



THE SMOKY HILLS ACADEMY



# THE WIDE RECEIVER OUTCAST

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## THE SMOKY HILLS ACADEMY BOOK 3

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SWEET ROMANCE THAT BITES



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THE SMOKY HILLS ACADEMY

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*To my husband, my very own Liam*

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## LIAM

Grayson was gone.  
Cora was out of reach.  
My life sucked.

I blew out my breath as I sat in the school parking lot with my engine running.

Call me crazy, but getting out of my truck and heading into school did not sound like something I wanted to do. If anything, being surrounded by those four walls would just be a reminder of what I was missing and how crappy my life had become.

Leaning forward, I rested my forehead on the steering wheel and closed my eyes. I'd spent most of the night running around Smoky Hills, trying to find Grayson. Trying to locate him to bring him back.

But I couldn't find him.

Either he was very good at hiding his tracks, or he had completely vanished.

Whatever had happened, I was determined to find him no matter the cost.

After all, what else did I have to do? There was nothing for me in Smoky Hills. Nothing.

There was a sharp knock on my window. I pulled myself to sitting as I glanced through the glass to see Noah and Evan standing outside. They both had concerned expressions as they peered in at me.

*Go away.* I pushed the words into their minds as pain gripped my chest.

What did any of this matter anymore? My life wasn't coming together with a pretty little bow, and at this point, I was beginning to doubt that it ever would.

The sound of someone pulling on my door handle drew my attention, and before I could engage the lock, Evan had the door open. He swung it wide, and both he and Noah filled the space so I couldn't pull it shut on them.

They folded their arms over their chests as they stared me down.

"Get out," Evan said.

I stared at him as heat began to creep up under my collar. Even though the desire to dominate didn't race through us quite yet, we were all creeping up to the age where that would be an issue.

But sitting here with their stares irritating me, I was ready to let my wolf loose on them. There was no way I wanted the whole *everything will get better* routine. I wanted to wallow in my pain, and no one was going to take that from me.

"Get out," Evan said again, his voice growing deeper with anger.

I growled and moved to shut the door. "Leave me alone," I said as I glared at him.

I knew it wasn't the best way to deal with my problems, but what choice did I have?

The warning bell sounded, and Evan and Noah glanced toward the school and then at each other. I could feel their frustration with me, but I didn't care. I wasn't going anywhere. Not with Cora in that school with Christopher.

How was I going to handle seeing them together, especially when my best friend was MIA?

Yep, I was right. Smoky Hills Academy had nothing to offer me.

"Whatever, man. Get in trouble," Evan said as he moved away from the door at the same time Noah did.

They slammed the door, and its thud rattled through me. I growled again and leaned my head back on the headrest and closed my eyes.

I felt bad for treating my friends—my pack—like I had. It wasn't their fault that everyone around me left. It was my responsibility to hold things together. To keep my pack in line.

But right now, I was hanging on by one tiny, fraying piece of thread. Distancing myself from those in my life who I could hurt

seemed to be my only choice. After all, they were better off without me. I'd prove that to them.

The final bell rang, and the parking lot became a ghost town. When the last straggler rushed into the school, I scrubbed my face and glanced around.

It was stupid, sitting in the parking lot, but I had nowhere else to go. Dad had eyes everywhere. If someone saw that I was skipping, he would find out. Besides, I was pretty sure he checked the school parking lot on his way to work every day. If my truck wasn't here, I would have to field his questions as to where I'd gone.

He and I weren't exactly on speaking terms right now. Not after he decided that the last thing he wanted to do was challenge Uncle Brutus's declaration.

Giving the Mother pack the right to rule seemed like a stupid idea, but Dad didn't care. He'd created a world here in Smoky Hills, and he naively thought that everyone would leave us alone.

Which I knew was wrong. Grayson's disappearance proved that.

I scrubbed my face with my hands and tipped my head toward the school. It was first period, which meant Cora was in homeroom. Despite my better judgement, I leaned in and sorted through the sounds around me until I found what I was looking for.

The trill of Cora's heartbeat. It was steady and gentle. Just like her.

I closed my eyes as I allowed its familiar cadence to wash over me. I was grateful for the peace it brought me. Right now, it was the only thing that was holding me together. Her existence was all that mattered.

She was all that mattered—even if I couldn't have her.

My nerves began to calm as my muscles relaxed. Her heartbeat was like a lullaby softly singing me to sleep.

And I would have, had it not been for the sudden ripple inside of me. One that told me someone was coming.

And not just someone. A wolf.

I pulled my head up and glanced around, my body pulsing on high alert. Could it be the wolf I saw with Cora? Or Oliver? I scanned the area around me, waiting for something, anything to come barreling into my world.

And then I saw him. He looked no older than me as he strode through the woods in human form.

My muscles tensed in anticipation as I reached over and gripped the door handle. I took in a few deep breaths as I watched and waited for what he was going to do. If he walked right past the high school, then I just might be able to let him go for now. But, if he made any movement toward the school, I would intervene.

The guy moved fast and steady as he walked across the fields. Then, just before he came to the crossroads of either walking down the sidewalk toward the school or toward the road, he stopped.

Blood was pumping through my veins as I glared at him, daring him to take a step toward the high school. Whoever he was and whatever he was doing here, I knew it couldn't be good.

And then he raised his gaze, meeting mine.

He studied me for a moment before he smiled, nodded, and headed toward the school.

That was the exact opposite reaction that I'd been anticipating, and before I could stop myself, I had the door open and was jumping down to the ground.

I sprinted in his direction, letting my feet pound on the pavement. A part of me, one that was rapidly taking over, begged for me to let my speed free. To release the wolf that was caged up inside of me.

It wasn't who I normally was, but right now, I wanted a fight. I wanted a reason to work off the tension that had built up to the point of breaking.

I needed something, anything, that I could control.

"Hey," I said as I neared the new guy and shoved his shoulder. "What are you doing here?" I growled, ready to pounce if the situation escalated.

The new guy stopped walking, but just stood there with his shoulders hunched forward. It felt as if time was moving in slow motion as I waited for him to make a move.

And then he turned, slow and steady, until he was staring at me.

"Excuse me?" he asked. His voice was low as his dark eyes hardened. His jaw was clenched, and I could see the fire in his gaze.

It matched the one blazing inside of mine. I could feel his anger as it rivaled mine. He was just as angry as I was.

"What the hell are you doing skulking around my school?" I asked as I began to circle him, my muscles jumping from the desire to shift.

He followed me with his gaze but kept his feet planted firmly on the ground. "Who are you?"

I scoffed as I rolled my shoulders and flexed my hands. "Don't play dumb with me. I know what you are," I said as I leaned forward, challenging him with my gaze. I was waiting for him to move. One gesture out of place and I would eat him for breakfast.

His eyes widened, and I heard his sharp inhalation. Then his lips began to curl up as a sick smile spread across his face. "Bronson kid, I assume."

I narrowed my eyes. I wasn't going to be played with. This was my territory, and he was going to leave. "Go back to the hole you crawled out of. You're not welcome here." I leaned in, allowing my frame to tower over him. "Leave. Before things get worse."

He hesitated, and before I could process what he was doing, he laughed. It was low and throaty, and I could feel the mocking connotation as it coursed through me.

Which just pissed me off more.

I grabbed his shoulders and shoved him toward the woods. He was leaving right now.

"Mr. Bronson," the sharp voice of Mr. Miller drew my attention behind me. I growled as I stepped away from the new kid and forced my nerves to relax.

"Yes, Mr. Miller?" I asked as I cast a relaxed smile in his direction.

The sun shone off Mr. Miller's bald head as he walked up to us. His gaze ran over me and then the new kid. When it settled back on me, I knew I was in trouble. He had seen what I'd done. And from the way his eyes were wide and his jaw was set, he wasn't happy about it.

"Is this the way we act at Smoky Hills Academy?" he asked as he peered up at me.

I sighed softly as I shook my head. "No."

Mr. Miller folded his arms. "I apologize for Mr. Bronson's behavior. This is not how we act toward new students." Mr. Miller extended his hand. "I'm the principal, Mr. Miller. And you are?"

The new kid glanced at me and then back to Mr. Miller. I could feel his hesitation as he stared at Mr. Miller's extended hand. Then, after what felt like a painful struggle inside of himself, he met Mr. Miller's handshake for a second before he dropped his hand to his side. "Matthew Young."

Mr. Miller nodded as he motioned toward the school. "Welcome to Smoky Hills, Mr. Young. I'll help you get settled in at the office." He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Mr. Bronson, I expect you head to your first class with vigor."

I growled as I shoved my hands into my front pockets. I didn't have any desire to go into the school, but now that I'd been seen, I didn't have a choice. Mr. Miller was known to check up on students. And Dad breathing down my neck because I was being stupid wasn't something I wanted to deal with right now.

"Yes, sir," I mumbled.

Mr. Miller nodded and then continued, "And let's discuss how we behave with new students today after school. I expect to see you in detention."

I parted my lips to complain, but Mr. Miller shook his head as he shot me a pointed look. Not wanting to push my luck, I just nodded and waited for Mr. Miller and Matthew to walk ahead of me.

Once they were far enough away, I started after them.

I didn't care that I didn't have my backpack. Honestly, there wasn't much that was going to keep my attention. I was at school strictly as a formality. Once that bell rang and detention was over, I was heading back to the woods, where I was going to run until my legs hurt.

I needed to regain some control of my life, and I wasn't going to stop until that happened.

I was going to find Grayson and bring him back home. No matter what.

If I didn't, and he was gone for sure, I didn't know what I would become. But if today was any indication, it wasn't going to be good.

For anyone.

## MATTHEW

I followed the principal of Smoky Hills Academy, trying to pay attention to what the old man was saying. He was mumbling about the school, its history, and the fact that I was just going to love being here.

Which was a huge joke.

Being here wasn't a choice I'd made. If it were up to me, I'd still be in those woods, living among my people. Not here in human haven. Living among the very people who'd killed my parents.

But disobeying my alpha wasn't an option. It was my job to come to Smoky Hills to discover just what was happening among the Bronson family. To infiltrate the pack that seemed to think that humans were better than their own kind.

With so much unrest in the Mother pack, I was sent to discover just what could be done with Theodore Bronson's pack. The pack that felt that they were above those of pure blood. They were a disease that was about to be rooted out.

Brutus was determined to do so.

So the fact that I was standing face-to-face with Liam Bronson, son of the traitor and brother of my alpha was...interesting. He definitely didn't like me or the fact that I was at Smoky Hills. For a moment, I wondered if he knew why I was here.

But, from his spastic movements and erratic heartbeat, I could tell he was operating more from emotion than logic, an aspect I could exploit.

Those wolf shifters who had fated were always weaker. More vulnerable. He was exactly what I needed to take down the Bronson

pack.

By now, we were standing in the principal's office and he was going over my class schedule. Honestly, I wasn't listening. I didn't care what math class I had or when science was. I wasn't here to learn—at least, not about numbers and such. I was here with one purpose and one purpose only. And there was nothing that was going to distract me from my mission.

"Mrs. Murphy, do you mind letting Ms. Smith in?" Mr. Miller said into the intercom next to his phone. There was a garbled response, and a few seconds later, the door opened.

I glanced behind me, and the world seemed to slow.

A girl walked in. She had long, wavy brown hair that slipped past her shoulders and down her back. Her eyes were wide and crystal blue. She had a light splash of freckles across her nose and the fullest lips I'd ever seen.

I started at her, taking her in. Her gaze slipped over to me for a moment before returning to Mr. Miller.

"Ah, Ms. Smith. I'm glad you're here," Mr. Miller said as he rounded his desk and made his way over to her with his hand extended. He nodded in my direction as he rested his hand on her shoulder. "This is Mr. Young. He's new to this school and will need to be shown around."

Mr. Miller smiled as Ms. Smith's smile tipped downwards.

"And you want me to do it?" she asked, pressing her hand to her chest. I could hear her change in heartbeat. It had quickened, which intrigued me. Was it my presence? Or did she sense in me what I was feeling in her?

Mr. Miller's smile faltered as he glanced between us. "Well, you are next on the list for school ambassador."

Ms. Smith glanced at the principal and then back to me.

I don't know why, but I had this sudden desire for her to like me. There was something about her. Something drawing me in. And the fact that I could tell she was a shifter as well wasn't one of those reasons.

I wanted her around me. I could feel this invisible tug to be close to her.

It was unnerving, and I didn't like it.

Ms. Smith sighed as she nodded and gave Mr. Miller a weak smile. "Okay. I can do that," she whispered.



If Mr. Miller sensed her reservation, he didn't say. Instead, he clapped his hands together and smiled. "Wonderful."

I spent the next five minutes listening to Ms. Smith and Mr. Miller discuss the details of my schedule. When they were finished, she turned to me and then nodded toward the door. "Let's go," she said, not waiting for me to follow.

She opened the door and walked out to the main office.

I gave Mr. Miller a quick nod and followed after her. Once we were out in the empty hallway, with the office door closed behind us, she turned suddenly, inches from my face.

It startled me, and all I could do was step back.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed as she glanced up and down the hallway.

My eyes were wide at this point. I wasn't sure if it was from the anger spewing from her gaze or from the fact that her close proximity was doing strange things to my thoughts. It was as if, suddenly, I was very aware of every part of her body and its relation to mine.

"What do you mean?" I managed.

Ms. Smith stared at me with a look of frustration before she took a step back. Sadness washed over her features, tugging at my heart. I blinked a few times, startled by my desire to protect her. To take away whatever was bothering her.

Which was strange, and if I were honest with myself, I didn't like it. It made me feel weak and vulnerable, not to mention distracted. That was the last thing I needed. I was here on a mission, and I couldn't deviate from that. I wasn't sure what Brutus would do to me if I failed. But from what I'd seen before, he wouldn't take it well.

Ms. Smith folded her arms over her chest, and I could hear the soft sigh she released. She was trying to get a handle on her emotions. I could feel them as they coursed through her. They were as real as my own.

"I'm sorry. I, um, I must have misspoken." She ran her hands through her hair, flicking the ends in my direction.

It took all the strength I had not to close my eyes and breathe in her scent. The desire to explore this new awakening was strong and rattled my nerves.

Even though I knew I shouldn't, I shot her a smile and leaned in. "It's okay. We've all had those kinds of days." I raised my eyebrows as I took in her wide eyes and soft features.

She held my gaze for a moment and slipped her bottom lip in between her teeth and pressed down on it as a contemplative expression passed over her face. Like she was trying to figure me out.

I wanted to hope that, maybe, she was feeling the chemistry that was zapping between us, but I doubted it. I was only feeling this way because I was exhausted and my emotions were on edge from being here. That had to be the explanation.

Nothing else seemed plausible.

Then she sighed and nodded toward the hallway. "Come on, let's get moving. I'll show you to your first class and then I'll be back to pick you up and show you to your next class."

I kept pace behind her. That way I was allowed to study her unnoticed. I wanted to take her in. To memorize the way she moved. She was like a drug that my body hadn't known it needed but most definitely wanted.

"So, do you go by anything besides Ms. Smith?" I asked, my voice coming out deeper than I intended. Which annoyed me. I cleared my throat. I must have something in it. That's what accounted for my change in tone.

She glanced behind me. Her blue eyes caused my breath to catch in my throat. They were so open, so raw, and I doubted she even knew how intoxicating they were.

"Brielle," she said.

*Brielle*, I repeated in my mind. It was beautiful. Just like her.

I pushed that thought far from my mind. There was no way I could let a complication like Brielle into my life. What was I thinking? I was pretty sure I'd gone completely crazy.

It had to be Bronson and his challenge from earlier that was confusing me. I guess I hadn't expected to meet Smoky Hill's bodyguard two seconds after setting foot on school property.

It was his fault I was so distracted, that I seemed to be having thoughts and feelings for Brielle that I knew shouldn't be there. Having feelings for anyone in the human-lovers pack was not in the book for me.

Feelings only led to actions, and actions would complicate my time here. I didn't need any of that. My home was counting on me, and I wasn't about to let them down.

Brielle must have stopped, because suddenly I barrelled right into her. She gasped, and instinct took over. Instead of letting her fall

to the ground, I wrapped both arms around her and pulled her to my chest.

"Whoa," I said, my voice deep and throaty. I was trying to ignore the heat that permeated my skin from her touch. Every point of contact was shooting electricity through my body straight to my heart.

And I froze. I didn't know what to do. Part of me wanted to keep standing there with my arms wrapped around her waist, pressing her against my body. The other part of me wanted to run far away from here.

With such conflicting feelings coursing through me, they paralyzed me. Which was ridiculous. I'd never had this happen before. How could one person—one girl—rattle me like this?

"Mr. Young," Brielle whispered as she rested her hands on my chest and pressed against me. "You can let me go now. I'm not going to fall over."

I blinked a few times as I pulled myself from the trance I was in. Then, as if her skin was burning hot, I dropped my arms and jumped back, running my hands through my hair.

I needed to get a grip right now. If any of this got back to Brutus, I was in trouble. Like, lose my life kind of trouble.

"Sorry," I mumbled as I glanced around, shoving my hands in my front pockets. They needed to stay there. Even though I knew I shouldn't let them, they were desperate to reach out and find Brielle again.

She folded her arms in front of her chest and shook her head. "That's fine," she said, her voice low. "Just don't let it happen again. Your first period is here."

I forced a smile and then glanced at the room she'd pointed to. "Here?" I asked.

Brielle followed my gaze and nodded. "That's right." Then she nodded toward the other hallway. "I have choir, so I'll be down there. But I'll be back to show you to second period."

The desire to keep her close came over me, but I pushed it aside. Then, not wanting to stand there looking like an idiot, I made my way over to the classroom door and rested my fingers on the door handle.

Before I could stop myself, I turned and said, "The name's Matthew."

Heat crept up my skin as she slowly smiled and nodded.

"Nice to meet you, Matthew," she said softly.

My whole body felt as if it were on fire, and for just a moment, I allowed that reaction. But then reality came crashing down around me. I cleared my throat, pushed down on the handle, and slipped into the back of the classroom.

The teacher was at the front of the room. He paused and ran his gaze over me. He nodded toward the empty desk a few feet away from me, and I readily took it. I didn't want to stand out here. I wanted to slip into the shadows and fulfill my duty.

Relief flooded my body as the sound of Brielle's heartbeat faded into the distance. With her gone, there was a much greater chance of me getting some control over my thoughts and reactions. I was finally going to be able to get my head on straight and focus on why I was really here.

And that was to make sure that the next alpha in the Mother pack was not a human-loving Bronson.

Things were changing in the Mother pack, and it was my responsibility to see those changes through.

No matter what.

## ROSE

I thought I knew pain. Apparently not.

What I was feeling as I walked through the hallways at school wasn't like anything I'd experienced in my life.

Grayson was gone, and I doubted—even though I was holding out hope—that he would ever come back.

I spent the entire morning at the diner on edge. Every time the door opened, my heart pounded as I whipped my attention to who was walking in. And, every time, a rush pulsed through my body before I crashed back to Earth when I discovered that it was most definitely not Grayson.

I never realized how much I missed Grayson and his random drop-ins every day at the diner until he was gone. I'd grown to expect him to come in, and when he didn't...well, it was as if a part of me had died.

I gripped my books to my chest as I made my way through the hallway with my head down. I really didn't want to talk to anyone, and thankfully, I wasn't popular enough to be stopped.

It didn't take long before I found Cora. She was standing in front of her locker, staring inside of it. I blew out my breath as I leaned against the locker next to her. I could feel her sadness, and that was comforting.

She knew the pain that coursed through me. I took solace in that.

"How was your morning?" she asked as she glanced over at me.

I shrugged as I tipped my face toward the ceiling and closed my eyes. "I've had better."

Cora snorted. "Tell me about it." I could hear her shuffling things around in her locker.

It was strange, this connection I felt to Cora. It was like we knew exactly what the other was feeling. There was a certain camaraderie between us.

We were both in love with wolf shifters. And we both couldn't have the one thing we wanted.

The wolf shifters.

Not wanting to wallow in my self-pity, I took in a deep breath and straightened my head, glancing around the hallway. A very large and very colorful banner hung on the wall in front of me with the words *Masquerade Homecoming Ball*.

Great.

Just what I needed.

A place where everyone was dancing and falling in love.

"Bleh," I said.

Cora glanced over at me. "What's wrong?"

I nodded toward the banner and Cora followed my gesture with her gaze. She studied it for a second before she sighed and turned her attention back to her locker.

"Are you going?" I asked, desperate for something to think about other than Grayson and how much it hurt that he was gone. But then, just as the words left my lips, I realized that I should have never brought it up. With Grayson gone, there wasn't anyone else I wanted to go with. And I couldn't imagine Cora feeling any different.

The sound of Cora's locker shutting drew my attention over to her. She was standing in front of her locker with her head tipped down toward the floor. Her expression was a pained one, and I suddenly felt like the worst friend.

"I'm sorry," I said as I folded my arms over my chest and squeezed.

Cora shook her head as she shut her eyes for a moment and then opened them again. "It's okay. I'm okay. It's hard, but it's getting easier day by day." Her smile was forced as she met my gaze.

I studied her for a moment before I nodded. "Right," I said.

And I knew that what she was saying was the truth. I knew what that pain was like. I lived with it every day. It wasn't like I didn't know loss. My parents were gone. Dead.

So I knew what she said was true—things would get easier—it was just hard to remember. Especially when the pain I felt from losing Grayson was so deep and so acute that it took my breath away every time I thought about it.

Cora gave me a small smile as she pushed away from her locker, and I fell into step with her as we made our way down the hallway to first period.

“Think Christopher will ask you to go with him?” I asked, peeking over at her.

I knew that Christopher wasn’t Liam, but they’d been spending time with each other. He seemed like the perfect guy to help her forget Liam.

“I don’t know.” She sighed.

I nodded. “Yeah. Well, if you don’t go with him, we should go together. I mean, it is our last homecoming dance for the rest of our lives. We might regret it if we don’t.” Even though I hated the idea of dancing with my fellow students, I also hated the idea of sitting at home wallowing in my self-pity. After all, a distraction was better than my own thoughts.

Cora nodded, drawing my attention over to her. “Sure. It’s a date.”

I grinned at her as my first period classroom came into view. I gave her what I hoped came across as a confident smile. Something that reassured her that we could get through this. It felt like a complete lie, but hey, I was willing to fake it for now.

“Have fun,” she said as she nodded toward the classroom door.

“You too.”

She peeled off, getting lost in the crowd of students all rushing to their first period classes. I pulled open the classroom door and slipped into the room. I ignored everyone as I made my way to my desk, where I sat down and pulled out my books.

I took a deep breath and tapped my pencil on the desk while I waited for Mrs. Trenton to come in and start class. I was ready to lose myself in the mundane schoolwork and lectures. At least then I could focus on something other than the complete lack of Grayson in my life.

I could pretend that I didn’t need him anymore. That it didn’t matter that he was gone.

I could live the lie that I was convincing myself of every minute of every day.

Grayson was gone, and I was going to be okay.

And even though I knew it was a complete lie, I couldn't deviate from that thought.

Not if I wanted to survive.



## CORA

The school day seemed to drag on and on. By the time the bell rang for lunch, I was ready to be finished. I grabbed my backpack and books and headed out of chemistry. Once I was out in the hall, I heard Christopher call after me, but I really wasn't in the mood to talk to him.

Sure, we'd had a fun Saturday as we took care of the doll, and he was sweet and cute...but he wasn't Liam. And I wasn't sure I was ever going to convince myself any different.

I made it to my locker in record time. After spinning the dial, I pulled up on the release and the door swung open. After shuffling some books around from my backpack to my locker and vice versa, I straightened and moved to shut the door.

But before I could even move, I caught a glimpse of Liam from the corner of my eye and my entire body froze. I forget how to move.

Liam was walking over to his locker. It was moments like this that I cursed the fact that we had lockers so close together. It was like fate was laughing at me. Horrible, ugly fate.

One day, we were going to have words.

"Liam!"

My body chilled as I saw Katie round the corner and rush over to him. I swallowed as anger rose up inside of me. Tears pricked my eyes as I stared daggers at my locker.

It was hard, the desire to run battled with the desire to stay. There was no way that I wanted either of them to know how I was feeling. That being away from Liam was literally crushing me on the inside.

I needed to be strong, and standing here while they flirted felt like the only way I was going to prove that. As crazy as that sounded.

"What do you want, Katie?" Liam's low voice washed over me, causing goosebumps to rise up on my skin. My breath hitched in my throat, and for a moment I wondered if Liam was listening to the change inside of me. If he still knew exactly what he was doing to my whole body.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm still dateless for homecoming. You know, in case you wanted to ask."

From the corner of my eye, I saw her lean in and wrap her arm around his. Anger. Hurt. Betrayal. All of those emotions rose up inside of me like a tornado during a summer rain.

I felt suffocated. My heart was pounding so hard, I could hear it in my ears.

The flight response inside of me took over, and all I could think about was getting out of there.

I slammed my locker and turned. The only thought in my mind was making my way to the lunchroom. Standing in line and battling hangry students sounded much better than standing in the hallway, watching Liam and Katie make plans.

Just as I neared them, Katie suddenly stepped out in front of me. Her eyes were wide and her eyebrows raised as she ran her gaze over me.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked as she blocked my retreat.

I cleared my throat and blinked back my tears as I forced myself to stand tall. There was no way I was going to let this girl intimidate me like that. I was tired of her bullying, and I was going to let her know it.

After all, that was just about the only thing I seemed to be able to control in my life right now.

Ignoring Liam's gaze, that I knew was on me—and burning a hole in the side of my face—I turned to face Katie head-on.

"Leave me alone," I said as I gripped the straps of my backpack.

"Excuse me?" Katie asked, stepping forward.

"Just leave her alone," Liam said as he neared.

I shot him a glare. "I don't need your help," I said, furious that he thought he could once again reinsert himself in my life. Like I wasn't

capable of taking care of myself.

"Cora," he said, his voice lowering from the obvious pain I could hear inside it. That, mixed with the way he was staring into my eyes, took my breath away—and angered me at the same time.

This wasn't fair. Any of it. I didn't choose to fall in love with him, and yet, here I was, completely and totally smitten by the one guy I couldn't have.

"You heard her, Liam," Katie said as she once again snaked her arm around his and pulled herself closer. "Cora doesn't need your help."

I glared at Katie as rage and pain coursed through me. The only other time I'd felt like this was when Dad died. When I realized I had no control over that kind of hurt. But this? This I could control, and I wasn't going to let some Barbie-doll bully push me around.

So I acted. The storm inside of me came to a head and there was nothing I could do to stop myself. Suddenly, my hands were on Katie. I shoved her and she went down, sprawling across the floor.

She screamed, but I barely heard it. Instead, all I could think about was showing Katie she couldn't push me around anymore. And, maybe, that she couldn't claim Liam like that.

Just as I moved to attack again, two very strong arms wrapped around my middle and pulled me away. I struggled against their strength as I tried to wiggle free.

Katie was going to get away with how she was acting, and there was no way I was going to let that happen.

"Let me go." I growled and pushed against the arms around my middle. I would know those arms anywhere. I'd felt that grip multiple times. Liam was once again inserting himself into my life.

"Ms. Gray." Mrs. White's voice rose above the chatter of the crowd. Realization hit me, causing my body to turn limp. The agitation that had been coursing through my body faded, and I was left with this empty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

One that told me I was about to get into trouble.

"I'm so glad you showed up," Katie said as she scrambled to stand. "Cora pushed me." Katie pushed out her lower lip as she turned to face Mrs. White.

Mrs. White glanced over at her and then back to me. I could tell that she wasn't too upset that I had pushed Katie. After all, it wasn't any secret that Katie was the mean girl at school. I knew it. The

teachers knew it. And I couldn't help but wonder if, according to Mrs. White, Katie had a little karma headed her direction.

"Is this true, Ms. Gray?" Mrs. White asked as she leaned in to study me.

By now, Liam had loosened his grip and was standing inches behind me. Even though he was no longer touching me, I could still feel him there. It both irritated and soothed me.

I hated that.

But concentrating on his proximity wasn't something I wanted to do right now. Not when Mrs. White was staring at me like she was expecting an answer.

So I blew out my breath and nodded. "Yes," I said.

A flash of disappointment rushed over Mrs. White's face as she folded her arms across her chest and glanced between Katie and me. Then she sighed and studied me. "Getting physical isn't the answer to your problems, Cora. The only choice I have is to give you detention."

I parted my lips to complain but then realized there was really nothing I could say to get out of it. And then I realized that if I was in detention, I wouldn't have to go to cheer practice, and I quickly clamped my lips shut and gave her a slow nod.

She looked satisfied with that response and made her way down the hall and disappeared around the corner. The crowd that had gathered around us dispersed, leaving Liam, Katie, and me alone.

Coming to my senses, I moved away from Liam. I hated the he was so close to me. And I hated even more that I cared so much. None of the pain that was coursing through me would exist had it not been for him inserting himself into my life.

I would be a happier and better functioning person had he never bothered me.

And yet, the idea of never knowing Liam made me sad. The idea of never experiencing the moments we had together made me sad. Liam haunted my dreams in both a good way and bad.

He made me feel whole and wanted. He made me feel like I could bring someone happiness. That I was worthy of love. And the way he looked at me? It made my toes curl and my heart take off.

As much as I wanted to tell myself that I didn't care about Liam, I knew it wasn't true. It was never going to be true.

Liam had changed me. And I wasn't sure if I was ever going to be able to move on.

Frustration flooded my body as I moved to make my way down the hall. Before I could escape, a hand wrapped around my elbow, keeping me from moving. I didn't have to look behind me to know who had stopped me.

Liam.

Taking a deep breath, I peeked over my shoulder to see Liam staring at me. His gaze was so intense, and to my surprise, he didn't look away.

"Liam," I whispered, my heart pounding inside of my chest as if it wanted to break loose and run away.

"Cora, what are you doing?" he asked.

I waited for him to loosen his grip or to pull away, but he didn't. Instead, he stood there, dangerously close to me, his fingers pressing into my skin and causing my senses to go haywire.

If this was getting over a boy, I sucked at it royally.

But the way he was looking at me drew me in, and before I knew what I was doing, I sighed and lowered the wall that I had built up around my heart. The one I'd put there to protect myself during this exact situation.

I studied him for a moment and then stepped back, breaking our contact. Even though my defenses were lowered, I knew I couldn't open up again just to have him pull away.

"I should go," I said as I ducked my head down and hurried down the hall.

I think Liam called after me, but I wasn't sure, and there was no way I was going to turn around to see. By the time I made my way into the lunchroom, my nerves were frayed and I was ready to collapse on a chair and bury my head in the crook of my arm. And never come out.

I found Rose sitting at a table at the far end of the lunchroom, and I made a beeline for her. She was studying something on her computer as I pulled out the chair next to her and sat down.

She glanced over at me and nodded, then she returned her gaze back to the screen in front of her. Whatever she was looking at had her complete attention.

I sighed as I rested my arms on the table in front of me and blew out my breath. After a few minutes of channeling my yoga breath-

ing, I straightened and glanced over at her.

"I'm not going to be at practice today," I said as I unzipped my backpack and pulled out my lunch.

Rose glanced over at me. "Oh yeah? Why?"

Movement at the other end of the lunchroom drew my attention. Liam had walked in and was scanning the room. I couldn't help but stare at him.

I was so angry and so frustrated but still so incredibly in love with him that it hurt. Deep in my soul, break my spirit kind of hurt.

When his gaze landed on me, my heart picked up speed. There was a look in his eyes and for a split second, I allowed myself to wonder if he felt the pain as acutely as I did.

From the depth in his gaze, it felt as if that were true.

But then he dropped his gaze and weaved his way through the tables to join the other football players, who were milling around a table. Some were sitting while others were throwing a ball back and forth.

I shook my head as I forced myself to drop my gaze and get a handle on my emotions.

"I think I know why," Rose said.

I glanced over to see that she was back to studying her laptop screen. Curious what she was doing, I slid the laptop in my direction so I could see what she was so intently looking at.

A map of Smoky Hills and the surrounding forest was up on the screen, and it seemed as if she were highlighting areas.

I flicked my gaze over at her. "What are you planning?" I asked.

Rose hesitated for a moment before she raised her gaze to meet mine. Her forehead was furrowed, and I could see hurt burning inside of her eyes. "I have to look for him," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

I studied her. Even though I didn't know exactly what she was going through, I could relate. I was hurt by a wolf shifter just like she was.

"You want to go into the woods?" I asked.

She pinched her lips together and nodded. "I have to. I have to look for him. It's what he would do for me."

I tapped my fingertips on the tabletop as I let her words settle around me. I knew what she was saying was true, but I wasn't sure

if I could just send my best friend out into the woods after a guy who might not want to be found.

"Rose, it's dangerous. You know it. I know it." I reached out and rested my hand on her arm. I hoped it would give her some sort of solace. But, from the way she scrunched up her nose and snatched her arm away, it didn't.

She was hurting, and me trying to rationalize wasn't helping her. Which made me sad.

"What if Grayson doesn't want to be found?" I finally mumbled. I knew it was a gamble, but I had to help my friend see sense. She was going off into the woods. From what I knew of Grayson, if he wanted to come back, he would have. He didn't seem like the kind of guy who would stay anywhere he didn't want to be.

Tears brimmed on the edge of Rose's eyes, and I could tell she was trying to process what I'd said to her. She was trying to come up with a reason to keep searching. To not give up.

"He wouldn't..." Her voice trailed off as she worried her lip. Her focus was concentrated to the side. Her gaze glossed over, and then she closed her eyes as she brought her lips inward, pinching them with her teeth.

"I'm sorry," I said as a tear rolled down her cheek.

Rose shook her head as she took in a deep breath and then opened her eyes to meet my gaze. "I can't give up. I just can't. You can help me if you want to, but I'm going out there tonight. I have to fight for Grayson."

I reached out and pulled my best friend into a hug. After a few seconds, I pulled back and offered her a sympathetic smile. "I understand, and I'll go with you. It'll just have to be after detention."

Her eyes widened. "Detention?"

I sighed and nodded. "I got into a tiff with Katie. Mrs. White saw and banished me to detention."

Rose laughed as she wiped at her cheeks. "Really? Man, I wish I'd been there to see that." Then she furrowed her brow. "Was it about Liam?"

At the mention of his name, I scanned the crowd only to see Liam sitting at the table with the other players with his head dipped down. His shoulders were sagged. His normal king-of-the-school persona was faltering.

He was hurting and I could feel it. Like we were connected in this strange cosmic way.

All I wanted to do was go over and comfort him. It was my job to make him happy, even if he didn't want me to do it.

I was born to bring him happiness.

"He's an idiot," Rose whispered, drawing my attention back to her.

For a moment, I allowed my defenses to falter as tears filled my eyes. I swallowed hard as I nodded. "You're right. He is."

Rose matched my nod until she burst out in a nervous laugh. "Look at the two of us. Stupid boys. Bringing us into their world. We would have been completely happy without them. And now?"

I fiddled with my backpack. I knew what she meant without her saying it.

We were in love with boys that we could never have. And no matter how hard we tried to move on, I doubted we would ever be able to fully get over how we felt.

"Let's make a pact. If we don't find Grayson tonight, we stop looking. We move on." I allowed my gaze to slip over to Liam only to find him staring at me. Heat flushed my body as I quickly dropped my gaze before I brought it back to study Rose. She was chewing her lip as she stared out the far window, and I could tell she was mulling over what I said.

"We can't live our life like this," I continued.

Rose was silent for a moment before she sighed and nodded. "You're right. We can't." Then she glanced over at me as she raised her pinky finger. "Promise?"

I nodded as I met her gesture. Maybe, if I had Rose to help me, I just might be able to kick this obsession that I called Liam. After all, it wasn't like I didn't have Christopher interested in me. I might as well attempt to see where that relationship could go.

"Promise," I repeated, giving her a smile.

After we dropped our hands, I scanned the lunchroom—avoiding Liam's table—searching for Christopher. He must have felt my gaze because, a moment later, he glanced up. He smiled and winked at me.

I allowed myself to smile back, even though a feeling of regret rose up inside of me. It only lingered for a moment before I forced it back down again.



There was no reason I should feel like I was cheating on Liam, because I wasn't. If anything, I was moving on. It was normal and, if I were honest with myself, the healthy thing to do.

Someone distracted Christopher, drawing his attention away, but not before he raised his fingers to signify that I should text him. I nodded and deepened my smile. After he was completely distracted by the person talking to him, I lowered my gaze—but not before I snuck a peek in Liam's direction.

My heart pounded as I took in his furrowed brow and pained expression. He was staring daggers at Christopher, and I allowed myself to think that it was because of me. That, perhaps, it meant he still cared. Which, deep down, I still wanted.

Clearing my throat, I forced my brain to change gears. Focusing on Liam's desire for me or his wish to obliterate Christopher wasn't fulfilling my side of the pact with Rose.

We had until tonight to get answers. If we were still in this place when we went to sleep tonight, then our relationships with the wolf shifters of Smoky Hills were over.

I was going to keep my promise. No matter how much my heart ached, I was going to move on.

I had to.

## BRIELLE

The final bell rang, and I grabbed my backpack and headed out of class. Once I was out in the hallway, I glanced both directions before I joined the throng of students making their way to their lockers.

There was something calming about allowing the horde of students to guide me down the hallway. I didn't have to think. I didn't have to decide anything. Instead, I could just follow.

That was something I'd gotten used to. At least where Grayson was concerned.

It was hard to have my own voice when my older brother was so overprotective. He was always there to tell me I was doing something wrong or that he disproved of a decision I'd made. It was something I'd grown used to, and now that it was gone, it was strange.

And, in general, the fact that he'd left was even stranger.

Grayson wasn't the kind of guy that just up and left.

I stood outside my locker, peering into it as thoughts of where my brother could have gone floated around in my mind. Was he back with Mom and Dad? Was he lost? Did the Cordens take him?

I blinked a few times, trying to calm my mind and heart. There was no reason for me to jump to conclusions. After all, it wasn't like this was the first time he'd left. There was that one incident, back when we first got to Smoky Hills, where he left for two days. Maybe this was the same situation.

He could have needed a break, and who was I to keep that from him?

He'd be back. He had to be. He promised me when we were kids and making our way through the woods to Mr. Bronson's door that he would always be there for me. And I trusted him.

He was loyal, and whatever was distracting him had nothing to do with me. He needed a break, and I would be the loving sister and allow him to take one.

"I've never seen someone stare so intently into their locker before," a smooth, deep voice said from behind me.

My heart picked up speed as I turned to see Matthew standing a few inches away from me. My breath hitched in my throat as I took in his stance. He was leaning forward as if he were trying to get a look inside my locker—or perhaps be closer to me—I wasn't sure.

I startled, jumping back and away from him. I didn't like how I felt when I was around him. A strange warmth spread through my body, causing my breath to turn shallow. I didn't like the way my body responded to him on an emotional and physical level.

Add that to the way he smelled, and I felt as if I were slowly losing my mind.

Being a shifter gave me heightened senses, but I doubted I needed that to pick out his smell. His cologne was intoxicating. He smelled like the woods after a hard summer rain.

It took all my control not to close my eyes and breathe in deeply.

I brought my gaze up to meet his, allowing myself for a moment to revel in his proximity. It wasn't like a lot of guys were breaking down the door to ask me out. And even if they had been, Grayson wouldn't let them.

I was off-limits. Untouchable. One look from Grayson and any guy who valued his life was gone.

Sayonara.

So the fact that this stranger was taking an interest in me, well, it had my entire body reacting. Which I knew was stupid. He could sense my reaction. Heck, I was pretty sure that humans would be able to sense it. You didn't need to be a mythical creature to realize what was going on between us.

And all of this because my older brother decided to disappear.

Blast you, Grayson.

Without him around, I didn't have that outer layer of protection around me. Without him here, I was going to have to talk to Matthew. And how did a girl do that? Besides my brother's dorky

friends who were already wrapped up in their own relationship drama, I'd never had interactions with boys. At least not with boys who wanted to stand as close to me as Matthew was right now.

How did a girl act coy? How did she reel in a boy without giving away the fact that she was interested?

I racked my brain for all the teen girl dramas I'd seen. I knew they laughed and flung their hair. Was that what I should do?

Throwing caution to the wind, I decided to act. He was peering down at me as if he were waiting for me to say something. Do something.

So I did.

I giggled.

And it sounded awful.

Heat rushed to my skin as I dropped my gaze and focused on my locker. What was I doing? This wasn't me. And the sound that I'd produced was proof to the world that this most definitely wasn't me.

Trying out my flirty skills on this stranger was the worst move I'd made in a long time. I wished a hole would just open up and swallow me. Maybe if I ignored him, he wouldn't try to talk to me and I could escape without him noticing.

Was that too much to ask?

Probably.

I blindly grabbed some book from inside my locker and slammed the door and spun around. I was ready to hightail it out of here.

"You okay?" Matthew asked as he leaned in again. His presence washed over me, causing my heart to pound harder. "Are you worried?" His voice had deepened as if he was concerned that he'd scared me.

Realizing that I couldn't stand here and ignore him, I shook my head and turned to face him. "Of course not. Why would I be worried?" I smiled over at him—just to prove how relaxed I was.

He raised his eyebrows as he pulled back slightly. Then he nodded and shrugged, shoving his hands into his front pockets. His hair fell across his forehead as he tipped his face toward the ground. Then he took in a deep breath. "I guess I just thought maybe we could hang out. After all, I'm new here and you're..." He pulled one hand out and swept it up and down. As if that were the universal signal for *wolf shifter*.

I studied him for a moment. I had to admit, I did feel bad for him. After all, when I'd come to Smoky Hills, I'd had Grayson and Liam. Matthew didn't have anyone.

Call me crazy, but it didn't quite feel right to abandon him to learn the ropes alone. Maybe I could be his friend. It wasn't like it was going to be easy for him, trying to fit into Liam's pack, but maybe I could help convince Liam to lower his guard. I knew he had his defenses up. I could feel it. It coursed through the fabric that held us together.

Liam was worried about more than Grayson and Cora, and I couldn't help but think that, perhaps, it was because of Matthew.

I sighed as I nodded. Matthew may be from the Mother pack, but he was here now. If he hated humans or half breeds, I was pretty sure he would have acted already. Members of the Mother pack weren't known for their patience. They were more the type to act now and ask questions later.

But from the way Matthew's shoulder curved forward and the hopeful grin he had spread across his lips, he wasn't a threat. Besides, I was pretty good at reading people, and my gut was telling me he was harmless.

I wrapped my arms around my books and held them to my chest. I took in a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. I'll help you figure things out until..." My thoughts trailed off as Grayson's face flashed in my mind.

I really hoped I was right about Grayson. That he just needed a few days' break and then would be back. I could distract myself with Matthew until then.

Matthew furrowed his brow. "Until?"

I pinched my lips together and shook my head. I didn't really want to talk about Grayson, and I definitely didn't want to spill my guts to this stranger. "Until you feel more comfortable," I replied.

Matthew squinted for a moment before he nodded. "Perfect. I'm happy to go with that." He stuck out his hand and held it there.

I stared at it for a moment. Then, realizing that I couldn't just stand there, that I looked like a complete idiot, I met his gesture. When our skin touched, heat coursed up my arm and throughout my body. For a moment, it sounded as if Matthew's heart was beating in time with mine.

Before I could allow myself to hope, I dropped his hand and threaded my thumbs through the straps of my backpack. Keeping my hands busy seemed the best move. There was something about him. A part of myself seemed to unlock when I was around him.

I knew it sounded crazy, but I couldn't deny it.

And that scared me.

"Meet me after practice," I said as I started making my way toward the locker room.

"Practice?" he asked, keeping step with me.

I glanced over at him. "Yeah. Coach Pennington is going to want to talk to you. Besides, being on the team helps burn off energy." I ran my gaze over his physique. He was built like Liam's pack. Tall and broad, with muscles for days.

Just what the team needed.

I paused outside the locker room and motioned toward the doors. "In there," I said.

Matthew glanced over at them and then back to me. "And where are you going?"

I took a step back, needing distance between our bodies. I didn't want him to read into my actions—which I was pretty sure he already was. If I was able to pick up his heartbeat, I was pretty sure he could pick up mine. And from the way my heart was beating, there was no mystery there.

I was attracted to Matthew. More than I'd ever been toward another guy.

"I've got soccer practice," I said, waving toward the opposite door, where the girl's locker room was.

I watched Matthew flick his gaze in the direction I'd motioned and then back to me.

His lips tipped up into a smile as I heard his heartbeat quicken. That intrigued me, but before I could ask him about it, the door to the boy's locker room opened and Noah stuck his head out. His gaze landed on me and then moved over to Matthew. Then his expression turned sour as he stepped out into the hallway.

"Is there an issue here?" he asked. He folded his arms across his chest as he rose to his full height.

I wanted to sigh and roll my eyes. This was totally a play from Grayson's overprotective brother book. "We're fine," I said, taking a step back just to make sure he believed my words.

Matthew ran his hands through his hair as his heartbeat slowed noticeably. I studied him, wondering how he had that much control over his emotions. If I hadn't been standing next to him a few seconds ago, I would have never known his heart rate was elevated.

Noah cleared his throat as he stepped forward. "My dad wants to talk to you," he said, tossing his head in the direction of the locker room.

Matthew raised his eyebrows as he studied Noah and then dropped his gaze back to me. He gave me a smile that I was pretty sure turned my knees to Jell-O. Then he turned, saluted Noah, and disappeared into the locker room.

My emotions were out of whack as I shifted my weight and attempted to get my heartbeat in check.

"Brielle," Noah said, lowering his voice.

Ugh. He sounded just like Grayson.

"What?" I asked, wincing at my volume. I was trying to be stealthy. To not give away my feelings for Matthew.

Noah's gaze drifted down to my heart and then back up. "You know what? With Grayson gone, it's my job to look out for you. And having anything for that guy"—he shoved his thumb in the direction of the locker room—"isn't smart."

I let out a groan as I gripped the handle to the girl's locker room door. This was *not* the conversation I wanted to have with my brother's friend. I didn't need advice on relationships. I could take care of myself.

"I think I'm perfectly capable of deciding what's going to be good for me," I said.

Noah shook his head as he stepped forward. "With things up in the air with the Mother pack, we can't be too careful. If anything happened to you, Grayson would have my head." He lifted his hand up to hold the door handle.

He must have sensed my desire to bolt and was blocking my retreat. He stared down at me in a way that told me he was serious and that he wanted me to acknowledge him. To agree with him.

Which I couldn't. Not truthfully.

So I just nodded. "I understand," I said, dropping my voice to a whisper. I knew he was trying to protect me, but it just made me angry. But if I let that anger brew inside of me, he would sense it and know I was lying.

Truth was, I didn't take too well to a guy threatening me or telling me who I could and couldn't talk to. I tolerated it with Grayson because he was my brother. But Noah wasn't my anything. Female wolf shifters didn't have loyalty to their pack quite like the males did. And teenage female wolf shifters had very little loyalty.

So even though he was standing there, dictating to me what I had to do, the desire to follow his commands just wasn't there. But that didn't seem to stop him.

Not wanting to get into an argument with him about what Grayson may or may not want, I just nodded and pulled harder on the door.

That seemed to snap Noah out of his trance, and he dropped his hand.

I gave him a small smile as I pulled open the door. But when I slipped into the locker room, thinking I was free of him, he grabbed my hand.

"I mean it, Brielle. Stay away from Matthew until we know why he's here." Noah's voice had dropped to one of concern instead of command. Like he was really scared that something bad might happen or was already happening.

A shiver rushed across my skin as I studied him. Then I slowly nodded. "Okay. I'll stay away from him."

He studied me for a moment before he dropped his hand and scrubbed his face. "Thanks, Brielle. That means a lot."

I nodded and walked forward, allowing the locker room door to close behind me. Now alone, I scooted over so I could lean my back against the wall and take a few deep breaths.

I hated lying to Noah, but I hated being told what to do more. Sure, Matthew was mysterious, and his sudden appearance was alarming, but I trusted my gut more than anything else.

And my gut was telling me that Matthew wasn't as dangerous as Noah was making him out to be. That, perhaps, Matthew was as lost as I felt.

How could I turn my back on that?

Tipping my face toward the ceiling, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Grayson's face flashed through my mind, only strengthening my resolve more.

I'd keep my distance, to honor Noah's request. I'd make sure I was safe at all times.



But I wasn't going to leave Matthew alone.  
Not when he might know where Grayson was.  
And maybe, and this was a small maybe, because I didn't want  
to.

## LIAM

This was a mistake. A huge, colossal rip-my-heart-out-and-stomp-on-it mistake.

I knew I should walk away. After all, I was the mayor's son. I was sure one phone call from him and I wouldn't have to go to detention. I could leave the school and never look back.

But I didn't want that. Not at all.

Not when Cora was going to be there too.

The chance to sit by her—no matter how painful—was a chance I was going to take.

As crazy as it sounded, there was something soothing about sitting by her. Just being next to her, feeling her warmth and hearing her heartbeat. It calmed my ragged nerves, and right now, I needed that.

I needed her.

I pulled my backpack up higher on my shoulder as I made my way down the hallway and over to Mrs. White's classroom. The door was open, and I could hear voices coming from inside.

It only took a second to pick out Cora's voice. It was soft and melodious, and before I could stop myself, I closed my eyes and leaned against the nearby locker. My heart pounded inside of my chest. My body yearned for me to rush in there and pull her to me, pressing her lips to mine.

All I wanted in this world was Cora, and yet, she was the one thing I couldn't have.

My life sucked.

"Are you joining us, Mr. Bronson?" Mrs. White's voice snapped me from my wallowing.

I straightened and glanced up to see her walk by me. Her heels clicked on the cement floor. Her glasses were perched on her nose. She had a no-nonsense look as her gaze roamed over me.

I shifted my backpack higher onto my shoulder and nodded, following her into the room.

Of course, I located Cora before I took note of anyone else in the room. In all honesty, I didn't care which students were there with us. All I needed to know was where my fate sat. She was all I cared about.

She held my gaze for a moment before her cheeks flushed and she dropped her gaze to the notebook on her desk. I heard the quickening of her heartbeat as I passed by her and dropped into a seat a few spots behind her. There was no way I wasn't going to sit where I couldn't keep an eye on her.

It was going to drive me crazy, having her within my grasp without being able to touch her. But what did it matter? I was already partially insane. I was learning very quickly why keeping a wolf shifter from their fate was torture.

Because that's how I felt right now. Tortured.

Once I settled into my desk, I grabbed a notebook and a pencil. There was no way I was going to be able to concentrate, but I knew I couldn't just sit here and look like I wasn't doing anything.

"I expect the room to remain quiet for the next two hours." Mrs. White said. "If you have homework, may I suggest that you accomplish it." She was sitting in front of her computer, wiggling her mouse as if she were trying to wake up the screen.

The room grew quiet as everyone dipped their head downs. They all looked busy, completely engrossed in their homework. I, on the other hand, couldn't seem to make out anything on the piece of paper in front of me.

Not when I could hear Cora's heart so clearly or smell her scent so strongly. I was completely entranced by her proximity, and it was taking all of my strength not to throw aside the desks between her and me, lift her up, and take her far away from here.

Where she would be mine.

All mine.

"Excuse me." Christopher's voice broke through my thoughts and caused my temperature to instantly rise.

I glanced up to see that he was standing in the middle of Mrs. White's room with a bouquet in his hands and a sheepish look on his face. I stared at him, trying to process what he was doing here. In front of me, Cora had straightened, her body rigid.

"Yes, Mr. Larson?" Mrs. White's voice came out annoyed as she stared at him from over her readers. "This is detention, not a flower delivery place." Her gaze dipped down to the roses in his hand.

Christopher laughed. It was forced and weak. And it made my blood boil. It was becoming impossible to think of a reason not to go over and dispose of this weasel. I didn't understand what Cora saw in this guy.

He was weak. A human. How could he protect her?

"I just needed to ask Cora a question," he said, glancing over at Cora and giving her a smile.

My body was molten lava now as I realized what was going on. I glanced between Cora and Christopher, waiting to hear the change in her heartbeat. The same one that happened when I neared her.

The one that would tell me if she had feelings for him.

But...it never came. Instead the cadence remained constant. Steady.

Mrs. White sighed and nodded. "Fine. Get it over with." Then she mumbled under her breath, "I can't wait until homecoming is over."

Christopher shot Mrs. White a smile as he made his way to Cora. I stared at him, daring him to look up. Daring him to take notice of me. If he did, there was no way I wasn't going to show him exactly how I felt about what he was doing.

But he never looked at me. Instead, he stopped in front of Cora and then went down on one knee. "Will you go to prom with me?" he asked as he looked up at her and held out the flowers.

I heard her breath catch in her throat as she paused. I studied her, wishing I could read her mind or see her face. I needed to know what she thought about this. Did she like it? Did she hate it?

What did this mean for us?

Feeling frustrated, I stood and made my way over to the dusty pencil sharpener. I doubted it had been used in years. I brushed it off

and shoved my pencil into it, hoping that no one would notice that it was actually a mechanical pencil.

I didn't care. I need the distraction. I needed a break from staring at the back of her head, wondering what she was thinking. Wondering if she'd forgotten about me. If moving on with Christopher would bring her happiness.

Despite my best efforts to stay away, I glanced over in her direction. From where I stood, I could see her face. She was watching me as if she were waiting to see what I would do.

I shoved every ounce of my energy into not running over there and taking her away from here. Away from Christopher.

My gaze met hers, and I held it for a moment. I let my guard down. I wanted her to see that I still cared. That I hadn't forgotten her. That I never could forget her.

Her eyes widened as she hesitated. I wanted to hope that she would turn him down, but then I realized how selfish that would be of me.

To not want her to be happy was wrong of me.

After all, it wasn't like I could take her to homecoming, no matter how much I wanted to.

With things so up in the air in my life, dragging Cora down with me wasn't fair. She deserved to have a stress-free senior year. She didn't need someone like me in her life.

She deserved to be free. And I was anything but free.

So I pulled my mechanical pencil from the sharpener, blew on it like that would do something, and headed back to my desk.

On my way past Cora, I spoke even though it broke my heart. "What are you waiting for, Gray? He wants an answer." I glanced over at her quickly before I dropped my gaze to the ground. I hoped she'd pick up on my forced playful tone and flirty smile even though I was breaking inside.

"Should I say yes?" she asked. It was a question but sounded more like an accusation.

*No.*

But I couldn't say that. Instead, I shrugged. "If that's the guy you want hanging onto your arm all night, then go for it. I'm not going to stop you." I flicked my gaze up to Christopher, who looked startled.

He glanced back and forth between us like he wasn't sure what to make of our conversation. I shot him a smile as I dropped down

into my seat and leaned forward, resting my forehead on my elbow. I welcomed the darkness that surrounded me.

I didn't want to look up anymore. I wanted to block out the world and what was going on in front of me. If I ignored it, maybe my heart would stop breaking.

I stifled a growl as I heard Cora and Christopher return to talking. Eventually, she said yes, which elicited a cheer from everyone in the room.

Frustrated with myself and what was going on, I stood and made my way over to Mrs. White's desk. I must have looked crazed as I stood there staring down at her. A semi-panicked look flashed in her eyes.

"Can I help you, Mr. Bronson?" she asked.

"Bathroom," I said.

She nodded and waved her hand toward the door. "Go ahead. I expect you back in a timely manner."

I growled as I shoved my hands into my front pockets and stalked out of the room. I wouldn't be back until Christopher was gone and my nerves weren't so frayed.

But I doubted that would be anytime soon.

I barreled into the bathroom. I blew out my breath as I tipped my face upward and wrapped my hands around the back of my neck. Luckily for the entire student body of Smoky Hills, I was alone. Right now, I wasn't sure what I would do to an innocent bystander.

I splashed some water on my face and stalked back and forth in the bathroom until I was sure the tile was worn down. Then I took in a deep breath and decided it was safe to go back to the room.

As I walked out into the hall, I glanced both ways only to be stopped by Cora. She was leaning against the lockers next to the bathroom with her arms folded across her chest and her legs stretched out.

I stared at her for a moment, wondering how I'd missed the sound of her heartbeat. I must have been too distracted to notice.

I shook my head as I turned to walk away from her. Whatever she had to say wasn't good. My self-control around her was seriously lacking. If I allowed myself to confront her, I doubted my ability to stay away from her.

It was fraying as it was.

"Liam," Cora's voice cut through the silence. "Wait."

Like a beta to his alpha, I stopped. There was no way I could ignore her. And the truth was, I wanted to stop. I wanted to see her. Speak to her.

Kiss her.

I growled as I forced my mind to what I was going to say. But before I came up with something good, she was in front of me, staring up into my face. She looked mad and hurt. And I didn't blame her. I was a jerk for leading her on.

"What the heck was that?" she asked, waving her hand in the direction of Mrs. White's room.

I glanced behind her and then back down. There was this fire in her eyes and pink hue to her cheeks that made her more adorable than I remembered.

And maybe I was taking a little comfort in the fact that she was so upset with me. It meant she still cared.

"What was what?" I asked as I lifted my hand to run it through my hair. Anything to keep my hands distracted from what they really wanted to do—reach out and never let her go.

She studied me and then blew out her breath as if she impatient with my answer. She slipped her hands onto her hips as she glanced side to side. "Why did you say that to me?" she finally asked.

I furrowed my brow. "Why did I say...?" I stared at her. I wasn't the one confronting her. She needed to be clear about what she was asking.

She held my gaze as if she were making her stand. "Why did you tell me that I needed to answer Christopher?"

I blinked a few times. Was she serious? "Isn't that what people do when another person asks them to homecoming?"

Her expression stilled for a moment before she nodded. "Well, yeah."

"And you want to go with Christopher, right?" I couldn't help the dip in my voice at the question. I wanted so badly for her to say no. But I doubted she would.

She held my gaze for a moment before she began to slowly nod. "Yes," she whispered.

I studied her, trying to read her real answer in her gaze. Was that true?

"Really?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Her expression stilled, and tears began to form in her eyes. I could hear her strained swallow and the trill of her heart. She was nervous and worried. Which I hated.

I hated that I brought that reaction out in her. Even though I was hurting, I didn't want her to feel the same.

"What do you want me to say, Liam?" she asked as she threw her hands up in exasperation. "Is there any other option?" A tear rolled down her cheek, and I just stood there like an idiot.

A huge, gigantic, heartbroken idiot.

And then I just acted. Before I could stop myself, I leapt.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pulled her to me, crushing her lips with mine. There was so much that I wanted her to know and feel, and this seemed to be the only way to do that.

She let out a gasp, but it only took a moment for her shock to wear off and her hands to find their way to my neck. She grabbed onto me like she didn't want to let go.

Losing control, I lifted her up. She seemed to know what I wanted as she wrapped her legs around my waist, bringing her closer to my body.

I reached out as I made my way to the lockers and pressed her against them. I needed that added strength. Especially when she parted her lips and let me in.

My heart raced in time with hers. It was as if they were doing a dance that was so right and so familiar, and I never wanted it to stop. Not with her.

She was my everything.

Our lips moved in sync with each other. Each of us desperate to feel and to say things we couldn't say out loud. Our love was forbidden, and in a few seconds, I was going to have to step away. To break her heart once more.

That's when regret and worry crashed into me.

What was I doing? Why was I doing this?

I started to pull away, but Cora growled and gripped harder to me. I allowed her to take control for a moment longer. Kissing her was so easy. It was the walking away part that challenged my strength.

"Bronson!" Evan's voice broke through our kiss.

We pulled away, and I glanced over to see him standing in front of the locker room, sweaty from practice. He had his helmet in his



hand and a confused look on his face.

Great. Evan was standing-in for Grayson now.

I gave him a low growl, but I knew what he was meant. I was being an idiot. Again.

So I nodded and lowered Cora to the ground. I could feel her frustration as she stared up at me.

"I got it," I said as I glared at Evan. He held my gaze for a moment longer and then shook his head as he made his way into the locker room, the door swinging shut behind him.

I forced myself to move to the other side of the hallway, where the temptation to grab her again was a little less potent. We waited for the rest of the team to file in after Evan before we spoke. We filled the time just staring at each other.

The kiss had felt so right and so complete that I could barely keep myself from her when the hallway finally fell silent.

"Cora," I said, my voice low and deep with the emotions that were coursing through me. I wanted to be strong, I did. But I loved Cora so much that walking away felt as if it was going to kill me.

Cora chewed her lip as she folded her arms across her chest and nodded. "It's okay. I get it. You have to go. We can't be together." Her voice drifted off to a whisper. "There's not an excuse I haven't heard before."

I stared at her, trying to muscle down the urge to throw caution to the wind and love her like she was meant to be loved. "I don't—"

"Please," she said, holding up her hand. "Please don't say it. I don't think my heart can handle that." She returned her hand to her arm and began to rub it as if she were cold. "It's better when you just tell me we're finished. That the kiss was a mistake."

But it wasn't. And I wanted to tell her that. Out of everything I'd been doing this last week, her kiss was the first right thing I'd done in a while.

However, from the look in her eyes, I decided to hold my tongue. If she wanted me to stay quiet, I would. I could do that for her.

She held my gaze for a moment before she sighed and nodded toward Mrs. White's room. "I should get going," she said as she side-stepped me and started making her way toward the room.

I whipped around, desperate to say what was on my mind, but I couldn't. I wouldn't do that to her. Instead, I watched her leave. I watched her walk away.

And I let her.

After all, what choice did I have? We could never be together, no matter how much I wanted that to change.

No matter how much I loved her.

I was a wolf shifter and she was human. No amount of wishing and hoping was going to change that.

Period.

## BRIELLE

I slipped my keys from the ignition and grabbed my backpack from the front seat. I gripped it to my chest as I reached over and pulled open the driver's door. I was ready to get out of my sweaty clothes and into the shower.

I placed my feet on the ground and shuffled to the side so that I could shut the door behind me. I took a moment to look around, allowing myself to see if Grayson had returned.

But, just as I suspected, there was no sign that he was here. Instead, all I heard was the muffled sound of voices coming from inside my house.

I stilled, trying to make out who they were and what they were saying, but there were too many walls in between me and them. And shifting in broad daylight was frowned upon.

Excitement hitched in my chest for a moment as I made my way up the walkway and pulled open the front door. As soon as I stepped into the entryway, it became very clear who was here.

Mr. Bronson was talking to Mrs. Diggory.

I caught a few words here and there. Something like "...new in town..." and "...just for now..."

I furrowed my brow as I dropped my things on the couch and kicked off my shoes. Then I tightened my ponytail and headed into the kitchen at the back of the house. The tension in the air was thick. I could feel it all around me.

"I'm just not sure how I feel about letting someone stay in Grayson's room without his permission," Mrs. Diggory said as I entered.

That statement caused me to stop in my tracks. I stared at Mrs. Diggory and then slowly let my gaze roam. My heart stuttered to a stop when I saw Mr. Bronson standing next to Matthew.

"What's going on here?" I asked as I turned my attention back to Mrs. Diggory, who was worrying her lips and avoiding my gaze.

"Hey, Brielle," Mr. Bronson said as he stepped forward.

I glanced over at him and his extended hand, but then I focused back on Mrs. Diggory. Call me crazy, but I really had no interest in shooting the breeze with someone who might be trying to rent out my missing brother's room.

"We can't let anyone stay in Grayson's room. He'll be back." I stepped closer to Mrs. Diggory, forcing her to meet my gaze. She had to know this was a ridiculous idea. Grayson was family. We didn't give up on family.

That seemed to appeal to Mrs. Diggory. She raised her gaze to meet mine and held it for a moment before she nodded. "I know. That's what I've been telling Mr. Bronson."

Relief flooded through me at Mrs. Diggory's words. At least I wasn't going to have to convince her to remain loyal. I was, however, going to have to address why Mr. Bronson seemed so eager to give away Grayson's room.

To assume that Grayson wasn't coming back.

"He'll have to find another place to stay," I said as I dropped my gaze to Matthew. He was smiling at me while he leaned against the table with his legs stretched out in front of him.

Heat crept across my skin as I furrowed my brow. Why was he smiling at me?

The desire to help him out that I had felt earlier today was completely washed away. There was no way I felt charitable toward him now. Not when he was here trying to insert himself into my life. Trying to push Grayson out.

"Brielle, listen. I've heard from your parents. Grayson went back to stay with them." Mr. Bronson's voice seemed strained, and I could tell from the increase in his heart rate he wasn't being completely honest.

Which angered me more.

"What? Who told you that?" I hated how desperate my voice sounded as the words left my lips, but I couldn't help it. I was mad.

Grayson would never leave, and hearing people challenge his loyalty to me was infuriating.

"Believe it or not, Grayson isn't coming back. At least, not for a while." Mr. Bronson extended his hand. "Matthew is in need of a place to stay. I think we could open our hearts and home to him." Mr. Bronson's gaze slipped to Mrs. Diggory. "Right?"

I scoffed as I glanced between Mrs. Diggory and Mr. Bronson. There seemed to be an interaction going on between them that I wasn't entirely comfortable with.

It was as if they had some secret agreement, and no matter how I felt about this situation, it wasn't going to change the inevitable decision.

Matthew *was* staying here.

"I—"

"It's okay. I'm sure there's a couch I can stay on," Matthew said as he shot me another cocky smile.

It took all my strength not to roll my eyes at him.

Mrs. Diggory mumbled something under her breath, which I didn't quite catch. I was too focused on Matthew and how irritated he was making me.

Mr. Bronson seemed to hear what Mrs. Diggory had said, and the look that crossed his face was one of displeasure. But it didn't last long. He cleared his throat and straightened.

"Well, I'll leave you to get settled," he said, nodding in Matthew's direction.

I sputtered, trying to come up with a good reason why Matthew couldn't stay here, but nothing was coming to mind. And Mr. Bronson was leaving faster than my brain could think.

And then he was gone. Leaving Matthew here.

Mrs. Diggory sighed as she moved to grab a water bottle from the fridge. "I'm going to go lay down," she said as she made her way into her room. Right before she shut her door, she called out to me, "Find a place for Matthew to stay."

Before I could think of a rebuttal, the door was shut, and I was left alone with Matthew and his ridiculously confident smile.

I glanced over at him, but when his smile deepened, revealing a dimple on each cheek, I rolled my eyes and sighed.

"What are you playing at?" I asked as I folded my arms, hoping I came across as formidable.

Matthew held up his hands as he winked at me.

*Winked at me.*

Gah. The nerve of this kid.

"I'm just here to learn the human ways," he said.

I shushed him as I tipped my head toward Mrs. Diggory's room. I listened, only to hear the sound of some daytime soap opera playing inside. I could picture her now, cuddled up in her blankets with her forbidden chocolate that she thought we didn't know she had.

Satisfied that she wasn't going to come out and overhear us, I let out my breath and glared at Matthew.

"Grayson isn't gone for good," I said as I extended my finger in Matthew's direction.

Matthew's gaze flicked down to my finger and then back up to my face. "Has anyone ever told you that you're adorable when you're angry?"

I blinked a few times, completely taken aback by his words. "I—um—" I cleared my throat as I tried to calm my nerves and focus on hating him. He was just trying to distract me from what was really going on.

When Matthew raised his eyebrows, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to continue until I addressed what he'd said about me. So I squared my shoulders and met his gaze head-on.

"I'm not sure what you are playing at, but it's not going to work on me." I glared at him as I shoved my finger in his direction again—then I curled it back into my palm and settled on placing my hands on my hips. Since when did wagging my finger become a thing I did?

Matthew chuckled as he raised his hands and took a small step back. "Geez, feisty much?" he asked, with that annoying smile returning.

I sighed as the adrenaline that had been pumping through my body began to settle in my muscles. I hadn't realized how much I had been on high alert, and the absence of the panic seemed to leave me weak.

I needed to figure my crap out if I was going to survive long enough to find Grayson.

Not wanting to stand here and fight with Matthew anymore, I waved for him to follow me. "Come on. I need a shower, so let's get this over with."

Matthew raised his eyebrows. "Are you inviting me into the shower with you?"

I nearly choked on my own spit as his words rang in my ears. I coughed and wheezed as I replayed the words I had just said in my mind. Had I actually asked that? "No," I rasped out.

Matthew studied me for a moment before his smile returned. "Ah, man. And you had me so excited."

I gritted my teeth as I almost decided right there to throw him out. I eyed him, taking in his six-foot-something stature against my five-foot-five frame. I doubted I could even move him, but that didn't mean I wouldn't try.

Especially if he tested me.

"Oh, goodness, Brielle. Relax. I'm just flirting with you. Has that never happened before?" he asked as he made his way over to the table that he'd been standing at earlier. He grabbed his military-grade duffle bag and turned back around to see me standing there like an idiot.

The truth was, no, I didn't have people flirt with me. Being the sister of Grayson meant that guys weren't allowed around me. He was always there to fight them off.

So if a guy had ever wanted to flirt with me, I would have never known.

Matthew studied me for a moment before he sighed and offered me probably his first genuine smile since meeting me. I was taken aback at how sexy and handsome he was behind the curtain of cockiness.

"Come on. Show me where I'm camping out, and then you can get to your shower." He held his hand out and waited to follow me.

I stared at him, feeling quite whiplashed.

He'd gone from cocky jerk to nice boy. And I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Matthew stepped closer to me, dipping down to meet my gaze. He raised his eyebrows as if he expected me to say something.

Realizing I needed to snap out of the trance I seemed to be in, I cleared my throat and nodded. "Okay," I managed to say.

Grayson smiled—a genuine smile—and nodded behind me. "Let's go, then."

Still not sure how I felt about anything that had happened, I turned and made my way down the hall to the basement door. I was

grateful for the moment to think that leaving his gaze gave me. I could segment my thoughts when I wasn't staring into his dark eyes or becoming consumed by the depths of his gaze.

Once we were in the basement, I flipped on the light and nodded toward the couch. "You can stay here," I said.

Matthew's gaze roamed over the room and finally landed on me. He nodded and shrugged. "Beats sleeping outside," he said as he threw his duffle bag down on the ground and moved to sit on the couch.

"My room is upstairs. Where Grayson's room is."

Matthew glanced up at me and nodded again. "Okay," he said as he started to pull off the zip-up hoodie he had on. His dark blue t-shirt hugged his very broad and very muscular chest. The swift moment caused his scent to waft over to me. For a moment, my entire body went numb as I allowed it to engulf me.

Despite the warning bells sounding in my mind, I inhaled. Deep.

Worried that he sensed my change in body chemistry, I blinked a few times, trying to ground myself. I needed to focus my thoughts. I needed to finish what I was doing and get the heck out of here.

"The bathroom's upstairs as well. I'm guessing you're free to eat what's in the fridge—but the cherry yogurt is mine," I said as I raised a finger.

Matthew chuckled as he raised his right hand like he was swearing in court. "I promise not to eat it."

I nodded and pinched my lips together as I glanced around the room. I couldn't think of anything else to tell him, but I felt as if I were forgetting something.

I narrowed my eyes and stilled my mind.

"Brielle?" Matthew asked.

I startled as I glanced over at him. "Yeah?"

"I'm not going anywhere. If you think of it, come find me," he said as he kicked off his shoes and lay back on the couch with his hands behind his head. He looked giant compared to the tiny piece of furniture underneath him.

His feet were up on the armrest and he maneuvered to grab a pillow and shove it under his head. He closed his eyes, and for the first time since I met him, I felt comfortable enough to study him.

His dark hair fell over his forehead. His jaw was chiseled, and his lashes were long as they sprawled across his cheekbones. How



someone had such perfect features boggled my mind.

Before I could drop my gaze, Matthew opened one eye and met my gaze. "Staring?" he asked as he closed his eye and smiled—the cocky smile.

I growled and charged toward the stairs. I needed to get out of here before I lost my mind. Because I was clearly on that path.

"I'm going," I said as I made my way up the stairs.

"Have a nice shower," Matthew called after me.

I huffed once I got into the kitchen and shut the basement door behind me. My collar was hot, and my heart was pounding as I thought about my interaction with Matthew.

He was so...annoying.

And aggravating. And everywhere I didn't want him to be.

I tugged my hair from my ponytail as I made my way upstairs to the bathroom. I needed a hot shower to calm my ragged nerves. Not only was Matthew getting under my skin, I was also worried about Grayson. Where he was and what he was doing.

And it was angering me that Matthew was distracting me from my desire to find him. Grayson should be my only focus. He was all that mattered.

Why did Mr. Bronson seem so confident that Grayson wasn't coming back? I knew Grayson. I also knew how he felt about our parents. There was no way he'd betray his loyalty to me in order to help them.

He hated the life we had before we came to Smoky Hills.

I doubted he would just give up everything and return.

I turned on the shower and then stripped out of my sweaty workout clothes as the water heated up. Steam began to fill the bathroom as I slipped into the shower. The warm water beat on my back, relaxing me.

I wasn't sure how long I stayed in the shower, trying to work through my thoughts and feelings, but when I heard three solid knocks and a muffled voice, I realized I needed to get out.

I rinsed the rest of the soap off my body and turned the water off. Grabbing a towel, I stepped out of the shower. After a quick rub down, I wrapped the towel around my body and grabbed another one for my hair.

I gathered my clothes and took a quick look in the mirror before I pulled the door open—revealing Matthew.

He was leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded and his gaze turned down. My heart began to pick up speed, and heat pricked my skin once more.

Frustrated that I was starting to undo the calm demeanor brought on by my shower, I growled and stormed past him with my clothes tucked in next to my body.

"Bathroom's all yours," I said as I cleared Matthew. I kept my bedroom in my sights as I made my way toward it. Honestly, I didn't want to stand in the hallway discussing anything with Matthew. Especially not when I was wrapped in only a towel.

He made me feel frustrated. Angry. And completely out of my depth.

Suddenly, a hand was on mine, halting my retreat.

My skin tingled from the feeling of his fingers pressed into it. I cursed myself for reacting this way.

"Hey," he said, his voice softer and more concerned than I thought him capable of.

And despite my best efforts, I melted a bit at that thought.

Realizing that he might not let me go until I turned around, I took in a deep breath and glanced behind me. "Yeah?"

His dark brown eyes were lighter now. And the smile that twitched on his lips was kinder. The persona that he'd shown me earlier was gone, and what was left was...Matthew.

Or at least who I could only assume was Matthew. I'd only just met the guy, even though it felt as if I'd known him for a while.

"I'm not trying to take your brother's place, and I appreciate you taking in a stray. You didn't have to," he said as he dropped my arm and then shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. He raised his shoulders and lowered them as he studied me.

I couldn't help but allow myself to think for a moment that what he was saying was true. And maybe he was as lost as I felt.

It couldn't be easy, going from a place where you knew everything to a new place, a new town where you knew no one. At least when I came, I had Grayson. Matthew had no one, and I felt my resolve to hate him until the end of time soften.

But then fear crept up inside of me and I stiffened. I couldn't let my guard down just yet. I still needed to understand why he was here.

So I turned fully around so that I could face him. I folded my arms across my chest and studied him.

"Why are you here then?" I asked, stepping forward so he had to look at me. There was no way I was going to let him change the subject.

And, to my surprise, he didn't. Instead, he met my gaze as he furrowed his brow. I got an inkling that he wanted to tell me something, but from his eventual shrug and forced smile, I realized that it had passed.

"Listen, Elle. There's a lot going on in the Mother pack. More than you could possibly know. Especially if you're hiding out here." He glanced around at the walls that surrounded us. Like somehow they shielded us from the reality of what was happening in the woods. Which, to an extent, they did. But that didn't mean that I was immune to the fabric that bound all wolf shifters together.

I knew something was going on. I could feel it in my bones.

"What?" I asked, stepping closer again. I wanted to halt his withdrawal. He needed to tell me what was happening. Especially since Grayson might be mixed up in all of it.

The need to protect my brother coursed through me like an unstoppable force. If he was in trouble, I was going to save him.

Matthew sighed as he stepped away from me and toward the bathroom. "You know what? Don't even worry about it. It's nothing." Then he paused. "Forget it, okay?"

I stood there, dumbfounded, as I watched him slip into the bathroom and shut the door.

Forget about it? Really? That's all he was going to say to me?

I growled as I stalked off to my room and shut my door. After I was dressed in my sweatpants and ratty t-shirt, I flopped down on my bed and stared up at the ceiling, my thoughts swirling in my mind.

Of two things I was certain.

One, something was going on. With Grayson. With the Mother pack. Something that I was pretty sure meant Grayson's life was in danger. Even though I couldn't hear his thoughts, I knew he was in trouble.

And as his sister, it was my responsibility to get him back.

And, two, I had feelings for Matthew. More than just a crush. I'd had those in the past. I could forget those feelings as quickly as they

came.

Even though I knew Matthew was hiding something from me, I couldn't help but feel as if we had a connection, and every conversation—every look—bound us tighter together.

And that thought scared me.

More than I cared to admit.

## CORA

I could feel Rose's agitation as she paced in front of me. We were waiting for the sun to set far enough behind the trees before we would venture out into the woods.

She said it was the only time she'd seen a wolf and had it in her mind that it was the peak time to go gallivanting around Smoky Hills in search of Grayson.

This girl was nothing if not prepared. She was decked out in black pants and a black sweatshirt. Her hair was pulled up into a bun at the top of her head, and her face was contorted into a look of frustration and pain.

Something I was becoming very familiar with.

Especially since, only hours ago, Liam had wrapped his arms around me. I could still feel his skin against mine. His lips pressed against mine. My entire being burned from the memory.

I hated how well my mind remembered things. I hated how nothing had faded. Nothing from the moment I'd walked into Smoky Hills.

Everything felt as if it had just happened moments ago.

Liam was a part of me—no matter how much I wanted to forget him, I couldn't.

I hated myself for that.

Especially since Liam seemed so willing to watch me leap and yet pull back himself.

It was unfair.

"Christopher asked me to go to homecoming with him," I said. I was sitting on the stairs outside the diner's back door. I extended my

hand behind me and rested my weight on it. I stretched my legs out and watched as she stopped moving to turn and face me.

"He what?" she asked, the wild look in her eyes subsiding for a moment.

I really hoped she wouldn't bring up Liam. I wasn't sure I could handle that right now. Talking about Christopher and homecoming was a distraction. One I really needed right now.

"He asked me to homecoming," I said again.

Rose snorted as she returned to pacing. "And you said, no, right?"

I furrowed my brow. "Why would I say no?"

She sighed as she brought her thumb up to her lips to chew on her nail. "Because..." she said, leaning her head toward me as if that was all it was going to take to explain her thought process.

"Because?" I replied, not really wanting to take the bait. But then again, I also didn't want to get into a long-winded discussion about Liam, so I decided it would be best to address the giant elephant in the room. "Because of Liam? Come on, I can't hold my breath for him." I managed to choke out the words in a halfway calm voice.

*Bravo, Cora. Even I don't believe you.*

Hoping that my lie was convincing to Rose, I peeked over at her to see her studying me. Then she sighed and threw her hands up in the air and began pacing again.

"I know you don't want me to say it..." Her voice drifted off.

"Then don't," I said, desperate for her to pick up on my tone. I couldn't discuss Liam. I couldn't talk about Liam. Every time I did, it just broke my heart that much more.

He was so ingrained in my being that I couldn't go seconds without thinking about him. We were over. We'd shared an amazing kiss and he still said we were over.

I was tired of being pulled and yanked in different directions. I was determined to gather my feelings and emotions and force them down the path I knew was healthy for me.

And right now, that path was Christopher.

"Well, you're in luck. Gran has already decided I'm going," Rose said as she blew out her breath.

Thankful that Rose had decided to change the subject, I smiled over at her as I adjusted my seat. My butt was going numb from the way I was sitting. "Really? Why?"

Rose shrugged. "Who knows. She said this is my senior year and she wasn't going to take my lazy attitude about something I might regret not going to." Rose sighed. "So I'm going. Apparently, we are going down the mountain to a dress shop tomorrow."

She cast her gaze in my direction. "Wanna come with us?"

I chewed my lip and nodded. I hadn't really thought that far yet. Although, it did make sense. If I were going to homecoming, I'd need something to wear. "Yeah, that would be great. If my mom's not busy, maybe she can come with us?"

Rose nodded as she kept moving. "Sure. That sounds like fun. Maybe we can do dinner down there as well?"

Having enough of sitting on the cold stairs, I stood and made my way toward her. "That sounds amazing. With Mom being so busy at the clinic, a lot of dinners have been me flying solo. And the results have been not so good."

Rose smiled. The first one I'd seen in a long time. It wasn't forced but genuine. And I missed those.

I hated what worrying about Grayson was doing to her. If I could, I would take away her pain. Force Grayson back here so she could stop worrying.

And then I felt guilty. Here I was complaining about how much it hurt seeing Liam all the time when she was completely in the dark about Grayson.

Was he safe? Was he okay?

She had no clue.

Sadness crept into my heart as I studied my friend. A desire to help her locate Grayson grew brighter in my gut. Even though we were mere humans, we were going to figure it out or die trying.

"Come on," I said as I nodded toward the woods. "It's dark enough. Let's get moving."

Rose met my gaze for a moment before she glanced behind me. She paused, as if she needed to amp herself up, and then nodded. "All right, let's do this."

We walked in silence toward the woods, almost as if we needed a moment to prepare ourselves for what we might find in there. We were entering their world.

The world of wolf shifters.

They were faster, stronger, and more aware of their surroundings than we were. We knew the danger that lurked in there, and even

though we were pretty sure we might not find anything, the chance that we would run into an antagonistic wolf shifter was probably pretty high.

It was so strange, knowing what I knew. When I first drove into Smoky Hills, the trees were just that, trees.

Now, they held a magical world that I knew almost nothing about.

And even though I wanted to know more, I doubted I would ever fully understand how things worked. Or what Liam was really going through.

I heard Rose sigh and it drew my attention over. We were in the woods now, stepping over logs and dodging low-hanging branches.

"Everything okay?" I asked, and then felt stupid for saying it. Of course things weren't okay. Why would I assume they were?

Rose pinched her lips together as she pulled out her flashlight from her back pocket and clicked it on.

I tsked myself. "Of course things aren't okay. I'm an idiot."

Rose laughed and nodded. "It's okay. I know what you mean." She sighed again, this one deeper, as if she were really hoping it would expel whatever was weighing on her mind.

We walked a bit farther in silence until a sob escaped Rose's lips.

"What if he never comes back?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper. She'd stopped walking and was now standing there with a pained expression on her face.

One I knew all too well.

I glanced over at her, not quite sure what I was going to say to that. I wanted to tell her everything was going to be fine. That Grayson was going to come back. That he would never leave.

But what did I know?

"You can't think like that," I said as I reached out and rested my hand on her shoulder. "He'll come back. He has to."

Rose raised her gaze to study me. Then she sighed and nodded. "That's what I hope. But, hoping hasn't really gotten me very far. I hoped for answers about my parents' death, only to have more questions heaped upon me." Her voice drifted off as if she were losing herself to her thoughts.

"I know," I replied. At times like this, it was best to help the person struggling work through their feelings instead of giving them the answers you felt they needed.



At least, that was what helped me with Dad's death. I'd needed sounding boards, not problem-solvers. And if that was what Rose needed, I'd be that for her.

Rose hesitated and then nodded as she took in a deep breath. "Right." Then she smiled over at me. "Thanks. This has been helpful. More helpful than Gran saying, '*Why are you so mooney? There are other fish in the sea.*' "

I chuckled at her perfect imitation of her grandma.

I wrapped my arm around Rose's shoulders and squeezed them. It was nice being in this mess with her. Knowing that someone else was going through exactly what I was going through.

It made this experience feel less lonely. And I needed that. From the look on Rose's face, she needed that too.

We stood there for a few seconds before we both sighed and stepped away. I glanced over at Rose and her downturned expression had turned into one of determination.

No matter what, we were going to be there for each other. We were going to stand by one another and see each other through this situation, even though we didn't know what was going to happen.

Were we ever going to find Grayson, and was there a universe out there where Liam and I could ever be together? Our unknown futures felt as if they were going to consume us. So having the anchor we needed in each other helped ground us.

I had a friend through all of this. I wasn't going to be alone in this crappy, heartbroken world. This wasn't like losing Dad, where no one really knew what it was like.

Rose knew the pain I was feeling, and there was a sense of solidarity in that thought.

And for now, I was going to cling to our connection. Because if I let go, I feared what would happen.

I feared the loneliness that would consume me.

And I doubted I could bring myself back from that again.

Not when it had nearly crushed me before.

Liam

I let out a curse as I jumped down from my truck, slammed the door, and strode into the house. It was late. The sun had already dis-

appeared below the horizon, and the evening sky was lit up by stars and the moon.

But none of that mattered.

Not when all I could think about was Cora and the kiss we shared.

That kiss had me going crazy inside. So crazy, in fact, that I stayed at school after detention and ran laps around the track until I was sweating and needing to puke.

Anything to work off the agitation I felt.

Too bad running as a human didn't have the same effect on me as running like a wolf did. Even though I was exhausted, I knew there was no way I was going to be able to just lie around at home.

I was going to grab a bite to eat, and then I was headed out into the woods. I wouldn't stop until I found Grayson and discovered what the hell was going on in the Mother pack.

I wasn't careful when I got into the house. I let the door slam behind me. Dad was most likely going to come down and scold me, but what did it matter?

My life was in the crapper. Might as well stop caring about a lot of things.

Just as I was in the middle of making a sandwich with all the lunch meat in the house, Dad made his way into the kitchen. He was in his sweatpants and a t-shirt, his hair looking more disheveled than normal.

He glanced around the room before settling against the doorframe with his arms folded and an accusatory look on his face.

"Mind telling me why my house is rattling?" There was a clip to his tone that caused heat to prick at the back of my neck. My frustration grew, but I muscled it down.

I was here to eat and get out. That was all. If Dad wanted to talk, he was going to have to wait until tomorrow.

I finished slathering the bread with mayo, screwed the lid back on the jar, and pulled open the fridge to return it to the shelf in the door. After slamming the door shut, I turned to find that Dad was holding my plate away from me. He had an incredulous look on his face.

"What are you doing?" I asked, leaning forward to grab the sandwich from him.

Dad was too quick, lifting it up as he spun around to block my advance. "Seems to be the only way to get you to talk to me."

I growled as I folded my arms across my chest and glared at him. It felt juvenile, but what else did I have? He'd taken everything that I cared about away from me.

Cora.

Grayson. Even though I didn't have proof, I knew he was involved somehow.

All I was left with was a grumpy demeanor and a broken heart.

Dad raised his eyebrows, signifying that there was no way he was giving in. I let out the breath I'd been holding and met his gaze.

"What do you want?" I asked, ready to get this interrogation over.

Dad lowered the plate and adjusted his stance. He nodded, as if satisfied that I was going to do what he said, then he motioned toward the table. "Have a seat."

I took in a deep breath and slowly let it out as I watched him settle on his chair after setting the plate with my sandwich next to him. He threaded his fingers and rested his hands in front of him.

He glanced back at me and motioned with his head to sit. I didn't want to—the itch to run was taking over.

I didn't have to eat as a human, even though the food tasted better in that form. I could sprint out the door and into the woods. But from the earnest look in Dad's eyes, I knew that wasn't an option.

I was going to have to sit here, eating and listening to whatever Dad wanted to tell me.

And from the look on his face, it wasn't going to be good.

## LIAM

I picked up my sandwich and took a bite as I stared at Dad. For someone who had been so chatty before, he'd suddenly clammed up. It was aggravating to say the least.

I chewed and swallowed before I let out a sigh.

That seemed to draw Dad's attention, and he raised his eyebrows at me.

"So?" I asked, nodding toward him.

He studied me for a moment before he shifted in his seat, resting his arm on the table. He stilled for a moment before tipping his face in my direction.

"Dirk Pennington and I saw Grayson with his family this morning on our patrol," he said. His voice was low and very mayoral. Like he was discussing building plans or something.

I stared at him, trying to process what he was saying. "Grayson?" That couldn't be. Grayson wouldn't go back to his parents. He hated them. Despised them. He would also never leave Brielle here alone. "You must have been mistaken."

Dad studied me and then slowly shook his head. "I wasn't, Liam. He was there with his family. And he didn't look like he was being tortured or forced to stay there." Dad leaned back and threaded his fingers together, then he extended out his arms, cracking his knuckles as he went.

I focused down on the crumbs on my plate as I tried to process what Dad was saying. Even though it didn't make sense, I had to believe Dad, right?

I mean, why would he lie to me about this?

I grabbed my sandwich and took another bite. Even though my stomach had soured, I knew I was going to be hungry as soon as I got outside. If I was going to spend my night searching for Grayson, I needed to fuel up.

"There's more," Dad said.

I glanced over to see that Dad had narrowed his eyes as he folded his arms in front of his chest.

"What?" I asked through a mouthful of bread and meat.

"Remember how I said that there were changes going on with the Mother pack?"

I chewed and nodded as the memory resurfaced.

"Well, there's more."

I paused as I tried not to hide my frustration. I didn't like where this conversation was going. If anything, I felt as if I were moving farther and farther away from what I really wanted. A normal life with my friends and Cora.

But the more Dad spoke, the more I realized that was never going to happen. Happily ever after wasn't in the cards for me. I was destined to be alone in a big empty house like Dad was.

"Apparently, there are a few in the pack that are rising up, saying there's a need for change. They don't want a Bronson to be alpha anymore."

I took a bite as I just nodded along with what he was saying. I didn't know a lot about the Mother pack and how things worked there. I was just a baby when we left.

But I did know what Dad was saying spelled trouble for us. No matter who was in charge, I doubted they were going to just sit back and allow us to live the life we wanted in Smoky Hills.

"And?" I asked, meeting Dad's gaze head-on.

I wanted to know what he was going to do with this information. Was he going to act? Or were we just going to sit back and do nothing?

I hated that idea. I wanted to make a change, and I wanted to make it now. The sooner things calmed down, the sooner I could have Cora to myself.

The chance of her getting harmed because of our relationship would be gone. The weight on my chest would disappear.

Dad studied me for a moment before he shifted in his seat. He blew out his breath and leaned forward on his forearms. "I'm not

sure. I haven't decided yet. From what I can tell, no one seems to be challenging me quite yet, besides Brutus. They seem to be staying in the woods for now."

Was he serious? He was waiting for the Mother pack to make a move? "Are you kidding?" I asked as I glared at him.

Dad furrowed his brow. "I can't just go into the woods with guns blazing. I'm not the only one I have to think about. There's you, the other wolf shifters..." He swallowed. I could see his jaw muscles flinch from the stress he was feeling.

And that made me feel bad...almost.

He was acting weak. Not like the alpha I knew him to be.

"Dad, if we wait and play defense, it could be too late. You said it yourself, there are changes happening. We need to strategize. Come up with a plan. Act." I slammed my hand down on the table as frustration coursed through me.

I needed to act even if he didn't want to. I needed to be successful at something. The itch to take charge was raging inside of me. Heat crept up my skin, and I felt as if I was boiling inside.

More so than I'd ever felt before.

I shoved the last bit of sandwich into my mouth and then scooted my chair out and began to pace next to the table. The energy level that surged inside of me was at an all-time high.

I felt stronger than I'd ever felt before. Almost as if a switch had been flipped. I could hear better. Smell better. Sense the world around me better.

And hate better.

And right now, I was raging against Dad.

I hated that he was being so weak when I knew he could be strong. I couldn't understand why the drive to be in charge wasn't taking over him.

Right now, that's how I felt. I wanted to be alpha, and there wasn't anyone who was going to stop me.

Suddenly, Dad appeared in front of me with his eyes wide. He grabbed my arm, and out of instinct I growled and pulled back.

"Don't touch me," I spat as I moved away from him. The last thing I wanted was to be infected with his weakness. If he wasn't going to take charge, I was.

"Liam, you need to calm down," Dad said, moving closer to me.

I growled again as I dipped my gaze to the floor. I'd never felt this in control of myself. Of my wolf. It was as if we were one. I could command him like I'd never been able to before.

I flexed my hands as power surged through my muscles.

"I'm serious, Liam," Dad tried again as he inched closer to me.

I glanced over at him and saw panic in his eyes. Which was ridiculous. What did he have to be afraid of?

"Why?" I asked, turning to face him, rising to my full height. If he wanted a fight, I was willing to fight.

Dad raised his hands and held them there. "I think you're changing. I thought you were still too young, but now..." He held my gaze for a moment before turning and letting out a sigh. "Why now?" he whispered.

I wasn't sure if he was speaking to me or himself. But I was confused.

"What are you talking about?" I took a deep breath through my nose, trying to calm my nerves. I was pretty sure I knew what he was talking about, but I wanted to hear it from his lips.

"You're not a teenager anymore. Your wolf...has evolved." The pained look on his face intensified as he held my gaze.

"What?" My ears were ringing as I tried to process what he'd said.

Dad turned and rested his hands on the table. Then he hung his head as he took another deep breath. "Maybe it was the change in the Mother pack you sensed. Or maybe it was just time."

I turned to look out the window. Change? I was an adult wolf shifter now? I glanced down at my hands, flipping them over a few times before running them through my hair. "Does that mean..." I almost didn't want to finish my question. Probably because I knew the answer to it.

"Your pack, it'll change." Dad straightened and turned to me, giving me a pained smile. "It won't be right now. It'll take time. If you're the only one evolving, then the others will fall in line. But I'm guessing, since you reached the age, the others aren't that far behind you."

My heart pounded in my chest. I felt as if I were being pulled in two different directions. I didn't want to give up my friends. I didn't want to be alone. But there was another part of me, one that was

stronger and more aware, that was telling me that I had to be alpha. That there was no other option.

I cursed under my breath as I walked over to the sink and grabbed a glass. I filled it with water. Then, after I downed it, I filled it again.

I was basically waterboarding myself as I drank glass after glass.

It wasn't only because I was thirsty. I was trying to cool myself down, hoping that I could negate this process. That if I held onto the previous version of myself, everything would work out.

Everything would go back to normal.

When it became evident that water wasn't my solution. I set the glass down next to the sink and turned to Dad. "So what do I do?" I asked, fear creeping up inside of me.

Dad sighed and scrubbed his face. He paused as if he were thinking, and then he turned to me. "You need to stay out of the woods. Things are too uncertain, and I don't need you going in there half-cocked." He rubbed his stubble as he stared outside the window. "I'll go over to Dirk's to talk to him. Maybe he has an idea."

I nodded, trying to muscle down the feeling of anger that was rising up inside of me. I knew it was ridiculous—Dad was only watching out for me—but that didn't seem to squelch the desire I had to run into those woods and solve our problems myself.

When I turned my attention back to Dad, I found him with his phone pressed to his ear. I could hear the dial tone from where I was standing. It was as clear as if I were holding it to my ear.

Weird.

When the dial tone turned into Coach Pennington's voice mail, Dad pressed the end call button and slipped his phone back into his pocket. Then he ran his hands through his hair as he sighed.

"What are we going to do?"

Dad hesitated and then walked over to the counter and grabbed his keys. He paused before turning to me. "I'm going to go figure out what we should do, but I need you to promise me you won't leave the house. I won't be gone long." He held out his hand that held the keys as he studied me.

I rolled my shoulders and nodded even though that seemed to be the last thing I wanted to do. My whole body itched to shift, and spending the night holed up in my room sounded miserable.



But from the look in Dad's eyes, he was worried. And I hated that he was worried. So, despite my urge to let loose, I was going to be the obedient son and stay home.

Even if the desire to challenge his authority was coursing through me like lava in my veins.

Dad held my gaze for a moment before he nodded, and then the soft sound of the door engaging filled the air.

Suddenly, I was alone. Very, very, very alone.

I rolled my shoulders and tipped my head from side to side as I tried to hush the voice inside of me that was shouting for me to shift. To run. To take all our problems on by myself.

It was frustrating, this push and pull inside of me. It made me feel more lost and incomplete than before. It was one thing to deny myself Cora. It was a whole other thing to try to deny a part of myself. A thing that lived inside me.

The temperature in my body began to rise, and I knew the only thing that would cool it down was a shower.

When I got to the stairs, I took them two at a time. I made my way through the hallway and into the bathroom, where I shut the door.

After an ice-cold shower, I stepped out and wrapped a towel around my waist. The mirror wasn't even fogged over, the shower was that cold.

I rested my fists down on the countertop and stared at my reflection in the mirror. Even though I looked the same as I had when I woke up this morning, I couldn't help but feel different.

And the world felt different to me. I could hear things, sense things, that I'd never been able to before.

I closed my eyes as I took in a deep breath, stilling my human mind and allowing my wolf to speak to me. It raged inside of my chest like a caged animal wanting to break loose.

And then a feeling of fear crept up inside of me. It wasn't fear for myself, but for Cora.

She wasn't safe. I could feel it in my bones. I needed to go to her.

Without thinking, I pulled open the bathroom door, and in two steps, was in my room. I threw on a t-shirt and some sweatpants. Then I grabbed a hoodie and zipped it up. I was outside before I even knew what I was doing. It was like my wolf took over with one thing to focus on.

Cora.

I needed to find Cora and make sure she was safe. Everything else just faded away into blackness.

As soon as I stepped into the woods, I shifted.

Everything around me seemed brighter and louder. I could hear the animals in the trees around me and the rustle of the wind in the branches above me, even though I was racing along the ground at a speed I'd never before gone.

I was free.

Finally, I was who I was meant to be.

And it felt incredible.

The idea that, perhaps, I could keep Cora safe made my chest swell. I didn't have to fear for her life. I could protect her—if only she would stay put like I told her to.

Cocking my head to the side, I listened for the only sound I cared about.

Cora's heartbeat.

And I wasn't going to stop until I found it.



## BRIELLE

I lay there on my bed late that night, listening with all my might for a sound—any sound—that would tell me Matthew was asleep. I needed him to be out before I snuck downstairs and out the back door.

Then I would run to the woods. I was going to find Grayson if it killed me. After all, that's what he would do. If it were me lost in the woods, he would come find me.

Letting out a sigh, I flipped to my stomach and closed my eyes, straining to hear what was going on in the basement. Why had I insisted that he sleep two floors away? If he was in Grayson's room, it wouldn't be too hard to listen for the indications of sleep.

Now it was a guessing game.

Frustrated with myself, I flung my covers off and wiggled until my feet were on the floor. I stood and shuffled over to my light and flicked it on. I dressed quickly, not wanting to signal to anyone what I was doing.

Once I was in the woods, I could take off and hopefully avoid tipping anyone off as to what I was doing. But until then, I had my human form to work around.

And that form wasn't as stealthy as my wolf.

After pulling on a black sweatshirt, I flipped off my light and tiptoed down the stairs. I grabbed my sneakers and opened the back door. I paused, listening for any sound that might signify what Matthew was doing.

Nothing.

Either he slept like the dead, or he was gone.

Banking on the first, I pulled open the back door and slipped out into the darkness. Just as I closed the door and turned around, a figure appeared in front of me.

Not able to control myself, I screamed before pressing my hand to my mouth to stifle the sound. I doubted Mrs. Diggory would hear me, but there was no way I wanted this trip to be over before it even began.

"Geez, Elle," Matthew said as he stepped into the light.

Realizing that I'd just made a complete fool of myself, I lowered my hand and glowered at him.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

I sidestepped him as I began walking toward the woods.

Whatever he wanted, I didn't care. I was on a mission, and I was going to complete that mission. "None of your business," I threw over my shoulder, not really caring if he heard or not.

The sound of his pace quickening and then falling into step with me just caused my heartbeat to pound and heat to rush across my skin. I was irritated that I was irritated. There was no reason for me to feel anything for him.

His reason for being in Smoky Hills didn't concern me. I just wanted him to stay out of my way. To let me do what I needed to do.

Find Grayson.

A hand engulfed my elbow, and suddenly I was stopped. One soft tug and I was turned around, directly facing Matthew as he peered down at me.

He raised an eyebrow as I glared at him.

"What do you want? Why are you even here?" I asked, pulling my arm away from him and stepping back. This was my home; he was the stranger. It was driving me insane that he kept inserting himself into my life. I already had a big brother—I didn't need another one.

"I just don't think that it's the wisest for you to just go tromping around in the woods without backup." He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and shrugged his shoulders like it was a perfectly acceptable thing for him to suggest.

I furrowed my brow. I wanted to hang onto the anger his sudden appearance had inspired, but I couldn't deny how sweet he was acting as he peered up at me. Or how his cocky exterior seemed to be slipping just a bit.

Like he actually cared what happened to me.

Then, feeling like an idiot for reading his body language the way I was, I rolled my shoulders and sighed. "And what, you could keep me safe?" I asked as I turned and made my way into the trees.

With my face away from him, I allowed my confident expression to soften. This wasn't who I was. I wasn't this strong person. I was the girl living in her brother's shadow. If anything, the idea of facing the Mother pack alone had me terrified. But I wasn't going to let anyone know that, much less Matthew. This stranger who'd suddenly showed up.

The only person I could trust was Grayson, and right now, I wasn't even sure that was true. What if Grayson was able to come back for me but chose not to? What did that say about me? About our relationship?

Grayson was a lot of things, but he wasn't a liar. If anything, he was loyal to a fault. I hated that I'd doubted my brother's loyalty to me for even a split second. He loved me and protected me. To think that there was something in his life that would stop him from being who he was made me feel horrible.

Shaking my head, I let go of the stress I was carrying and allowed my wolf to surface. A moment later, I was standing on four legs, my body completely covered in fur. I shook my whole body, reveling in the feeling of the world around me.

I tipped my nose into the air and took in a big breath, allowing my lungs to expand. The sound of steps behind me drew my attention, and I saw a larger black wolf appear. His eyes were yellow as he stared over at me.

*So this is your wolf?* He asked, slipping into my mind before I could push him out.

I glared at him as a growl escaped my lips. *What about it?*

His gaze roamed over my body, and as much as I hated to admit it, my heartbeat took off. He tipped his ear closer to my chest, and I could see his chest rising and falling. Like he was laughing at me.

*It's cute,* he said as if sensing my agitation.

Irritated that I was giving myself away, I growled and readied my stance. *Well, you can see how cute I am when you're eating my dust,* I said as I took off through the trees.

Matthew's laugh could be heard behind me as I attempted to put distance between us. But, no matter how much ground I gained, he

managed to make it up in half the time.

Finally, my muscles felt as if they were going to give way, and I veered left until the trees opened up, exposing Creator's Circle. There, I collapsed to the ground and rolled to my side. My lips were parted, and my tongue hung out as I attempted to cool my body temperature.

I could feel Matthew as he made his way over to me and sat. His gaze was trained on me as he stared. If I were in human form, I would have been blushing not only from embarrassment, but from the fact that he was even looking at me.

It was something that no guy ever seemed to want to do. Ever.

Realizing that this was the least attractive thing I could be doing, lying here with my tongue touching the ground, I rolled back to my stomach and rose up until I was sitting on my hind legs and my front paws were in front of me.

I glanced over at him and rolled my eyes. He hadn't changed his gaze. Not once.

*Do they do that a lot where you're from?* I asked, not hiding the snippy tone in my voice. Then, not wanting to speak in wolf form, I shifted and settled down on the grass with my legs crossed in front of me. My arms stretched behind me, bearing the weight of my upper body.

I could tell that Matthew was annoyed, but he shifted anyway. He sat on the grass with his knees brought up and his arms hooked around them.

"Do what?" he asked.

I reached out and picked a blade of grass. Then I twirled it by drawing my thumb and forefinger across each other. "Stare," I said.

When Matthew didn't say anything, I glanced up to see him staring, again. "Case in point," I said, nodding toward him.

"What? Like this?" he asked exaggerating his stare by widening his eyes and bringing his face closer to mine.

I narrowed my eyes. "Yes. Like that. It's not something humans normally do."

Matthew chuckled. "Well, earth to Brielle, we're not humans."

I parted my lips as I tried to think of a witty comeback, but nothing came to me. I closed my mouth and wrinkled my nose. "I know that," came out as my only defense.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shift to extend his legs and lean back on one arm, similar to how I was sitting. Feeling slightly uncomfortable that he seemed so relaxed as he sat next to me, I shifted until my legs were criss-crossed and my elbows were resting on my knees.

"Do I make you uncomfortable?" he asked, peering up at me.

I scoffed and shook my head. "No."

Matthew tipped his head closer to me, and I could tell what he was doing without even asking. He was listening. To my heartbeat.

Great.

I cleared my throat. "I was running, that's why my pulse is elevated." As if needing to prove that only physical exertion was causing my heart to pound, I stood and began to pace.

Matthew squinted up at me as he watched me move back and forth. His gaze and the quickening of my pace only caused my body to heat more.

"And it doesn't help that you stare at me. It makes me nervous." Before I could stop them, the words sort of spilled from my lips.

Matthew's eyebrows rose as a flirty hint glistened in his gaze. I knew what he was thinking without even entering his mind. And I hated it. There was no way I should be flirting with a guy right now.

Not when Grayson was gone.

Forbidding myself from speaking more, I clamped my jaw shut. I only seemed to get myself into trouble when I spoke.

Matthew rose up until he was standing. He took his time to brush off his pants and then made his way over to stand next to me. I had stopped moving to watch what he was going to do.

"Brielle," he said as he reached up and tucked my hair behind my ear.

Zaps of electricity rushed across my skin from his touch. It startled and warmed me at the same time. It was a hot chocolate on a cold winter's eve kind of feeling. I wanted to lean into it, but I couldn't. I wasn't the kind of girl to fawn over a boy. I could control myself.

Fating with Matthew was the last thing I was going to do. It wasn't in the cards for me. I was going to make sure of that.

So I stepped back, holding my hands up as I did. "Hey," I said softly.



Matthew held his hand in the air for a moment before he dropped it by his side. Then he glanced over at me with a confused look on his face. Probably the first real expression he'd given me since meeting him.

"I don't know you," I whispered.

Matthew shoved his hands into his front pockets and nodded. "What do you want to know?" he asked as he shrugged his shoulders.

I paused, not expecting that he would actually ask me that. And suddenly I felt put on the spot. Did he want to get closer to me? Why?

I pinched my lips shut, suddenly feeling very vulnerable. Like, if he was going to answer questions, I was going to have to answer them as well. And, right now, I wasn't sure if I wanted to expose that part of myself to a stranger.

The broken, abandoned girl that everyone seemed to leave just fine.

I was supposed to be strong, and I was going to be. No matter what.

I forced my emotions down to the very bottom of my heart and shot what I hoped was a relaxed smile in his direction. "I don't need to know anything. In fact, the less I know the better," I said as I twisted my head to crack my neck. I felt the tension in my shoulders, and I tried not to wince. These last few days had been so stressful to me that it was getting unbearable to even breathe.

I could tell he was watching me, and I was trying to ignore the confused expression on his face. It seemed he hadn't expected me to pull back.

"So, what's your plan?" he asked as he stepped up next to me.

I glanced over at him as I began to shift. He raised his eyebrows and then did the same. We stood side by side, each staring into the woods and then back at each other.

*I'm going to find Grayson,* I said as I shrugged and took off into the woods. I was energized and ready to find my brother.

There wasn't anything that was going to stop me. Not Matthew. Not my fear of what I might find hidden in between these trees.

And certainly not my growing feelings for the wolf running next to me.

Whatever feelings I had, they could be squelched. I would make sure of it.

Because right now, Grayson needed my focus, and I was going to force myself to concentrate. No matter how hard it was going to be, I was going to do it.

Grayson was depending on me. At least, I hoped he was.



## CORA

**T**he world deep inside of the woods was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. It was dark and strangely calming—even though I knew what was lurking in the shadows.

I could see why Liam liked it so much in here. Why he always managed to be in the woods when I was. It was peaceful when you forgot about the oversized wolves that roamed these woods.

I glanced over at Rose to see her staring off through the trees. She seemed agitated, and I didn't blame her. It felt as if we'd been walking in these woods for hours, and there hadn't been even an inkling of Grayson or the wolves.

The moon shone above us, and when the tree branches shifted in the wind, we could catch glimpses of it. I tipped my face upward, marveling in its beauty.

Rose sighed as she sat down on a broken tree stump. She leaned her elbows on her knees and took in a few deep breaths. I wanted to comfort my friend, but I didn't know what to tell her. She was hurting, and there wasn't anything I could do to stop it.

I wished I could shake Grayson and tell him to wake up—that walking away from Rose was the stupidest thing he'd ever done.

But I needed him in front of me to do that. And if he were in front of me, Rose wouldn't be so sad. It was a complicated situation.

Rose sighed as she tightened her ponytail and glanced over in my direction. I gave her a consolatory smile. She tipped her lips up into a half smile and shrugged.

"Am I being stupid?" Then she hurried to repeat, "I'm being stupid. Only a stupid person would sit in the woods, waiting for some-

one who most certainly doesn't want to be found." She blew out her breath on the few strands of hair that hung down in front of her face.

I shrugged as I moved over in her direction. "You're not being stupid. You care about Grayson." I sat next to her and sighed. "Truth is, I'd be doing the same if I were in your shoes."

"No you wouldn't," a deep and very familiar voice said from behind me.

A shiver ran up my spine as I paused, closing my eyes. I don't know if I was wishing that Liam wasn't standing here, or if I was trying to control my emotions before I saw him. Whatever it was, I almost needed a countdown before I turned around.

"What are you two doing out here?" Liam asked. His voice was changing direction as he walked around until he was facing us. I hated that I knew where he was before I saw him. That we were so connected that I couldn't break myself away from him even if I tried.

I felt Rose shift next to me. She was agitated with Liam, and I didn't blame her. During one of her rants about Grayson's disappearance, she may have mentioned her anger at both guys. The fact that they had known she was hurting about her parents and yet, neither guy had managed to tell her they might know exactly what she was talking about. Instead, they'd allowed her to think her hypothesis about her parents' death was crazy.

Well, she was not too happy with either of them right now.

Realizing this, I took in a deep breath and opened my eyes, only to find Liam standing inches from me. His brow was furrowed, and he was staring at me with his arms folded.

My breath hitched in my throat, but I did everything I could to calm my pounding heart. Especially when the memory of our hallway kiss flooded my mind.

Dumb, stupid, long-term memory.

Liam looked at me expectantly as he held my gaze, and I realized that he'd asked me a question and was waiting for an answer.

"It's a beautiful night. We're just out for a stroll," I said, waving at the world around us. Just at that moment, the wind picked up, rustling the leaves above. A few were shaken loose, falling around us like snow.

I shivered, but I fought it. I didn't want Liam to do what I was watching him do—remove his hoodie and hand it to me.

"No," I said, shaking my head at his offering.

But that didn't seem to dissuade him. He remained standing there with his hoodie held in front of me.

"If you're looking for Grayson, you should go back to town," Liam said, continuing the conversation like he wasn't forcing something on me. Again. He expected me to follow even though I'd already told him to leave me alone. To go away and never look back.

After all, it was the only way I was going to be able to forget him. Just being around him broke my heart. And as much as I hated how he insisted on taking care of me, there was a part of me that wanted him to never let go.

Realizing that he wasn't going to stop until I took the hoodie, I grasped it in my hand and pulled it from him, resting it in my lap. He could make me take it, but I wasn't going to wear it.

His gaze flicked over to me and then dropped to his hoodie, but he didn't mention it. He folded his arms as he studied Rose.

"Liam, listen, she just wants to make sure he's okay. That's all. We're fine," I finally offered, knowing that we couldn't wait him out. No matter how long we held out on what we were doing, Liam could wait longer. He wasn't going to go anywhere until he got what he wanted.

And call me crazy, but I was ready for him to leave us alone, to move on from staring at us and get back to doing whatever it was that he did when he was in these woods.

Liam studied me for a moment before he glanced over at Rose and sighed. He shifted his weight as he ran his hands through his hair. I could tell that there was something he wanted to say, I just wasn't sure what it was.

And from the hesitant look in his eye, I wasn't sure Rose wanted to know.

"Listen, I know it's hard. I know you want answers—we all do. But Grayson's not dumb. He's smart. If staying away is the wisest move, Grayson is going to do it." He offered Rose a consolatory smile.

She studied him and then let out her breath. "But..." she started and then winced.

Liam watched her, waiting for her to finish, but it never came. I watched as he walked over to her and rested his hand on her shoulder. "Things are more complicated for guys like Grayson and me. Feelings we wished were easy...aren't."

My body warmed as, suddenly, Liam's gaze was on me. He held my gaze, and I couldn't help but feel like what he was saying was just as much for me as it was for Rose.

And it wasn't fair. None of this was. I felt my whole heart squeeze as I dropped my gaze and turned, breaking the contact I had shared with Liam.

Wrapping my arms around my chest, I brought Liam's hoodie closer to my body. The air filled with his scent, and before I could stop myself, I took a deep breath, allowing every part of Liam to consume me.

Closing my eyes didn't solve my problem. With my eyes shut, the only thing I could see was Liam's dark eyes staring back at me. His soulful gaze made my whole body ache.

It wasn't fair.

I hushed my pounding heart as I gathered my courage and opened my eyes back up. Thankfully, Liam had dropped his gaze to Rose, and they were speaking in hushed tones. Worried they were saying something without me, I leaned in only to catch the end of their conversation.

"...please, I just need to see that he's okay," Rose said.

Liam was studying her. I could tell that he was listening to her. So many times in the past, Liam had seemed to ignore what we were saying. Like he didn't have the time or desire to listen to our concerns. But now? He looked as if he were taking in what Rose was saying.

And, dare I think, considering it?

"I know. I feel the same. I've been searching for Grayson all week as well. But I haven't found him." Liam shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and shrugged.

I could hear the defeat in his words. Not being able to find Grayson was killing him. I knew a lot about Liam. I knew he liked control. He'd lost control the moment his best friend left, and it was killing him.

And my heart ached for his sadness. Say what you want about our relationship, I never wanted him to hurt. I wanted only good things for him, no matter what happened to us. To me.

"We'll find him," I said softly, stepping up to cast a smile in their direction.

Rose and Liam raised their gaze to me. Rose smiled, like she'd always done. But Liam studied me with a stoic expression on his face.

When I met his gaze, my heart pounded with desire. Desire to wrap my arms around him and never let him hurt again. Desire to kiss him. To show him just what he meant to me, even if he said it wasn't allowed.

But I couldn't do any of those things. We'd moved on. I was supposed to be moving on with Christopher. No matter how much I wanted to open my heart up to Liam, I couldn't.

Liam was untouchable even though he was mere inches away from me. I couldn't have him. He would never be mine.

I blinked a few times before I dropped my gaze. I could feel his desire as acutely as my own. But this wasn't the time to dwell on any of this. We were in the woods not for me and Liam but for Grayson and Rose.

I smiled at Rose and nodded toward the trees. "Ready to get moving again?" I asked.

Rose sighed and stood, nodding as she took a few steps in the direction I'd gestured. "Yes," she said.

I kept behind her a few strides. I wasn't sure if it was because I wanted to give her some space or because I wanted to see what Liam would do.

Even though I wished it was the former, I knew, deep down, it was the latter.

I feared I was never going to move on from Liam. That he was seared on my soul, and no matter how hard I tried—no matter how much I attempted to move on—he was always going to have this hold over me.

And it sucked.

"What are you doing?" Liam's voice was deep and commanding with a hint of fear hidden behind his words.

I glanced over to see that he'd fallen into step with me. His head was ducked down, and his hands remained in his front pockets. His shoulders were rounded, and I could feel his frustration pulsing from his body.

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked. It was frustrating me that he thought I could let my best friend wander through the woods by herself. "Rose is determined, and I can't just leave her alone."



I felt Liam's gaze on me as he tipped his face in my direction. My breath hitched in my throat. I could feel his intensity as he contemplated what to say.

"You should have asked me. I would have taken her." He reached up and ran his hand through his hair.

I knew that was true, even if it frustrated me. But I wasn't going to just leave my best friend's life in the hands of someone else. I was strong enough to handle myself. I could protect her if I had to.

"Liam—"

"Get down," he hissed as he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me to the ground.

Suddenly, I was face-first in the dirt. I winced as a tree root stabbed me in the stomach. Liam shielded me with his body, his weight pressing me further into the damp ground.

"Rose," he whispered, waving his hand in her direction. If she noticed, she didn't move toward us.

Fear coursed through me as I tried to figure out what was going on. Who was here? What did they want? Why the heck wasn't Rose listening to Liam's desperate pleas?

All of it caused my ears to ring and my head to swim. I blinked a few times, trying to clear my mind.

I heard Liam curse under his breath as he rose up on his forearms to lessen his weight on my body. I gasped, taking in a deep breath and trying to steady my pounding heart.

"Liam," I whispered as fear clung to my words. Rose had disappeared into the woods, and there was nothing I could do about it. She seemed too distracted with her own thoughts to realize that we'd stopped following her or that Liam had sensed danger and dropped to the ground.

I moved to stare up at him. He was inches away from me as he met my gaze. His breathing was heavy, and I could feel his desperation. It was as apparent as my own.

"I can't leave you," he whispered. His voice was deep, and I could feel his pain.

As much as that caused my body to warm and my skin to flush, I couldn't just lay here while my best friend walked into a dangerous situation.

"Please," I begged. "I'll be fine. Go. Make sure she's safe."

He studied me for a moment, then he growled and sprang off of me. Before I could even blink, he shifted and disappeared. The last thing I saw was his tail as he slipped between the trees.

I lay there on my back, taking in a few deep breaths. My heart was pounding, and my arms and legs were tingling from the lack of the warmth that Liam gave off. The night sky loomed above me as I closed my eyes and tried to steady my mind.

Whatever was going on, I knew Liam would fix it.

I had more confidence in that than anything else at the moment.

If Rose's life was in danger, Liam would find her. He would bring her back.

I knew he would. He had to.



## ROSE

**M**y heart was pounding. My whole body went numb. I wished that I could figure out what was going on, but with a dark hood pulled over my head and tied tight around my neck, I couldn't seem to get my bearings enough to process what was happening.

I could feel the pounding of the wolf's paws on the ground. I was strapped over his back with my feet tied to my hands so I couldn't slip off. My body ached from the angle which I was forced into, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I was going to go wherever these wolves wanted me to go. I was their pawn, and they were in charge. No matter how much I squirmed or screamed, they were going to silence me.

I winced as my body slid against the wolf's spine, grinding my rib cage against the large, protruding bones. I whimpered, but that was all I could do after they'd stuffed my mouth with some type of fabric.

The jostling caused my head to ache. I'd hit it on a low-hanging branch when I was bombarded by the pack. I'd been temporarily blinded, making it impossible to see the faces of my attackers. By the time my sight returned, I had the fabric over my face, and I was being tied to the back of a wolf.

That was all I knew.

My stomach churned as the desire to vomit rose up inside of me. The fabric in my mouth tickled the back of my throat, activating my gag reflex. I wanted to vomit. I wanted them to drop me in disgust.

But all throwing up was going to do was cover my own face in vomit, and that was the last thing I wanted. So I would to muscle it down with as much determination as I could.

I would to be strong. I had to be.

Time passed, and before I knew it, the wolf slowed to a walk. I perked my ears up, trying to catch words or sounds that would explain where I was or give me an idea of what to expect.

I needed to prepare myself for whatever was going to happen, good or bad.

*Ha.* Why would I assume anything good was going to come of this?

Bad. It was going to be bad.

Muffled voices finally met my ears, and my heart picked up speed as I felt hands grip the ropes tied around my hands and feet. The tension that was pulling them together loosened, and my body slid off the wolf's back and crashed to the ground.

I winced as my attempt to brace myself failed. A whimper escaped my lips again, and the only response was the sick laugh of someone standing over me. A hand gripped me under my armpit, and I was pulled to my feet.

"Let's go, little human," he said as I felt his lips nuzzle my ear.

I tried to scream. I twisted my body in an attempt to free myself from his grip, but nothing happened. Instead, his fingers dug deeper into my skin as he held me tighter.

"Oh, a fighter," he said with a hint of laughter in his voice. I didn't need to see his face to know that he was smiling in a disturbing and sadistic way. He was enjoying this.

Bile rose up inside of my throat, and I forced it down. I wasn't going to give this guy the satisfaction of knowing he was hurting me. Instead, I went limp.

If he was going to drag me off into the woods, I wasn't going to make it easy for him. He was going to have to literally drag me.

He growled as I began to fall toward the ground. I felt his arms surround my waist and hoist me up onto his shoulder. I winced as his shoulder bone dug into my stomach, but I stayed limp. I wasn't going to let him know what he was doing to me. I was going to be strong even though I felt so weak.

"What's wrong with her?" another deep voice asked from beside me.

The man who was carrying me shrugged his shoulders. "Dunno. She just dropped to the ground, the witch."

"Boss's not going to be happy if something happens to her. She needs to be alive to do what we need."

The man carrying me growled. "I know. She's fine. She's just being a pain."

Suddenly, a hand clubbed me. I whimpered as pain seared through my head. I must have gotten cut or seriously bruised from when I hit my head.

"See? She's alive. She's just being a bitch right now," the man who was carrying me said.

I wanted to tell him off. I wanted to unleash a slew of insults at him. To tell him how he was acting like an animal, and I could see why he was hiding me behind this fabric. That he was a coward. One that needed the protection of the woods because if he showed his face, the world would be at his door.

That only a weak person would do what he was doing.

But that chance never came. I was dumped onto the ground and left alone in a dark room or tent—I wasn't really sure which. All I knew was the walls were very thin and I could hear voices as if their owners were standing next to me.

Once I was sure I was alone, I wiggled around trying to free my hands, my feet, anything. But all the pulling and shifting didn't help. If anything, it just caused the rope to rub my wrists raw. My eyes were filling with tears as the feeling of defeat settled in around me.

I had no idea where I was, why I was here, or what these wolf shifters wanted with me. Was this a joke? Were they trying to get to Grayson by kidnapping me?

If only they knew I'd been abandoned. It seemed like Grayson had no intention of ever finding me again. At least Liam followed after Cora. Sure he showed up at inopportune times and demanded strange things of her—like forcing her to take his hoodie—but he cared enough to stay. Not Grayson. He was fine with stomping on my heart and then disappearing.

Forever.

The feeling of helplessness overtook me, and I shifted until I was lying on the floor. My body ached from the angles at which they had me tied. I was desperate to free my hands, but I couldn't.

Right now, all I wanted to do was lie on the ground and close my eyes. Maybe if I fell asleep, I would wake up and find that all of this had been a nightmare. I would be back in my room in Smoky Hills, the same Rose I'd been a week ago.

Before I knew what really lurked in these woods.

Before I let Grayson into my heart.

It seemed like a simpler time. It felt like a lifetime ago.

I closed my eyes. The small glimmer of light that had made its way through the fabric of the hood faded away. I took a few deep breaths through my nose and allowed my body to relax. If I just ignored the pain of lying on my bent arm, I could actually fall asleep.

Thankfully, it turned numb, and soon, I succumbed to the darkness and fell asleep.

## Grayson

I kept pace with Oliver as we raced through the woods. I could feel his agitation, and I kept casting my gaze in his direction, fearing that he might feel the change in my heartbeat. That he might sense what I'd already picked up on.

Humans. In the woods around Smoky Hills.

And not just any human.

Rose.

I growled at myself for thinking her name. Every time I did, part of the wall that I'd built up around my heart crumbled a bit, and I knew it was only a matter of time before my father or Oliver sensed it.

They would know I was lying.

They would know I still loved Rose. That she was just as much a part of me now as she had been before I walked away from her. All the work I'd done to convince them that she didn't matter would be for naught, and I would be right back where I was before.

Fearing for her life.

*Dad wants us*, Oliver said, pushing into my mind.

I nodded and followed after him as he veered to the left. As much as I wanted to continue on—to find out if, in fact, Rose was in the woods like I'd sensed—I couldn't deviate from Oliver's commands.

I was still trying to convince them that I was on board with their plans to overthrow the Bronsons. That I would fight to the death to see my father become the alpha of the Mother pack.

They told me it was my destiny to help them win this battle. That as soon as I evolved, I would be the perfect killing machine. Destined to do what my father commanded.

Anger coursed through me at the thought. There was so many things I wanted to do, and being my father's lapdog was not one of them.

But they saw me as weak. Living among humans had made me weak—or so they thought. It had caused my wolf to grow soft. That was why I wasn't changing like most eighteen-year-olds did.

They were going to force it out of me if they could. They were pushing me to the point of breaking, just to force my adult wolf to the surface. Anything to get me to evolve so they could take their fight to the pack.

But nothing they threw at me seemed to work. And maybe it was because I wasn't letting them. I wasn't this person. I refused to be my father. I refused to be what he saw me as.

We neared the camp and I slowed my gait. There was something going on, something I wasn't going to like. I could feel it. Sense it. Smell it.

Rose.

She was here.

Anger took control, and I slammed into Oliver. He yelped as he was flung into a nearby tree.

*What did you do?* I yelled at him as I charged him again.

But he seemed to expect that. In a matter of moments, he was on all fours and facing me. He growled as he lowered his head and plowed toward me.

I welcomed his advance. I was ready for this fight.

I knew it had been only a matter of time until they did something stupid. And bringing Rose to our camp was...stupid.

*Dad was right. You'd stop at nothing to save your precious human,* Oliver said, sneering with disdain.

*Shut up,* I growled as I rose up onto my hind legs and attempted to get the dominant position.

My fury had turned to rage. I could feel it coursing through my veins. It was like hot lava as my heart pumped it throughout my



body.

My vision turned hazy as white spots filled it. I blinked a few times, shaking my head. Trying to focus.

Before I knew it, Oliver rammed into me, tossing me a good five feet. I winced as my body landed on the ground. The grass was cold and wet.

I took a few deep breaths as I lay there on the ground. I hated this feeling pulsing through me. I feared and welcomed it at the same time.

It felt good, the charge the change was giving me. But I couldn't allow it to happen. Not right now. Not when it was the exact thing my father wanted.

I stilled my mind as I closed my eyes, relaxing my body. I could fight this off. I had to. If my father got what he needed, my fate and the fate of the shifters in Smoky Hills would change.

And not for the better.

"Get up." Oliver's human voice cut through my thoughts,

I allowed myself to shift. I kept my eyes closed for a moment more—just to make sure I was ready—and then opened my eyes. I glared at him as he stood over me.

He extended his hand like he wanted to help me up, but I hit it away. There wasn't anything that I was going to accept from him. Not when he'd betrayed me.

Sure, he hadn't fated yet, but he knew what it meant. And messing with the fate of another wolf wasn't right. Especially when I was his blood.

"What is going on?" I asked as I stood to my full height, towering over him. But he didn't seem threatened. Instead, he shrugged as he shoved his hands into his front pockets and headed in the direction of camp.

"Dad wants to speak to you," he said as he glanced over his shoulder at me.

I glowered at him as I followed behind. With Rose in their possession, there was nothing I could do.

I had to follow. Her life was all that mattered. I didn't know what I would do if something happened to her.

Not when it might be my fault.

So I dipped my head and obeyed.

We headed toward my father's tent. Just as we neared one of the tents on the outskirts of the camp, I heard it. Plain as day.

Rose's heartbeat.

It was soft and quiet. Like she was asleep.

I whipped my gaze over to Oliver, who was studying me as if he knew exactly what he was looking for.

He was looking for a change in me.

And it was there.

A burning. A fire deep in my gut. I was trying to ignore it, but I couldn't.

If I needed to evolve to save Rose, I would.

And Oliver knew that.



## CORA

I wanted to cry. I wanted to sob. I wanted to allow my grief to swallow me whole.

What else was I supposed to do?

Lying here on the forest floor, waiting for Liam to return was pure torture.

What if he didn't find her? What if something had happened to her?

What if I lost my best friend?

How was I supposed to move on from that?

Dad was gone. Liam was untouchable. Besides Mom, who didn't seem to want to do anything but work, I was alone in Smoky Hills.

And I was never too good at being alone.

Rustling in the trees drew my attention. I scrambled to sit up, scooting until my back was pressed up against the tree trunk. I held my breath as I willed my heart to stop hammering.

Whoever—or whatever—was coming toward me, had to be part wolf, and my erratic pulse wasn't going to help me.

If only I could control my emotions like I so desperately wanted to do, I just might survive.

I closed my eyes and stilled my mind. I figured the last thing you wanted to do when trying to calm yourself was to think about how you *weren't* calming down.

So instead, I imagined myself on a beach. Where it was warm, and I wasn't wet and cold from the damp forest floor.

"Are you okay?" Liam's voice asked, drawing me from my thoughts.

I startled and glanced up at him as soon as I felt his hands on my body.

His brow was furrowed as his gaze swept over me.

Heat raced across my skin from every point of contact. My heart pounded, and I hated myself for it.

"I'm fine," I said, breaking his contact with me and scooting to the side. I wrapped my arms across my chest and peeked over at him. "Did you find her?"

It was a stupid question. If he'd found Rose, she would be standing in front of me. I would be able to see her. Touch her.

But the only thing I could see, besides Liam, was a bunch of trees covered in leaves. That was it.

No Rose. No Grayson.

I felt as dark as the sky above me.

"Where did she go?" I asked, my voice breaking along with my heart.

Liam ran his hands through his hair and shook his head. "I don't know. The trail went cold...like they were expecting us." He blew out his breath as he scrubbed his face and then tipped it toward the sky. His eyes were closed, and I could see the way his shoulders sagged.

This was weighing on him as well.

"Do you think Grayson..." I allowed my question to taper off as I studied Liam.

Just saying Grayson's name caused Liam's body to tense. He glanced over at me, and I could see the pain in his gaze.

"I don't know," he whispered, no doubt from the emotion clinging to his throat. It matched my own.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, wrapping my arms around myself as if that was the way to keep a heart from breaking. Just hold it together. Then I could survive.

He glanced over at me, down at the ground, and then into the woods around us. I could see his thoughts spinning as he squinted and shrugged. "I have to tell my dad. He'll know what to do. Those wolves"—he waved his hand toward the trees—"I think they are finally going to get what they want."

From the seriousness of his tone, I wasn't sure what to think.

"What do they want?" I whispered, scared to learn the answer.

Liam glanced over at me, his lips drawn into a tight line. Then he blew out his breath. "A war."

My stomach sank as I took in those two little words.

*A war.*

What did that mean? And who was going to fight? Liam? Grayson?

Would they have to fight each other?

Liam must have sensed my questions, because his hand appeared in my line of sight and hovered just above my arm. It was as if he were assessing whether he should actually touch me or not.

I glanced up to see him studying me. His brow was furrowed, and I could there was something there. Something he wanted—no, needed—to say.

But he wasn't sure how.

And I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it.

And that made me angry. Like, fire-in-the-pit-of-my-stomach mad. I wasn't going to just stand by when my best friend was kidnapped. I wasn't going to wait any longer. I wanted answers. I wanted normalcy. I wanted my previous life back.

"We have to go after her," I said through my tears, and I pushed past him and into the woods.

"Cora," Liam said, grabbing my hand and halting my advance.

That was the wrong move. I whipped around and glared at him as I twisted my arm, trying to break our contact. In a matter of seconds, I broke away. Either I'd suddenly gotten extremely strong, or he'd taken pity on me.

I hoped, for his sake, it was the first.

"I can't just leave my best friend out in the woods by herself. If you cared about me at all, you'd come with me. You'd help me." If I were honest with myself, I had no idea what I was walking into. Who was on the other side of these trees? If I even managed to find Rose, what would those who'd taken her do to me?

Would they hurt me?

Probably.

And then I felt weak, useless, and hopeless.

There was nothing I was going to be able to do against wolves. Not when they held such disdain for humans. I had nothing. Just the clothes on my back.

I was the idiot who thought she could fight a wolf.

Maybe I needed to regroup. Go back home and figure out what I was going to do from here. Running into the woods with guns blazing didn't feel like the smartest move.

Right now, helping Rose didn't include getting myself killed. I had to trust that Grayson was out there somewhere. That he would find her and rescue her.

If not, I'd come back. I was going to make sure that my best friend came home safe. No matter what.

"Take me home," I whispered as I pulled away from him and turned toward where I thought the town was. "Please," I begged.

"Cora, I want to find her too." His voice drew near as he approached me.

I tensed as I tipped my head to the side to verify what I had felt. I could see him as he stood behind me.

I could feel his desperation. I could feel his presence as he stood inches away from me. But I couldn't do this again. I didn't want to open up to him just to have him pull back.

"Can I..." His voice drifted off, and I was intrigued enough to glance over at him.

"Can you what?" I asked.

His gaze remained trained on the ground as I saw his shoulders rise and fall from the deep breaths he was taking. "Can I give you a ride?"

I stared at him, confused at what he was talking about. And then the memory of riding on his back at the waterfall entered my mind. The idea of being that close made me nervous, but probably not for the reasons he thought.

I worried that if I allowed myself to touch him—to trust him—I just might never come back from that. And right now, with Chris, I could at least pretend to be happy. I could pretend to be normal.

Right?

But the desperation in Liam's gaze when he glanced up at me forced all thoughts from my mind. All I could see was him. The raw, hurting wolf shifter who was completely consumed with my safety.

And I couldn't tell him no.

"Why?" I choked out. The pain flowing through me didn't allow any other words to escape. Instead, I just pinched my lips together, silently begging him to let it go. To let me go. He was the stronger of the two of us. He should be able to walk away when I couldn't.

Liam sighed as he reached out and broke a dried branch from a nearby tree. He snapped a few pieces off and threw them into the woods. "I want to keep you safe. I...have to keep you safe."

He paused, and I waited for him to expound more. When he didn't, I asked, "And me riding you while you are in wolf form will help keep me safe?"

He broke the stick in half and threw it into the woods. It hit a tree, and the hollow sound rang through the woods. "Yes. I hear better in wolf form. I smell better. I'm stronger," he said as he glanced over at me. "Are you scared?"

I furrowed my brow. It was out of instinct. Like that was an absurd question—'cause it was. I didn't fear him. I didn't fear his wolf. "No."

He studied me and then scoffed. "You can tell me."

Frustrated, I stepped closer to him. Then, without thinking, I grabbed his hand and pressed it to my heart. "Feel this. Hear this. The only reason it's pounding is..."

Realizing what I was doing—what I was about to confess—would only leave me with a broken heart, I stopped talking and stepped away, letting go of Liam's hand. It slowly fell to his side.

"For someone who thinks he knows a lot about me, you really don't know a lot about me." I folded my arms across my chest and glowered at him.

It was the only thing I could do to remind myself that I wasn't supposed to like Liam. That he was off-limits.

He was not meant for me. Nor I for him.

"Come on," I said, waving in his direction.

His once stoic expression turned to surprise as he raised his eyebrows. "What?"

I sighed, ready to get this evening over with. I really wanted to wake up tomorrow morning in my bed, with Rose home and this whole experience behind me.

"You want to give me a ride. Let's do this."

Liam's surprised expression was frustrating me. Not wanting to stand here and go another round with him, I turned and started making my way through the woods. If he wanted to stay here, more power to him.

I was finding my way out.

"Wait."



Liam's voice caused me to stop in my tracks. I hesitated and turned just in time to see Liam shift. It was smooth, and if I'd blinked I would have missed it.

But I couldn't miss what he turned into. Instead of Liam's frame towering over me, his wolf form stood there with his dark brown eyes staring back at me.

My heart picked up speed as I stared at him. I guess I was still shocked that he was actually a wolf. That I hadn't dreamed this all up.

And then, all I wanted to do was touch him. For some reason, there was something so open about him standing in front of me in wolf form. Like he trusted me above everyone else.

Reaching out, I rested my hand on his nose. He leaned into it, and I saw his eyes close slightly. I heard him growl. It was low and rattled in his throat. I could see his chest expanding as if he were breathing me in.

"Liam," I whispered.

He opened his eyes and met my gaze. He held it for a moment before he whipped his head toward his back. His signature *get on my back* move.

Not wanting to stand here anymore, I nodded and moved to his side as he lowered himself so that it would take just one swift movement for me to swing my leg over and climb on.

And I did.

Without hesitation. Without worry. I climbed onto Liam's back. As soon as I was situated, he straightened. I fisted my hands in his fur as I lowered my chest to his back, bringing me closer to him.

I could feel his breath deepen as I rested my face close to his ear.

"I'm ready," I whispered.

He nodded and then took off through the woods. I had to clamp my legs tight as he ran. The wind whipped my face, so I closed my eyes and allowed the feeling of his paws landing on the ground to rattle through my body.

There was something about being around Liam while he was in wolf form that calmed me. Like, no matter what was happening in the world, all I needed to know was that Liam was here.

I felt safe and protected next to him.

It was something I hadn't felt in a very long time. And I missed it. My body longed for it in a way I could no longer deny.

And that scared me. Opening up to Liam was only going to break me once he left. Again.

I was the fool that kept thinking that, this time, it would be different.

Liam never indicated that was the case. He never led me on. Sure, he'd kissed me in the hallway, but then he'd pulled back. I was the idiot who couldn't seem to accept what he'd said.

Humans and wolf shifters were never meant to fall in love.

We were a violation of the way things were.

If we loved each other and wanted each other to be safe, we needed to stay away from each other.

It was the only way.

Because the only thing more painful than staying away from the person you love is watching them suffer.

And I didn't want Liam to suffer.

I wasn't strong in a lot of things, but I could be strong in this. I could walk away when he couldn't. I could push myself to turn away from the one person who made me feel complete.

Liam deserved my strength, not my weakness.

And I would give it to him.

Wholly and completely.

I would do it.

For him.



## GRAYSON

**H**ow did this happen?  
How did they find her?

There was a fire burning in me as I stood in front of my father. I was trying to concentrate, I was, but it was almost impossible. All I could think about was Rose, alone and, knowing my father's goons, injured.

It was taking all my strength not to shift and run to her side. I wanted to take her far, far away from here. Away from my world. Away from the person I was and the people I came from.

If they had their claws in her already, she was never going to be safe.

Ever.

I was the idiotic fool who'd thought leaving her defenseless was the answer to my problems. She was here because of me. Her life was on the line because of me.

Why did I ever let her in? Why did I ever let myself love her?

My heart ached, but I kept my expression stoic as my father rose to his feet. He'd been sitting on a recliner in his tent, texting someone on his phone. When Oliver forced me inside, Dad hadn't moved to acknowledge me.

It was as if he knew he had something to hold over me, something I wanted. And now that he had it, he was going to take his sweet time addressing me.

This act. This ridiculous power struggle my father had with me and the rest of the Mother pack just angered me. He wanted to reign. He wanted all power to go to a Smith, but he needed me to get it.

Now that Rose was here, he had me.

He was going to use Rose to get what he wanted, and there was nothing I could do to stop him. Not when I loved Rose like I did.

I would stop at nothing to keep her safe.

He knew it. I knew it.

"Geez, boy, calm down," Dad said as he slipped his phone into his back pocket and glanced over at me.

I wanted to show him how I felt. I wanted to let him know what I thought of him. But that wasn't going to help me, so I just let out a deep growl.

"Ooo, I'm scared," he said as he raised his hands and shot me an exaggerated fearful expression.

I knew he was mocking me. He was enjoying this a little too much. How could someone be so heartless to his son? Messing with another wolf's fate was against the code of a shifter. And normally they were considered off-limits—unless they were a human.

The wolves in my family—in the Mother pack—didn't respect human life. To them, they were as disposable as tissue paper. Wipe one out and another pops up in their place.

"What do you want?" I growled. I was done playing games. I was done being the person they wanted me to be. I'd done it to keep those I loved in Smoky Hills safe. But now I realized I'd given my father the one thing I'd wanted to keep away from him.

Power over me.

Dad chuckled as he walked over to the small fridge he had at the edge of his tent. I could hear the hum of his generator as he pulled open the door and removed a beer. After cracking the tab, he glanced at me as he tipped the can to his lips. "Don't play games, Grayson. You know why you are here. This dance we've been doing? It ends tonight."

My throat tightened as I stared at him. I narrowed my eyes. "How?" I asked and inwardly winced.

I didn't want to provoke my father—even though every fiber of my being was begging me to. I wanted to keep a safe distance from him. As much as I didn't want to admit it, he did have the power. At least, until Rose was in my grasp. Then I would come for him.

He was never going to do this to me or those I loved again.

Dad scoffed. "Oh, Grayson. You think I'm so stupid, don't you? You think I haven't been watching you? That I don't know about

your little human pet?" He downed the rest of his beer and crumpled his can in his fist. "She makes you weak. Fating with a human. What were you thinking?"

I growled as I lunged forward. Oliver stepped in front of me, his hand on my shoulder. I glared at him as I rose to my full height. Was he seriously threatening me? What did he think he could do?

Dad paused and turned to study me. His gaze flicked between Oliver and me. Then, I saw him pause. I could tell he was concentrating. He was speaking to someone, but it wasn't me.

If I was going to get out of this alive and save Rose, I needed to act now.

But, just as I moved to grab Oliver, hands grabbed my wrists, and suddenly my hands were pinned behind my back. I struggled and strained to free them, but I couldn't. Nothing would free me. And then there were too many.

They dragged me down to the ground, where they began to tie my hands, my feet, and even gag me.

A piece of fabric was shoved into my mouth and rope was tied around my head to keep it in place. I glared at the faces that peered down at me as they worked. I didn't know them, and I didn't care to. They were loyal to my father. I was a nobody to them.

I channeled my father's frequency and pushed into his mind. He didn't fight me. Instead, he studied me as he allowed me to speak.

*What are you doing?* I asked.

A sadistic smile spread across his lips. *You're weak, Grayson. Being around humans has made you weak.* He paused as he took in a deep breath and glanced around. *Can't you feel it? The winds of change are here. You either join us, or you fight against us.*

I glared at him. *I would never join you. You killed my fate's parents. You are nothing to me.*

Dad forced a disappointed expression. *You'll see. Once you evolve, you'll see. Things change when you become a wolf. You will no longer be satisfied with the wolf you are. You'll see what humans are and will always be. You'll become one of us. You'll fight for us.*

I wanted to speak more. I wanted to shout that I would never become like him. That once I was free, I was going to run. I would take Brielle and Rose with me, and I would never look back. They were my family, not this man standing in front of me.

But I didn't have a chance. Instead, four sets of hands grabbed me and dragged me from my father's tent. They pulled me through the camp, not really caring if I was scraped or bumped against the ground. I had to hold up my head to keep it from smacking a rock or exposed tree root.

They brought me over to the campfire, which was roaring now. It lit up the world around us. I could see the light dance off the eager faces of those around me. I could feel their energy as it coursed through the fabric that tied us all together.

They knew what I hoped wasn't true.

Something was about to happen.

And that something dealt with Rose.

I didn't have to see her to know she was here. My body. My heart. My every sense was heightened from her presence. I could hear her rapid heartbeat, and I craned my neck to see her. I needed to make sure she was okay.

I needed to protect her.

"Calm down, son. You'll see her soon enough."

I pulled and twisted, trying to free myself from the hands that held me up, but without the use of my limbs, I was helpless. I was dragged over to a chair that had been set up next to the fire. They dumped me there.

I hurt, sitting there with my hands pulled behind my back and my legs tied so tightly together that circulation was slowly being cut off. My face stung as the rope dug into my skin. My throat burned with the want to expel the fabric from my mouth.

But all of that dulled in comparison to the pain that was coursing through me now that I could see exactly what they had done to Rose. I could feel her pain as acutely as mine. I could sense her fear. It was coating my body and causing my muscles to itch.

I had one desire and one desire alone. I needed to get to her. I needed to protect her.

That was what I had been put on this earth to do. She was the reason I lived. The reason I breathed. I'd never felt anything as clearly as what I felt for her. She was the one person in the world I was meant to love.

And I loved her.

*Let her go. I'll do what you want,* I said as I pushed into my father's thoughts. I didn't hide my desperation now. She was here, and I

would do anything to free her.

Dad chuckled as he shook his head. He paused but didn't speak to me, and before I could say anything, two of my father's thugs reached down and pulled Rose up. I heard her whimper, and fire coursed through my entire body.

I pulled at the ropes that bound me, but nothing happened.

I was too weak. Why was I so weak? I needed to be stronger. That was how I was going to protect Rose. The way I was right now wasn't going to work. I needed to be bigger, faster, stronger if I was going to have any hope of taking her far away from here.

"Yes," Dad whispered as he stared at me.

I glowered at him and flicked my gaze over to Rose for a moment. She had been set in front of me. She was ten feet away, but I could feel her. I longed to be closer to her. To wrap my arms around her and never let her go.

One of my father's henchmen reached down and removed the bag they had placed over her head. Her hair was pulled down in front of her face, but as soon as they tossed the bag to the side, she glanced up.

My entire body lunged against my bonds when I saw the gash across her forehead and the pure terror that was in her gaze. She glanced around at the men that surrounded her, and then, suddenly, her gaze landed on me.

It was in that moment that I wished I could enter her mind. I wanted to be able to tell her not to be scared. That I would protect her no matter what. I begged for her to understand through my gaze. I stared so hard into her eyes, hoping she could feel what I felt for her.

That I knew she was going to be safe or I would die trying.

"You love her," Dad spat as he stepped between us. His hand struck my cheek, and my face was whipped to the side. "You're disgusting. She's a human. How could you want to taint our blood with her weakness?" He turned and stilled. He was talking to his henchmen. I didn't need to hear him to know what he was saying.

Suddenly, the man who had removed the bag stepped forward and raised his hand. He slapped Rose, the force of it throwing her to the ground. She cried out. It was muffled and weak, but I could hear it. I could feel her pain.



I growled and strained against the ropes that bound me. The fire inside of me turned hotter and more concentrated. I allowed it to flow through me. It gave me a power that I'd never felt before. I was stronger and more aware when I allowed it to course through my veins instead of fighting against it.

My hearing changed. My sight sharpened. I could see things, smell things that I hadn't been able to sense before. The fabric that bound me to the wolves around me felt tighter, more pronounced. I could feel their anger and fear. It was as palpable as my own.

And it scared me. I knew what was happening. I didn't need anyone to tell me that I was evolving. Even though I'd fought it for so long, it felt natural and needed. Like I was meant to become this wolf. This stronger, braver man.

I could only imagine what I could do with this change inside of me. No one would ever hurt Rose or Brielle again. I would sense them before it happened. They were my world right now, and the thought of being able to protect them made my heart pound hard in my chest.

"Yes, yes. Let the change flow." Dad's voice broke through the cloudy fog in my mind. I blinked a few times as reality crashed down around me.

I was doing exactly what Dad wanted me to do. He was pushing me to evolve, and I'd let him. He'd won. I growled. I was angry. What kind of parent did this to his child? What would he use me for?

I wanted to pretend that me evolving didn't change anything. I wanted to pretend that I could keep living the same life that I had been living. But I knew that wasn't possible.

There were some truths spoken by my father. Ones that I couldn't ignore anymore.

I was going to want to be alpha. No matter how much I cared about my best friend, I was born to be an alpha. Which meant I could no longer be part of Liam's pack. There was a chance—a slim one—that if the Bronsons took over the Mother pack, I may be able to follow the head alpha's command. If Mr. Bronson told me to be subordinate, there was a slight chance I could do it.

But if my father was the alpha?

That would be the end of our friendship.

Sadness clung to my soul as I fisted my hands and stared at Rose. She was the one thing that was grounding me in all of this. She was all that mattered to me. As long as she was safe, that was all that mattered.

Her eyes were wide, and I could see the fear inside of them. I wondered if she understood what was happening to me. The fear that she might leave me because of what I'd become had never felt more poignant or painful than right now.

Could she forgive me for what my family was doing to her? Could she forgive me if I had to leave Smoky Hills?

I cared about Liam enough to leave. I didn't want to fight him for dominance. I could leave and look for my own territory. A place to call my own.

Would Rose leave with me? Could she?

I dropped my gaze and let it fall to the ground next to me. Through my evolution, I felt more connected to my wolf than I ever had. It made sense, the animal inside of me.

But the sacrifices I was going to have to make because of it seemed too great. I wished I could just denounce who I was. I loved Rose too much to walk away from her, but I knew it might be just what she needed.

I couldn't ask her to give up her family and her life in Smoky Hills. She had so much of her future in front of her, and I knew I couldn't ask her to walk away from that. She was a human. I was a shifter.

Our paths weren't meant to cross.

It must have been the adrenaline mixed with my pain that gave me the strength to break the bonds that were wrapped around me. I reveled in the feeling of the ropes breaking. Dad's eyes widened as I stood and pulled the fabric gag from my mouth. My throat burned as I faced my father. I glowered at him.

I was his equal now. I didn't need to bow to him. And right now, while the fate of the Mother pack was still up in the air, I leaned into him. I wanted him to feel the full weight of my words.

"If you ever touch my fate again, I will kill you." I met his gaze. He looked as if he were trying to stand strong, but I could see the fear in his eyes.

"You have to understand why I did this, Grayson," Dad said as he held up his hands. "The feeling you have inside of you right now,

that's who you are meant to be. You think you can just go live with the humans. You think you have the strength. But you're going back a changed man. There's nothing for you there."

I flipped him off as I walked over to Rose. I could see the fear in her eyes as she stared up at me. I broke the rope that was tied around her wrists and ankles. Rage pulsed through me as I took in the rawness of her skin as the rope slipped away.

I wanted to pummel my dad. I wanted to show him what he'd done. That encouraging me to evolve was the worst mistake he could have made.

But I needed to get Rose to safety first. She was my one and only concern.

I gently undid the rope that held the fabric in her mouth. Once it was removed, tears began to flow down her cheeks. I reached up, catching them with my fingertips. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and take away all her pain. I wanted to love her like my entire body begged me to do.

But I knew where that would lead us. I knew, with the way things were right now, it would only lead to heartache and pain.

For myself, I could handle that. But for Rose? I didn't know if I had the strength to walk away. But I needed to find it.

With one hand on her back, I reached down and slipped my other arm under her knees and pulled her to my chest. Her warmth washed over me, and when she slipped her arm around my neck and buried her face into my skin, my heart leapt in my chest.

All I wanted was to take her far, far away from here. To set her down and heal the wounds she felt.

"Where are you going?" Dad asked as I walked by. I could feel his presence as he followed after me. "You are meant to be part of this family."

"Leave me alone," I growled as I made my way out of the camp. I knew where I was going. I was taking Rose back home. After that, I wasn't sure what was going to happen. But for now, Rose's safety was my number one concern.

"You'll be back, you know. The draw will pull you to me. You and I are connected now. You're my son. Your bloodline can't be ignored." Dad's words were low. I paused as I turned to face him.

A small light flickered in my gut. One that told me he was right. I knew he was right. My blood—my desire for our family to reign—

would call me back here. I was going to struggle being in the presence of a Bronson. At least until they figured out the Mother pack.

But I wasn't going to give my father the satisfaction of knowing his words affected me.

So I growled at him and then turned and focused back on Smoky Hills. I was going to return Rose. I was going to make sure she was okay before I faced my future. Before I faced this draw I now felt to stay in the woods.

To stay where my father was and fight.

Fight for dominance. Fight for the power to reign.

No matter how much I wanted to fight it, it was there. Pulling me like I'd never felt before.



## BRIELLE

**I**t was faint. I could barely smell it. But as soon as I caught a whiff of Grayson's scent, I zeroed in on it.

Never mind the fact that I picked up on a few other wolves as well. I couldn't let that bother me. Not when we were so close to finding him. We would rescue my brother and bring him back home. Back where he belonged, where life could return to normal.

*What are you doing?* Matthew asked, turning to study me.

I shook my head, not wanting the distraction he brought me.

I was going to find Grayson, and I wasn't going to deviate from that.

*We need to come up with a plan,* he tried again, this time releasing a low growl as he neared.

*No. I can't let this trace go,* I said as I dipped my head down and ran faster.

*You don't know where he's at or what he's doing. We can't just ambush his camp if he's there.* Matthew's voice was louder and more desperate.

I glanced in his direction to see him watching me.

Frustrated that he was pulling back and forcing me to see reason, I veered off to the left. I wanted to get away from him. I knew what he was saying made sense, but I didn't want to listen to it.

Not right now.

Suddenly, Matthew appeared next to me, and before I could brace myself, he rammed into me. Not hard, but enough to fling me to the side.

I growled as I stumbled and collapsed on the ground. Frustration and anger coursed through me as I stood and turned to face him. Matthew was staring at me with a desperate look in his eye.

*What did you do that for?* I screamed as I lunged at him.

He allowed me to tackle him to the ground.

That just enraged me more. He thought I was a joke. That I was someone he could patronize. Why was he even here? I never asked him to come. If anything, I'd told him to stay back in Smoky Hills.

Realizing that there was no way I was going to be able to force him to fight me, I pulled back and shifted into human form. I was frustrated. I fought the tears that threatened to spill. There was no way I wanted Matthew to know how angry, frustrated, and alone I felt.

Why was he keeping me from my brother? Who was he to tell me what to do? Whatever I was about to face, I could handle it. I was strong. I didn't need someone to protect me. For once, I could be brave enough to help Grayson.

Rage burned inside of me as I turned to glare at Matthew. He was standing next to me in human form. His eyes were wide, and worry etched his face. It made me want to punch him.

Here was yet another person in my life who thought I wasn't strong enough. That I needed to be protected.

"I don't need you. I can help Grayson if I want to." I lunged toward him, my hands landing squarely on his chest. If I thought that would move him, I was sorely wrong. I was like a fly running into a windshield. He didn't move, and I was left standing there.

Matthew's hands engulfed mine, pressing my palms against his chest. I could feel his heartbeat. It raced like mine.

I struggled to pull my hands away. There was no way I was going to let him hold me like this. There was no way I wanted to touch him—even if my body screamed for more. My hands itched to explore his chest, arms, and back. For a split second, my guard lowered, and I wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

Did his lips feel as good as they looked?

*Get a grip,* I scolded myself as I forced a glare in Matthew's direction.

This had been his plan all along. Distract me from what I was meant to do. Keeping me away from Grayson was guaranteeing a

win for whatever side he was on. The fact that he was still holding onto me told me he wasn't on my side.

Not now. Not ever.

And that made the emotions that were coursing through me feel like a betrayal. I was betraying myself and my brother. I shouldn't feel this for a stranger. Especially not one that would keep me from Grayson.

"Let me go," I snapped as I wiggled and pulled. But nothing I did freed my hands.

Instead, Matthew just tightened his grip. "Brielle, stop. You can't do this," he mumbled. He furrowed his brow and gave me his best desperate look. Like he was truly worried that I was in danger.

Which was laughable.

"I don't need your help. You're not in charge of me. I can take care of myself," I growled. I contemplated shifting, but then pushed that thought out. Matthew had already proved stronger than me as a wolf. At least I'd been a human more than he had. I could outwit him if I wanted to.

Or, at least, I hoped I could.

Matthew glared at me as he started to approach. I could see desire flickering in his gaze. I backed up at his advance but stopped when I felt the rough bark of a tree press into my back, halting my retreat.

Matthew didn't seem to mind. Instead, he let my hands go and moved to press his hands against the tree, caging me in. He dipped down so he could study my gaze. "There are things going on out here that you don't understand," he said. His voice was low, and for a moment, I wondered if I heard a hint of concern there.

But I pushed that out. We'd only just met. There was no reason for him to care about me. I wasn't his concern—even if his eyes told a different story.

"Matthew, you don't have to worry about me," I said and then felt stupid. Who'd even said he cared?

His brows furrowed as he studied me. Then his gaze slipped down to my lips, and my heart began to pound. What was he thinking? And why?

"Brielle," he said. His voice was low and gravely and sent shivers across my skin. "I know I shouldn't worry about you." He inched



closer to me. I could feel his warmth cascade across my skin. "But I can't help it. I don't want to see you get hurt."

My heart was hammering so hard that I could hear it in my ears. My breath hitched in my throat as my entire being responded to his proximity. I wanted to touch him. There was a part of me that ached to feel his body close to my own.

I wasn't sure of a lot of things, but I was pretty sure that this wasn't a normal reaction. The feelings that were coursing through me weren't from a run-of-the-mill crush. They were deeper. And even though it felt stupid to think it, what I was feeling felt like destiny.

Like I was meant to touch him. Kiss him. Love him.

And I wanted to.

I grasped the front of his shirt with my hands and pulled him down. I must have startled him because confusion flashed in his gaze before I crushed my lips to his.

Heat exploded across my skin as I held him there. His smell. His touch. The way he tasted. All of it filled the ache inside of my soul.

If Matthew was shocked, it wore off quickly. Suddenly, his hand was on my cheek, and his lips were moving against my own. I didn't have to tell him what I wanted, he already seemed to know.

He teased my lips open and I responded. We fell into a dance as we touched and explored. I felt myself falling, hard and fast. His hands were in my hair, on my neck, and then on my back as he pulled me toward him.

I gripped the back of his neck, tangling my fingers into his hair. Our breaths were shallow, and I could hear his heartbeat. It matched the cadence of my own.

The entire world felt as if it had faded away, and all that mattered right now was Matthew and me. Our souls were bonding in a way that I'd never imagined possible. He was my person. My fate.

"What the hell is going on here?"

In the cloudy haze of my mind, I heard Grayson's voice. It sounded tired. I pulled back and blinked a few times as I stared up at Matthew. He looked confused as he stared back at me.

Then, together, we slowly turned to my left. There, standing with Rose cradled in his arms, was Grayson. He looked different. The fabric between us felt different. Even though his skin was bruised he looked...alive. Like every part of his body was heightened.

His glare was pronounced as his gaze ran over me and then over Matthew. I could feel his anger boil inside of him as he refused to break his gaze.

In desperation, I stepped forward as if I would be able to protect Matthew if Grayson lunged. I glared at my brother as the emotions of losing him and then seeing him again pulsed through me. "Where have you been?" I asked.

There was no way he was going to get out of explaining why he'd left. Why he'd stayed away. And why the heck he was standing in front of me instead of being chained to a wall or boarded in a locked room, unable to get out.

From what I could see, he'd voluntarily stayed away. And that realization angered me more than I thought it would. I'd been sick with worry for him, but from the way he looked right now, that worry hadn't been necessary.

"What have you been doing?" Grayson growled. His gaze remained on Matthew, like he was threatening Matthew to move.

I pressed my hand on Matthew's chest and gently pushed him away. He stepped back and I felt better, less claustrophobic, as I stood there. I took a deep breath and faced Grayson.

"I was looking for you," I said. Emotions coated my throat, making it hard to speak. I swallowed, hoping that I could push them down.

"That was stupid. You know better than to go galavanting around the woods with wolves you don't know." His gaze shot daggers in Matthew's direction.

Matthew straightened as he stepped forward, but I grabbed his arm to stop him. This wasn't the time or place to fight. Not with the sun threatening to peek up over the trees. The world was going to start waking up, and if we didn't get back, people would notice.

"It's not your job to protect me. Not when you leave and don't come back," I said as I pushed away from the tree, tears stinging my eyes. I was so frustrated and angry with him that I couldn't contain it inside of me anymore. I needed to pace. I needed to work off the energy that was pulsing through me.

"You're such a child, Brielle. Just because you're not involved with something doesn't mean you should take it upon yourself to fix things. I was staying away to protect you. To protect Rose." His last

words were quiet as he glanced down. His brow furrowed, and I could see the disappointment he had for himself linger there.

I studied him. Feeling the brokenness my brother felt for what had happened to his fate. And it wasn't until now that I realized how truly devastating it was to a wolf. Your fate is everything. You'd die to protect the one you are meant to be with. It wasn't even a question. It was an action.

And I could feel that pain and worry as it cascaded through my brother as he held his fate in his arms. I stepped forward, wanting to console him. To let him know that I understood.

Grayson winced as I approached. Rose was clinging to him, her face bloody and bruised. I stared at her, wondering what the heck had happened.

"I need to get her back to Smoky Hills," he said. Grayson's gruff exterior was slipping, and I could see concern in his eyes. He was worried for Rose. He was worried for me.

I nodded and swallowed down all of my emotions. This wasn't the time to fly off the handle. Even though I didn't understand what had happened, I knew demanding he explain right now was selfish. And I didn't want to do that to Rose.

She looked scared, and I could feel her fright emanating from her.

"Okay," I whispered.

Grayson shot me grateful look, and then we both turned and began to walk toward town. I could hear Matthew walking behind us. His footsteps fell heavy on the forest floor.

Grayson growled as he glanced over his shoulder. "I think I can take it from here," he said.

I glared at my brother and then glanced back at Matthew. "Don't listen to him."

Grayson stared at me. "You don't know where he's from. Or why he's here. Why would you bring a stranger along with you?"

I swallowed. I knew what Grayson was saying was true, but that didn't mean anything to me. Right now, I trusted Matthew more than I trusted Grayson.

"You left. I had to find you. Matthew helped."

Grayson snorted as he gently adjusted Rose, who whimpered. His expression was pained as he pulled her closer to his chest. I could feel his love for her. It was as real as what I was feeling for

Matthew. So the fact that he was downplaying what had happened between me and Matthew angered me.

I could feel heat as it pricked at the back of my neck. I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying exactly what I thought. He had no idea what I'd been through. And being around Matthew had calmed me in a way I doubted could have happened with anyone else.

So the fact that my brother, the one who knew exactly what I was feeling, was acting this way angered me.

Luckily, Grayson seemed too distracted with Rose to talk. Instead, he focused his attention on avoiding branches and not jostling her as he sidestepped roots and fallen tree trunks.

I began to slow my gait until I was walking beside Matthew. His head was down, and I could tell he was thinking. I wanted to ask what about, but I doubted he would tell me.

*Everything okay?* I asked as I pushed into his thoughts. It seemed easier than normal. As if we were on the same wavelength and, instead of needing permission, we could just join at will.

Matthew glanced over at me, and I could see the pain inside of his gaze. He was worried about something.

*What's wrong? Is it Grayson? Don't worry about him. He'll get over it.* A sense of panic rose up inside of me. I could feel him slipping away, and it scared me. We'd only just begun. How could he pull away?

I reached out to grab his hand, but he must have sensed my intention. Instead, he shoved both of his hands into his front pockets and pulled away. *Elle, no.*

Tears formed on my eyelids again. I blinked, trying to push them away. He couldn't treat me like this. Not after our kiss. Not after I opened my heart up to him and trusted him.

He'd fated with me. I knew that. I could feel it. It was as palpable as what I felt for him.

*What are you saying?* I asked, grateful that, in my mind, my voice wasn't affected by my emotions.

He glanced over at me and held my gaze. Then he dropped his gaze to the ground and shrugged. *There's so much about me that you don't know.* He paused, and I saw his shoulders rise and fall from his breath. He was worried about something.

*Then why don't you tell me?* I asked, reached out and resting my hand on his arm. I reveled in the feeling of my hand on his skin. Touching him felt right. Caring for him felt right.

It was like I'd been shut off from the one person I needed to be with. He was my person. My soul knew it. My inner wolf knew it too.

"Say goodnight." Grayson's voice cut through my thoughts.

I glanced up to see that we were standing on the outskirts of Smoky Hills. The sky was warming, preparing to welcome the sun.

In the morning light, I could see Grayson's face. I could see the worry etched in his expression. His eyes were dark as they stared at Matthew. I could feel his warning. It was written in his body language and gaze.

He was challenging Matthew to make a move.

"I should go," Matthew said as he stepped back, breaking the connection between us.

I parted my lips to beg him to stay. I hated that Grayson had this hold over him. That no matter what I said, he was going to listen to my big, overbearing brother.

*I'll find you later*, Matthew's voice entered my thoughts.

Not wanting Grayson to sense that we were speaking to each other, I sighed and made my way over to where Grayson stood. I waved to Matthew as I followed after my brother. As soon as we stepped out of the woods and onto the grass around Smoky Hills, I peeked over my shoulder.

I channeled my thoughts until I was sure I'd found Matthew's mind. It felt warm and familiar, like I'd come home.

*You better*, I said, making sure to emphasize the flirtatious way I was feeling.

I could hear him chuckling, and then suddenly he was gone. He had shifted and was now running far away from Smoky Hills.

For a moment, I wondered where he was going. And, for a moment, all I wanted was to go with him.

But Grayson wasn't going to allow it. And from the energy my brother was putting off, this wasn't the time to challenge him.

There was something happening to our world. An unease that I could feel from every shifter that roamed our mountains.

Whatever this change was going to be, wasn't good.

Shifters were going to challenge each other, which meant shifters were going to die. With my heart pulled in different directions, I'd never felt this fact more poignantly than I did right now.

When it came down to it, who was I going to protect?

Who was I going to choose?



## ROSE

**I** ached everywhere.  
My body. My heart. My soul.  
My head.

I was pretty sure I was broken, and I doubted I would ever be the same again.

Something had happened in those woods. Something beyond being kidnapped and that thug beating me up.

No. Something had happened to Grayson. Something I was never going to understand, no matter how much I wanted to.

He was different. I could see it in his eyes. I could feel it in the connection that bound the two of us together.

My heart ached for my weak, human state. He deserved so much better than me. If he were in love with another shifter, he would be able to love her like he should. He wouldn't have to worry about her being hurt. She would be able to take care of herself.

Something I hadn't been able to do.

Grayson walked up the back stairs of Cora's house, clutching me to his chest. I could feel his heart beating. It was fast and steady. I'd felt his heartbeat before, and compared to that, what he was feeling now was more intense. Like he was worried or agitated.

Whatever it was, I feared it was because of me.

That I somehow had ruined his plans.

He knocked a few times on Cora's door and waited. When no one answered, he growled and took a few steps back as he stared up at the top-floor apartment. He paused, tipping his ear in the direc-



tion of the nearby window. Then his gaze flicked to Brielle, who was standing a few feet off.

"Go. Get Cora to open the door."

Brielle looked worn-out, but she nodded. A few seconds later, she scaled the nearby tree, opened a window, and slipped inside.

A few seconds later, I heard a muffled scream and then the clamoring of footsteps on the stairs. The lock released and the door opened, exposing Cora's tousled hair and puffy eyes.

One look at me and her arms were around my neck, pulling me into a hug.

"You're home. You're okay," she murmured as she pulled back to study me. Her brows furrowed as her gaze swept over my face. "What happened to her?" she asked, glancing up at Grayson.

I felt him stiffen as he drew me closer to him.

"I need to clean her up. Can we use your bathroom?"

Cora nodded and stepped out of the way. "My mom's out for a run so you should have some privacy for the next thirty minutes."

I shot her a thankful smile, but that only lasted a few seconds. Grayson seemed to be done with the pleasantries as he carried me through the doorway and up the stairs. I heard Cora mention something about breakfast, but I never heard the end of her sentence. Instead, I was whisked into Cora's apartment and then into the bathroom.

Grayson set me down on the edge of the tub and then turned and locked the door. Silence filled the room as Grayson stood there, frozen. His back was to me, and I could see his shoulders rise and fall with each deep breath.

I wanted to reach out. I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to tell him that I was okay, but I wasn't sure if he would listen. There was something different about him. An anger that I'd never felt before.

It was pulsating from him and filling every corner of the room.

"Grayson," I whispered. My throat felt raw. The fabric that had been shoved into my mouth had dried it out, and no amount of swallowing seemed to fix it.

His shoulders tightened as if he heard the change in my tone as well. He paused, and the silence felt as if it would deafen me.

Then he moved. He walked over to the sink, grabbed the glass that was sitting next to the faucet, and flipped the water on. After he filled it, he turned and shoved the glass in my direction.

"Here. Drink," he said.

My eyes were wide as I slowly nodded. I tipped the cup to my lips and let the smooth liquid cool my burning throat.

While I drank, Grayson busied himself with gathering supplies from around the room. A washcloth, some soap, a dry towel. He stacked them next to him on the counter. Then he wetted the washcloth and turned toward me.

He stared everywhere but at me.

I studied him. His gaze was stern. His jaw was tight. He looked so worried. So angry. So broken. It pulled at my heart in way I didn't know how to handle.

I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to tell him that he didn't have to worry. That I was fine. That the last thing I wanted him to do was blame himself.

But he didn't look like he would listen.

So I did the only thing I knew how to do. It was the only way I knew to get through to him.

I showed him.

I reached out and cradled his face in my hands.

My touch must have shocked him because he snapped back and his gaze dropped to meet mine. His brow furrowed as I saw pain pulsating through him.

"Grayson," I said again. This time, more forceful. I needed him to hear me. I needed him to understand what I was about to say. "I'm fine," I whispered.

Grayson's gaze made its way up to my forehead and rested there. Then he shook his head, breaking my contact, and turned to face the sink. "No, you're not, Rose. You're not okay."

Feeling as if he were slipping away, I stood behind him. I stared at his reflection in the mirror. He wasn't going to shut me out. I wouldn't let him.

"Grayson, look at me," I whispered. Tears were flowing down my face. My heart was breaking, and I was exhausted. It was an awful combination.

Grayson's gaze flicked up to me, and he held it there. I could see his jaw muscles flinching. I knew he hated that I was crying. He was my protector. He'd always been my protector. Even if I didn't want him to be.

Even if it meant he needed to protect me from himself.

"I am," he said. "I am looking at you. And all I see is the pain my family inflicted on you. The pain that comes to a human when they love a shifter." He turned and faced me. "My family killed your parents. They were the ones who left you an orphan."

He closed his eyes as his chest fell. I could only imagine the weight that he was carrying on his shoulders. The pain of what happened to me back then and now.

But he wasn't his family. He hadn't killed anyone. He took care of me. He'd saved me. He had to see that it made more sense for him to be around me than far away.

I slipped my fingers under his chin and pressed up. I needed him to look at me. I needed him to know what I was about to say was true.

He moved—reluctantly. A few seconds later, he opened his eyes and stared at me. I could feel his pain. I could feel his regret. It was as palpable as my own.

"I don't care about any of that anymore. What happened to my parents is in the past. They wouldn't want me to hold a grudge. They wouldn't want me to be unhappy with my future." I stepped closer to him and pressed my hands onto his chest. I could feel his heart pounding. I could feel his breaths deepen. I could feel him lean into me. He wanted this as much as I did.

He needed me as much as I needed him.

"Rose...what if I can't protect you? What if this happens again?" He dipped his face closer to mine. His warmth—his being—cascaded over me like a waterfall.

My body sang from his proximity. All I wanted—all I needed—was his touch. When he was next to me, holding me, everything was right with the world.

I rose up onto my tiptoes and pressed my lips to the bottom of his chin. He pulled back as he met my gaze. I could feel his desire. It was mixed with his wish to pull away. I needed to convince him fully, before he changed his mind.

"I can't live without you. Please don't push me away again. Please don't leave me." A tear slid down my cheek as I stared at him. He had to know that leaving me would hurt me far worse than whatever his family could do to me.

I loved him. Wholly and completely. There was nothing that would keep him away from me.

"I love you," I whispered. Emotions clung to my throat, and I breathed them out with every word.

Grayson held my gaze for a moment longer, and then it seemed as if a dam had broken inside of him. One that he'd been using to keep his feelings for me at bay.

Butterflies erupted inside of my stomach as he wrapped his arms around my waist and crushed his lips to mine. My entire body tingled as he pulled me up and pressed my body to his.

Not wanting him to regret our kiss and pull away, I wrapped my legs around his waist. My arms clung to his neck as I kept my lips locked with his.

We fell into a dance. Our lips parted, and we spent that time feeling and exploring each other. His hands went from my back to my rear to hold me up. Then, he moved slightly so that he could press me against the wall. As if he needed the added support.

I tangled my fingers in his hair as I pushed myself closer to him. Our hearts beat as one. Our breaths matched each other. It was as if we were born to kiss, and by doing so, we were fulfilling our destiny.

I was meant to love Grayson, and he was meant to love me.

I had never really believed in the concept of soul mates, but being here with Grayson made me a believer. I was never going to be the same without him. He'd changed me in a way that I could never come back from.

I was his, and I wanted to be his. In every way possible.

I wiggled a bit. He must have picked up on my intent because he gently lowered me to the ground, breaking our kiss. He pressed his hands on either side of me, caging me between him and the wall. He leaned in toward me, and I could feel his stare on my face.

His breathing was shallow, and it sent shivers across my skin as I stared at him. My fingers fiddled with the hem of his shirt. There was so much of Grayson that I wanted to feel. To touch.

Would he let me? Was it a good idea?

He shifted until his weight was on one arm. Then he brought his other hand up and wrapped it around my fingers.

"Rose, I can't," he said, dropping his gaze.

My heart stuttered to a stop as I stared up at him. I hadn't expected this. I parted my lips to speak, but nothing came out.

He must have sensed my disappointment because he raised his gaze up to meet mine. "Not that I don't want to. Heaven knows, I

want to. But I can't." He let go of my fingers and raised his hand up to brush my hair from my cheek and tuck it behind my ear.

I was such an emotional wreck that I didn't know what to do. My brain seemed to settle on a nod and a snort—which I think was an attempt at a laugh?

"It's fine. It's totally fine," I said in what sounded like a wheeze.

From the look on Grayson's face, he knew the truth.

"Rose," he growled as I tried to step away from him. He pressed on my shoulder and returned me to the wall, where he then caged me back in again. "If you think I'm saying no because I don't want you, you couldn't be more wrong." He leaned forward and held my gaze. The intensity of his stare and the tone of his voice caused me to stop moving.

"It's not?" I whispered.

Grayson shook his head. "If you only knew what was going on inside of me every time we kiss. Every time I touch you." He paused as he tipped his face up. I could see the muscles straining in his neck. Like he was physically trying to stop himself.

He glanced down at me again. This time, his gaze was softer. I could feel the way he felt for me by the way he looked at me, the way he took me in like I was the most beautiful woman in the world.

"But I respect you too much to do anything." He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against mine. "When a shifter mates, something changes. In him. In her. It's not just for fun. It's forever." He pulled back and stared at me. "And I can't ask you to commit yourself to me forever. At least not right now."

I parted my lips—the answer to his response felt as natural as breathing. I wanted to tell him that he was wrong. I was ready. I wanted him and only him. He was my future. I couldn't be more sure of that.

But when he met my gaze, I saw the pain in his eyes. I saw his plea for me to let it go, so I swallowed my words. I furrowed my brow as it felt as if my heart was breaking.

But if I loved him, I would wait. If that was what he needed, I would prove to him that he was the only thing I would ever need. I would prove my loyalty to him, and then he would be mine and I would be his.

Wholly and completely.

So I pinched my lips together and nodded. Then I rose up onto my tiptoes and brushed my lips against his. "I'll wait then," I said as I shot him a devious smile.

Grayson furrowed his brow as he growled and wrapped his arm around my waist. Then he pulled me in and buried his face in my neck. I giggled as I tipped my head back, welcoming the touch.

"You make a guy regret his resolve," he murmured as he kissed a trail of kisses from my neck to up behind my ear.

My body tingled as he nibbled on my earlobe a few times before blowing out his breath and stepping back.

"And that's where I stop," he said as he shoved his hands into his pockets like he needed to be physically restrained.

I pushed out my bottom lip, and Grayson narrowed his eyes at me.

"You're mean," he said as he turned and fiddled with the washcloth. He turned on the water and pushed it under the stream. "Sit down so I can finish cleaning you up. I can't drop you off at your grandmother's looking like that."

I smiled as I nodded and obeyed his command. After I was settled on the tub, Grayson knelt in front of me. He pressed his body into me, and I glared at him.

"Talk about not being nice," I said.

Grayson chuckled as he reached forward and began to dab at my face. He must have hit the gash on my forehead because pain shot through my body and I sucked in my breath.

He pulled back and studied me. "You okay?" he asked.

I nodded and forced my bravest face. He didn't look like he believed me, but thankfully, he didn't push it further. Instead, he leaned in and returned to cleaning my cut, this time with more of a gentle touch.

Before either of us could speak again, there was a frantic knock on the door. Grayson and I both glanced over when the door handle began to jiggle.

"Hey guys, my mom will be home any minute. Are you almost done in there?" Cora's voice carried through the door.

Grayson winked at me as he leaned over and unlocked the door. "Yeah, we're almost done. She's all cleaned up," he said as he stepped back.

I stood, hoping Cora wouldn't pick up on what had just transpired between Grayson and me. But from her raised eyebrows and her hesitancy to come in, I knew she knew. The kiss had been epic. Something that I would dream about for nights to come.

My feelings for Grayson pumped through my veins and made me feel warm and safe. Standing next to him filled my soul with a rightness that I'd never felt before.

He said to wait, so we would. And someday, I could see myself walking down the aisle with him. Pleading my love to him. Giving myself to him in the ways that I so desperately wanted to do. I would be his and he would be mine.

But until then, we would be right where we were.

With the unrest of the pack in the woods, I wasn't sure where that was, but I didn't care. I'd leave that worry for the future.

The front door opened, and we heard Mrs. Gray call in for Cora. We turned to Grayson with wide eyes, and he just raised his hands.

"You've gotta go," Cora said as she started pushing him toward the bathroom window.

Grayson nodded and reached over to unlock the window and slide it open. Then he climbed up and slipped out with an ease that surprised me. He clung to the windowsill as he turned around to face me.

"I'll see you later?" he asked.

I nodded as I chewed my bottom lip and stepped up next to him. I brushed my lips against his and then pulled back. "You better."

He gave me a wink, said his goodbyes to Cora, and then let go and fell to the ground. I watched as he sprinted across the backyard and into the woods.

Once he was out of sight, I turned to see Cora staring at me. Then a moment later she wrapped her arms around me and pulled me close.

"What happened?" she asked as she pulled back.

I swallowed as I turned my attention to the mirror. I winced at my reflection. I looked tired. I looked swollen. The gash on my forehead was bigger than I'd imagined—but I didn't really care.

I had Grayson back, and he promised me he wasn't going anywhere. Even though I looked like death, I couldn't be happier.

I linked arms with her as we walked out of the bathroom and right into the surprised expression of her mom. Mrs. Gray ran her

gaze over me.

"Oh my, Rose. Are you okay? Do you want me to take a look at that?"

I waved away her worry. "I'm fine. Just a klutz. Tripped on my way over here to grab Cora for breakfast."

Mrs. Gray stared at me and then pushed her hair from the sweat that clung to her forehead. "Sounds good. You girls have fun."

Cora nodded as we walked past. Remembering what we had planned for the afternoon, I nudged Cora. "Shopping?"

Cora glanced over at me and then nodded. "Right. Wanna go shopping after school, Ma? Christopher asked me to homecoming, and Rose is going dress shopping with her grandma."

We turned around to see that Mrs. Gray had stopped and looked contemplative. Then she nodded. "Sure. That sounds fun." Then she slipped into the bathroom and shut the door.

The entire way to the diner, Cora pelted me with questions. Where I had been. What happened after I disappeared. What did any of it mean. I gave her my answers as best I could. Truth was, Grayson and I hadn't really talked much about what the future held for the two of us.

Instead, we'd lived in the moment.

I was tired of worrying about the future. It was nice, for a moment, to not care.

Eventually, we would have to face what happened in the woods. We would have to talk about what it all meant.

But for now, I was going to eat breakfast with my best friend and think of the boy that had my heart. For a moment, I was going to imagine that I was going dress shopping so I could go to a dance with the boy I loved.

I was going to pretend that I was just a girl in love with a boy.

At some point, I was going to have to face the truth. But not right now.

Right now, I was happy. And I was going to be happy for as long as I could.





## LIAM

I woke the next morning with a headache and in a piss-poor mood. I was agitated and angry, and the entire world felt as if it were suffocating me.

I threw my covers off, and I swung my feet to the ground. I leaned forward with my elbows on my knees and scrubbed my face.

This change in me—the one that was causing all of my senses to go haywire—was taxing. It took my body to a whole other level, and my human form was having a hard time keeping up. It didn't help that whatever was going on with the Mother pack felt as real as my hand on my face.

I could feel their agitation. I could feel the unrest.

Something was happening. A war was brewing, and the wolf inside of me could feel it. The only thing it wanted to do was jump from my skin and sprint through the trees until it appeased this feeling.

I growled as I stood and stumbled to the bathroom. After a quick shower, I dressed and made my way downstairs. Dad was up. I could hear him. Sense him.

He was just as agitated as I was.

By the time I got into the kitchen, Dad had a plate of eggs and toast ready for me. He set them on the table and gave me a look. Then he returned to the counter to grab his own full plate.

"School today," he commanded as he pulled a fork from the drawer in front of him.

I glared at him as I sat down. "So, it's business as usual?" I asked. Hunger took over, and I began to shovel the food into my mouth at

record speed.

Dad growled. It was low and menacing and, surprisingly, didn't have the same effect on me as it had in the past. It must be because I was an adult wolf now. And, since Dad hadn't taken his place as the alpha of the Mother pack, he didn't rule me like he once had.

"Don't give me lip," Dad said as he stood in the kitchen, shoveling food down as well.

We ate in silence for a few minutes. My anger for my father and his weakness grew with each passing second until, finally, I threw my fork on my empty plate and stood. "How long are we going to go on like this?" I asked as I stomped into the kitchen and dumped my plate in the sink. Then I made my way to the fridge, grabbed the gallon of milk, and unscrewed the lid.

I didn't bother with a glass. Instead, I drank straight from the jug. Once my thirst was quenched, I stuck the gallon back into the fridge and turned to see Dad glowering at me.

"Don't speak like you know what's at stake," he said. He'd set his plate down and was facing me head-on. His arms were folded across his chest, and he was glaring at me.

"What does that mean?" I asked, matching his stance.

Dad studied me for a moment before he sighed and scrubbed his face with his hand. "You don't understand the cost of what we are about to enter into. You think it's all about dominance. That it just takes one wolf who is stronger than the other to win." Dad's voice drifted off as he stared out the window.

I waited, not really sure where he was going with this. But then I sighed and parted my lips to speak, but Dad beat me to it.

"Are you willing to kill Grayson? Evan? Noah?"

I blinked a few times, taken aback. "What?" I asked.

Dad stared at me. His gaze was fierce and unwavering. He spoke as if he'd experienced exactly what he was asking me. He'd killed his friends.

Dad's expression dropped, and he turned away from me. He placed both hands on the counter in front of him, and his shoulders slumped as his head fell forward. "You don't understand what it will be like. Friends will turn on friends. Family will turn on family." Dad's voice was low and broken.

My stance began to soften as Dad's words sunk deep into my soul. I hadn't realized what all of this was going to mean. Me evolv-

ing. Uncle Brutus declaring a challenge. Grayson leaving and whispers of his family rising up.

The gravity of the situation hadn't triggered until right now.

At some point, I might have to fight Grayson...I might have to kill him.

Could I do it?

The fire that lit in my stomach told me I could. That, if it came to dominance, I would fight to the death. But another part of my soul, the part connected to the human side of me, cowered at the thought.

How could I willingly go into a situation that might result in the two of us killing each other? Was this what my life was now?

A deep desire to murder those who stood in my way?

Dad turned and looked at me. His expression had morphed into one of sorrow. "This isn't what we wanted for you. Your mom wanted me to keep you from this life. She loved the pack, but when she saw what they were capable of, she wanted to leave." Dad closed his eyes as he folded his arms across his chest. "I convinced her to stay. That there was some good left in the pack. That they weren't just ruthless killers."

Dad's voice trailed off as he winced. The seconds that ticked by felt like hours as I waited for him to continue. The silence that filled the room felt deafening.

It wasn't right, what the pack did to my mom. If I could go into the past and protect her, I would. But she was gone. There wasn't anything I could do about it. Living in fear of the past wasn't fair to my dad or me.

And it certainly wasn't fair to Rose, who was still missing.

"They took Rose," I said.

Dad opened his eyes and glanced over at me. "What?"

"Rose Jordan. They took her." I stared at him, wondering what he was going to do with that information.

Dad furrowed his brow and then, a moment later, began to pace. "When? How?" Then his brow furrowed. "How do you know? Did you leave last night when I specifically told you to stay?"

I stared at him. I'd just told him that one of the residents of Smoky Hills was taken, and yet all he cared about was me leaving the house? Was he serious? "What does that matter? Rose is gone. What are we going to do about it?" I asked.

Dad blinked a few times before he turned around, grabbed his coffee mug, and brought the rim to his lips. He took a sip and then set it back down. "Liam, I understand what you want me to say, but we can't just go into the woods with guns blazing. This is something we are going to take care of as adults." He raised his eyebrows as he studied me.

I could tell he hoped that I would just accept what he said and leave it alone. I knew he wanted me to forget my desire to put all of this unrest to bed for good. But he had to know that wasn't going to happen. That, either way, things were going to change. For Smoky Hills. For the Mother pack.

I growled as I grabbed my backpack and pulled open the back door. I was finished with talking. If he wanted me to go to school, I'd let him think that was where I was headed.

Once I made sure that Cora was safely in her classroom, I was going to head to the woods. I was going to find Grayson and Rose. I would save my friends.

Dad didn't say anything as I pulled the back door closed and jogged down the steps. Just as I reached my truck, I stopped and turned toward the woods.

I didn't have to see Grayson to know that he was there. I could feel his presence. I could feel his change.

He had evolved just like me.

My wolf clawed at my chest. It wanted to be unleashed. It wanted to be set free. The desire to be the alpha overtook me, and it took all of my strength to keep the animal at bay.

My friend was back. That was what I needed to focus on. I swallowed a few times as I pulled open the driver's door and threw my backpack inside. Then I shut the door and jogged toward the woods. To where I felt Grayson hiding.

A few yards into the trees, I found Grayson. He was leaning one shoulder against a tree trunk, with his arms folded. His expression was strained as he stared at me. The struggle was as real for him as it was for me.

I pushed my hands through my hair. I needed to release this energy that was building up inside of me somehow. The last thing I wanted to do was shift. With my evolved abilities so new and so raw, all I could think about was what my dad had said.

*Are you willing to kill Grayson?*

Right now, the desire that raged inside of me shouted yes. But the other part of me, the sane and human part, yelled no.

It felt impossible, living this life. Feeling torn in two directions.

"You okay?" I asked, keeping my distance from him.

Grayson cleared his throat and nodded. "Yeah."

I furrowed my brow. He didn't sound okay. Nothing about what was happening was okay. I was losing my best friend. My right-hand man. Things were changing, and I didn't like it. But it was too late to go back.

It was all too late.

And then I realized that he didn't know. He didn't know that Rose was missing. "Rose, is..." How was I going to tell him that his fate was missing?

Grayson shook his head. "I know. My father kidnapped her." He must have picked up on my surprise because he rushed to say, "But she's home now."

I studied him and nodded slowly. "So are you back? For good?"

Grayson pushed off the tree trunk as he began to pace. Then he slowed and turned to look at me. "Do you know who the new kid is?"

Confused, I stared at him. "Who?"

Grayson glanced toward town and then back over at me. "Some kid. I caught him making out with Brielle in the woods. He smelled like a traitor."

It took a moment before I realized who he was talking about. I'd forgotten he'd been gone when Matthew came strutting into town. That he hadn't been privy to our new guest.

Then I blinked as his words settled in around me. "Wait, he was kissing Brielle?"

Grayson glowered as if he were reliving a bad memory. "Not kissing, more like sucking the face off my sister. And his hands?" Grayson let out a deep, throaty growl.

I could feel his agitation, and it helped feed my own. "What are you going to do?" I asked, flexing my hands as adrenaline pumped through my veins. It felt nice, our mutual hatred for this newcomer bringing my best friend and me closer together.

When we were both hating on Matthew, we could forget our desire to dominate and just be friends. Friends determined to discover who had infiltrated our town.

We may not be able to control what was happening outside of Smoky Hills. But inside was a different story. We both knew what it was like to want to protect. To feel as if we would die for the ones we loved.

With a common enemy, we could band together and figure this out.

At least, we could do this for now. I knew it was ridiculous to think that things weren't going to change. As soon as we sent Matthew back to where he came from, Grayson's and my friendship would be over—it had an expiration date.

But for now, we were going to be friends again.

And, for now, that was all I could ask for.





## BRIELLE

I felt like an idiot, spending the entire day at school looking for Matthew. After our incredible kiss last night—and Grayson’s ridiculous display of brotherly *love*—I hadn’t seen him, heard from him, or felt him.

And let me tell you, my senses were heightened to his presence like I’d never felt before. It was like I was a homing pigeon and he was my home. I felt as if my mind and soul would stop at nothing to find him.

Which is why when I headed to practice that afternoon after school, I felt exhausted. Nothing would make me feel better. Not soccer. Not running up and down the field to burn off this pent-up energy coursing through me.

Nothing.

Matthew was gone and my heart was broken.

After disposing of my backpack in my locker, I kept my head down as I walked toward the locker rooms. My mind was distracted, and I didn’t notice the two hands reaching out to grab me until it was too late.

I yelped as I was pulled into the nearby janitor closet and the door was shut behind me.

I didn’t need the light on. Even though it was pitch-black, I knew who was standing in the room with me. I could hear his heartbeat. It was the sound my soul had been begging to hear.

Matthew.

My hands found his arms, then his shoulders, then his neck. I pulled myself closer to him as I searched through the darkness for

his lips. I needed him. I wanted to feel his arms around me once more.

With him, I felt like...me.

"Elle," he whispered. I could hear the chuckle in his voice.

I growled, hating that we were this close to each other, and yet, he was keeping me at bay.

And then I heard Grayson's voice and the instant change in Matthew's heartbeat.

Something was wrong. Something was very, *very* wrong.

I pulled back as I focused my gaze upwards. Even though I was in human form, my wolf instincts came out and I was able to see Matthew in the darkness. His skin was grey, and his eyes lit up like flashlights, but I could see his worry. It was etched across his face and illuminated in his gaze.

"What's going on?" I asked. Even though I wanted to pull away—my mind screaming that something was wrong—I couldn't move. I had Matthew back, and my wolf couldn't let him go.

Matthew's hands rested on my hips as he leaned in. My soul sang from the fact that he felt the closeness too. That he cared for me like I cared for him.

"I can't be around you anymore," he whispered as he leaned in. His lips found my forehead and he pressed them to my skin.

I paused and blinked a few times, trying to register what he'd said. "What? Why? Because of Grayson?"

I loved my brother, and I was happy he was back, but if he scared off the one guy I cared about, I would wring his neck.

I put on my determined expression as I met Matthew's gaze. "He'll be fine. He's a little prickly at first, but he'll get used to having you around." I moved to snuggle into him only to have him pull away once more.

"Elle, you don't understand. This isn't about your brother being overprotective. Grayson is right to feel the way he does about me. I'm not just a passerby. I'm here..." His voice drifted off.

Worry coursed through me, and I did the only thing I knew how to do. I pulled away to protect myself. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

Matthew didn't pull me back to him. In fact, he stepped back and shoved his hands into his front pockets.

Which angered me.

He wasn't supposed to give up this easily. He was supposed to fight for me. I was his fate. His destiny. How could he be okay with leaving me?

I couldn't help the tears that formed on my eyelids. They stung as I forced them to keep from falling. I couldn't let him see what his words were doing to me. I couldn't let him see my breaking heart.

I was the idiot who thought we were destined to be together. I'd fooled myself into thinking we were fates. That he was meant to come to Smoky Hills. That he was meant to find me.

Man, I'd watched too many cheesy romantic comedies in my life. No wonder Grayson felt as if he needed to protect me. I was gullible and naive, and this just proved it.

I sniffled, holding back my sobs, and cleared my throat. I wasn't going to allow my heart to break anymore. Matthew didn't deserve my tears. He should be grateful that I didn't shift right then and there and unleash my wolf on him.

Right now, she was pissed, and I didn't know what she would do to him.

"You should go," I said as I pointed to the door.

Matthew studied me for a moment. I could feel his gaze on me. And then he nodded and moved to place his hand on the door handle.

When he paused, my heart skipped a beat. For a moment, I allowed myself to think that, perhaps, he was changing his mind. That he wanted to stay here with me. That this had all been a joke. A mean one, but a joke all the same.

He turned, and from the slump of his shoulders and his frown, I could tell he wasn't changing his mind. He was about to explain to me why he acted this way. Why he allowed me to care for him only to have him rip my heart out and stomp on it.

Oh, this was going to be rich.

"I'm sorry, Brielle. I never should have led you on. I never should have—"

"Don't," I snapped, holding up my hand. Sure, he could say he was leaving. That he wasn't supposed to be here, and I wasn't supposed to fall in love with him—that was my bad. That was my mistake.

But there was no way I was going to allow him to take back our kiss. To say what happened between us in the woods had been a

mistake.

There was only so much heartbreak a person could take. I'd lost my parents and, for a short time, my brother—I wasn't going to give Matthew the satisfaction of leaving me, too.

Not if I could help it.

So I turned, placed my hand on the door handle and turned it. I knew he heard the release engage because his whole body stiffened. This was ending, and I took some satisfaction in the fact that he'd reacted to my imminent retreat.

"Don't ever come back," I growled as I pulled open the door and stepped out into the hallway.

The lights felt blinding, but I didn't care. Right now, I needed to escape. I needed to get as far away from Matthew as possible.

Once I was in the safety of the locker room, I collapsed on the bench in front of my locker. Tears slipped down my cheeks, and I bent forward and cradled my forehead in my hands.

I felt like an idiot. A giant, colossal idiot. What kind of person falls for someone after only a day? Did I really think that everything would work out?

My life was in the crapper right now.

Grayson was acting strange. There was so much unrest in the Mother pack, and I could feel it in every fiber of my being. And then this mystery guy showed up, and I was the idiot who decided to fate with him.

As much as I wanted to blame my aching heart on Matthew, I knew better. I was the one who leapt without looking. I was the one who decided to lower my walls and let him in.

I should have known better.

I wiped the tears from my face as anger boiled up inside of me. I wasn't going to allow myself to cry over this for one more second.

We were done, and there was nothing I could do about it.

For now, I was going to change into my soccer clothes, head out to the field, and try to work off all my aggression.

Then, I was going to go home and confront Grayson. Since he'd been back, he hadn't talked to me. In fact, I hadn't seen him at all at school. Wherever he was, I could feel his agitation.

Something was eating him alive.

And I was tired of living in the dark, not knowing what was happening with him. With our parents.

Once practice was over, I was going to find my brother and we were going to talk.

If there was a war brewing, I wasn't going to let him shield me from the truth.

I was going to fight.

I had to.

I had nothing left.

---

The house was quiet when I pulled open the front door. My ears perked as I glanced into the dining room and then the living room.

Mrs. Diggory was nowhere to be found.

Normally, I would hear the faint voices of her soap opera coming from her bedroom, but that wasn't happening.

A cool feeling carried across my skin, causing me to shiver. I'd never felt so strange in my house before. Someone—or *something*—was here.

"Hello?" I called out. My wolf rose to the surface. If I had to, I was going to shift to protect myself.

If it was a human, I could kill them. If it was another wolf?

My heart pounded at the thought. I was a female wolf and a teenage one at that. I hadn't evolved, which meant I was weak. But I wasn't going to think like that. Not right now.

I was strong, and I would fight off anyone who was here if I had to.

"Mrs. Diggory?" I called out as I peered into the kitchen. A muffled voice startled me, and I hurried into the room. Just as I cleared the table, I saw her.

Mrs. Diggory's eyes were wide and the skin around them swollen. A piece of fabric had been tied around her mouth, and her hands were tied in front of her. She was cowering on the bathroom floor.

When she met my gaze, she began to squirm and shout. But with the fabric in her mouth, I had no idea what she was saying.

Determined to free my foster mom, I hurried over to her and knelt down. I reached over to free her when a hand clamped around my wrist and pulled me up.

I started to scream, but there was a crack and then a blinding light. My entire body went limp as I crumpled to the floor.

I tried to shift. I tried to fight back. But there was nothing I could do. My mind and body were numb, and the only thing left for me to do was succumb to the darkness.



## GRAYSON

**I**t was getting dark as I ran alongside Liam. I really wasn't sure what we were doing. Our excursion today had started out as a search for Matthew, but I doubted that was what we were doing anymore.

Liam was angry.

I was angry.

And we were running to burn off that anger.

It was nice, not to be alone. There were times when I allowed myself to believe that nothing had changed. That we were back where we'd been a few weeks ago.

Before the change. Before the death of the alpha. Back when the only thing we worried about was work and school.

It felt like a simpler time.

Now? We were faced with a future that both of us knew was inevitable but neither of us wanted to face.

Liam slowed as the sound of a river perked my ears. Sensing what he wanted, I followed alongside him as we made our way through the trees. As soon as they broke, we paused at the bank, each taking our time drinking.

The water was cool and refreshing. I lapped it up, reveling in the feeling of the fluid running down my throat. It helped relieve the tension that had built up inside of me. At least, it did for a moment.

I knew as soon as I lifted my head, things were going to change. I was going to be faced with a reality that I didn't want to confront right now.



*What do you think Evan and Noah are going to do?* Liam's voice cut through my mind.

I glanced over at Liam to see him sitting there on the rocks. He looked relaxed, which helped calm me down. We could have a conversation like we'd always had. We could be civil.

I stood and shook and then shifted. Once I was in human form, I sat down on the gravel, brought one knee up, and hooked my arm around it.

It was nice, sitting next to my best friend like this.

Liam shifted and sat a few feet away. We were both facing the river. I picked up a few rocks and chucked them into the water.

"I don't know," I said.

Liam nodded, and from the corner of my eye, I saw him grab some nearby rocks. "This sucks," he said.

"Yeah."

We both fell silent, and the only noise that filled the air was the trickling water. My shoulders slumped as I fished out a rock that was buried in the bank. The grit of the sand scraped my skin and I welcomed the feeling.

It helped ground me. It helped me realize that as much as I was a shifter, I was also a human. Something my family had forgotten.

"Cora's going to homecoming with Christopher." Liam's voice startled me.

I turned to face him. "She is?"

Liam studied the ground as he ran his finger over the sand. "Yeah. He asked her while we were in detention."

"You were in detention?"

Liam chuckled. "Stuff happens when you leave, man."

Reality sunk in around me and I nodded. He didn't know what the future held, and neither did I. We were both living in limbo, and it sucked.

I sucked in my breath and nodded. "Yeah," I said.

Liam didn't respond right away. I'd begun to relax when his voice broke the silence. "So what are we going to do?" he asked.

I glanced over at him. He was staring straight ahead. His eyes were narrowed and his forehead furrowed.

"My dad's not going to stop," I offered. My voice came out lower than I'd intended. It was as if the gravity of the situation was weighing on me. It felt as if it were crushing me. "I was his plan A, but

since I won't be his lapdog, he's going to come up with a plan B." I stretched out my legs in front of me. They were cramping, and I needed the distraction moving gave me.

"What do you think he's going to do?" Liam asked.

I shrugged. "I overheard bits and pieces when I was with him. His henchmen weren't too tight-lipped about anything."

Liam glanced over at me. "And?"

I swallowed, realizing that I was going to have to speak. I was going to have to tell him. "First, take out the Smoky Hills shifters. Then go after your uncle."

"Do you have a timeline?"

A rustling in the trees startled us. We both stood and whipped around to see Matthew emerging from the trees.

The entire world began to blur around me. All I could remember was Matthew with his arms wrapped around my sister. I let out a growl as I lunged toward him.

"It's best if you get out of here," Liam yelled, and I felt his arms surround me.

I glared over at him as I struggled against his restraint.

Liam's words didn't seem to stop Matthew. Instead, he just raised his hands and stepped toward us.

"I don't want to fight," he said.

"Then you shouldn't have touched my sister," I yelled. I was seconds away from shifting. It was taking all of my strength to not bring my wolf to the surface and fight it out with this loser.

Matthew paused. A shadow fell over his expression. I could feel his pain as his shoulders slumped and his gaze fell to the ground.

I stopped trying to free myself. Instead, I stared at him. What was he doing? Was he serious? Had he...?

I growled as I glanced over at Liam. I knew I'd hate the guy that fated with my sister. I knew it was inevitable. But right now, knowing that he was in pain connected us. I knew what he was going through.

I felt that way for Rose.

The love for someone you can't have. Staying away to protect them.

I adjusted my clothes and then turned to stare at him. "What do you want?"

Matthew paused as if to make sure that I wasn't going to attack him. He must have felt safe because he relaxed and stepped toward me. "We have a problem."

Liam folded his arms as he studied Matthew. I could feel his hesitation when it came to this intruder, but if I wasn't going to attack, neither was Liam.

Matthew blew out his breath and then glanced in the direction of Smoky Hills. "They're not safe," he said.

I sighed. "Duh. My dad has it out for them."

Matthew narrowed his eyes. "Your dad's not alone."

"What are you saying?" Liam asked.

Matthew glanced over at him. "Brutus has a plan as well," he said finally. His voice had dropped an octave. He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. He turned his gaze down to the ground.

I blinked, my ears ringing from what he said. "They're taking the fight to Smoky Hills?" I asked. This couldn't be. Humans lived there. How would they keep their secret if they were exposed?

Matthew shrugged. "I don't know his plans specifically, but I know Brutus wants the Smoky Hills shifters gone. And I'm pretty sure he'll stop at nothing to do it."

I growled as I pushed my hands through my hair and turned so my back was to them. I blew out my breath as I thought of all the people who were now going to get caught up in the feud between our packs.

Rose. Her grandmother. The students at Smoky Hills.

If what Matthew was saying was true, then we were in trouble.

A war was brewing, and there was nothing we could do to stop it.

Crap.

\*\*\*

FIND out what happens in the LAST Smoky Hills book!

If only Homecoming was the only thing Cora, Liam, Grayson, Rose, and Brielle had to worry about. With tensions rising high, it is no longer safe for anyone.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Wolfe is Team Jacob all the way.

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Now, she gets to write about mystical beasts who fall for ordinary girls and it's the best job she could have ever imagine for herself.

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And Emma would LOVE to hear directly from her fans through her EXCLUSIVE Facebook Group, [HERE](#).

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