reminders of his brother being gone.

Besides, I'm starting to get attached to his "frat bros." They're a strange little pack, and I think a few of them are "a few fries short of a Happy Meal" as Brad would put it. But they clearly love Brad, and I can tell, no matter how much shit he gives them, he cares about them, too.

I can't help but wonder what's going to become of them when we go back to my world. Every pack is only as cohesive as the alpha holding it together, and as strange as it is for that title to apply to an omega—let alone mine—that's clearly the role Brad plays here.

Part of me wishes we could bring them all back, but considering the fact that Luna clearly hasn't had much luck just getting the three of *us* there, I'm not holding out much hope.

Once I get to the room, I take out the extra key Brad gave me. He didn't think it was necessary to lock the door, and I admit, I'm probably being paranoid, but I'm protective of the book that's my only way back into my world. I try not to check it obsessively, since there's only been one chapter that's magically added itself since I got here, and it was mostly just filler about Devon settling into the pack.

So far at least, everyone seems all right, and Constantine hasn't struck again.

But how long will that be the case?

I don't feel right being here, not able to protect them. Not able to fight. I can only do so much to protect Brad here from threats I don't even understand.

Then there's that strange dream Brad had that Constantine was here in his world. Even though nothing seems to have come of it, he's woken up every couple of nights in a cold sweat, refusing to talk about what's bothering him. I don't know how I know it's the same dream, but I can tell.

I know *him*.

I move aside the mattress to check for the third time that day that *The Wolf's Mate* is still there, convincing myself I'm just being paranoid, and *expecting* it to be there, just like it always is.

When it isn't, my heart plummets.

I toss the mattress off, then scramble to look under the bed, in the closet, behind the dresser—anywhere it could have fallen or been knocked aside to. But it's gone. Vanished without a trace.

Panic rises in my chest as I race upstairs, barely noticing the curious and concerned looks of Brad's frat brothers. I burst into the living room, eyes wild. "The book is gone!"

Brad's head whips up, eyes wide.

"What do you mean, gone?" Brad demands, standing up so fast his chair crashes to the floor behind him.

"I mean it's not there anymore," I growl. "Someone took it, or hid it, or—I don't know, but we have to find it!"

"Wait, what book?" Nathan asks, looking between us.

The look on Reese's face suggests he's the only one besides me and Brad who knows exactly what I'm talking about. And what the stakes are.

"*The Wolf's Mate*," Brad says, scanning over his frat brothers. "Raul's on the cover. Don't ask. Have you guys seen it?"

"No," Nathan says, scratching the back of his head as he looks over at Adam and Steve. They both shrug and shake their heads.

"I need you guys to help me look," Brad says, his tone urgent and his voice tight. "Please."

A chill comes over the room as the others seem to sense the shift in Brad's demeanor.

"Yeah, sure," Adam says, jumping up along with the others. "Don't worry, bro, we'll find it."

"Not a lot of books in this place," Steve muses. "Shouldn't be too hard."

"Thank you," Brad says, breathing a sigh of relief that's short lived as his eyes meet mine. I don't need to hear his words to know what he's thinking. What we're both thinking.

Catalina.

CHAPTER 5



BRAD

The frathouse is empty. All the guys have helped me search every closet, every cabinet, under every bed.

No Catalina.

No book.

Catalina's room looks untouched, but her things are gone.

Another shitty sign.

There's no note or anything, so it's not like she's holding the book for ransom. I even tried calling the number of the phone she conned Steve into buying her because the extra I gave her wasn't to her liking enough.

The bitch has been on this side of the twenty-first century for a few weeks and she's already decided she only likes Apple products.

Raul bounds through the front door, fur matted with mud and leaves. He shakes himself off, sending water and dirt flying. His wolf form is massive, bigger than a bear, all muscle and teeth. But his eyes are still the same familiar amber.

He pads over to me, lowering his head.

I scratch behind his ears. "Any sign of her scent?"

He huffs out a breath, the smell of dead leaves and damp earth. A no.

Reese emerges from the kitchen, spatula in hand. "Wolfy's back, huh? No luck?"

Raul shifts into human form right there in the foyer, muscles rippling under his tan skin. He's naked, but he doesn't seem to care. Alphas rarely do. "Her scent disappeared at the river. She's covering her tracks."

My stomach drops. This can't be happening. If Catalina stole the book, there's no fucking way she's planning on doing anything good with it.

"This is fucking bad," I mutter, digging a hand into my hair.

"What's Catalina want with that book anyway?" Reese asks, looking between us.

"Probably revenge," I mutter.

"Revenge?" Reese echoes in confusion. I can see the answer dawning on him. "Oh, right. Because you're fucking her destined mate or whatever."

"The other way around," Raul says tersely.

I roll my eyes. Alphas.

"Well, what can she do with the book?" Reese asks. "Could she actually change anything?"

"I don't know," I admit. "But I'm sure she's going to try to *re*-rewrite everything to put it back the way it was. And if that doesn't work, maybe even destroy the book when she's done just to spite us."

"She wouldn't," Reese says. "Would she? Wouldn't that destroy her, too?"

I fall silent for a moment, and Raul and I exchange a look. He knows the answer to that question as well as I do.

"We don't know how desperate she is," I answer. "But we can't take the chance. We have to find her before she does anything, especially when Devon and the others are still there."

"I've searched everywhere," says Raul. "She could be anywhere, and she clearly doesn't want to be found right now."

"Have you tried tracking her phone?" Reese offers.

I stare at him blankly for a moment.

"Sorry, if that's dumb—"

"No," I say quickly. "Reese, you're a fucking genius."

"Really?" he asks, perking up. "Never heard that before."

"Go find Steve," I say, grabbing his arm. "Please. Tell him I need access to his account."

"Yeah, sure. I think he went to math class, he'll be down for an excuse to ditch," Reese says, already headed toward the door.

"What do you mean track her phone?" Raul asks, wandering over as I take out my phone to contact Luna, figuring it's about time I let her know what's going on since it's her evil brainchild running loose out there. "How would you do that?"

"It's a tech thing," I answer, sending a text to Luna. "If you wouldn't think of it, neither would she. Which means she probably hasn't ditched it yet."

I can tell he still doesn't quite understand, but he stays silent as I text. All of two seconds later, Luna is calling me.

"Oh, so you do know how to pick up a phone," I mutter when I pick up.

"Don't start with me. Do you have any idea what spending an entire month with my mother and her alcoholic frenemies is like?" Luna demands from the other end. "And what do you mean, the book is gone?"

"Just what I told you," I say with a sigh.

"I told you to keep it somewhere safe!"

"Yeah, no shit," I say. "We did. It was locked up in our room, and I have no idea how, but Catalina must've nabbed my key because she broke in and stole the book somehow. The door was still locked."

"She's fucking sneaky," Luna mutters. If I didn't know better, I'd think there was a hint of admiration in her voice. "You should have kept a closer eye on her. I told you letting that bitch stay at the frat house was a bad idea."

"You're the one who wrote her like this!" I cry.

Luna falls silent for a moment. I can practically hear the gears turning in her head from here.

"Where would she go?" I ask. "You created her. You know how she thinks. Where would she take the book?"

"I don't know," Luna says slowly. "I mean, she's cunning. At least originally. She has to want something, but I don't know what. I'm still not used to the idea of my characters doing shit I don't have control over."

"Well, she did," I say. "So start thinking like her. What does she want?"

She hesitates. "I mean, she probably wants Raul back."

"Yeah, no shit, but do you think she's going to fuck with the book to accomplish that?" I ask. "Or destroy it?"

More silence. "I... don't think so. She's too smart for that. This version of her, at least," Luna finally murmurs. "She's probably waiting for something. Trying to use it for leverage. She has to want to go back as much as you and Raul do."

I'm not really sure if that counts as comforting, but I decide it's something. "So what do we do? I take it you're still not any closer to fixing the spell to get us back?"

"Actually, I did make some progress," she says. "I talked with one of Mom's friends who actually knows what she's talking about, and she's been helping me refine the incantations. But that's all dependent on actually having the book in your possession."

"Yeah," I say with a grimace. "I get it. So where do we go from here?"

"I'm coming down there," Luna says decisively. "I can help look for clues about where she might have gone, and if we find her, I can try reasoning with her to get the book back."

"Thanks," I say. "When will you get here?"

"I'm packing my bags now," she replies. "I'll drive down tonight and be there first thing in the

morning. Try to get some rest. We've got a long road ahead of us. And hey, maybe Catalina will contact you once she's put enough distance between you and her to feel safe."

"Yeah, I guess," I sigh. "Drive safe."

I hang up, glancing over at Raul. I can tell he heard everything.

"So now we wait," he says in a somber tone. I can tell it's the last thing he wants to do. Man of action and all that.

And I can't say I'm any more comfortable with this shit, but what choice do we really have?

"There's still Steve," I say, shooting him a text to find out if he's on his way.

"I'm really not enthused by the idea that our fate might rest in the hands of a man your pack calls 'Smelly Steve,'" Raul says flatly.

"You and me both, buddy," I snort. "And it's not a pack, it's a frat."

"Same difference," says Raul.

Before I can argue, the door opens and Steeve breezes in. "Hey, Reese says you need me?"

"Just your phone," I say, holding my hand out. "Give it."

He scowls, but hands it over. "Just stay outta my browser history. And if you see anything about feet, it's not what you think."

"Foot powder?" I ask, opening up the Find My iPhone page.

Steve's face goes blank. "Oh. Uh. Yeah. That's it, actually."

I scroll through the list of devices on Steve's plan until I find the newest phone on there, and I press the button to track it. When I hear a shrill dinging sound coming from down the hall, my heart sinks.

Raul grimaces, bringing a hand to his ear like the sound is painful. "What is that awful noise?"

"Wait, it's here?" I cry, rushing off in the direction the sound is coming from.

"Hey, that's my room!" Steve cries as I burst in and look around, trying to narrow the sound down even more. It sounds like it's coming from his dresser, and when I start rummaging through the top drawer, Steve gives up and throws his hands in the air. "What the fuck, man?"

I toss aside a few socks that definitely shouldn't be in the clean sock drawer—God, I *hope* these aren't supposed to be clean—and frown when I see the phone sitting at the bottom of the drawer, still pinging.

"The phone," Raul says, his eyes widening as he comes up behind me.

"I don't get it," says Steve. "What's that mean?"

"It means Balsamic Vinaigrette is a hell of a lot smarter than I've been giving her credit for," I mutter. "And we're fucked."

CHAPTER 6



BRAD

Once Raul and I leave Steve to return the contents of his drawer to their rightful place, I slump against the wall and take a deep breath, trying not to let myself get too discouraged.

Or panic.

"Luna is right," I say, slipping my phone back into my pocket. "We should probably get some rest while we can." I look over at Raul's mud-covered, naked form. "And you need a bath."

"You could join me," Raul says, taking a step closer with a glimmer of mischief in his eyes as he holds out his leaf-and-dirt-covered arms.

I back up instinctively. "Hey, don't come near me with that Rambo shit. You look like you just crawled out of the swamp."

Raul just grins, flashing a bit of fang that's at once sexy and intimidating.

He lunges, and I cry out in half-hearted rage, dancing out of the way.

But Raul is fast.

He bounds after me down the stairs, and I'm pretty sure the only reason it took him that long to catch me is because he wanted to get me alone. In a flash, he's got me pinned against the wall, his hard body pressed against mine.

"Gotcha," he growls, nuzzling my neck.

"Get off, you overgrown hellhound!" I protest, though I don't really want him to. My body thrums with desire, going pliant under his touch.

That's one of those words I had to look up the first time I read *The Wolf's Mate*, and I thought it was another one of Catalina's exaggerations until I felt the full effect of Raul's touch first hand.

Raul growls again, the sound vibrating through me. "Make me."

I swallow hard, meeting his gaze. His eyes glow amber, swirling with lust and challenge.

Oh, fuck. That look is all it takes to get me hard. And judging by the way he's grinding against me, he fucking knows it, too.

He dips his head, kissing a line up my neck until he reaches my ear. "I can smell how much you want me, omega," he says, his voice low and growling.

He's right, of course. I do want him, even now that there are a thousand distractions swirling in my head. But this could be a nice distraction of its own, especially when I'm powerless to do anything about all our problems right now.

But right now, with Raul's hard body pressed to mine, his scent and heat enveloping me, I can't bring myself to care.

I surge up, crushing my lips to his in a bruising kiss. Raul growls in victory, grabbing my ass and hauling me up to wrap my legs around his waist.

"That's my omega," he growls, lifting me up the rest of the way to carry me into the room and the adjacent shower like he's carrying back a prize.

"Hey, put me down," I grumble, struggling in his grasp. He doesn't even seem phased, just grinning as he finally puts me down in front of the shower.

All of a sudden, I find it hard to care about the mud and leaves that are sticking to my shirt from all the roughhousing.

Raul tears my shirt off with a snarl, sending buttons flying across the tile. He unbuttons my jeans before I can even start them and has us both naked in record time. He crowds me into the shower, turning the water on and pushing me under the spray.

The warm water cascades over us, plastering Raul's dark hair to his head. He looks like some sort of dangerous, feral creature—all hard muscle and sharp teeth. Sometimes I swear he's more vampire than wolf when he looks at me like that. And I remember the pain and pleasure of his mating bite, which adds fuel to that theory.

When he kisses me again, it's harsh and demanding. I moan into his mouth, clutching at his shoulders.

Raul breaks the kiss to trail biting kisses down my neck and chest, pausing to suck a bruise onto my collarbone. His hands are everywhere, roaming over my body and squeezing my ass.

I reach down between us to palm at his cock, loving the way he groans and thrusts into my hand.

"You're acting like you're in rut," I say, my own voice husky with the desire I feel for him.

Raul responds with a growl against my lips and gripping my hips before flipping me around to face the wall. I brace my hands against the tile, my breath coming in pants even hotter than the steam billowing around us.

"You're mine," Raul says, pressing a kiss to the spot he's just marked.

The outline of his fangs isn't quite the tattoo I had thought it would be, but it's kind of cool-looking. A reminder of exactly who I belong to, and even though I can't believe I'm okay with that—let alone turned on by it—I am.

I shudder at his words and how right they feel. Emphasizing the message his mark has already carved

into my skin, and somewhere even deeper than that.

When I feel him pressing the head of his cock between my cheeks, my body tenses instinctively, knowing what's coming. Wanting it, even though I know the pain that comes with it, despite the fact that I'm already getting slick for him.

And then he's sliding into me in one smooth thrust.

I cry out, fingers scrabbling against the wall to brace myself. Raul eases into me, holding back with more restraint than I have, but it still hurts. Even with my own natural lubrication.

It's almost too much, the ache and the pleasure warring within me. I push back to meet his thrusts, wanting more. *Needing* more.

Raul wraps an arm around my chest, pulling me flush against him. His other hand slides down to grip my cock, stroking in time with his thrusts.

"Good boy," he purrs.

There it is again. That phrase that should drive me insane, and it does.

Just not in any of the right ways.

I feel his knot pressing against my hole, trying to stretch it open as the rest of his length disappears in me. And a part of me wants it, but there's just enough common sense left to chime in.

"You shouldn't knot me in the shower," I pant. "Pretty sure that's dangerous."

Raul chuckles, easing back just enough that I can still feel his knot, but it's no longer threatening to push into me. "Safety first," he teases. Only he could manage to make those words sound sexy.

Everything does in that voice of his.

I press my cheek against the shower wall, as he finds a steady pace, being gentler than he needs to be even though it still makes my ass ache each time he thrusts inside. Not that I'm about to complain. Even the ache feels good in its own way. A reminder that he's inside me. That he's my mate, and he's claimed me in every way there is now.

I moan, unable to form words as Raul pounds into me. His hand on my cock is relentless, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

"Come for me," he growls.

An order, not a request. One I'm helpless to disobey.

My orgasm rips through me, leaving me trembling in Raul's arms. He continues to fuck me through it, chasing his own release. When he finally comes, spilling hot inside of me, I'm still shaking.

There's something about the sensation of being filled with his come, even if his knot isn't inside me this time, that pushes me over a whole different edge. Something that feels so impossibly good I can hardly stand it. If it were possible to come again just from that, I would.

As it is, I just tremble with satisfaction, enjoying the little aftershocks as he sinks against me, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist and his strong, muscular chest pressed to my back. He buries his face in my neck and kisses me. I can tell he's breathing in my scent.

Either it's my imagination, or I can smell him a little better, too, even through the shower steam. I can smell both of us, our scents and arousal mingled in a perfect concoction that does something to the animalistic part of my brain.

Raul finally goes soft and eases out of me so we can both wash up. He starts massaging the bar of soap over my tense muscles, and while I'm usually not the type to let someone else fuss over me, it feels too good to stop him and I can tell he enjoys it. Probably some alpha thing.

When he turns off the water and helps me out of the shower, I'm unsteady on my feet, still dazed from the intensity of what we just did.

What he did to me.

What I let him do.

It should probably bother me. I keep waiting for the panic to sink in over the fact that I let myself get pounded by another dude on the regular, but it hasn't.

It just feels...right.

Good.

We end up back in bed, wrapped up in each other's arms, and Raul's scent envelops me, marking me in a way his bite already has.

"You're mine," he says, low and possessive.

I know I should argue. Tell him I don't belong to anyone. But the truth is, he already has me. And I don't want it any other way.

"Yours," I agree softly. "For the record, you're mine, too."

"Always," he says, his breath rustling my damp hair against my neck.

Raul's arms tighten around me, and I let my eyes drift closed. Safe and satisfied in the embrace of my alpha.

At least until I open them again and find that Raul is gone.

And I'm back in woods as dark as they are familiar.

CHAPTER 7



BRAD

The woods close in around me as I walk, thick branches clawing at my arms.
My heart hammers.

Not again.

Please, not another fucking dream about Constantine.

Why can't I dream about Raul? Hell, I'd take those weird shame-boner dreams about my Poetry professor calling me in front of the class in a clown suit over this shit.

At least there's no sign of him. Not yet, anyway.

Something up ahead does catch my eye, though, and I'm on edge immediately. A flash of brown fur darts between the trees. Relief washes over me when I realize it's just a regular wolf this time.

But something about it draws me closer, luring me to follow it into the woods, where the brambles tug at my arms and legs.

At least, I *think* they're brambles.

What are brambles anyway?

While I'm still at war with the dream brambles, the wolf bolts like it saw me.

"Hey, wait!" I call after it.

It responds by diving deeper into the forest.

Because of course it does.

I yank myself free and stumble after it, even knowing Constantine might be lurking somewhere nearby. Hell, for all I know, he's leading me into a trap, but something about that damn wolf is so weirdly familiar, I can't resist.

Finally, the wolf stops at a stream and turns to face me.

Yeah, there's no mistaking it. Those eyes look like mine.

I start walking slower, not wanting to spook it, and hold my hand out like that guy in the dinosaur movies does. And it seems to be working, so I guess I shouldn't have ragged on him so much.

"Hey," I say, taking another slow, steady step.

The wolf's fur bristles all the way down its back, its lips curling back from sharp teeth. A warning snarl rumbles in its throat and I freeze.

"Hey, easy," I say. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

But then I realize it's not looking at me.

It's looking *behind* me.

I spin around, heart pounding. There, leaning against a tree, is a man with long, bone-white hair and golden eyes. I've never seen him before, but if the white hair isn't enough of a clue, that scar over his left eye sure as hell is.

"Constantine," I say through my teeth.

He pushes off the tree and saunters over, hands tucked casually in his pockets. Every step cracks a stick under his expensive-looking shoes.

"Miss me?" His smile is all teeth.

I back up until I can hear the stream babbling a bit too close behind me. When I crane my neck a little, just enough to look over my shoulder, I see the wolf has vanished.

Coward.

"Not enough," I say, hoping I sound braver than I feel.

Constantine stops an arm's length away, looming over me. "Now, now. There's no need to be rude." His eyes flick down, tracing the line of my throat. "We're going to be mates soon enough."

Panic rises in my chest like bile. "Bullshit. In case you haven't noticed, I'm marked now."

Constantine sneers. "So you are. But that doesn't mean much to me. It won't mean much to you, either, once Raul is dead."

Rage washes over me and it's all I can do not to fling myself at him and attack. I'm not sure if I'd be able to take him in a dream, but even if he doesn't have the advantage of shifter strength here, he'd still kick my ass. I'm arrogant, but only where I can back it up, and one look at this stylish asshole is enough to know that's just not gonna happen.

"Why do you even want me?" I demand. "I'm not even really from Blue Fang."

"That hardly matters, does it?" He reaches out, grasping the air an inch from my face. His nails have lengthened into claws. "We all have to play our roles."

My breaths come sharp and fast. "What are you talking about? What roles?"

Constantine smiles, a flash of teeth. "You'll find out soon enough, my lamb. Now, wake up!"

I stare at him in confusion for a few seconds before his voice distorts into a familiar shout. "Brad, wake up!"

I gasp and bolted upright, blinking at the dim light of my bedroom. Raul is in bed next to me, his hands on my shoulders as he gently tries to shake me awake. My heart is still pounding from the dream, but the sight of Raul eases it back to a normal rhythm.

I'm safe.

And he's still with me.

Raul's expression eases into one of relief as I look at him and he gathers me to him, his strong arms wrapped around me. "Another dream?"

I nod not yet trusting my voice. Raul wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me against his side. I lean into his warmth, breathing in his soothing scent.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Raul asks softly.

I take a deep breath and pull back to meet his eyes. "I dreamed about Constantine again."

Judging from the look in his eyes, that's no real surprise. His expression darkens, but he nods for me to continue.

"I was in the woods," I explain. "There was a wolf, but not Constantine. It sounds weird, but it looked like me."

"Like you?" Raul asks, blinking.

"Yeah. In the eyes, anyway," I say, starting to have that feeling I usually have after I think I've had a really profound dream only to realize it was just random bullshit like playing Major League Baseball at the Olive Garden and not some Einsteinian revelation.

"When I cornered the wolf, Constantine showed up instead," I continue. "He was human this time, but it was definitely him." I shudder, remembering the predatory gleam in Constantine's golden eyes. "He said some cryptic bullshit about roles, and threatened you. And then he told me to wake up."

Raul is silent for a long moment, his brow furrowed in thought. "And you don't think it was just a dream?"

"I've dreamed about him just about every night since you've been back," I admit. "And it sure as shit ain't because I've got a crush."

"No?" Raul asks dryly, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "He's not your type?"

"No!" I balk, grimacing at the thought. "He's a fucking creep. But... is it possible? To communicate with someone through a dream, I mean."

Raul hesitates, and seems to be considering it. "Wolves communicate telepathically, of course. But I've never heard of one being able to talk to a human. And Constantine shouldn't be able to enter your dreams. Not unless you share a bond—and you certainly don't."

"What if it's magic?" I ask warily. "What if he's found a way to track me?"

"If that were true, he would have tried to take you already," says Raul. "You heard what Luna said. We're bonded. That's why I was able to come through, into your world."

"Catalina's here, too," I remind him.

He pauses, but takes me back into his arms. "It was just a dream, Brad. And if it wasn't, we'll deal with it. I'm not letting anyone take you from me again."

"I know," I say, sighing deeply. But I can't get Constantine's threat out of my head.

What if he really is here?

What if he tries to kill Raul, and there's nothing I can fucking do about it?

I can't lose him again.

I won't.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand and when I see Luna's name on the display, I'm only kind of relieved.

"Luna is here," I announce. "Let's see if she had any more luck than we did."

CHAPTER 8



RAUL

The stairs creak under our feet as Brad and I pad down to answer the insistent knocking. Reese is still snoring away on the couch, drool pooling under his slack jaw and a half-eaten burrito sitting on his chest. If he were a shifter, he'd be a damn St. Bernard.

I open the door first, putting myself between the door and Brad just in case, ignoring his eyeroll. Luna stands on the threshold, looking like a woman who's running on coffee and fumes.

She gives me a wary look, and if I really am a character from her book who's come to life, from her perspective, I guess I can see why. I step back to let her into the entryway, noticing she has a heavy bag that looks overstuffed hanging off her shoulder.

"Hey," she says, looking around. "This place is quiet."

"Most of us are morning people," Brad says, yawning. "More or less."

"Still no sign of Catalina?" Luna asks, a worried glint in her eyes.

"Not yet," says Brad, growing somber in an instant. "We tried tracking her phone, but she just left it here."

"She's a crafty little thing," I say with a sigh.

"Yeah, that sounds like my Catalina," Luna muses, and if I didn't know better, I'd think she was proud.

"Where's your mom?" Brad asks.

"You think I was going to trap myself in a car with her for hours on end?" Luna asks, shifting her bag onto her other shoulder. "But one of her friends, Alicia, turned out to be pretty helpful."

"You have a way for us to get back into the book?" Brad asks hopefully.

"Maybe," she says, making a beeline for the stairs. "Where was Catalina staying? I need to see her room."

"Upstairs, four doors down on the right," Brad answers, following her, and I follow him in turn. "Why?"

Luna ignores him as she enters the room and starts rifling through the dresser drawers, tossing the few

things Catalina left behind aside until she finds a hairbrush. She plucks a long, dark hair from the bristles and holds it up. "Was this Catalina's?"

Brad frowns. "The guy who was in this room before her is bald. So yeah, it's gotta be."

Luna's eyes gleam. "Good. We'll need it for the spell."

My hackles rise at the mention of magic. I know we need it to get back home, but magic is both the thing that brought Brad to me and separated us for those unbearable weeks.

Brad glances at me, brow furrowed. He knows I don't trust Luna. But we both know we don't really have any other options.

"What do you need Catalina's hair for?" Brad asks.

Luna smooths a few strands between her fingers. "We have to perform a tracking spell. It's the only way to find out where she's gone."

"And then what?" I demand. "What will you do once you've found her?"

Luna's gaze slides to mine, guarded. "First and foremost, we need the book. The spell depends on it. It's our ticket to the other world, and from what Alicia told me, when I did the first spell, I accidentally made it into a—"

"A portal?" Brad offers.

"Yes," Luna says slowly, staring more intently at him. "How did you know that?"

"Something Catalina said," Brad admits. "When she was trapped between our worlds, she mentioned she could see all these different portals, including the one leading into hers. And out of it. When we did the ritual, another portal opened up, I guess, and that's how she followed me through."

"And you're just mentioning this *now*?" Luna cries.

Even though I'm thinking the same thing, I'm immediately defensive of my mate, and I step between them.

Luna gives me an incredulous look and mumbles under her breath, "God, you're exactly how I wrote you."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I say dryly, folding my arms.

"Look, I didn't know what she was talking about, and it creeped me out," Brad says, raking a hand through his short hair. "All this woo shit does."

"Well, get used to it, big guy," Luna says pointedly. "And you'd better hope this 'woo shit' is enough to get us to Catalina. Otherwise, we're all fucked and you're never seeing your bother again."

Brad grimaces. I want to comfort him, but there's little more I can do than reach out to put a hand on his shoulder. She's right, and we both know it. There's a chance we're going to be stuck here in this world forever, and while I can deal with anything other than losing Brad, I'm still not ready to give up without a fight.

Not when my pack and my family are depending on me.

Especially not when Brad is pregnant, and something tells me that's not going to go over very well in this world.

"What do you need for the ritual?" Brad asks, sounding as resigned as I feel.

"I have everything," Luna says, patting the bag on her side. "I just need about an hour to set it all up."

"The downstairs is all yours," Brad assures her. "I kept everything how you left it."

"Will it show where Catalina is right now?" I ask. The sooner we find her, the better. She's too clever and too dangerous to be left to her own devices for long.

"That's the idea," says Luna. "As long as the spell goes according to plan, but Alicia's a lot more thorough in her record keeping than my Nana was, and it's a lot easier than opening up a portal to another dimension. So there's that."

I look up when I hear someone coming down the hall, and a moment later, Reese appears in the doorway, yawning and rubbing the back of his neck. When he sees Luna, he straightens up, eyes widening.

"You're back," he says, like he can't quite believe it.

Luna gives him a small smile and nods. "Well, someone's gotta find Catalina."

"Do you need any help setting up?" Reese asks, a bit too eagerly.

Luna hesitates. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

She leaves the room and Reese follows her eagerly. Yeah, he's definitely a St. Bernard, and the puppy eyes he's giving her are unmistakable.

"Do you think they...?" I ask, once Brad and I are alone in the room.

Brad blinks, looking at the spot the other two were just a second ago. "Reese and Luna?" He scoffs. "Nah."

I'm not so sure, but I decide we've got other things to worry about. I step closer, listening to make sure the others are out of earshot. "Are you sure we can trust her?" I ask.

"Luna?" he asks, his brow furrowing. "Of course. She's the one who started all this to begin with."

"That's my point," I say. "She clearly doesn't know what she's doing."

"Maybe not," Brad snorts. "But neither do we."

It's a fair point. I know I'm not being logical right now, but I can't help feeling like Catalina running off with the book is far from the last of our worries. "I'm just afraid of getting separated from you again," I admit.

I'm not used to being afraid of much, let alone confessing it, but Brad is the only person I've ever felt safe being that vulnerable around. His gaze softens and he reaches out to take my hand, giving it a

squeeze. "You won't," he says. "You marked me, remember?"

"Yeah," I say, taking a deep breath.

I just hope that's enough.

CHAPTER 9



BRAD

"*L*ooking like a real magician's apprentice there, Reese," I say dryly as I come down the stairs with Raul to see my frat bro and Luna setting up the new ritual.

He shoots me a half-hearted glare as he places the candles around the circle Luna set up with yet another sigil poured from salt. This one looks a hell of a lot more complicated than the last, so maybe Luna's friend is legit after all.

Seated on the floor, Luna is arranging candles and bowls of herbs around the circle and giving Reese instructions, which he obeys like an obedient puppy.

When she finishes, she places a charcoal disk in the center of the circle and drops a few of Catalina's hairs onto the surface. She lights the disk with a lighter and the scent of human hair burning in the air makes me gag.

Luna sits at the edge of the circle, a look of focus coming over her. "Come. Sit."

We obey, Raul pulling me down beside him. His warmth calms my nerves, but only a little bit.

Luna begins muttering under her breath, and the candles flicker to life one by one. The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

"You're getting good at that," I remark.

Luna's lips twitch. "Getting better at the whole witchy thing in general."

"You might want to consider a career change," I tease.

She rolls her eyes. "Don't count on it. All right, we all need to join hands," Luna says. "Complete the circle."

Raul grasps my hand, his palm hot against mine. On my other side, Reese links his fingers through mine. I stare at our joined hands, dread pooling in my gut. Even though we aren't traveling anywhere, I'm still nervous, considering how on-and-off our previous magic sessions have ended up being.

The smoke coming up from the charcoal disc thickens, swirling faster and faster like a big gray tornado. A crack splits the air and then a portal yawns open above us, only this time, rather than the blue light, it's just black and gray.

Reese groans. "Not again."

"Hush." Luna peers up at the portal, her eyes wide. "There. I can see something!"

The portal stretches wider, but it doesn't threaten to consume everything like before. Instead, it's like a window, or maybe a screen. I squint, trying to figure out what Luna means.

A familiar figure steps through a crowded bus station, heading toward an empty bus. Even though her dark hair is piled up in a messy bun and she's wearing a nondescript leather jacket rather than her usual unicorn puke colors, I recognize her immediately. My heart nearly stops.

"That's her," I say. "That's Catalina."

Raul's hand tightens around mine, his eyes flashing. "Where is she?"

Luna leans in closer to the portal, frowning. "There's a word on the bus scroll. It looks like... Heartland?" She meets my gaze, her eyes widening with the same realization I'm coming to. "She's trying to go home?"

"How?" I blur out. "Isn't Heartland just some town you made up?"

"No, the town is real. It's everything else I made up," Luna mumbles.

I groan. "Woman, couldn't you at least come up with a fake town name?"

"Look, it's not like anything is actually there," Luna protests. "Like I said, everything else about the town in the book is made up."

I sigh. "Fair point."

The woo-woo spirit camera we're looking through zooms in as Catalina climbs onto the bus, dropping coins into the fare box. The doors hiss shut behind her. Then the portal starts to shrink as the bus takes off.

"Shit," Luna mutters. "I can't hold the portal open." She winces as the portal flickers, as if in emphasis.

"We have to follow her," Raul chimes in. "Does anyone have a private jet?"

We all just stare at him. Sometimes, it's easy to forget he's a fantasy alpha male from a romance novel, and then other times, it smacks me in the face like a ten-inch cock.

"No, no one has a private jet," I say pointedly. "This is the real world, remember?"

He snorts. "In a manner of speaking."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure Rich Bryan's dad has a private jet," Reese muses. "And he owes me a big favor."

"Seriously?" I ask, afraid to get my hopes up. "That would be awesome."

"If that's true, I could kiss you," Luna says, and even though I'm pretty sure she means it as a figure of speech, Reese whips out his phone like it's a pistol and he's in some kind of Wild West duel and starts

texting like his life depends on it.

And overall, the stakes aren't that far off.

If Catalina is going to Heartland with the book, she's definitely up to something. I don't know what, or if it's something that's even gonna work, but if she managed to swipe that thing out from underneath our noses, she's smarter than she looks.

And if we can't get that damn book back, we're seriously fucked.

I guess I should be grateful she probably hasn't destroyed it.

Yet.

Half an hour later, Rich Bryan comes through and we're all on our way to the airport. Luna is driving and Raul is being his usual overprotective self, so he insisted on me sitting in the back seat with him while Reese rides shotgun.

"You know, you owe me now that Bryan doesn't," Reese grumbles. "That was a *premium* favor."

I snort. "Yeah, yeah. I'll pay you back," I promise.

"How? You're gonna be in this freaky book world if everything goes according to plan," he counters.

"You could always come with us," Raul offers. "I have a jet in my world."

Reese glances dubiously at him in the rearview mirror. "So does that make Brad, like, a trophy wife or something?"

"I'm not a trophy wife!" I snap. "I'm a trophy *omega*. Get it straight."

I can't believe those words just came out of my fucking mouth. Then again, I really can't believe a lot of things about the way my life has been going lately.

"So what's the plan once we get there?" Reese asks, glancing between me and Luna in the driver's seat.

"First, we find Catalina," I answer. "Then, we get that fucking book."

"He's right," Luna says with a sigh. "Once I have the book, we can theoretically get back into the other world. But there's still the matter of what we're going to do with Catalina. As long as she and the book are both here, that's going to be an issue."

"So we'll take her back," I say, shrugging. "And lock the bitch up as long as we have to in order to keep her from causing more interdimensional bullshit."

I'm pretty sure that's not actually a crime you can prosecute in either world, but Raul does have an underground prison. And apparently a private jet. I really need to ask him if he has an island, too, because I could deal with disappearing for a while after all this shit is over.

"Easier said than done," Luna mutters, looking over at Reese. "What about you?"

"Huh?" he asks, as confused as I am.

"We need someone we can trust to keep the book safe once we're in the other world," she answers.

"You'd trust me to do that?" Reese asks, sounding touched.

Luna shrugs. "That and you're the only person who knows what's going on. Kind of hard to explain this shit to anyone else."

"Oh," he says flatly. "I mean, yeah. I guess I can figure something out. There is a safe in the frat house."

"Why is this the first I'm hearing of it?" I cry. "That would've been useful to know before."

Reese shrugs. "It's in the Kappa Nu handbook, bro. Didn't you get one when you took over as prez?"

I rack my brain, trying to remember. "What did it look like?"

"It's a big red binder with the frat letters on front," Reese answers.

I gulp. "Oh, yeah. We're using that to prop up that one leg of the beer pong table that's unsteady."

Luna groans, dropping her head back against the rest. "Unbelievable."

"Hey, you wing ancient powerful magic, I wing frat policy," I argue. "Don't ask me which one is worse."

Luna snorts a laugh. "Fair enough."

The car falls silent for the rest of the drive, but it feels like something heavy has settled over us. And it's not just the tension of what could happen if Catalina gets away with that book, at least not on my end.

I've been so focused on getting back to the book world, and back to my twin, that it didn't really hit me until just now that I'm going to be leaving my frat bros behind.

Possibly forever.

It's a choice I've already made, and with Raul beside me, I know it's the right choice. The only choice.

But that doesn't make it any easier to swallow.

CHAPTER 10



BRAD

The private jet is every bit as cushy as I imagined, and I can definitely say this beats traveling in a cramped SUV with the guys—especially with Steve's feet up on the dashboard—any day of the week.

I could get used to this.

Unfortunately, I'm too tired to even stay awake for most of the flight and I end up falling asleep on Raul's shoulder. When I wake up, there's a puddle of drool where my cheek was and Raul is gazing down at me in pure adoration, like I haven't just been slobbering on him for the last two hours.

"You guys are kind of cute, actually," Luna says with a snicker. "Definitely my OTP."

I roll my eyes, running a hand through my hair. When I look out the window, I can see the city below coming into view, so I know we're starting to descend. "Coming from you, that's a lot," I say dryly.

"It's kinda weird," Reese muses, and when he sees the death glare Raul is giving him, he holds his hands up in defense. "I'm not talking about you both being dudes. It's just... I've never really seen Brad like this."

"Like what?" I ask, immediately defensive.

And embarrassed.

Reese pauses to consider it for a moment before he says, "Vulnerable, I guess. No offense, but you've always been a little tightly wound. Around him, you're not." He shrugs. "Like she said, it's... cute."

My face turns red hot and I look out the window again, even though the sight of the plane steadily descending is making my nausea act up. I'm not even sure if that's the morning sickness, or just the fact that I get nervous every time I fly.

And this time, I can't even have booze.

"Yeah, whatever," I mumble, not missing the faint smile on Raul's lips.

"At least planes haven't changed too much," he remarks, looking around the cabin.

"Yeah, maybe not rich people planes," I snort.

The landing is smoother than I expected, considering the jet is a lot smaller than any of the commercial planes I've flown on. My heart leaps as the plane slows, anticipation and nerves tangling in my gut.

We're here.

And now it's just another hour's drive to Heartland.

The door opens with a hydraulic hiss, sunlight flooding the cabin. I squint against the glare, taking a deep breath of thick, humid air tinged with the scent of pine and damp earth.

Raul takes my arm to help me up, and if my leg wasn't asleep, I'd remind him I'm not eight months pregnant.

"We'll find the book," he says, giving my arm a squeeze as we make our way toward the exit. "And then we'll go home."

"Yeah," I say, realizing that's exactly how I've come to think of Raul's pack.

My home.

We disembark and head to the tiny rental car counter, where we wait for Luna to rent a car since she's the only one over twenty-five who actually has a valid license in this world. A bored attendant slides a set of keys across the counter to her after dicking around on his phone for way too long.

"You're all set for a red sedan. Just bring it back with a full tank or they'll charge you out the ass," he says.

"Thanks," Luna says, taking the keys from him.

His gaze slides over our motley crew with faint curiosity. "Y'all have a good day now."

"You, too," I say, looking around only to realize Raul is gone once we make it out of the kiosk. "Hey, where'd Raul go?"

Reese blinks and looks around. "I dunno, bro, he's your alpha."

I groan, looking over at Luna. "You're the one who wrote him with a tendency to disappear and reappear randomly."

She just shrugs innocently, glancing around the lot. "It's... mysterious."

"It's annoying," I grumble.

A few minutes later, Raul emerges from the airport carrying a massive piece of paper.

"There you are," I huff, walking over to him. "Where the hell'd you go?"

"Sorry, I thought we could use this," he says, holding up the piece of paper.

I frown. "What is that?"

"It's a map," Raul says, as if it should be obvious.

Reese wrinkles his nose and holds up his phone. "Dude, we got a map right here. And a GPS."

Raul opens his mouth to respond, but stops when Reese pulls an app up on his screen. He looks helplessly at the paper map and sighs. "Well, I thought it would be useful."

"You sound like my dad," I scoff, taking out my own phone. He stares at the screen like it's some kind of dark magic. "All right, Heartland is here," I say, zooming in on the map. "Exactly how far is the pack?"

Raul looks over my shoulder, still as wary of the phone as he was the first time I showed him how it worked. He points to a spot on the outskirts of town. "About there."

I don't see any markers for any restaurants or anything. Hopefully this place isn't sitting on someone's private property. I switch to Street View.

"What the hell?" Raul mutters.

"Pretty cool, huh?" I ask, virtually traveling down the small dirt road. Other than a few abandoned storage containers sitting in the middle of the woods, it's nothing but trees. "Man, this place is remote."

"It was in my world before we settled," says Raul. "That's why the pack bought the land in the first place."

"Well, at least we won't be trespassing," Luna says with a sigh, pushing the button on her keyfob. A red sedan in the lot chirps, and we all get in.

Anxiety gnaws at me as we drive down the winding dirt road. What if Catalina destroyed the book out of spite? What if I'm stuck in this world forever, separated from Devon? The thought of Raul being torn from his pack and family because of me is almost too much.

Raul squeezes my hand, startling me from my spiraling thoughts. "Everything will be all right," he says softly.

I force a smile, not wanting him to know what's really worrying me. "I know. Just a lot riding on this."

"We'll get the book back," he says confidently. "And we'll make Catalina pay for what she's done."

His reassurance does nothing to ease my anxiety.

We finally arrive at the spot Raul indicates is where the pack house should be, but other than the winding dirt road we had to take to get here, there's nothing. No sign of a house, or even another car for miles, and there's definitely no sign of Catalina.

"Well, we're here," Reese says, looking out the passenger's side window. "What now?"

Luna parks and takes the keys out of the ignition. "We might as well look around," she says.

"Why would Catalina come here?" Raul asks, frowning as he opens the car door and offers a hand to help me out. I take it even though I'd usually rebuff his chivalry, but only because my side is stuck.

"No idea," I say, feeling a sense of foreboding as I take in our surroundings. The woods are dense and

dark, even though it isn't even dusk yet. There's a weird stillness in the air, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

Judging from the tense look on Raul's face, he's feeling the same way. "This is right where the pack house should be," Raul finally says. "But this place feels off."

"It should. It's a liminal space," Luna remarks.

"A what?" Reese asks.

"A liminal space," she explains. "It's a place that exists between two states of being. In this case, you've been here in two different worlds. It feels strange and uncanny, like you're not supposed to be there."

A chill runs down my spine. "Yeah, well, it's creepy as shit."

Raul's gaze sharpens as he scans the tree line. "It's strange. I don't hear anything."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Reese asks warily.

"The forest is full of life, even if you can't see it," says Raul. "This place... there's nothing. No birds, no squirrels, no wolves. Not even the normal kind."

"I mean, that doesn't sound so bad to me," Reese says. "I'd rather not run into any all the way out here. No offense."

Raul snorts. "None taken."

"Catalina isn't here," I realize aloud, feeling the crushing weight of fresh panic as it settles in.

"Not right now, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything," says Luna. "The portal we were watching her through isn't necessarily synced up perfectly with our time. That could have been hours earlier, or later."

"You mean she could be long gone," I say. "Or nowhere near here yet."

Luna winces a little. "Yeah...?"

"Great." I sigh. "So what do we do now?"

"The only thing we can do," Raul says. "We wait."

We trudge back to the rental car in defeated silence. The woods press in around us, lifeless and watchful. Every step feels heavy. Even the air is suffocating.

When we go back to the car, everyone is quiet. Except for Reese playing games on his phone.

I lay my head on Raul's shoulder, trying not to let myself obsess over all the potential bullshit Catalina could be up to right now. At least he's still with me. That's not going to change, right? Even if she does destroy the book...

The thought of him disappearing before my eyes is going to send me into a full-blown panic attack if I let it go too far, so I push it away and try to just clear my mind. I've always been pretty good at that.

A little too good, according to Devon.

The thought makes a smile tug at my lips. My eyes drift shut at some point, exhaustion weighing them down.

I wake with a start, but I'm not in the car anymore. I'm in the middle of the fucking woods, just like I have been so many times before, only...

Something about this time feels different. They're the same woods from my other dreams, but there's another sense present that wasn't there before. The familiar, mossy scent of the woods when we got out of the car links the two together in one awful, unsettling realization.

These are the same woods from my dream, only this time, I'm in the real world.

I pinch myself hard enough to confirm that.

"Shit," I mutter, looking around for any sign of the others. Did I sleep walk? That's the only explanation, but damn, not a great time to start.

The woods are dark, shadows pooling between the trees. An owl hoots softly in the distance. The air is cold and smells like pine needles and soggy earth.

A twig snaps behind me. I whirl around to see a pair of glowing eyes reflecting the moonlight from the depths of the forest. A low growl rumbles through the trees, raising the hair on the back of my neck.

Shit. Not again.

My heart leaps into my throat as I stumble back. In front of me, emerging through the shadows of the trees, is a familiar face with a jagged scar over the left eye. Constantine's face.

"There you are," he purrs in the same smooth, velvety voice from my dreams that hits my ears as all kinds of wrong, leaving a bone-deep feeling of dread inside me that's more intense than all those dreams combined. "I told you I'd find you, didn't I?"

"You really didn't need to go through all that trouble," I say through my teeth. "I wasn't holding my breath."

Constantine laughs, the most menacing sound I've ever heard, and it makes me cringe. "That hurts my feelings," he taunts. "And here I've been so very eager to meet you."

I take a step back, trying to steady my nerves and come up with a plan. If I run, he's just going to shift, even though I'm pretty sure he could outpace me on two legs.

If I scream, Raul might hear me, but could he make it in time?

Man, I am so fucking screwed.

CHAPTER 11



RAUL

At some point, I must have fallen asleep because my eyes snap open and my heart is pounding. The car is empty.

Brad is gone.

Panicking, I turn sharply to Luna and Reese, who are still sleeping in the front seat. "Wake up! Brad's missing!"

They bolt upright, eyes wide. Luna scrambles for the door handle. "What do you mean he's missing?" she asks, still sounding dazed and half-awake.

"I don't know how, but he is," I growl, searching the woods. My first thought is that he went off to piss somewhere because he's too prideful to ask someone to go with him, and that's just the kind of thing he would do.

But when I search the immediate woods, calling his name to no avail, the panic seeps back in even stronger than before.

I try to focus, knowing I need to think clearly, and then I feel it—the tugging sensation in the middle of my chest. Our mating bond is still freshly forged, and it's only going to grow with time, but maybe it's strong enough already to lead me to him. I tell the others to keep looking before I shift into my four-legged wolf form, since it's faster. I run into the forest, branches whipping my face, guided by instinct alone.

He has to be around here somewhere.

And if he isn't...

I shake off the thought, trying not to let myself go there.

I freeze in my tracks when the bond pulls me one way, but I catch Brad's scent in another direction. For a moment, I'm torn, unsure of which to follow, but then I reason that the bond is still new and faint. His scent is more familiar, and it's stronger. It's never led me astray before, so I change course and run toward it.

When I catch sight of a familiar brown leather jacket up ahead, my heart plummets.

Brad?

I immediately rush over. But when I find a pile of leaves and stones beneath the jacket, seemingly meant to make it look like someone was wearing the jacket from a distance, I feel a mixture of relief and confusion.

Rage boils in my gut as I hear a twig snap behind me. I whip around, hackles raised, and snarl at the sight of Catalina standing there with her arms crossed. She's smirking like she's won some game I never agreed to play.

"Where is he?" I demand, shifting back so she can hear me and stalking toward her with my teeth still bared. She holds up her hands, but her smile doesn't fade.

"With Constantine, of course," she says. "Thank you for walking into our trap. You played your role perfectly."

My blood turns to ice.

They were waiting for us.

For *me*.

Brad was nothing more than bait—and I fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

"You're working with Constantine?" I snarl. Of fucking course.

"Let's just say we have mutual interests," she says with an innocent shrug.

A rumbling growl builds up in my chest. "You're a damn fool. If he's hurt a single hair on Brad's head —"

"Now, now," she tuts. "Constantine won't damage his prize. Not yet, anyway."

My rage boils over and I lunge for her, but I hit something that feels like an invisible wall and I'm thrown back to the ground. My heart is pounding, my thoughts racing in confusion.

What the hell?

"What is this?" I demand, looking around for any sign of what's holding me in.

"Look down," Catalina says smugly.

I turn to look at the ground beneath my feet. When I notice a strange divet in the earth, I move the leaves and brush aside only to realize it extends in a perfect circle around me. My eyes widen as I trace the intricate sigil carved into the dirt.

Magic.

"Luna isn't the only one with tricks up her sleeve," Catalina says. She steps closer to the edge of the circle, her lips curling into an even crueler smirk. "Turns out I'm not too bad with magic myself."

I lunge for her again, snarling, but I slam into the invisible barrier once more. The sigil is holding me in. I'm trapped. I try to dig up the earth around it, but something is keeping that thought from becoming

an action. The brush of magic against my mind is a foreign yet unmistakable sensation now that I've experienced it.

"Let me out!" I roar. "Now!"

"I don't think so." She shakes her head. "Not until Constantine and Brad are back in the other world."

My heart drops. So that's what they're planning. "You have no idea what you've done."

"I helped Constantine get what he wanted," she says, her tone laced with bitterness. "In return, he's going to help me get what I want. You."

"Then you're a fucking idiot," I spit. "You think I could ever love you? You think this will do anything more than make me despise you even more than I already do?"

Her eyes flash dangerously. "You will be mine, Raul, one way or another. Even if I have to break you to get you there."

"You're out of your mind," I growl.

"No, I'm in love," she counters, her voice sickly sweet. She reaches out a hand to caress my face, and I swipe out at her fingers with my partially shifted claws, barely missing them.

She jerks back with an irritated huff. "You'll come around eventually."

She turns around and walks toward the edge of the trees, where another shadow is beginning to form.

Constantine emerges from the darkness, his eyes glowing triumphantly. I bare my fangs at him.

"You coward," I snarl. "Fight me like the alpha you claim to be instead of hiding behind magic and your little henchman."

Judging from the murderous glare Catalina is giving me, she does not appreciate that remark.

Constantine smirks, completely unbothered. "There are many ways to fight, and many ways to win. I've already won this battle, and soon, I'll have won the war."

"You'll never have Stone Hollow," I growl. "My pack will never bow to you."

"They won't have a choice once you're gone," he says calmly. "And once I have your mate at my side, uniting my pack with his, there will be no one left to stand against me. Your territory will be mine."

Fresh anger washes over me. "You'll have to kill me first."

I throw myself against the invisible barrier again and again, clawing and snarling. The magic holds fast, burning against my skin, but I don't stop.

I can't.

Brad is mine.

No one will take him from me.

"You're only hurting yourself," Catalina says with a sigh.

I whirl on her, eyes glowing, and let out a bone-chilling snarl that doesn't sound human. The shift is spreading up my forearms, so I won't be for much longer.

She takes an involuntary step back.

"If you value your life at all, witch, you'll release me now." My voice comes out as a distorted growl. "Or I will tear you both apart as soon as I'm free. That is a promise."

Her eyes widen, and for the first time, I see a flicker of fear in them.

Good. She should be afraid.

Constantine only watches on with amusement. "Empty threats. You have no power here. Not anymore."

He turns away, disappearing back into the shadows. Catalina hesitates a moment longer before following after him.

I shift fully and throw myself against the barrier again, desperate and enraged. I can feel the bond between Brad and I stretching and fraying as Constantine takes him further and further away.

I can't lose him.

I won't.

There has to be a way out of this. There has to be.

And I won't stop fighting until I find it.

CHAPTER 12



BRAD

All the dreams I've had up until this point were definitely a trial run. Now that I'm faced down with reality, there's no doubt about what I have to do next.

My breath comes in ragged gasps as I sprint through the woods, heart pounding in my chest. But I'm no match for Constantine. His long legs easily devour the distance between us, and before I know it, he's on me.

"Gotcha," he hisses, grabbing me from behind.

I struggle and thrash until I feel something sharp pierce the side of my neck, and my body goes heavy. All the fight leaves me and I go limp in his arms.

Everything goes black.



MY EYES FLUTTER open and I find myself in a clearing, arms bound behind my back. I feel something beneath me, a blanket or maybe a coat, even though mine is gone despite the fact that I was definitely wearing it when I blacked out.

I can barely lift my head, and I hear people talking, even though it sounds like they're underwater and there's ringing in my ears. When I notice the sting in my neck, I realize it's probably from whatever that son of a bitch drugged me with.

"Are you sure this is where it is?" Catalina's voice.

What the hell?

"Positive," Constantine responds, his deep voice immediately recognizable. I strain to get a better look and see him glancing around the clearing. "The landmarks are slightly different, but my wolf has a good sense of direction. This is where I was fighting Raul on the edge of Grayridge territory. It's the best place to go back to the other world."

"Other world" echoes in my mind, jolting me fully awake. I wriggle against my restraints, trying to free myself without alerting them to the fact that I'm awake.

What the hell are they planning?

And where are Raul and the others?

"Stop moving," Constantine orders, golden eyes locked on me. He's not wearing his white jacket anymore, and I realize I'm laying on it.

So he's a *chivalrous* psychopath.

I think I hate him even more now, if that's possible.

"Go to hell," I spit back, continuing to struggle. The ropes are digging in, but I don't care. I need to get free, to warn Raul about whatever sick plan Catalina and Constantine have cooked up.

Catalina smirks, clearly amused by my predicament. "Good. You're awake. Just in time to enjoy your trip." She saunters over, her brown hair swaying with each step, and I despise the cruel glint in her eyes.

"Where are Raul and the others?" I demand angrily.

What the hell did they do to them?

Constantine chuckles, a sinister sound that sends chills down my spine. "How touching. Brad is worried about them. You'll make a perfect mate to rule at my side, even if you are marked," he says, reaching out to lightly stroke the mark on my neck.

I jerk away from his touch, baring my teeth, and bite his finger hard. He hisses in pain, pulling his hand back, and I feel triumphant for a moment.

"Fine, if you like feral dogs, I guess," Catalina mutters, scowling at Constantine.

I can tell she's annoyed that he praised me, but honestly, I couldn't care less about her jealousy.

"Shut up, Catalina," I growl, glaring daggers at her. "Do you have any idea who this fucker is?"

"Of course I do," she says, folding her arms. "Haven't you ever heard? The enemy of my enemy, and all that."

"You're a fucking idiot," I seethe, turning to Constantine. "And so are you if you haven't figured out by now that she's the one you want, not me."

"I've pieced together enough from going through the portal—and everything Catalina has told me," he says calmly. "Sure, Catalina was originally Raul's mate, but then you entered our world and that changed." He looks at me with those cold, golden eyes. "She isn't my mate, and neither are you, Brad. But you are my ticket to taking over the Blue Fang pack, so why should I care?"

"Pathetic," I spit out. "Being willing to be mated to someone you don't love just for power? You really want to waste your life like that?"

Constantine doesn't seem bothered by my remark. Instead, he smirks as if he finds my anger amusing. "Love is a weakness, Brad. And when it comes to power, any means necessary are acceptable."

"I won't let you use me like this," I snap.

"Good luck stopping me," he replies, his voice dripping with arrogance.

As much as I hate to admit it, I'm scared.

Not of him, but of whatever he's done to Raul and the others.

What if he...?

Fuck, I can't even let myself think about that. And as new as the bond between me and Raul is, I have to believe I would feel if it he was gone.

"Raul will come for me," I mutter, trying to find some hope in this nightmare.

"Let him try," Constantine says, clearly unfazed. "We'll be ready for him when he does. But I don't think he's going anywhere anytime soon."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I demand as Catalina walks over to stoop down in the tall grass, messing with something on the ground. I can see what looks like a flame flickering and squint, realizing there's a whole fucking magic circle set up.

Oh, hell no.

"Shut up," she hisses, picking up a book. "I'm trying to focus."

I watch in horror as she flips through the pages of a book I immediately recognize thanks to Raul's abs being plastered on the cover. "What, you're a witch now?" I ask incredulously.

She shoots me a withering glare but doesn't answer. She's too busy muttering something under her breath, and I can see the glow of the candles in the circle intensifying as she works.

"Natural wicked witch of the west, aren't you?" I say, hoping to throw her off. It brings me a small sense of satisfaction when she flips me off without looking up from her work.

"Charming," I scoff. So much for little miss innocent. "How do you even know how to do this shit?"

"I told you, I was stuck in that Twilight Zone watching all those different worlds while you stole my life," she says, her words dripping with bitterness. "And I spent plenty of time watching your world, too, trying to figure out how to get back. That flake who wrote *The Wolf's Mate* was a great case study in what *not* to do with magic." She sneers. "That and I'm pretty much fluent in Latin now."

"Okay, I get it's a real language, you don't have to rub it in," I mutter.

Catalina gives me a quizzical look before she's interrupted.

"Hurry up," Constantine says, his impatience growing as he walks over to her. "It's close to the same time as the battle took place, and we need to get it as close as possible."

"I know, I'm working on it," Catalina hisses. She continues her incantation, and with each word, the magic circle seems to get stronger, the air around it crackling with energy. My heart pounds faster in my chest, worry and fear gnawing at me like a persistent itch.

Finally, she finishes and steps back, a satisfied smirk playing on her lips. "There," she announces, brushing her hands off against her jeans. "That should do it."

As the ritual space comes to life, my stomach drops. This bitch is really going to succeed at opening a portal, isn't she? I feel like an idiot for underestimating her.

No matter who or what she was before, she's definitely made use of her time between dimensions.

Now I'm starting to feel like a slacker.

"I still don't see a portal," Constantine says in a gruff tone.

"I just have to do the incantation," Catalina says, closing her eyes and holding her hands out toward the flames.

"Fine," Constantine growls, yanking me to my feet and dragging me toward the ritual circle.

I try to struggle against him, but it's useless. His grip is like iron, and I'm barely able to move.

To my horror, a portal opens up in the clearing, but it's not the blue light from before. It's a dark gray hue, and Catalina's eyes are glowing the same shade.

She might have learned by stalking Luna like some creepy little interdimensional ghost, but she's definitely working with a different kind of magic.

And by the looks of it, it's a hell of a lot more effective, which scares the shit out of me.

"Wait," Catalina calls out suddenly to Constantine as the portal continues to grow above the magic circle. "I did my part. What about yours?"

"I helped you trap Raul, didn't I?" he challenges.

My heart sinks at the realization. I already figured that was the case since I know Raul would have found me already if he was free, and I'm grateful he's alive, at least, but that doesn't stop me from being afraid for him.

Or fucking furious.

"How am I supposed to make sure Raul doesn't kill me when I set him free from the trap?" Catalina asks in a whiny voice.

"That's your problem to figure out," Constantine says coldly, not even bothering to look at her. The disdain in his voice makes it clear he couldn't care less about what happens to her.

Catalina's face twists with anger, but she bites back any retort. Instead, she turns her attention back to the ritual space, continuing the incantation under her breath. As she speaks, the flames dance higher, and a sickening sense of dread fills my gut as the portal stretches bigger and bigger until it's big enough to step through.

Even from this side, I can see a hundred glimmering, shifting portals just like this one.

I try to yank my arm away, desperate for any chance to escape, but Constantine's grip is like iron. He

drags me toward the portal, and I brace myself as we step into the swirling vortex.

In an instant, we're transported to a vast blue space with countless smaller portals arranged in a hallway that looks like it goes on forever. Each one flickers like a television screen, offering glimpses of different worlds. Some of them look identical to mine, while others I can't look at for more than a few seconds without feeling like my brain is gonna break.

Like algebra on steroids.

The air around us hums with energy, and I can't help but stare at the otherworldly sight in front of me.

"Come on," Constantine growls, tugging on my arm to pull me down the corridor.

As we continue our search for the right world, I see a flicker of something that seems like it's coming from my mind's eye, not my physical eyes. It's like there's another presence inside my mind, something that feels both foreign and familiar.

When I close my eyes, I see the wolf from my dreams with startling clarity. Its eyes bore into mine, like it's trying to communicate something important.

Let me take over, the wolf whispers in my mind. Not with words, but with a feeling, but the message is clear all the same.

What the fuck is this?

"Found it," Constantine says, stopping abruptly. His grip on my arm tightens even more, making it impossible to shirk away. "This is the one."

I glance at the portal he's indicating and notice that it shows Raul's house. I feel a wave of nostalgia that hits me like a punch in the gut.

The portal's image zooms closer toward something on the rooftop.

No, not something. *Someone.*

I recognize Devon immediately, and I feel a mix of relief and fear for my brother, knowing I'm not the only one watching him. When I look up at Constantine, though, he's frozen, staring at the very same image I'm seeing, even though he looks like he's seeing a ghost.

His entire body is rigid, and there's an unmistakable look of shock on his face, his jaw slightly slack and his eyes getting wider by the second. I do a double take at the portal, wondering if he's getting a glimpse of something else back in his home world, but all I see is Devon.

"It's...him..." Constantine breathes, sounding shaken for the first time since I've met him. Possibly for the first time ever.

Rather than stick around to make sense of it, I choose to seize my opportunity, knowing it's probably the only one I'm gonna have, and break out of his grasp. I don't even stop to turn around to see if he's following me as I bolt down the corridor, back the way we came, and I feel it again—that nudging presence at the back of my mind, from a freakishly familiar stranger who's begging me to let him in.

"Brad!" Constantine snarls. Whatever trance he fell into is clearly broken, and I can hear him coming

after me. A snarl splits the air and I don't need to turn to look to know he's shifted.

Fuck!

With no other choice, I give over to the strange impulse that's been nagging at me. I close my eyes and focus, letting the presence in my mind take over. It's like a rush of energy, coursing through every fiber of my being, filling me with strength and power I didn't know I had. And then, suddenly, I feel my body changing, bones shifting and muscles morphing as I transform into...

A motherfucking *wolf*.

Constantine's snarl grows louder as he realizes what's happening, but it's too late for him. As a wolf, I'm faster, stronger, and more agile, and most importantly, I'm free from the restraints that bound me seconds ago.

I'm glad I'm not fully the one in the driver's seat because I'm not sure I could even make my foreign limbs work enough to put one foot in front of the other. Instead, I sit in the backseat as the stranger takes control and sprints down the corridor, weaving between the portals, not daring to look back.

All I can think about is getting back to my world. To Raul, and to Devon. That seems to be enough direction for this thing that's taken over me. The feeling of desperation drives us forward, pushing us toward the portal that leads home.

My world. Raul's. It doesn't matter.

Raul is my home, and as long as I get to him, everything will be okay.

Behind me, Constantine's enraged howls echo through the liminal space, but they sound distant compared to before. I can sense his fury, his frustration at losing his prize, but I refuse to let it slow me down.

"Almost there," I tell myself through gritted teeth, every muscle in my body straining as I push myself to the limit.

Finally, I see it. The portal leading back to my world. With one last burst of speed, I leap through it, leaving Constantine and his twisted ambitions behind me.

As I emerge on the other side, I collide with a stunned Catalina who shrieks as I land on top of her. She falls silent when her head cracks against a rock on the way down, but I keep going. I can deal with her later. For now, I just have to hope that keeps her out of my hair.

Or... fur.

Right now, I have to find Raul.

CHAPTER 13



RAUL

My wolf form is exhausted from struggling against the invisible barrier for... minutes? Hours? I've lost all track of time.

"Raul!"

Luna's voice cuts through the darkness like a ray of light. Reese is by her side, his eyes wide with concern. I shift back into my human form, wincing at the sudden sensation of vulnerability when my adrenaline is already pumping.

"Constantine has Brad," I grit out. "You need to break this seal so I can save him."

"Brad?" Reese's face contorts with worry as he rushes over. "How did that happen?"

"No time to explain," I growl, feeling the urgency pressing down on me. "Please, just help me get out of here."

Luna looks down at the sigil and nods. She kneels, placing her hands on the ground, and hesitates. "How do I do this?"

I was hoping she'd know, but I have an idea. "Just dig. I can't, but I think that's part of the spell."

Luna shrugs and starts digging the earth away with her hands. As soon as she breaks the outer circle, I feel something shatter around me like an invisible glass wall coming down, and sure enough, I'm able to step past it. Relief washes over me, but there's no time to waste.

"Thank you," I say quickly, already ready to shift back into my wolf form. "Get back to the car, both of you. It isn't safe out here."

Without waiting for their response, I shift and take off into the woods, following Brad's scent. The fact that it goes hand in hand with Constantine's fills me with rage. The darkness closes in around me as I push my body to its limits in search of my mate.

When I find him, I'll settle what I should have with Constantine years ago.

Halfway into the woods, I catch sight of another wolf. My heart hammers in my chest when I recognize Brad's scent on it. How is that possible? Confused but desperate, I take off after it, my paws pounding against the earth.

The chase is short-lived as the other wolf turns and tackles me with relief, licking my muzzle. I can't help but laugh when I realize who the wolf is.

It's Brad.

The tension drains from my body as relief floods through me like a wave.

Brad? I ask, still reeling from the shock. *How did you—?*

I don't know, but fuck, I'm glad to see you. His ears prick. *Wait, did you hear that? Did I talk?*

I chuckle. *Yes, you did. Telepathically. You... really are a wolf now.*

It's a long story. He pauses, tilting his head adorably. *Well, okay, it's actually an extremely short story, but I don't really know the answer.*

I raise an eyebrow but decide not to press the issue. We have more pressing matters at hand. *How did you get away from Constantine?* I ask, deciding we need to settle that first and foremost.

Brad hesitates. *Catalina did a spell and opened up another portal for him. We went through, but I shifted somehow and got away. The portal's still open, but not for long, so we have to find Luna and Reese and get through it before it closes,* he continues, urgency returning to his voice.

Portal? I ask, my confusion mounting. But I trust Brad, and if he says there's a portal, then there's a portal. We'll deal with the details later.

Come on, let's go! Brad leaps off me and runs off into the woods. He's adapting well enough to his wolf form already.

Maybe he's not such an atypical omega in that regard, after all.

This way, I say, shifting directions to head back to the spot where we parked, since that's where I told Reese and Luna to go.

We catch up with them on the way, and Reese does a double take when he sees two wolves barreling after him, which I can't say I blame him for. Especially since I'm certainly not the normal garden variety of wolf.

"Holy shit!" he bellows.

Brad stops just short of him, and shifts back, rising from the kneeling position he shifted into. That makes Reese scream even louder.

"Chill out, bro," Brad grumbles. "It's just me."

"You're a wolf now?" Reese cries in shock, not seeming that much calmer.

"I don't have time to explain. The portal's closing!" Brad barks. "We have to go now!"

"The portal?" Luna cries, even though she's already running after Brad. I take off after them both and glance over my shoulder to see Reese hesitating, but he finally mutters something to himself and starts following us.

Brad skids to a stop when we reach the clearing. Sure enough, there's a yawning portal in the middle sitting atop what looks like a ritual circle, not unlike the sigil Catalina trapped me in. A familiar book is sitting in the center of the circle, but what catches my eye is the unconscious woman lying off to the side, blood trickling from a wound on her forehead.

"Is she—?" Luna breaks off, clamping a hand over her mouth.

Brad walks over and kneels down, checking her pulse. "She's still alive," he mutters. "The question is, what do we do with her?"

"Leave the bitch!" Luna cries, snatching the book off the ritual circle. "I still don't know what happened, but she's clearly gone off her fucking rocker."

I'm inclined to agree with her.

Brad doesn't look convinced, though. Leave it to him to still find a way to be sympathetic toward the woman who literally handed him over to our enemy. As if I couldn't love him any more than I already do.

But it's that very selfless streak that scares the hell out of me.

"We don't have much time," I warn him, looking up at the portal, which looks a few inches smaller than it was when we arrived.

Brad gnaws on his bottom lip and nods to the others. "All right, everyone who's going through, come on. We don't have time to waste."

Luna nods, handing the book to me before she walks over to the portal, takes a full breath, and steps through. I can still see her on the other side, which makes me a bit less apprehensive about losing Brad on the way.

Reese is watching her intently, and I can tell from the look of indecision on his face he's struggling with what's about to happen. Maybe there is something between them, after all.

"Fuck it," he mutters, stalking forward. "I'm going, too."

Brad's face lights up. "Seriously?"

"What the hell." Reese shrugs. "I did say I'd do anything to get out of finals."

"Wait," Luna says, looking between them. "What about the book?"

I look down at *The Wolf's Mate*, still a bit uncomfortable with the fact that my abs have been plastered across bookstores nationwide.

At least it's a good picture.

Brad hesitates, looking between me and the book. "Can we even bring it with us?"

"I mean, it's a tether between worlds," Luna reasons. "It could help us if we ever need to get back here. And we wouldn't have to worry about it falling into the wrong hands again," she says, looking pointedly at Catalina.

"Okay," Brad says with a shrug, taking the book from my clawed grasp. "Let's get this show on the road, then."

I place a hand on his shoulder and walk with him toward the portal. I offer a hand to help him since the portal is shrinking even more, and he takes it, but hesitates, looking back at Catalina. I can see the guilt and the war going on behind his eyes.

I shake my head, pleading with him, because I can already tell where his thoughts are going.

He gives me that look he knows I can't resist. He doesn't need a wolf form to have puppy eyes that have become my Achilles' heel.

"Look, I know she's evil, but we can't leave her like this," he reasons. "Besides, how much trouble could she cause in an underground cell?"

I groan, but I can tell from his tone he's not going to be dissuaded, and the last thing I want is this stressing him out for the rest of his pregnancy. With the portal growing smaller by the second, there isn't time to argue, anyway.

I grunt an acknowledgment and lift Brad through first before stalking over to gather Catalina into my arms. I step through the portal with her.

Not a moment too soon, either, as the portal shrinks to the point where we couldn't go back through if we wanted.

Not that it stops me from considering whether I want to toss her out.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Luna cries, looking at the woman in my arms. "Seriously?"

I nod in Brad's direction, telling her to take it up with him.

"Look, I'm no magician, but I'm pretty sure it's bad karma to leave someone to bleed out in the forest!" Brad protests. "Besides, who knows where the fuck Constantine is—and if we have her, at least they can't plot together anymore."

It's a fair point, and judging from the others' silence, they think so, too.

"So where do we go from here?" Reese asks, eyeing the seemingly endless corridor of portals stretching out on all sides around us.

And I can't say I blame him. When I look into one portal and see nothing but an eternal stretch of paisley that looks like my grandmother's favorite tablecloth became Hell itself, I quickly realize my mistake.

"It's this way," Brad says, striding forward confidently.

We all follow him, but I keep my eyes peeled for any sign of Constantine, who might well be lurking around here. Brad finally stops in front of one of countless portals, and sure enough, when I look, I see the familiar sight of my home on the horizon.

Finally.

"This is it," Luna breathes in awe, staring at the portal as she comes to terms with the fact that the world she wrote is as real as hers. "Holy shit."

"All right," Reese says, rubbing his hands together as he inspects the portal. "Let's do this." When no one moves, he glances over at Luna. "Ladies first."

"My hero," she says dryly, rolling her eyes before she takes a step closer and puts her hand through. When nothing happens, she shrugs and steps through the portal.

Reese leans closer, squinting. "You still alive over there?" he calls.

"Just get in here," Luna snaps, reaching through the portal to grab him by the arm. Reese cries out in surprise as she yanks him through, but I can still see them both on the other side in the clearing.

"You ready?" Brad asks, going over to the portal next as he looks up at me.

"More than ever," I assure him. I watch as he steps through, and follow him, glancing back as the portal vanishes behind us.

CHAPTER 14



BRAD

The flash of light blinds me for a second as we tumble through the portal. When my vision clears, I find myself surrounded by Raul and the others in a tangle of limbs as we're spit out on the other side.

Raul leaves Catalina's unconscious body on the ground, then turns to me to help me back to my feet. "Brad," he murmurs in relief. "Are you—" His eyes go wide as he cuts off, staring down at me.

"What?" I ask warily, wondering if the portal rearranged some limbs or something, judging from the way he's looking at me like he's seeing a damn ghost.

"You're... pregnant," Raul chokes out, unblinking and confused.

Now Reese and Luna are staring at me in shock, too, like there's something about my appearance that has them even more shaken than the fact that we just traveled into another world.

"Uh, yeah, no shit," I tell him. "You had a role to play in that, remember?"

"No," he says slowly, looking down toward my stomach. "I mean you're *very* pregnant."

I follow his gaze, and when I realize I can't see my feet anymore over my stomach, I let out a scream of panic. My hands fly to my swollen belly, and it feels all too real. Stretch marks and all.

"What the fuck?" I cry, staggering back even though it's not like I can escape it.

Raul catches me before I can trip. "Brad, careful," he pleads.

"*Careful?*" I bellow. "I look like a damn blimp that's about to take off at any second, how are *you* not freaking the fuck out?"

"Shh, it's okay," Raul murmurs, pulling me against his chest. I struggle in his grip. "You don't look like a blimp."

"He kind of does, though." Reese gives me an apologetic smile in response to the death glare I'm giving him over Raul's shoulder. "No offense."

Raul growls at him. I renew my struggles, panic clawing up my throat. I can't breathe. "See?" I grumble.

Raul strokes my hair, his touch gentle. "Even if you were a blimp, you'd be the most beautiful blimp to ever exist."

"Not. Helping," I grit out, finally pushing away from him. "How the fuck is this even possible? I'm not *that* pregnant!"

That fact alone seems impossible enough.

Raul doesn't seem to have an answer than that, and neither do the others.

"Interdimensional travel clearly isn't an exact science," Luna finally says, always one to try to find the reason in a situation. Even one that's completely unreasonable. "Especially since we all went through at once. Maybe that... fucked with something?"

That makes about as much sense as anything else here, but it's little comfort. I'm about to demand we get me to a doctor *right the fuck now* when familiar voices reach us from the house.

"Brad!" Devon comes sprinting across the lawn, Curtis and Lenore close behind. Relief and joy wash over me at the sight of them, momentarily overshadowing everything else.

Devon reaches us first, throwing his arms around me. "Holy shit, you're back." His voice cracks as he hugs me tight. "It's been so long. We didn't think you were coming back."

"You weren't gonna get rid of me that easily," I murmur, squeezing him back tight. I was starting to think I was never going to see him again, and actually being able to see, touch, and hear him is more of a relief than I can say.

Enough that it takes my mind off the pregnancy disaster. At least for a second.

Until he pulls back a little, eyes dropping to my stomach, and they widen almost comically. "Holy shit," he says again.

"Yeah," I say warily. I need to get some fucking clothes on. By far my least favorite part of shifting. The panic is starting to creep back in at the edges of my mind as another question occurs to me. "How long were we gone here?"

Devon looks between Raul and I, eyes lingering on my stomach again. "Five months," he says, his voice cracking a little.

The world tilts.

Five months.

I'm going to be sick. And not just in the way I always am lately. Maybe that portal super-charged my morning sickness, too.

Raul steps back from embracing his brother and Lenore and puts a hand on my shoulder to steady me. "Five months?" he echoes, looking between them.

"How long has it been for you guys?" Lenore asks warily.

"Not *that* long!" I blurt out.

"We'll figure it out," Raul promises, giving my shoulder a squeeze. His strong touch always makes the tension in my body melt, like some alpha muscle relaxer. If they could figure out a way to bottle that shit, it would be the best selling drug on the market. How he can sound so sure is beyond me, though. "For now, just breathe. We're home, we're safe. Everything will be okay."

I suck in a sharp breath, but I'm still far from settled about all this bullshit. But he's right. We all made it through, and we're back with the people we love.

That definitely counts for something.

"Who is that?" Lenore asks, her gaze landing on the unconscious woman on the ground.

Curtis's eyes widen. "Holy shit. Is that...?"

"Thousand Island dressing," I say dryly. "Your favorite."

"It's a long story," Raul says with a sigh. "But we need to get her into a cell before she wakes up."

Lenore gives him a dubious look, and considering that Catalina doesn't look like the evil mastermind she is, I can't say I blame her.

But Raul's right. We need to lock her up, and fast.

She's the one who opened the portal, so for all I know, she's partly responsible for the fact that I look like the Michelin Man.

Even unconscious, she looks smug.

"And who are they?" Lenore asks, her gaze drifting to Reese and Luna as Curtis lifts an unconscious Catalina into his arms.

"This is my bro, Reese," I tell her, gesturing to him. "My frat bro, not my bro-bro."

"Sup, wolf lady," Reese says, nodding to her.

"And this is Luna Daycrest," I say, pointing to the woman who's gone dead silent, like she's shell-shocked. And I guess she kind of has reason to be, considering we're in the world she thought she dreamed up until recently. At least I'm not the only one experiencing a complete mindfuck. "The author of *The Wolf's Mate*."

"The..." Lenore trails off, like she doesn't want to repeat the title. She looks at me and I recognize the look of realization dawning on her face all too well. "Holy shit."

"Seems to be the theme of the hour," I grunt.

"Nice to meet you," Luna says with an awkward wave. I wonder if she's starting to second guess her decision to come here, but it's a little late for that.

"This can't be happening," Lenore groans, raking a hand through her hair.

"Tell me about it," I scoff.

"We should get you inside," Raul says suddenly, his eyes dark with concern as he looks down at me.

"I want Dr. Wilson to give you a full workup. Maybe he can at least tell us how far along you are."

"Great. My favorite person," I mutter, even though I follow him back to the house with the others.

There are still so many questions I need the answers to—even if they're answers I'm not sure I'll be able to swallow—but for now, it just feels good to be home.

CHAPTER 15



BRAD

An hour later and change, I find myself sitting in the pack house with Raul's arm around my shoulder as he sits with Mina on his lap. She's clinging to him like she's trying to choke him. And I can't say I blame her, considering how suddenly he disappeared. At least she doesn't seem to be holding it against me, considering she tackle-hugged me, too, when we first arrived.

Lenore, Curtis, Devon, Hannah, Reese, Luna, and even Trent all surround us, their eyes flicking between Raul and me as he finishes recounting everything that happened while we were gone.

Well, most of it.

"... And that's how we got here," Raul concludes, his voice steady but tired.

Luna groans and rubs her temples. "That's the kind of transitional, expository scene I would have glossed over with a lazy time skip if I was still writing the book."

I roll my eyes at her comment, trying to ignore the knot of anxiety in my stomach. The fact that it's been months here since we've been gone is freaky enough, but when I think about how much further that pushes me toward my due date, I wanna hurl. And not for any of the usual reasons.

Hell, I haven't even come to terms with the fact that I'm pregnant yet.

Lenore shakes her head in disbelief. "I can't believe you were right about all that, Brad. I thought you were just crazy."

I flip her off half-heartedly. She just gives me a smile in return, her icy blue eyes softening a little.

"Whatever the case, we're glad to have you both back," she says sincerely.

"Yeah, we are," Trent says earnestly. He's giving me those puppy eyes again, and as relieved as he was when we got back, he looked freshly devastated when he saw the baby bump I'm sporting under my T-shirt.

More like a mountain than a bump.

Ugh.

"Thanks." I sigh.

"We're not out of the woods yet," Raul warns, glancing around at our packmates.

Our packmates.

Fuck, when did I start seeing them as that?

And I apparently have a wolf form now, so I guess if there was any doubt that this is where I belong—and there isn't, if I'm being honest with myself—that would cinch it.

"Constantine is still out there," Raul continues.

"Are you sure he followed you through?" Curtis asks, growing somber.

Raul hesitates, looking over at me. "Brad is the last one who saw him."

"He was staring through the portal when I bolted," I admit, glancing over at Devon. "Watching you, actually."

"Me?" Devon asks anxiously. "You saw me?"

"Yeah, those portals are like windows into other worlds," I explain. "I'm pretty sure they show you whatever you're looking for the most. So... actually, I don't know if Constantine was seeing you or something else. All I know is that he ran after me, but I found Raul and the others, and he was gone by the time we made it back through the portal."

"So he could be anywhere," Lenore says, her voice tight. "In this world, or the next."

"We can't leave anything to chance," says Raul. "I'm going to need extra patrols around the clock. Pull everyone you can from the neighboring packs, too."

Lenore nods. "I'll make the calls."

"I can go out now," Trent offers, rising from the sofa.

I can't help but wonder if my pregnancy is part of the reason he's so eager for an excuse to leave, but I'm not about to call him out on that. As much as I want to catch up with him and the others, there's still a lot of shit that has to get sorted first.

And I'm fucking exhausted.

"Thank you," Raul says, nodding to him. It's a weird relief to see him roaming around freely, but Raul and the others seem perfectly relaxed in his presence. Hell, for that matter, Devon seems like he feels even more at home here than I did when I left.

I guess a lot really has changed here while I've been gone, too.

"I'll go with him," Curtis says, getting up next as he looks over at me and Raul. "You guys should get some rest while you can. You must be beat after all that bullshit."

"You have no idea," Raul says in a dry tone. "Just come get me if you find anything."

"Of course," Curtis says, heading toward the door with Trent at his side.

"Speaking of rest," Hannah chimes in, clapping her hands together. "I bet you're all starving. I'll go whip up some dinner for everyone."

"Ooh, let me help!" Reese pipes up, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "I bet this place has a sweet state-of-the-art kitchen, considering how ritzy it is."

Hannah raises an eyebrow but smiles warmly at him. "Sure, you're welcome to help, Reese."

"Awesome!" he exclaims, following Hannah toward the kitchen. "So do you guys have an air fryer?"

"A what now?" Hannah replies, her voice trailing off as they disappear into the other room.

Did I mention to Reese that this place is set in the '80s?

Probably should have done that...

Oh, well. He'll figure it out.

Luna yawns and stretches as she gets up from the couch. "Honestly, I could use a shower to wash off the interdimensional cooties," she says, rubbing her eyes. "And a marathon nap."

"Of course," Raul says, nodding his head toward Mina. "Mina, can you show Luna to one of the guest rooms?"

"Okay!" Mina chirps, hopping off the couch and bouncing over to lead Luna up the stairs. "Do you like writing about murder?" she asks on the way to the stairs, her eyes wide with curiosity.

Luna hesitates for a moment before replying, "Well... sometimes."

"Great!" Mina exclaims, rubbing her hands together. "I have *lots* of ideas!" With that, she grabs Luna's hand and marches her up the stairs, leaving the three of us alone in the living room.

"Wonderful. A bad influence is just what she needs," Raul mutters.

"Are you talking about Mina or Luna?" I ask.

He pauses like he's considering it. "Both."

I can't help but laugh, but not for long. Something else occurs to me. "So you let Trent come and go freely?"

Raul runs a hand through his hair. "He proved himself when he went looking for you after you disappeared. He put his neck on the line for us both when we thought you were in Blue Ridge. Trent's more or less a part of the pack now."

I can't help but smile. "I knew you'd come around. What'd I say about him being trustworthy?"

Raul rolls his eyes, but there's a glimmer of amusement in them as he pulls me closer against his side. "Okay, so you were right."

When I look up and find Devon staring at us both, it's clear he's still trying to process everything that's happened.

"This is still really weird," he says, shaking his head.

"Which part?" I ask, smirking. "Me and Raul being a couple or me being pregnant?"

"Both," Devon replies, looking slightly exasperated. "I mean, you're my straight brother, and now you're mated to a guy, and you're pregnant with his baby, and you're ready to pop."

"Trust me, it's been a wild ride for me too," I admit. "But wait until you find out about my wolf form."

"You can shift?" Devon asks in disbelief, his eyes widening like he can't decide if this is the coolest or weirdest thing he's ever heard.

"Yep," I say, shrugging. "The portal must have shaken something loose. And that clearly wasn't the only unintended side effect." I poke my own stomach for emphasis, causing the baby inside to kick gently in response.

Holy shit, that's fucking weird.

"Just when I thought things couldn't get any stranger," Devon says, running a hand through his hair.

"Tell me about it," I say, trying not to think about the movement fluttering around inside of me. At least I know the kid's okay.

And I'm pretty sure they're gonna be a quarterback, judging from the strength of that kick.

"Well... as weird as it is, I'm happy for you," Devon says with a small but genuine smile. "And I'm glad you're back."

"You and me both," I tell him.

I still can't believe all this myself, but knowing I have my brother's support means a fucking lot. And I've really never been that great with words, so I don't have a whole lot of hope that will change anytime soon, but I kind of hope everything I did to get back to him is proof enough of how much I care about him.

"I don't want to interrupt your reunion, but we really should go see Dr. Wilson," Raul says, concern etched on his stupidly perfect features as he looks down at me. "He's probably back from treating Catalina at the prison."

I groan. "I was kinda hoping you'd forget."

Raul chuffs. "Like I'd forget something like that."

"Fine, let's just get it over with," I say, reluctantly getting up from the couch.

Or at least, I try.

In reality, I plop back down since I'm sporting a fucking beach ball where my abs used to be.

Devon snorts a laugh before he clamps a hand over his mouth and muffles it like he knows I'm gonna kill him.

Not. Fucking. Smooth.

"Here," Raul says, taking my arm to gently help me onto my feet. I hate that now I don't even have a choice but to take him up on it, but at least I won't have to worry about being pregnant for too much longer.

The relief that accompanies that thought only lasts as long as it takes me to realize that I have no fucking idea how I'm going to give birth.

CHAPTER 16



RAUL

When we get back to the clinic, the light is on in Dr. Wilson's office, so we head in. The doctor comes out to greet us, clearly about to say something when he sees Brad and his jaw drops open slightly.

"Welcome home," he says with a chuckle. "I take it you won't be needing any suppressants for a while."

Brad gives the doctor a death glare, and I'm pretty sure if his swollen belly wasn't slowing him down, he would be leaping across the room to strangle the doctor.

And I'm not sure I'd stop him.

"Are you both all right?" Dr. Wilson asks, looking between us. "Curtis said the only injuries were our friend in the dungeon."

"Friend is a stretch," I say through my teeth. "Believe it or not, before we went through the portal, Brad wasn't this pregnant. He was just a few months along."

Dr. Wilson's eyes widen as they travel back to the omega's very pregnant belly, and I can see the wheels turning in his eyes. "A few months? He looks at least seven."

Brad looks like he doesn't know whether to be offended or not.

"It had to be the portal," I continue. "He was able to shift for the first time, too."

"Fascinating," Dr. Wilson says, his eyes lit with curiosity. "Well, come in, let's have a look." He quickly ushers us into one of his exam rooms.

I reach out and gently place my hand on the small of Brad's back, guiding him toward the examination table. My mind is racing, thoughts tumbling over one another like stones in a river. We may be home, but with Constantine still out there, I know we're far from safe.

And then there's the matter of Brad's pregnancy.

All reasons I can't relax anytime soon.

I take Brad's hand and help him onto the table, even though I can tell actually needing help is driving him nuts. But my protective instincts are in overdrive now that he's as far along as he is. It didn't take

long for those to catch up.

Dr. Wilson's expression grows more serious as he prepares his instruments. "I should do a thorough examination just to make sure the omega and baby are healthy."

Brad bristles at the term. "Don't call me that!" he snaps. His face reddens with anger, and I can feel his frustration radiating off him like heat.

"Apologies," Dr. Wilson replies coolly, unfazed by Brad's outburst.

He hands Brad a gown to change into and leaves the room to give him some privacy. I stand nearby, ready to help him if needed.

"Here, let me help you with that," I say softly, taking the gown from Brad's hands. He nods reluctantly, and I assist him in removing his shirt and slipping the gown over his head. It's hard not to stare at the curve of his belly, a living testament to our bond.

I wonder if he knows just how beautiful he looks like this, even though I know he's uncomfortable and scared.

Brad catches me staring and arches an eyebrow. "Are you seriously checking me out right now? I look like I swallowed the rest of the football team."

"Of course I'm checking you out. You're my mate," I remind him. "And I happen to think it's hot. It's proof you're carrying my pup. Proof I bred you."

His face grows noticeably red, and I can't help but find the signs of embarrassment adorable in his expression as he looks away, clearly flustered. "Oh, for fuck's sake," he mutters.

I can't help but smile as I help him tie the gown in the back. "It's going to be okay, Brad."

"Yeah. I know."

When Dr. Wilson returns, he begins his examination. He checks Brad's blood pressure, listens to his heart and lungs, and asks questions about any symptoms he's experienced. I watch and listen intently, trying to gauge the doctor's reactions and read between the lines of his professional demeanor. My heart clenches with worry. I desperately need to hear that everything is going to be all right for both Brad and our child.

"And are you having any morning sickness?" Dr. Wilson asks as he shines a small flashlight in Brad's eyes.

"No," Brad says flatly. "It's morning, noon, night, and every other fucking second in between."

"That's unfortunately quite normal," Dr. Wilson says. "But I can prescribe you something to help with the nausea if you'd like."

Brad grimaces. I know he hates medicine, but the fact that he nods is proof of how sick he really is. "Yeah, sure."

"Everything seems normal so far," Dr. Wilson finally says, taking a step back, and I can see the relief on Brad's face. "Your vitals are strong. But there are still some tests I'd like to run. I'll be back to get

a blood sample, and then we can run a sonogram to verify some things with the baby."

"Verify?" Brad blurts out before I have the chance to voice the question on the tip of my tongue as well. "Something's wrong with it?"

There's no mistaking the panic in his voice, and my heart aches to soothe him. Even though I know Brad hasn't really had enough time to adjust to the fact that he can get pregnant as an omega, let alone that he's having my baby—let alone this soon—he's gotten attached.

I know he has.

"I have no reason to think anything's wrong," Dr. Wilson assures us. "But a sonogram will help me know just how far along you are."

Brad relaxes visibly, and so do I.

The room is still filled with silent tension as we wait for Dr. Wilson to return to take Brad's blood. When he's finished—and Brad doesn't pass out even though he sure as hell looks like he's going to from the moment he sees the needle—he sets up the machine I haven't actually seen him use since my mother was pregnant with Mina.

I have to rein in my protective instincts as the doctor settles on a stool beside the exam table and places a towel over Brad's lap. He lifts Brad's gown and spreads clear jelly over the swell of his belly.

"That's fucking cold," Brad hisses.

"I know," Dr. Wilson says patiently, placing the ultrasound wand against Brad's lower stomach, where a few stretch marks have formed.

Seeing how much my mate's body has changed to accommodate the pregnancy stirs some primal instincts within me that make me want to keep him safe and close to my den even more, if that's possible.

All the more reason I have to find Constantine and put an end to the threat he poses before the baby comes.

I study the picture that forms on the screen intently, but it's hard to make out much of anything in the gray-and-black blur.

"Ah, here we go," Dr. Wilson says, adjusting the settings on the machine. The sound of a heartbeat fills the room—strong, steady, and comforting.

But then confusion sets in.

I focus on the sound again, realizing there are more than just two heartbeats. More than just Brad's and our pup's.

I glance at Dr. Wilson, who seems equally surprised.

"Is everything okay?" Brad asks, concern creeping into his voice as he picks up on our reactions.

"Everything is fine," says Dr. Wilson. "I see no abnormalities in fetal health—or yours, for that matter. And the sonogram confirms my suspicion that you're seven and a half months pregnant on the dot."

"Seven and a..." Brad trails off, looking like he's going to pass out. And I can't say I blame him. It's one thing to know he's close to giving birth and another to actually have it confirmed medically. "Holy shit."

Dr. Wilson laughs. "The good news is you're perfectly healthy."

"And the bad news?" I ask immediately.

"Well, it's more good news, I suppose, depending on your perspective," he muses. "But you're not just having one baby. You're carrying twins."

"*Twins?*" Brad shrieks, sitting up so fast I'm worried he's going to fall off the table. Especially since he's not as agile as he used to be. I reach out and take his arm, just to be safe. "Are you fucking kidding?"

"They do run in your family," Dr. Wilson reasons. "Are you really that surprised?"

"Bro, I'm not even ready to accept the fact that I'm pregnant!" Brad cries, looking back at the screen. His eyes are wide as saucers, but even though I can hear his heart hammering, both through the monitor and my own heightened senses, I can see his expression soften to the same adoration I feel.

Adoration and love that's so overwhelming, I don't even know what to do with it.

And shock, too. Plenty of that.

"I'm sure this is a lot to take in," says Dr. Wilson. "But I can assure you, I've handled countless births, and you're young and healthy. There's no reason to think this one won't go smoothly."

"That's easy for you to say," Brad snaps, all fiery once again. "You're not the one who's gonna have to shove two cantaloupes through your ass!"

Dr. Wilson coughs awkwardly. Brad's clearly been gone long enough that the doctor isn't quite used to my omega's "colorful" language. I can't help but feel a smirk tugging at the corners of my mouth, but I don't dare let it spread.

"Yes, well, there are drugs that can make the process of labor easier, should you choose to avail yourself of them," Dr. Wilson answers.

"Oh, I want the drugs," Brad says urgently. "I want *all* the fucking drugs."

"I'll keep that in mind," the doctor assures him, glancing my way with a "you've got your hands full" expression.

Like I don't already know that.

But I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Would you like to know the sexes?" Dr. Wilson offers.

Brad and I exchange a look, even though neither of us is finished processing the first bombshell.

"It's up to you," I tell him.

Brad hesitates, and I can tell he's not sure. "I... don't know. Surprises are good, I guess." He glances up at me. "Right?"

I'm afraid to let my unabashed joy show through when I know he's still reeling, but I nod, smiling a little. "Surprises are great."

"Well, I'll give you a moment alone to celebrate," the doctor says, heading toward the door. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," I tell him. "Is there any way we can get a printout of the sonogram?"

"Of course," he says before slipping quickly out of the room before Brad realizes how many objects there are that can be used as projectiles.

Once we're alone, I turn to Brad, assessing his current emotional state so I can respond accordingly. Mostly, he doesn't seem to know what to think.

"So... twins," I say, treading carefully.

"Yeah," he croaks, swallowing audibly. "Twins."

I reach out to take his face in my hands, taking the time to study his perfect features. I'll never get tired of doing that no matter how many times I carve them into my mind. "I love you so much," I say, lowering my hands to his stomach and smiling. "All of you."

Brad blows a puff of air through his nostrils, but to my surprise, he doesn't push my hands away. He just settles his on top of mine. "Yeah," he mumbles. "I love you, too. And judging from the somersaults these little bastards are doing in here, they love you, too."

I chuckle, leaning in to kiss him. His lips mold softly against mine, warm and smooth and perfectly mine. "At least there's still a little bit of time to get used to it," I tell him.

He gives a noncommittal grunt. "Yeah, one and a half months."

I decide not to mention it's not uncommon for omegas to give birth a bit prematurely. He's had enough earth-shattering revelations for one day.

"Just enough time," I say.

The truth is, as excited as I am to meet our pups, I don't mind having a little more time to enjoy him being pregnant. To enjoy this blissful moment I never thought would come for a while.

And I'll do whatever it takes to make sure nothing interferes.

CHAPTER 17



BRAD

I stand in the middle of the nursery, feeling a strange sense of accomplishment as I put the finishing touches on the room. For a place that was just storing unused treadmills and boxes a week ago, it doesn't look too bad.

For the past week, Raul and I have been slowly settling into our new lives together, and that includes working on setting up a space for our future pups.

As I hang up the last of the sporty decorations, Devon walks into the room, his eyes scanning the space.

"It looks like an NFL merchandise warehouse and a Babies R Us puked at the same time," he says. His gaze travels to the rubber squeaky toy shaped like a football in my hand. "And a pet store."

"Thanks!" I reply enthusiastically, even though I know he didn't mean it as the compliment I took it as. Devon rolls his eyes. "What if they're girls?"

"Powderpuff is a thing," I say with a shrug, not seeing the problem. The room feels warm and inviting to me, and I hope our pups will grow to love it just as much as I do.

Devon sighs, shaking his head. "You're adapting pretty well to this whole impending parenthood thing."

"I've been thinking about it," I say, "and I don't really mind getting to skip over five months of morning sickness."

Devon snorts. "Fair enough."

I study my brother, noticing the dark circles under his eyes and the tense set of his shoulders. Something's off. "Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine," Devon says automatically.

I frown, seeing right through his bullshit. I know my brother, and I can tell when something's bothering him. Not that that's ever stopped him from putting up a front.

It was always, "Brad, you can't stuff that guy into a locker because he talked shit about me," and "there are laws, Brad."

Fucking goodie two shoes.

"Don't give me that crap," I mutter, setting down the stack of baby onesies on the dresser since holding them doesn't exactly make me look intimidating. "What's wrong?"

Devon hesitates. "I've been having weird dreams lately," he admits.

"Dreams?" I echo. It's only now that I realize I've been sleeping like a baby all week, unless you count the odd 3 AM nacho cravings or all the somersaults these kids like to do at all hours. "What kinds of dreams?"

Devon avoids my gaze, clearly reluctant to share more.

I decide to occupy myself with attaching Mina's old baby mobile to the crib, only to realize there's one dangling toy that's missing.

"You can tell me," I say, trying to sound a little less forceful, since that's clearly not working. And I promised myself if I ever got back to my twin, I'd work on all the shit that made us fight before. Being overbearing is definitely at the top of the list.

After a long moment, Devon finally mumbles under his breath. "It sounds so stupid, but it's always the same dream. I'm in the woods, being chased by this... wolf."

"A wolf?" I ask, looking up sharply. His dream echoes mine a little too close for comfort. "What kind of wolf?"

He hesitates. "I don't know, just a regular wolf, I guess."

"Yeah, but what color is it?"

He tilts his head, and I know I've failed miserably at the whole nonchalant thing.

Practice makes perfect, and I have zero practice, so that kinda figures.

"I mean, I'm running in the dream, so I wasn't really paying attention," he answers. "But it was light. Silver maybe?"

"White?" I press.

Devon blinks. "Yeah, I guess it could have been. Why?"

"No reason," I say quickly.

But that's bullshit.

Ever since we've gotten back, I haven't dreamed about Constantine at all, and considering the fact that he hasn't showed up, I've let myself hope maybe he got lost in some other dimension.

But what if he's just started targeting Devon instead?

There's no way I could've known he was in the real world if it hadn't been for those dreams. He was definitely invading my subconscious, so what if he's capable of doing the same to Devon, and he's just found a new way of getting at me?

I thought he was looking at something else through the portal before, but now...

Before I can say more, Mina bursts into the room with a triumphant grin, brandishing a familiar rubber bat toy. "Look what I found!"

I raise an eyebrow. "I thought Hannah threw that out after you hid it in the meatloaf."

"She did," she chirps, entirely too pleased with herself. "But I got it out of the trash. I wanted to save it for the babies!"

"Oh," Devon says stiffly. "How... sweet."

"Well, it smells like the trash you dug it out of," I point out, taking the floppy bat from her. Devon gives me a look, like she's a sensitive little girl and not the chaos gremlin I know her to be, so I sigh and add, "I'm sure I can get the smell out with some bleach. Or a flamethrower."

"Can I feel it?" Mina asks, pointing at my giant stomach. Like I needed the reminder.

"You wanna feel the babies kick?" I ask doubtfully. She really isn't the sentimental type, so I'm kind of surprised.

She nods, so I shrug. "Knock yourself out."

Mina trots over and puts a hand on my stomach, her eyes growing wide like she's waiting for something. When one of the babies kicks as if on cue, she shrieks and yanks her hand back like it bit her before letting out a peal of giddy-slash-horrified laughter.

"Ewww!" She cackles. "It's like you're full of parasites!"

"Yeah, touching," I say flatly. "Thanks for that nightmare fuel."

Devon snickers.

"Can I still go on a run with you guys later?" Mina asks, giving me big innocent puppy eyes that are one hundred percent a farce.

I doubt I'll actually be doing any running, but that's the term the pack uses whenever they need some time to let their wolves out, and since me and my wolf are just getting acquainted, Raul promised to help me get used to it.

"Did you finish your homework?" I counter.

"Yep!" she says a bit too hastily.

"Uh-huh," I say, folding my arms. "Let's see your hands."

She brings them out of her pockets slowly, fingers crossed.

I sigh. "Homework first, you little psycho, or no run."

"Fine," Mina grumbles, stalking toward the door. "You're almost as boring as Raul," she announces.

"I'll take that as a compliment!" I call after her.

"You know, you're getting pretty good at this whole parenting thing," Devon observes wryly.

I make a face. "You think? I'm kind of winging it here."

"That's always been your approach to life," he points out. "And you're doing a hell of a lot better at it than I ever have, for all my planning."

I roll my eyes. "You're doing fine. This is a fresh start for both of us, and you should take it."

"Maybe," he murmurs. "I'm just... not sure I fit in here any more than I did back home."

His words fill me with concern for a bunch of reasons, not the least of all my fear that he's going to want to go back. "You haven't even been here for six months yet. Stop letting yourself get in your own head. You doubt yourself way too much. You just need to relax and be yourself."

He blinks, like he's surprised to hear that, but he shrugs after a moment. "Maybe you're right."

Downstairs, the front door opens and closes. Ever since I shifted into my wolf form for the first time, my senses have been getting stronger, which is a blessing and a curse. The better hearing is great—unless you count being able to hear Reese snoring down the hall—but the amplified scent means every food smell that triggers my morning sickness is turned up a hundred fold.

Being able to pick up even more of Raul's scent definitely outweighs the bad parts, though.

I perk up, scenting Raul even from here, and I can't help but smile.

"Yeah, go greet your mate," Devon says, shooing me toward the door. "I'll finish up in here."

"Thanks," I tell him, setting the rubber bat aside before I head downstairs.

Raul meets me halfway up the stairs, and he looks surprised to see me.

"There you are," he says, a grin spreading across his face as he takes me into his arms, rubbing my swollen belly. The babies both start kicking against his hands, and I swear they know the sound of his voice already.

It's cute and all, but kind of creepy.

Especially now that I have that parasite thing planted in my brain.

Someone's gotta take away that kid's access to the nature channel.

Raul leans down to kiss me like he's been gone for a year and not a few hours. When he finally pulls away, I breathe in his scent, savoring all the woodsy notes. I'm not sure how a person can smell like sandalwood when I know shifters can't stand cologne—and now that I have a super nose, too, I get why—but he does.

That's one thing I can't fault Luna on.

That and his giant cock.

"Long patrol?" I ask, leaning into him.

"Uneventful, thankfully. But I'm glad to be home."

His hand slides up to cup the back of my head, guiding me into another kiss. It's slow and deep and thorough, and by the time he draws back, I'm boneless in his arms.

"Still feeling up for that run?" he asks, looking down at me.

"Definitely. I could use some fresh air," I admit. "But we're gonna have company, assuming company can work her way through her multiplication tables in time."

"Ah," he says in a knowing tone. "I guess it won't be that kind of run, then."

"What kind of run?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"The kind where I fuck you against a tree," he answers without missing a beat.

"Well, hang on a sec. I could always hide her pencils."

Raul gives a deep, hearty laugh that sends a shiver down my spine, and all of a sudden, I'm not sure I'm joking. "There will be plenty of time for us to have to ourselves later," he assures me, running a hand down my back.

I decide to finish heading down the stairs before his touch completely melts me. "I'll hold you to that," I mutter.

Almost eight months pregnant or not, I'm horny as fuck. Even more than when I was heat, if that's even possible, and it's not like Raul can ever keep his hands off me anyway.

As we head downstairs and outside, we find a quiet area behind the house where Raul helps me get undressed and we both shift into our wolf forms. He wastes no time nuzzling my neck to mark me with his scent.

I lick his cheek in turn, feeling the subtle shift as my wolf nature takes over. Before, it felt like a completely different being, but I've come to realize it's just another part of myself. One I never knew existed.

And somehow, even though shifters aren't even something that exists in the world I'm from, I know it was meant to be.

Just like the two of us.

You're such a cute wolf, Raul remarks.

I give a half-hearted growl, my fur bristling as I follow him toward the edge of the woods. *I am not cute.*

Oh, yes you are, he counters, looking pointedly over me. *Especially pregnant.*

I growl again, looking over myself. My belly is a lot lower to the ground in this form than I'd like, to the point where my fur actually brushes the tall grass.

When I first realized I had the ability to shift, I had all these visions of being a majestic, wild wolf

running through the woods like Raul and the others. In reality, I feel more like a stuffed animal waddling my way through the brush.

Wait for me! a small voice calls from behind us.

I look up to see a small black wolf running toward us.

Something tells me Mina wouldn't appreciate being called cute any more than I do, even if she *definitely* looks like a stuffed animal.

Did you finish all your homework? Raul asks in a suspicious tone that's well earned.

Yes! Mina answers, her tail swishing behind her.

Careful, I tease. *You can't tell if her fingers are crossed when she has paws.*

She gives a playful snap of her fangs at the air before bolting off like the mischievous little imp she is. *Bet you can't catch me!*

You bet wrong, I shoot back, already after her.

Brad, Raul warns, loping along at my side. Even though we're both regular wolves right now, he's bigger and taller, and he clears more ground with a single step than I do. *Don't push yourself.*

Even that buzzkill you keep on payroll says I'm allowed to run a little, I remind him.

He rolls his eyes as he falls into step beside me, and it's frustrating that I know he has to struggle to slow down enough for me to keep up with him. *Yes, but Dr. Wilson also said you shouldn't push yourself.*

Yeah, yeah, I know the drill, I assure him.

As we run after Mina, chasing her through the berry bushes and trees, I find myself relaxing to the rhythm of my paws on the earth. Even if I'm not exactly at my most agile right now, running as a wolf is one of the most freeing experiences I've ever had. It's the same rush I get from playing football, and as little time as I've been a wolf, I can't imagine ever going back.

Running at Raul's side—on our pack lands—makes it even better.

This is where I'm meant to be. This is home.

And for the first time in my life, I actually feel like I'm who I'm supposed to be, too.

I break out of my relaxing daze when I realize Mina has gotten a bit too far ahead of us and I can't see her dark fur through the trees anymore. Raul quickens his pace, coming to the same realization at the same time, and I follow suit.

We finally catch up to Mina, who's stopped at the side of the river and is splashing around, chasing frogs, oblivious to just how close she is to the rushing water.

Raul grabs her by the scruff in his teeth and yanks her back before dropping her onto the ground a safe distance from the water.

What did I tell you about running off like that? Raul scolds her. *Especially not now. It's not safe.*

She gives him an exasperated look, her fur bristling as she refuses to back down. *I'm fine. Nothing's going to happen.*

You don't know that. Raul nudges her toward the path back to the house. *Come on. Time to head in.*

No! she cries, bounding away from him. *I'm not a baby.*

Raul growls lightly in frustration.

He's right, Mina, I tell her. *It's not safe for any of us to be out here on our own right now.*

Maybe not for you. You're an omega, she counters. *I'm gonna be a warrior one day.*

One day, perhaps, Raul agrees in an even tone. *But not now.*

She growls and snaps her fangs, and this time, as comical as the gesture is, I can tell she's not playing. *Stop it! You're not my parents!*

Raul freezes, and I can tell her words cut him deep. Mina takes advantage of his stunned silence and dashes off into the woods.

Raul turns to look at me, hurt etched across his face even as a wolf.

I nuzzle against him in comfort. *I'll go after her,* I tell him. *She just needs a minute.*

He hesitates, then nods. *Be careful. I'm right behind you.*

I take off at a run, following Mina's scent through the trees. It doesn't take long for me to find her sulking in a clearing up ahead, ears flat against her head.

Go away, she snaps when she sees me.

Not a chance, pup, I tell her gently. To my relief, when I approach, she doesn't try to run again. *Look, I know you miss your parents. But Raul's doing the best he can.*

I know, she grumbles, and if I didn't know better, I'd think there was a hint of guilt in her tone. *He's just so bossy.*

No argument there, I say dryly. *But he's overprotective because he's scared of losing you. He loves you. We both do.*

She looks up at me in surprise.

Before she can respond, though, her expression goes blank as she looks at whatever's behind me. At first, I think Raul came up from a different direction, but then I realize it's not surprise in her eyes.

It's the first hint of fear I've ever seen in them.

No... not fear.

Terror.

She's staring behind me, frozen in place, and when I turn to look, my gaze lands on a familiar white-furred figure watching us from the shadows of the trees.

I leap to turn around, putting myself between him and Mina. I give the most convincing snarl I can, relieved when it sounds relatively menacing, for all that's worth.

Constantine.

He's here, and this isn't a fucking dream.

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