THE VEHIDLARIES BOOKSEVEN

WHEN THE DEAD HAVE IT EASY

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For my wonderful team! You guys are amazing and I sure as hell couldn't pull this off without you!!

And as always, thank you Robert for sharing me with five other imaginary men.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1 Chapter 2 Chapter 3 Chapter 4 Chapter 5 Chapter 6 Chapter 7 Chapter 8 Chapter 9 Chapter 10 Chapter 11 Chapter 12 Chapter 13 Chapter 14 Chapter 15 Chapter 16 Chapter 17 Chapter 18 Chapter 19 Chapter 20 Chapter 21 Chapter 22

Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Epilogue

To stay up to date...

CHAPTER 1

AUGUST 15TH, AFTERNOON

I pulled Hades to a stop, as the crowd continued to move around us. Turning, I spotted Miles moving through what seemed to be the entire population of every town in three counties. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. But the crowd was starting to get on my nerves.

Emerald eyes met mine from behind rimless glasses. I couldn't help but smile as he came toward me. Miles' angled jaw and high cheekbones made him cute. But when he smiled like he was now, you could see how handsome he really was. He looked down at me from his six inches of extra height as he stepped in close, his hand going to the back of my arm. "How was work?"

I shrugged. "Not bad, but not great."

"Are you still having trouble with script?" He asked in that smooth timbre that I loved.

I smiled up at him as I breathed in his wintergreen scent. "Yeah, Meghan says I need to practice more. How was physical therapy?"

He gave me a sheepish grin. "It was... alright."

"Oh?" Miles had been hitting the pool hard to get back in shape for the next swim season ever since the cast came off last month. A little too much too soon to be honest.

His ears turned pink. "I received a lecture about over training while the break is still healing."

"Called it."

"But she did release me, so, I can get back to my usual training schedule." He smiled that smile again making my heart pick up the pace.

"Oh no. We're never going to see you now." Hades pulled on the leash, making me look down and give him scratches on his head. "You're going to turn into frog man, aren't you?"

"No, I have a better reason not to train all the time." His voice grew softer.

"Oh, yeah? What's that?" I lifted my head and met his amused eyes. He just smiled down at me, his fingers running lightly up the back of my arm. His silence had me going back over what he said. My face caught fire. "Oh."

He chuckled. "The twins were right, that is a fun game."

I playfully narrowed my eyes at him before we started walking through the crowd. "Have you seen them?" Hades stayed to my left keeping everyone a good three feet away. It helped that he was enormous now. Fully grown, his head was at my hip and he weighed over a hundred pounds of muscle. And wrinkles. My baby was still my wrinkly ball of love, only now he was huge.

"Just Ethan. I've only talked to the others on the phone." He slid his hand around mine and squeezed. "Have you?"

"Only on the phone this week. Though I still haven't seen Isaac." But at least he still talked to me this month. Several random people started staring at me as we walked through the crowd. I tried to ignore it. "I still haven't spoken to or seen Zeke."

"So, naturally, you are stalling meeting them today."

I made a point to look anywhere but at him.

He sighed. "Angel, it's going to be alright."

"How? None of you have seen each other since New Orleans, and only just started talking again." I couldn't keep the strain from my voice.

His thumb stroked my hand. "Just trust me."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked for the fiftieth time.

Miles looked down at me. "Yes. It's the only way this conversation is going to happen. We'll be in the middle of nowhere, and I'll have all the car keys."

"Then, what? We'll play 'who wants to date the necro?"

Miles stopped and turned toward me. "What are you really afraid of?" Busted. "Their answers."

His eyes softened. "We need to get this sorted out and this is the best way to do that."

"Out in the middle of the woods, alone and trapped is the best way to do it?" This could be a disaster of epic proportions.

Miles gave me a small smile. "I've known these guys almost my entire life. They won't make this kind of hard decision without some incentive."

I grumbled under my breath. I hated that he was right. Dating or not dating. It was time to answer the question.

"So, are you ready for your house to become Hotel Huntington?" I squeezed his hand, needing the reassurance.

Miles took a slow deep breath and let it out. "Mostly. All the rooms are aired out and ready for the... crew from New Orleans to arrive."

A group of supernaturals were moving into the area to provide back up for the guys and me. And moving into Miles' house. He'd reluctantly offered to house them so they'd be able to move to town quicker. "You know you don't have to do this, right?"

He nodded. "It's only temporary. They'll all be out in a couple of weeks once they have their housing situations figured out."

"When are they coming?"

"In a couple of days. We'll be on the camping trip and Hollis gave the key to the ones coming up." He gently got me moving again. "We need to meet Isaac."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Miles took the lead through the crowd towards the ride section of the fair. I was supposed to meet with Isaac and spend some time with him away from the others. Miles squeezed my hand one more time before letting go. Isaac must be close by, I tried to spot him through the crowd but it was no use. I was too short.

"Isaac's on his way over." Miles looked down at me. I met his eyes as the urge to run hit me hard. Miles gave me an encouraging smile. "It's going to be alright."

I nodded. Sure, it was. And hell was just a sauna.

Isaac stepped out of the crowd. He was taller than I remembered. His wide shoulders seemed to have more muscle than a few weeks ago. His amber eyes met mine, a grin spread across his face. My stomach unknotted a bit as I just soaked in his face. A square jaw, slightly pouty lips and a straight nose made him more striking than handsome. His hair was blue,

with a darker blue mixed in as usual. He was going for a Cookie Monster thing and it worked for him. I smiled back as warmth filled my chest.

Isaac finally noticed Miles, his eyes dimmed a bit as he reached us. "Hey, I've got some bands for the rides... but you brought Hades."

"I'll take Hades with me so you guys can enjoy the rides." Miles held his hand out for the leash.

I pulled my gaze from Isaac's to look up at him. "Thanks."

He smiled down at me. "Of course. "

I handed him the leash along with the small backpack that had Hades' water dish and water bottles in.

"Have fun," Miles said before disappearing with Hades into the crowd.

Heart pounding, I looked up at Isaac. "Hey."

His smile was back in full force. "Hey." His voice was rich and smooth like honey. He pulled me to him and hugged me tight. I had to stretch a little more than usual, did he get taller?

I took in a deep breath of his usual lime scent. More of the knots disappeared. "I missed you."

He squeezed me tighter. "I missed you too." He kissed my cheek before pulling back. "Let's have some fun."

I chuckled as he put the band on my wrist and pulled me through the crowd. "What have you been up to?"

"Skateboarding, MMA, the usual," he hedged.

"Training?" I asked, knowing full well he quit a month ago.

"Um, yeah." He got us into the line for the Zipper. The ride had closed in seats that rotated with your body weight while it flipped you around the rotating track.

"Cookie Monster," my voice grew softer.

He turned back to me with warm eyes. "Later. Let's just have some fun."

I smiled up at him and let it go.

We went on ride after ride, anything that got the heart pumping. The Ring of Fire, the Orbiter, the Pendulum, you name it, we went on it at least twice. It was outright war when bumper cars became involved, to the point we were told not to come back. Over the next two hours I forgot about everything else that was going on and just had fun.

Isaac was rubbing his shoulder as we went down the steps from the Gravitron. "You were right, the ride was slowing down."

I continued laughing as I stepped off the steps and wrapped my arm around his waist. "You should have seen your face when you dropped from the wall."

"Hey!" He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "I practically landed on my head."

That only set me off again.

He shook his head as his cheeks tinted pink. "Come on, we have time for one more ride before we meet the others."

We stepped into the short line for the Ferris wheel. Surprised, I climbed into the seat. Isaac climbed in after me. The bar was closed across our laps and we were lifted backward into the air.

"A slow ride?" I eyed him. "Who are you and what have you done with my Cookie Monster?"

He chuckled as he moved his arm over the back of the car so he was turned toward me. "I wanted to talk."

My stomach knotted. "Okay..."

"How are you doing?" His face was serious. "With Ordin's sentencing coming up?"

I sighed as a weight settled in my gut. In January, Clay Ordin had abducted me. Then the psycho proceeded to beat the crap out of me when I told him I'd never be his. Not my smartest move, I'll admit. "You've noticed all the looks too?"

He nodded. "How do they know? You're a minor, your name is supposed to be protected."

I turned a little so I could face him more. "Small town. Everyone in school knew he was arrested and I came back with the shit kicked out of me." I shrugged. "I'm assuming word spread from there." The wheel rotated, putting us further into the air.

The backs of his fingers brushed over my cheek sending warmth back through me. "Are you okay?"

I gave him a smile. "I'm okay, I just wish it was over and everyone could go back to forgetting."

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against mine. My heart melted. What had I been thinking earlier? This was Isaac... My sweet, funny Isaac. His lips moved against mine slowly as everything else faded away. The ride moved, jolting us back to reality. I pulled back and looked around, praying that none of the guys saw that.

"Chill out, that's why I picked the Ferris wheel." He shifted.

I relaxed as the wheel began to lift us higher. The sun was starting to set. Orange, pinks, and yellows streaked across the sky as we reached the top. The noise of the fair faded leaving a comfortable quiet. "I thought you wanted to talk?"

"I thought I did too." He sighed. "But I have a feeling there is going to be a lot of talking tomorrow at Miles' and then on the camping trip."

"You're dreading it too?"

He nodded. "Yeah, and you know Zeke is going to be a grumpy ass the entire time."

"You've spoken to Zeke?" I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"No, I just figured he's going to show up." His eyes ran over my face. "Haven't you?"

I shook my head as a knot formed in my throat. "Only texts every few days." I looked around at the fair, trying to hide how much it bothered me.

"He won't miss your birthday tomorrow. And he won't miss the camping trip," he muttered. "You in the woods? There's no way he'd let you go without him."

"Not just me," I reminded him, hating the bitterness in his voice. "He'd go even if it was just you guys."

Isaac snorted. He knew I was right, he just wanted to be angry at Zeke right now.

"It wasn't his fault," I reminded him. "It was mine."

He ran his fingers through his hair as the wheel started climbing again. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Okay." I swallowed hard. "How are your nightmares doing?"

He brought his arm down so he could hold my hand. "Not as bad. Just those four I called you about." His eyes met mine. "Sorry I keep waking you up."

I shook my head. "It's okay, I'd rather talk to you than sleep." I didn't add that I was up already because Ethan usually had to talk too. Oddly, the twins had nightmares the same nights, but at different times. Once I was done talking to one, the other would call within ten minutes. "How's Ethan doing?"

Isaac's shoulders rolled forward. He suddenly looked tired. "As far as I can see, he's okay. I don't think he's hurting, but..."

"Have you two been talking?" In New Orleans they finally had it out. I had hoped...

He turned to me. "We're talking, we're just working our way up to the big stuff."

"Next time you have a nightmare, go talk to Ethan."

His brow drew down. "What?"

"Just trust me." I smiled. "Don't hesitate, go and talk to him."

He sighed. "I'll try."

The ride came to a stop. We climbed out and headed back into the crowd.

"I guess we should head over to watch the end of the chili competition." Isaac took my hand again.

As we got closer to the cookout contest, the more aware I was that I was still holding Isaac's hand. Once the booths came into sight, I let go and started looking for the others. I finally spotted sandy blonde hair at the booth with the most people around it.

I was about to tell Isaac when Hades shouldered several people out of the way in his rush to get to me.

"Sorry! Sorry!" Miles called over his shoulder as the dog pulled on his leash.

I bent down and gave him the loves he was looking for. "There's my baby. Have you been terrorizing Miles?" He gave a half bark that I took as a yes.

Miles was shaking his head as he handed me the leash. "I remember now why I don't have a dog."

"'Cause you're too nice to pull them back when they want to go somewhere?" I smiled a big smile. Miles spoiled Hades rotten and just couldn't tell that wrinkled face no.

Miles handed me Hades' backpack. "Perhaps."

I snickered.

"They've finished the competition and the judges are deciding. They'll announce the winner in the Hunter pavilion." Miles gestured down the wide cement walkway where the crowd was moving.

"Um, I'll meet you guys there." I said watching as the crowd left Asher's booth. If he was going to be mad at me or break my heart, I'd rather do it without the others watching.

"We'll meet you there." Miles' voice was understanding.

"Yeah, see you at the pavilion," Isaac muttered before they went with the crowd.

My stomach rolled as I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. We'd been okay on the phone but we never talked about us... or me with the others. Come on, Lexie. Big girl panties! I walked Hades over to the booth. Asher was busy emptying the chili from the pot into take away containers. High cheekbones and a sharp chin had given him the all-American boy look, but at model status. He always looked as if he just stepped out of a magazine to me. Then there were his eyes... Blue, with dark and light streaks through them. Even some white. They reminded me of an ocean wave crashing. Those eyes suddenly turned to me. I swallowed hard as he set down the pot.

"Hi." His rich baritone practically ran over my skin.

"Hi." Light spread through me as he smiled. I reached the booth as he came around the table. I had to tilt my head back to see his face since he was more than half a foot taller than me. "How'd it go?"

His eyes stayed on mine and grew warmer. "Good, uh, I think." He started rubbing the back of his neck. "I had to make three pots for samples so..."

I smiled up at him. "That's better than good, that's great."

"Ally girl..." My heart slammed as his eyes grew warmer. He reached out to me only to curl his fingers closed and pull back. A sharp pain shot through me. He didn't want to touch me. What else did I expect? I turned and started down the walkway, pretending it didn't hurt. That everything was okay. Calloused fingers grabbed my wrist, pulled me back around and into his arms.

My arm slipped around his neck as I took a deep breath of cinnamon and vanilla. Though today it had a bit of paprika too. Hades sniffed Asher's leg as he held me against him.

"I missed you." He whispered into my ear.

I closed my eyes. "I missed you too."

Just like that, it was as if we hadn't lost any time. When I pulled back, he kissed my cheek making my face warm.

"Shouldn't you be going to the pavilion?" I reminded him when all I really wanted to do was kiss him.

"Oh, yeah." His face turned pink as he let me go. "I just have to finish cleaning up."

I eyed him. "Are you stalling?"

He made a point not to look at me. "No. Not at all."

"You're a horrible liar." I chuckled.

"Okay... I might be stalling." He took the towel off his shoulder and set it on the table. "I've never done a competition before. And a lot of previous winners were in it too. I don't think I have much of a shot."

"Hey, Superman." He turned to meet my eyes. "Even if you don't win, you still went for it. You still gave samples to a bunch of people."

A smile began to spread across his face. "Yeah, that's true." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he held my gaze. "You're right."

I wrapped my arm around his. "I know." I made sure Hades was beside me as I pulled Asher toward the pavilion.

He chuckled as his hand dropped to take mine. "How was crossing today?"

"Not bad, I managed forty each trip so... around a hundred and twenty crossed this time."

"And you're still not having any side effects?" he asked, looking down at me.

"Nope," I chirped.

"No headache? No bloody nose?"

"Nope. And nope." I smiled as I squeezed his hand. "Relax, I'm not dying anymore. I've got a normal, happy life ahead."

Hades barked and pressed against my leg. That chill ran down my neck. Several ghosts moved through the crowd in front of us. We both watched as the ghost couple walked by. "Okay, as normal as I can get."

He chuckled.

"Did you win?" Jessica, Asher's twin sister, popped out of the crowd. Her boyfriend, Jason, staying several feet back. Tall, curvy with the same sandy blonde hair, Jessica was pretty. Too bad she was extremely aware of it.

"They're about to announce the winner at the pavilion." Asher's voice grew firmer as his gaze went to Jason.

Jessica made a point to talk to her brother without looking at me. "I know you're going to win. I'll see you at home!" Jessica went back to Jason.

Jason's face grew paler as Jessica took his hand and tugged him back into the crowd. I looked up at Asher and realized why. Asher's eyes were

hard and cold. Hatred and anger practically came off him in waves. I'd never seen Asher make a face like that. Zeke? At least once a day but Asher... Hades' head snapped around to him. The large dog made a low half growl.

"Ash?"

He blinked and unclenched his jaw before looking back down at me. The look was gone, his eyes were just as warm as before. "I hate that guy."

"Me too." We started walking again, Hades' tail wagging happily.

"Have you ever heard any rumors about them?" he asked.

"Only that he was cheating on her." I tried to remember who it was supposed to be with.

"No, I mean..." He stopped himself. "Never mind."

When we got closer to the pavilion, we both let go at the same time. I smiled to myself as we joined Isaac and Miles in the back row of the benches. I sat next to Isaac while Asher sat on my other side. Hades sat behind me, pressing his body against my back so I knew he was there.

A man with silver in his beard and hair stepped away from the circle of judges and climbed the steps to the stage. "Ladies and gentleman! We have tallied the scores for the cook off!"

"A little close aren't you, Asher?" Isaac muttered.

"No closer than you." Asher bit back under his breath.

"Our third place winner is Mrs. Cynthia Loffle!" The announcer started the applause.

Everyone clapped while I reminded myself to be patient.

"Seriously, Asher, scoot down," Isaac whispered.

"Our second place winner is James Demarks!"

Everyone clapped again.

"If she doesn't have a problem, why should you?" Asher hissed.

"If you two don't stop bickering and talking about me as if I'm not here, I'm smacking you both upside the head." I bit out between my teeth. "I'm not something to be fought over like a prize."

"Sorry, Red."

"Sorry, Ally."

"Our first place winner is... Asher Westfell!"

I turned to him with a smile. Asher's mouth was hanging open as he froze.

"Get up there." I gave him a small shove on the shoulder.

Stunned, Asher got to his feet and made his way to the stage. The applause was loud as he accepted his certificate and shook the judges' hands.

The crowd began to break up as everyone headed back to the fair while I turned to Isaac and Miles. "This isn't going to work if you guys are going to bicker like this."

Isaac ran his hand through his hair, his fingers digging into his scalp. "Okay, it upsets you. I get it."

Upsets me? My temper sparked. "Not because it upsets me. That is one of your best friends since you were... like four! You're only going to end up hurting your relationship with him. Do you really want that?"

Isaac's eyes unfocused as he thought about it. "No." He turned back to me. "No, I don't want that."

"Then remember that you value him just as much as you value me." I took a deep breath trying to calm down.

"You're right, Ally." Asher's voice had me turning around. He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's really easy to forget that right now." He turned to Isaac. "Sorry."

"Me too. Sorry," Isaac answered.

"Why don't you two head to the concert. You can talk on the way." Miles' voice made it clear it wasn't a suggestion.

Isaac got to his feet and walked with Asher out of the pavilion.

Heart aching, I put my elbows on my knees and buried my face in my hands. Hades jumped over the bench to stick his head in my lap.

Miles' hand went to my back, moving up and down my spine. "We just need to get it all out in the open."

I sat up and scratched Hades' ears. "I don't know if I can survive it."

He chuckled. "There's going to be issues, Angel. We knew that. But it worked out alright so far with Isaac and Asher. It'll work out with the others too."

I nodded. "I know you're right, I just wish I could fast forward to the end where everyone is happy."

"I know, but we can't." He smiled. "Come on, let's head to the concert."

We got to our feet and walked toward the concert area with Hades beside me. The concert area was a nice flat area of green grass and trees with large bulb lights strung overhead. Vendor booths lined both sides along with drinks. We spotted Asher and Isaac laughing under a tree. We had just joined them when my phone rang. It was Brooklyn, the band's vocalist.

"Yeah?"

"Lexie, Ethan's having his panic attack and he's being an ass about it. Do you think you can come backstage and save us?" Brooklyn's voice was strained and hushed.

"I'm on my way." I hung up and tucked my phone into my pocket. "I've got to go backstage."

Both Isaac and Asher grew still. The air grew thick with tension.

"Go calm down Ethan." Miles said with a smile breaking the silence.

I gave them a small wave and took Hades with me toward the stage. Backstage here wasn't hard to find. It was easy to walk between two food carts and toward Ethan's band.

Ethan was about ten feet away from them, pacing and spinning his rings. Ethan's jaw length straight black hair was back in a ponytail again. Showing off the five silver hoops that ran up his earlobe. Since he was Isaac's identical brother they looked, well, identical. In everything but style. Although his eyes were always more chocolatey then Isaac's.

On his next pass I stepped in front of him, forcing him to stop.

His head snapped up, his eyes wide.

"Hi," I said, feeling lame.

He smiled a little. "Beautiful." His smoky smooth voice rolled through my ear, making my toes want to curl. I moved closer and slipped my arms around his neck. His arms wrapped around me, one at my lower back the other running up my spine. It was an Ethan hug, and I was desperate for it. Though, he also felt a little taller...

I held him tight as fear battered at me. "Why didn't you call?"

He exhaled as he buried his nose in my hair. "I didn't think you'd come."

I squeezed him tighter. "Always."

He relaxed against me, his body wrapping around mine as his spicy cologne filled my nose. "I was stupid."

"You weren't the only one." I rasped as my eyes burned.

He lifted his head and pressed his lips against my temple. "We were both stupid."

"Yep." I looked up at him and had to ask. "Did you get taller?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, we both grew an inch or so in the last month. Ma was pissed because we needed all new clothes immediately."

I shook my head. "Did she make you empty your closet?"

He sighed. "She may as well have."

I laughed as I pulled back, letting my hands slid down his hard chest before I moved back a step.

His eyes were warm when they met mine. "This is the biggest crowd..."

"I know. And you guys will do amazing." I said in a soothing voice. "How many hours have you practiced the new set?"

"Around thirty-five," he admitted, his cheeks tinting a rose color.

"How did you feel last night after rehearsal?" I asked as usual.

"Great. I felt like we had it." His lips lifted into a half grin as he met my eyes.

"Then you've got it down," I told him. "You never would have gone home if you didn't."

He nodded, his face relaxing. "You're right."

"Hey! We're on!" Ryan shouted from his spot between Jake and Riley. His gaze found me. "Is he done wiggin' out?"

I nodded before looking back up at him. "You're ready."

His eyes ran down my face to my lips. He kissed me hard and fast sending my heart into overdrive. Then he was walking off toward the stage and past a gaping Ryan. My face burned as I tried to calm my body down.

Smirking, Ryan followed him to the stage.

"Lexie..." Jake said, smiling. The jock's green eyes sparkled. His short styled blonde hair streaked with lighter blonde highlights. His cute face was lit up as if it were Christmas.

"What was that?" Riley asked. The lilac haired cutie gaped at me. Jake and Riley walked toward me. I only had a few heartbeats to figure out what I was going to say.

Jake smirked as he wrapped his arm through mine. "You and I need to talk, missy."

"You and her? More like all of us," Riley stated, her brown eyes still wide. "I thought you liked Zeke."

Oh, fuck it. "I like all of them."

Riley brow drew down. "What?"

Jake looked down at me. "Isn't she up to speed yet?"

I smiled. "Nope."

Jake's mouth dropped.

"What do you mean, all of them?" Riley raised an eyebrow as she tucked a stray lilac hair behind her ear.

"Look, I'll explain on our way to the fine arts building. Tonight is the last night to pick up my painting." I pulled out my phone and sent a text to tell the guys where I was going.

"And see who won." Jake pointed out. I rolled my eyes as my phone chimed.

Tough Guy: Not alone!

Oh, so now he appears.

Alexis: I'm with Jake and Riley.

Superman: I'll meet you there.

Alexis: Ok.

Zeke didn't text again. I tucked my phone away then headed away from the concert. As we walked, I filled her in quickly. That I was in love with all the guys, and that I had kissed all of them.

Riley couldn't quite believe it. "All of them?"

I nodded. "And Miles has this idea..."

I filled her in on that too. It was like once the lock was broken, all my secrets came pouring out of my mouth.

By the time we reached the building, Riley was all caught up. She shook her head. "No, that's..." Riley turned to me. "If you're crushing on all of them the same... that's not love. You can only love one person at a time."

"Says who?" Jake countered.

"Well, that's what's happened." I could hardly believe it myself and I was living it. "I know it sounds crazy-"

"No, it doesn't sound crazy." Riley turned to me, her eyes flashing. "It sounds impossible. I broke up with Zeke because he was in love with you. And I thought you felt the same way about him."

A spark lit in my stomach as I stopped walking. "I do."

She scoffed. "That's not how it works."

I dropped Jake's arm and crossed my arms over my chest while I tried to hold onto my temper. "Maybe not for you, but it's my reality." I eyed her. "And you might understand if you'd been around the last few months."

She shrugged. "I've been busy-"

"With Ryan. Too busy to call me back. Too busy to answer texts." I shook my head. "You weren't here, Riley. You don't get to pop back in and

start judging me when you've been too wrapped up in your own love life to even answer the fucking phone."

"That's not fair."

"No, that's me calling you on your shit," I snapped, my arms dropping. "What's not fair is you dropping your friends because you got a boyfriend. And then come back in telling me how I feel is impossible."

She looked at me as if she didn't know me. "Are you actually thinking of trying to date all of them?" Hades moved between me and Riley, pressing his body against my leg.

I clenched my jaw and didn't answer. I didn't owe her an answer, she hadn't been here and this was my shit to deal with.

"'Cause that's fucked up." Riley's gaze ran over me. "I didn't think you were that kind of girl."

That spark turned into a blaze. "What kind of girl is that, Riley?"

"A girl who messes around with a bunch of guys." She wrinkled her nose as if something foul was standing in front of her.

"It's not that simple-"

"It is that simple," she snapped. "You mess around with that group of guys and you're... everything Jessica and her bitch friends say you are."

I scoffed. "If that's all it takes for your opinion of me to change that drastically..." I shook my head. "You're not the kind of friend I need."

Her lips pinched together. "You're right. It's none of my business. It's your life." She stepped back from me, her arms open at her sides. "I'll see you around." Riley walked off leaving us in silence.

"Wow." Jake turned to me with his mouth hanging open. "I figured she'd need some time to adjust to the idea but damn..."

My heart sank. "A part of me thinks she's right."

Jake scowled at me. "Oh, honey, no. She's not."

I shook my head. "If this wasn't me, what would you think of that person?"

He moved closer. "Just because it's different, doesn't mean it's wrong. As long as everyone knows and agrees, what's wrong with that?"

I held his gaze "You have a point."

"I'm going to go talk to her." Jake decided. "I'll fill her in on how hard its been for you. Maybe she'll get it then." He squeezed my arm and went after Riley.

Shoulders tense, I turned and went into the metal hangar like building. If that was how Riley reacted, how would people who didn't know me react? They'd think the same thing. But did I care? No, but... I'd think the same thing if someone else was dating several guys.

I made my way through the temporary walls that held the artwork. I might have thought the same thing, but I wouldn't have shouted at them about it. Not wanting to dive too deep into why Riley's words hurt so much, I focused on finding my painting. It took a bit of time but I found the large canvas.

It was a painting of a wolf pack prowling toward the front of the canvas. All five wolves were highly detailed. Each different from the next. At the center a large wide black wolf with blue eyes showed its fangs. To his right, a tall lean gray and brown wolf that was built for speed. Next to him, a tan and white wolf that had a more playful look on its face. To the left of the black wolf was a gray one, tall, majestic, certain. Next to him was another dark gray wolf with haunted eyes. It was the best painting I'd ever done.

It was the guys. I hadn't meant to paint them this way but once I realized it, I couldn't stop. They were family, a team. And now they weren't together and it was my fault. Guilt ate at my heart as I found a blue and white ribbon hanging from the frame. First place. I won my category. Then why the hell wasn't I happy? Sighing, I took the ribbon off the corner of the canvas and looked down at it. It was real and solid in my hand. And it didn't look like it was a fake... I won. My heart grew a little lighter as I took my painting down off the temporary wall and started back toward the door.

I was almost there when someone stepped out from behind another fake wall. Hades moved and growled. My heart jumped as I fell back into a defensive stance. Only to realize it was Dylan.

ylan stayed perfectly still until I relaxed my stance. My ex was cute. Sapphire eyes and brown hair made his already boyishly cute face handsome. His eyes ran over me. "You good?"

"Yeah... fine." I picked up my painting from where I dropped it and straightened.

"I saw that you won first place in the oil paintings," Dylan said. "That painting is pretty incredible."

My face burned. "Thanks. How'd you do in photography?"

He held up a blue ribbon. "First place."

"Congrats." I started toward the door. Dylan fell in step beside me. Hades stayed put between us. Good boy.

"Wow, he really got big," Dylan said, clearly trying to come up with something that would fill the awkward silence.

"Well, yeah, they do that." I didn't know how else to answer that as we stepped outside. "How is everyone?"

Asher walked around a bend in the walk way. As soon as he spotted us, he lengthened his stride.

"My friends are doing good, apparently Jake and Derrick are working on their issues," he said. "Which has definitely put Derrick in a less pissy mood."

"That's good. I hope it works this time." I looked up at Asher as he stopped beside me.

"Dylan." His arm slid around my waist so his hand could hold my hip. "How's it going?"

Dylan's eyes narrowed on Asher's hand on my hip. "Can't complain. You?"

"Not really." Asher's voice was firm with an edge. His fingers tightened on my hip as he looked down at me. "The guys are waiting."

I eyed Asher then Dylan. What was going on here? Asher had never touched me in front of Dylan before... "Um, yeah, okay..."

"See ya later." His hand on my hip pulled me to get me going.

Somehow I ended up on the side furthest from Dylan. "Um, bye."

Dylan's eyes had moved to my chest. On the delicate rose gold angelwing necklace that Miles had surprised me with last week. He gestured at his own neck. "I thought I got you silver."

My fingers wrapped around my necklace as we kept walking. "You did. Miles got me one that works with my complexion a couple of weeks ago." It was also more delicate and simpler. More my style. Asher's arm urged me to pick up the pace. "See ya around." What did he care what necklace I was wearing?

We were almost back to the concert area when a chill ran down the back of my neck. I forced Asher to stop and looked around the empty pathway. No one... Just Asher and me. Then why did I still feel like I was being watched?

"Ally?"

"Nothing." Chalking it up to paranoia, I shook my head and started walking again.

Two hours later, I pulled up to Rory's house. The concert had gone great and the crowd had been packed. But I was tired and ready to just curl up with Hades and go to bed. I opened my door and let him out on my side, not even bothering with the leash.

I went to the back and pulled my painting out of the back of my '87 Blazer. Tucking it under my arm, I made my way across the bright lawn. Should I call Zeke? We were all going to Miles' house tomorrow for a family meeting, shouldn't I talk to him alone before then? I was at my door when I felt it. That chill running down my neck. Sighing, I set the painting down, turned and froze. A black rotting human skeleton was shambling down the street. My heart pounded in my ears, my hands broke out into a sweat. Was I dreaming? Tell me I'm dreaming. Because I can't take having

raised a zombie right now! Cold terror shot through me. Please, let the eyes be gold, please.

I was starting to take deep breaths when a car drove by, going through the skeleton. The tension left me practically sagging against the door. It wasn't a zombie. That only left... a ghost.

I walked back across the lawn slowly. Is this what happens if a ghost rots long enough? My stomach rolled at the black sludge hanging from its ribs. I moved past the wards. It took a shambling step toward me. I couldn't not take them to the Veil. That would just be cruel. I lowered my barriers a smidge. Memories slipped into my head. Ones that were extremely familiar. Rage burned in my heart as my will snapped out, wrapped around his neck and squeezed tight. "You sick motherfucker." It was the serial killer. The one who attacked me at the bowling alley. I dropped.

We landed in the Veil. I rolled and got back to my feet in a heartbeat. The vines were already wrapping around his soul and sucking all the extra energy from him as if they were starving. I watched, with a heavy burning in my chest as he screamed. For once, I didn't care that a soul was in pain. I didn't worry over if he'll survive. I just watched and waited.

It took longer than usual, but when the vines finally let him go he was barely an image. That's okay. If he still had form... I strode toward him and clocked him across the jaw as hard as I could. He flew back and dropped to the grass with a sickening thud. I moved through the grass to him and stomped my heel right into his balls. His eyes bulged as he cried out. I didn't care, the fucker was sick. He cupped his balls and curled into the fetal position. I punched him again. But I wasn't done. I drove my foot into his gut. His face began to turn purple. After hitting him in the groin one more time, a ball of light came down from the Way.

Breathing hard, I straightened and backed up. He deserved so much more but I wasn't judge, jury or executioner. The gold door opened. For the first time since crossing the dead, it was empty. An icy wind blasted across the Veil. Frost began to crawl from the door. The fucker slid across the grass toward the door.

His eyes bulged as he rolled over and tried to scramble away from the door. "No! No! No!"

I watched as the arctic wind blew through the Veil and moved back through the door. Slowly dragging him toward the darkness. His fingers dug into the plants, the sweat on his forehead turned to ice. The wind never touched me. Not even when I walked through the whirlwind and knelt down in front of him. He was whimpering when I met his eyes.

My hands grabbed his. "Burn in hell, Shane." I jerked his hands from the plants. A primal scream ripped through the Veil as he was sucked into the blackness. The door slammed shut and shot back into the Way.

I pulled myself back out. When I opened my eyes and I was instantly disgusted. Shoving open the front door, I ran to the kitchen and turned on the sink faucet. I started scrubbing my shaking hands, using more and more soap. Why wouldn't this feeling go away? I washed my hands frantically, building up a good lather. It was awhile before my hands finally felt clean.

Needing to talk, I leaned against the counter and pulled out my phone to call Zeke. Then hesitated. Zeke hadn't been answering my calls. A knot formed in my chest. This one wouldn't be any different. He didn't want to talk to me, fine. But I had needed to talk to him over the last month. My temper sparked. What kind of fucking friend does this? I get needing time, I understand wanting space. But a month? That's it.

Blood pounding in my ears, I left Hades in the house, grabbed my painting and headed back outside. The engine roared as I drove toward to Zeke's house.

Yeah, I hurt him. I get that. But I was done with the silent treatment. Furious, I barely slowed down to turn into his driveway. Gravel flew as I slid on the road. He doesn't get to treat me like I don't exist!

The truck skidded to a stop. I jumped out without even turning off the engine, jerked the painting out and strode toward the house. I didn't knock, I just shoved open the door and went straight down the hall. When I reached his room, I slammed the door open. Zeke was scowling as he looked up at me from his desk. Genetics had made Zeke scary looking with a wide brow, cheek bones and jaw. But it had always been the look in his ice blue eyes that scared people, not just that he was a giant mountain of muscle. With his black hair and blue eyes, he still made my heart pound and it pissed me off.

"I won. Since you haven't been around, here!" I threw the painting at him, he ducked as it sailed over his head. "Enjoy it!" I turned and stormed out.

Heavy bootsteps came down the hall but I didn't give a fuck. I was tired of this bullshit! I was about to reach my open truck door when his large calloused hand wrapped around my upper arm and pulled me to a stop.

"What the fuck is the matter with you?"

I turned on him, throwing his arm off me. "What's wrong with me? What the fuck is wrong with you?" I shouted. "I fucked up. I get it! But this silent treatment bullshit is fucked up too!"

"Try being lied to for months!" His face flushed.

"I wasn't trying to lie to you!"— I clenched my fists — "I didn't know what to do!"

"You could've tried fucking being honest!" His eyes blazed as his nostrils flared.

"How? I was scared!" Didn't he fucking get it? "I was terrified that you'd look at me exactly the way you're looking at me right now!"

"How the fuck am I looking at you?"

"Like you can't fucking stand me!" I couldn't keep it in anymore. "You guys are the only people in my life I care about. All I can say is I'm sorry over and over again!"

He pointed at me. "You should have told me Ethan kissed you."

"He said he didn't remember!" My voice cracked as he dropped his hand. "Why create a problem when there wasn't one?"

"But he did remember, didn't he?" The veins in his neck stood out more against his skin.

"I didn't know that." I stopped shouting as the burning in my chest cooled and turned into a deep ache.

"When did you kiss the others?" His hands clenched at his sides.

I scoffed. "Do you really want to know?"

"I want to know where I stand." His voice grew deeper than usual as his eyes grew hard, his shoulders rigid. Fine.

"Asher was... we went swimming. And we kissed. I had already talked to the doctor and knew I didn't have long." My eyes burned as I stared at the shirt over his wide muscled chest. "I told him it wouldn't work because there was someone else. He guessed it was you."

"And?" His voice was like a blade to my heart.

"He said he'd step aside for you." Tears rolled down my face. This was the end of me and Zeke. After he hears it all... He'll never want to speak to me again.

"Isaac?"

The tears flowed faster. "It was on the cliff. The fucking demon was trying to make him jump and... I kissed him."

"Miles?"

"We were dancing..." I swallowed hard, trying to ease the tightness in my throat. "The night I told everyone."

"My fucking birthday," he spat out.

Tears fell even faster. "Yeah." That little fact still made me feel lower than dirt. He had every right to be beyond done with me. When he walked away, it'll be my fault.

"Why the fuck are you crying?" he bit out through clenched teeth.

"'Cause I know we're done. You don't want me anymore." I sniffed and tried to take a deep breath through the anvil that was suddenly crushing my chest. "And it's my fault.'

He scoffed and shook his head. "Not want you? Not wanting you is like not breathing. It's fucking impossible! What the hell do you think I've been doing for a month? Every single day, I'd be doing fine. Then something would remind me of you or you'd call, text. Or, hell, I'd just fucking break down and listen to your messages. And then next morning, I have to fucking start all over again!"

My temper caught fire. "That's what you've fucking been doing? Are you fucking serious?"

"Yeah! I've been trying to get you out of my system because I know how this shit is going to go down and it just leads to pain!" He turned away and paced several steps as he ran his hand through his hair. "But nothing fucking works!" He turned back to me. "I can't fucking ignore you! Why? Why did you have to come into my life and make me fucking care? I was fine! I was getting through! Even okay sometimes!"

"Then what? I came along and ruined it?" My hands shook. "Go fuck yourself! *You* kissed *me*, Zeke!"

"Then maybe I shouldn't have fucking kissed you!" His deep voice echoed through the trees.

It was like a blow to the stomach, it took my breath away. I stepped back away from him, my chest an aching hole. "You want me out of your life? Fine. I'm gone. Enjoy the camping trip." Eyes filling, throat tight, I turned away and climbed into the Blazer. Refusing to look at him, I backed down his driveway and got back on the road.

Tears ran down my face the entire way home. It was hard to breathe... I sniffed and wiped my face when I finally parked outside Rory's. In a pain filled fog, I got out and headed inside. Hades was whining at the door when I opened it.

"Hey, baby." I scratched his ears. Fresh tears ran down my face. He'd never call me that again... Quickly, I wiped my face and headed for the stairs.

"Lexie?" Rory called from the living room. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not going on the camping trip." My voice cracked as I hurried up the stairs.

"What do you mean?" Rory moved as if to get up.

"I'm staying home." I wiped my face as I hit the second floor. Hades moved ahead of me and into my room. I shut the door and locked it. Then I lost it. Tears flowed down my face as I sank to the floor. Hades moved between my knees and laid his head on my shoulder. I clung to him. It was over...

There was a knock on the door. "Lexie? What's wrong?"

I lifted my head and swallowed hard. "I'm fine."

"Did something happen?" His voice grew softer. "Is this about the sentencing coming up?"

"No, it's not that." I tried to keep my voice even. "It's something else."

"Alright. I'm downstairs if you need me." Rory's footsteps headed back down the stairs.

I broke down and sobbed into Hades' fur. The pain couldn't last forever, right?

* * *

Zeke

HER TAIL LIGHTS disappeared from view. The aching pit in the middle of my chest had me struggling to breathe. She was gone... It was better to hurt now and get it over with. I glared at the end of the driveway, waiting. She was probably going to come back any minute and call me an asshole. That's what I expected. That's what always happened before... I just needed to hold on until she left again.

"You're an idiot." Sylvie's voice made me jump.

I turned to her. "What the fuck, Sylvie?"

She shook her head, her eyes hard. "You just let her leave?"

I turned back towards the driveway. No headlights. She wasn't coming back... everything inside me jumbled together as I walked past her and toward the house. "You don't know what's going on."

"Oh, so, you and all the boys don't have feelings for Lexie?" She turned and raised a knowing eyebrow.

I stopped and turned back to her. "How do you know that?"

She gave me a 'really' look. "You two were fighting and neither one of you have learned volume control."

I closed my eyes and cursed. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Of course you don't." She shrugged. "You never want to talk about the heavy stuff, Zeke."

"It's none of your business." Needing space, I started toward the door of the garage.

"Just tell me one thing..." Her voice changed to the one she always used when I was in trouble as a little kid. It brought me to a halt in the garage doorway. "What was this really about tonight?"

Scowling, I turned back to her. "What the fuck are you talking about? You were fucking listening."

She surveyed me. "I know you. It wasn't about the others."

I clenched and unclenched my jaw. I didn't want to hear this. But it was Sylvie. I always listened to what she had to say.

"This was about you being scared." She crossed her arms. "You push everyone away that you could possibly care about."

"That's nothing new." I started toward the garage where my weight room was in the back. The need to hit something making me clench my fists.

"But this is the first time a girl that mattered refused to budge," Sylvie barely even raised her voice.

I stopped.

"Zeke, if you've found someone who understands you, who makes you feel...." She sighed. "After the fucking hell you've gone through... don't let go of her because she scares the shit out of you."

"She'll choose someone else." My voice was a dry rasp.

"Maybe. If you walk away? Definitely. But then again, if you leave first then that means it's your choice not her's. Right?" Sylvie's boots crunched in the gravel then echoed on the porch before the door closed. My gut twisted itself into knots as my shoulders ached. I headed for the garage door with Sylvie's voice in my head.

CHAPTER 3

AUGUST 16TH, 7:00 A.M.

Zeke

turned off the engine then got out as the sun was just peeking over the mountains. After a sleepless night of pacing and thinking, I was already exhausted. Hitting the heavy bag for hours didn't even help me sleep. I slammed the jeep door closed and headed toward Miles' house. Sylvie's words wouldn't leave my head all night. They just kept eating at me. Then there was what I said to her... I needed to talk to Miles alone, he was probably still in bed...

I shut off the alarm and started across the foyer. Coffee would clear up my head.

"Get. Out. Of. My. House." Miles' voice was like ice, sending a chill down my spine. I stopped in the foyer.

"It's not yours, it's your mothers." The cockiness in those words... Rage pulsed through me as I stormed into the living room. Miles was dressed for the day, standing at the back of one of the sofas, glaring at the tall man. High cheekbones, a strong jaw, black hair and the same eyes as Miles.

Son of a bitch... Miles' dad's suit was immaculate even though it was only seven in the morning.

"No. It's part of the trust Mother set up behind your back." Miles crossed his arms over his chest. "One that I had access to at eighteen. One that doesn't have your name anywhere near it."

Miles' father chuckled. "She was always a smart one."

"Yes, she is." Miles' shoulders pushed back making him stand straighter. "Now, leave before I call the police and have you arrested for breaking and entering."

His father eyed him. "You haven't been answering your phone."

"I haven't answered my phone in over a year. Why does it suddenly matter now?" An edge slid into Miles' voice. I stepped into the room, drawing their notice for the first time.

"We need to talk about your future." His dad turned back to Miles. "And not wasting it with the psychotic."

Psychotic? Huh. Guess that was a step up from last time. Trailer trash had been thrown around.

"I'm not interested in anything you have to say. Not now, not ever." Miles dropped his arms to his sides. "Now, get out."

"Miles-"

"Don't." Miles' lips flattened together. "Just leave."

Tense silence fell as he walked toward the door. He paused. "About this girl-"

"If you mention her again, I'll be getting a shovel." Miles's voice was emotionless, chilling. A cold chill ran down my spine. How the fuck did he know about Lexie?

His father gave an amused chuckle. "You really are my son."

"I'm nothing like you." Miles' eyes were hard as he glared at his father.

"Maybe, maybe not." He grinned as he strode by me and out the door.

Neither one of us moved until the sound of an engine faded away completely.

"What the fuck happened?" I growled as I walked further into the living room.

Miles closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I came downstairs and he was here."

"What did he want?" I started pacing. Whenever Miles' dad showed up, bullshit usually followed. Along with blackmail attempts and us scrambling to cover our asses.

Miles sighed. "He wanted to talk about my future."

I cursed as I ran my hand through my hair.

"I'll have the locks changed while we're camping." Miles shook his head. "And make sure the supernaturals have a key."

"You okay?" I eyed him. The shadow of bags hung under his eyes. They weren't dark but they never were for him.

"Yes." He turned and headed for the kitchen. I followed. It wasn't like I could get Miles to talk about it if something was bothering him. No one ever could. But that wasn't the only thing.

"He knows about Lexie?"

Miles nodded as he filled a mug with coffee then slid it over the counter to me.

"What did he say about her?" I took it and leaned against the counter. If we could get ahead of him...

"He knew basic information." Miles finished making his coffee then leaned against the other counter beside the sink. "Her name, where she's lived..."

"You think he has a tail on her?" It wouldn't be unheard of. Arthur liked to keep tabs on Miles and had him followed before.

"It'd have to be someone new." His eyes unfocused, the gears already working. "I've got his usual on retainer."

"Miles?"

Miles' gaze met mine over his glasses.

"This isn't good."

His eyes flashed with ice. "Really? Are you sure? My abusive father knows who she is and where she lives. I thought that was a good thing." Miles turned and slammed his mug into the sink shattering it. Coffee splattered over the tiled back splash and sink. Miles braced his hands on the counter and took several deep breaths.

I waited until he had control again. It wasn't often that Miles lost his temper like this. In fact, I don't think anyone else had ever seen it.

When Miles straightened and turned back to me, he was stone faced. "I'll put his usual guy on him. Find out if he has a tail on her. If so, convince them it's not worth their time."

"That should work." I took a drink of my coffee.

"We can't tell her she might have a tail, it'll raise too many issues." He grabbed a dish towel and wiped off his hands and shirt. "But if we don't, she'll be upset we kept it from her."

The look on her face as I yelled at her last night hit me. My throat seemed to grow thicker as I swallowed. I eyed Miles. His jaw was clenched,

his fingers were tapping the corner of the sink. No... I couldn't talk to Miles about this. I fucked up, I'd have to fix it on my own.

* * *

Lexie

Cursing, I crumpled up the picture I had been working on and tore it out of my sketch book. Muttering under my breath, I threw it to join the others on the coffee table in the living room. Absently tapping my charcoal pencil on my sketchbook, I tried to get my shit together.

I eventually got myself to bed sometime early this morning. But sleep seemed to have its own grudge against me and stayed away. I huffed. Just like I was going to have to. I closed my eyes and rested my cheek against the back couch cushion.

I needed to stay away. How the hell was I going to do that? During the rest of the summer was easy but once school started... My throat tightened. Seeing them in the hallway? No. No I couldn't do it. Home school? I could go on independent study for the last year of school. Maybe work full time to save enough money to get out of town as soon as I graduate? Hell, if I busted my ass, I probably could graduate early...

I watched as my phone vibrated on the table. Again. The guys had been texting me on and off all morning. At least the twins had. My chest seemed hollow as I stared at my phone. What the hell had I been expecting? That we'd work it out and everything would be okay? This was the real world and reality didn't work that way.

A mistake. Kissing me was a mistake. Everything I was seemed to sink into the darkness inside me. It just didn't matter anymore. It was a mistake, moving here was a mistake. Everything was just.... I was a mistake. Mom had been right all along...

Miserable, I picked my phone up off the table.

Nemo: Are you coming over early tonight?

No, sweetie, I wasn't coming over at all... Zeke wanted me out of his life. That meant out of his friends' lives too. My eye lids were heavy from crying last night as I tried to figure out how to tell him.

I picked up my sketch book but instead of drawing, I started writing.

Guys, I love you all but I can't come around anymore... No. If I use can't they'll ask why. Maybe if I just made it sound like my decision? I scratched it out and tried again. I'm sorry, but I won't do more damage to your relationships with each other. I couldn't live with myself if that happened. I've decided to stay away for a while. A while... more like forever... That hollow, numb feeling grew as I tried to figure out the best way to say this. Several more tries, several more slashed out lines that didn't work.

Someone knocked. I dropped my sketchbook down onto the coffee table and shuffled over toward the door. Maybe I was never going to find the right words to tell them... maybe it should be a fast and clean break... Just get it done and go. Yeah, that was probably the best for them. I opened the front door and looked up.

Zeke's wide shoulders filled the doorway. His bloodshot eyes met mine, the bags under them were heavy. When he didn't say anything, I figured out why he was here.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my set of keys. I slid the ring with all the guys' house keys off and held it out to him without a word. I expected to feel something. Sadness, anger... something. But it was like I had nothing left to give. I was empty.

"Your door wasn't locked." His voice was a rough rasp.

"So?" My voice was as hollow as the rest of me. "Take your keys and go."

He looked down at the keys in my hand, his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. He opened his mouth to say something, but he stopped himself. His hands balled into fists at his sides.

I made it easy for him. I let go of the keys. He automatically snagged them before they fell too far. I started to close the door.

"That's not what I'm here for."

I stopped and looked up at him around the half-closed door. "What else do I have? Your shirt?" When he only clenched his jaw, I shook my head. "All that stuff burned in New Orleans."

Shadow and light fought it out in his eyes as he looked at me again and shook his head.

I racked my brain trying to think of what he'd want. Only one thing came to mind. "If you're worried about what I'm going to tell the guys, you can relax. I wasn't even going to mention you."

His face grew slightly paler as he shook his head.

"I'm done trying to guess what's going on in your head. You're going to have to actually say words." When he didn't say anything I started to close the door again.

The door was almost shut when he smacked the palm of his hand against the door stopping it. The sound of flesh hitting metal was loud in the silence. When the door opened again, his eyes met mine. "I hate these fucking talks."

"Then walk away." I held his gaze without flinching. "There's nothing keeping you here."

He pressed his lips together. "You... I..." He swallowed hard. "You're here. That's enough."

I wanted to feel something, warmth, irritation, anything. But there was nothing but the emptiness. "I'm backing out of your lives. Out of school. Out of town really. You guys can go back to normal."

His eyes narrowed on mine. "And what would you do?"

I gave him an empty smile. "What I always do. Figure it out. Alone."

His eyes ran over me. When they met mine again, worry seeped in with the shadows.

I pushed the door shut and headed to the kitchen. I was pulling a bottle of water out of the fridge when the door slammed open.

I shut the fridge and turned as Zeke stepped into the living room and slammed the door shut behind him. He didn't want me around but he was just going to walk into my house? A spark struck in the darkness. Just a tiny glow.

He strode toward me. "Kissing you wasn't a fucking mistake."

That spark surged into a small flame in my chest. Pretty, but too small to feel.

He stopped a couple of feet away from me. "I had thought about it, you, a million times. The only thing I'd change about it was that I walked away from you."

That flame spread sluggishly as if finding wet kindling.

He shook his head. "You're in my head, Lexie. Everyday. Now, when I'm exhausted, hurting or out of it... I don't go somewhere to deal with it. I go looking for you. I've never... needed someone before." He stepped closer. "And it scares the shit out of me."

That one flame spread into many.

Zeke's gaze ran over me, his jaw set. "I said that because it would have been easier if it was my fault when..." His voice was thick and gravelly as he continued. "When you chose someone else."

It was like throwing gasoline on a fire. "You. Fucking. Prick."

Relief filled his eyes as he took a step back.

I slammed the closed bottle onto the counter. "Do you have any fucking idea the kind of shit you put all of us through? Put me through?"

He went to answer but I didn't let him.

"You said it was a mistake, Zeke!" The nails of my right hand bit into my palm as the heat built in my chest. "Do you have any fucking idea how many times I've been told I'm a mistake?"

His eyes snapped to mine as his lips parted.

"No, you fucking don't. Because that would be a conversation you'd avoid like the plague!" I strode past him toward the door.

He watched me as I walked past him. "There's my girl."

I stopped dead and turned on him. "Your girl? I'm not your girl, Zeke. Being your girl would mean we had that conversation about us. Remember? The one you kept fucking dodging. So, why wouldn't I run to you the second someone else kisses me? Probably because you didn't seem to give a shit! You're a fucking master at it. You could give lessons on not giving a shit!"

His temper flared to life in his eyes as he opened his mouth to fire back. Somehow, he managed to close his mouth without saying a word. A first.

But I wasn't done. "You bark orders and expect everyone to fall in line. And the worst part about that is that the people around you go along with it!" My heart raced in my chest. My body shook as I took a deep breath. "We all do it your way because we care. Because we want you to know it and it's the only damn way you let us show you!"

He looked over my head at the stairs behind me, his jaw clenching and unclenching.

"But if someone screws up, do we get forgiven? No! We get grounded and have to earn your trust back." My voice cracked as his eyes shot to mine. "When was the last fucking time someone made you earn their trust back after you fucked up, Zeke?"

His silence and blazing eyes were more than enough of an answer.

"Because you do. All the time." My eyes burned as they filled. "You fuck up just as much as the rest of us and we're just supposed to forgive

you." Tears I didn't know I still had in me burned a path down my face. "Well. Fuck you. This time it fucking hurt!"

Silence rang in my ears as I wiped my face and sniffed. I shook as I tried to pull my shit together again.

"I'm sorry." His voice was a rough whisper as he stepped closer.

I grew still. I could count the number of times Zeke apologized to anyone on one hand.

He eyes ran over my face then back to meet mine. "You're right. About everything. I do all of that. It's just... it's not easy having someone walk around with a piece of you."

"That's what family is." My voice was rough in the quiet of the house.

"I really didn't mean to hurt you." He looked down at the floor between our feet. "I... panicked and made a giant mistake."

I crossed my arms over my chest. He needed to understand something. "I can deal with panic. I can deal with mistakes."

He lifted his head, his shining eyes met mine.

"I won't deal with cruel. If you ever go that far again..." I shook my head. I didn't know exactly what I'd do. But it wouldn't be around him, that I was sure of.

He reached out to hold the back of my neck.

I backed up out of his reach. "Don't touch me right now."

He curled his fist and dropped his hand, understanding in his eyes. An awkward silence fell.

It was several minutes before Zeke shifted on his feet. "If I'm going to go to the family meeting tonight, I need to go to work." His eyes met mine. "Are you going to Miles' tonight?"

I nodded.

He let out a long breath he'd been holding and headed for the door. Before walking out he paused. "Happy birthday, Baby." He slipped outside and closed the door behind him.

I sat down in the armchair and tried to get through the mess in my chest. He didn't want me to leave... that was good... wasn't it? Thoughts of tonight slammed to the front of my mind. This whole thing might not matter by the end of tonight. My stomach churned. I was so lost in my head I didn't even notice Tara until she sat down on the arm of the couch closest to me. My cousin Tara was pretty. There was no denying it. She had her mom's blue eyes, light blonde hair and pert nose.

"That was some fight." For once her voice wasn't arrogant or shrill. "Are you okay?"

I lifted my eyes to look at her. Tara...caring? "As well as could be expected."

She gave me a strained smile. "You have plans for your birthday?"

I guess I did but now... I just wanted to go to bed and hide there with Hades. "I have some stops to make first."

"It's kinda obvious you've been crying all night." Her honesty caught my attention. "Your eyes are swollen."

I shrugged with one shoulder. "I'll live."

She gave me a timid smile. "I could show you how to get the swelling to go down. No one would know when you're done."

Tara was being helpful? I wasn't even going to start poking at this. "I'd appreciate it."

Her smile grew more confident. "I'll get the ice."

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ara's ice pack worked. A half an hour later, my eyes were back to normal. Which meant I had to go see everyone else. I sighed as I parked between the twins' house and Asher's. My grip on the steering wheel tightened as I took several deep breaths. Okay, shit hasn't been great. But we were talking. That was a start. Yeah, the morning didn't start great but it's a new hour. I can do this.

It wasn't long before I was up the stairs and going through the twins' front door. Something delicious hit my nose. My stomach growled, reminding me that I had skipped breakfast. I ignored it as I looked in the living room for the guys. Nope. Empty. I followed my nose into the kitchen. Maria, the twins' mom, was at the scraped-up dining table reading a newspaper. Maria was a beautiful woman. Thick black hair, the same chocolate eyes as the twins. It wasn't hard to see where they got their looks.

Ethan was at the stove singing a song to himself. "Sopes, sopes, you're so delicious, I love you more than all the other dishes."

I bit back a smile as Maria looked up from the paper. "Where have you been, young lady?"

I immediately stood up straighter. "I... um.... was busy?"

Maria frowned at me as she folded her paper and set it down. "Too busy to come over?"

"Everyone had a fight, Ma." Ethan shot over his shoulder before going back to what he was doing.

Maria sighed and shook her head. "Good thing it's over now, you were gone too long."

I relaxed and walked around the table to hug her.

"I've been stuck with these boys and they've been worse than normal." She squeezed me tight.

"I know, I'm sorry." I chuckled as I pulled back. "Where's Isaac?"

"Still asleep, as usual." Maria shook her head as she picked the paper up again.

"Beautiful, Ma made sopes last night. Want some?"

I turned and moved to his side. Sure enough there was a pile of plain sopes in a plastic bag. "Have I ever turned down food in this house?"

They both chuckled.

"Then make yours and I'll heat 'em up." Ethan used a small spatula to take one out of the pan and moved it onto a plate. Only to replace it with another.

"Oh, yum." I picked up a couple of sopes. The small circles were like thicker tortillas. But, oh, the goodness... I quickly made one. A swipe of beans, cheese and a little leftover shredded beef. I got a plate and set it beside Ethan. I made my next one. This one got a big scoop of leftover chicken verde, then cheese and a little pico de gio. By the time I was setting that on the plate, Ethan was handing me a heated one. "Sopes, sopes, you're so delicious, I love you more than all the other dishes... except tamales. And empanadas. And enchiladas... okay, I spoke too soon."

Ethan and Maria laughed.

Maria got to her feet. "You guys have a good day. And stay out of trouble."

"When have we not?" Ethan smirked.

"When you came home with tattoos." Maria shot back.

He cringed. "Oh, yeah..."

Maria turned to me. "I still can't believe you couldn't talk them out of it."

I raised my hands up in surrender. "It was too late when I found out."

Ethan chuckled. "Ma, you can't get Lexie to feel guilty about tattoos."

"I can try." Maria sent him a chiding look on her way out of the kitchen.

He turned back to the stove. "Yep, she's still pissed about that."

I chuckled. "I'm glad she doesn't know about mine."

Ethan narrowed his eyes at me. "Hmm. Blackmail material."

I shook my head and went back to making my other sope.

Soon, we were at the table and eating. I'll admit, it didn't take me long. Maria was an amazing cook and she always did everything from scratch.

Huh, maybe that's where Asher learned it. Asher... I was here for more than lunch. "So, are you coming to the meeting tonight?"

Ethan looked up from his food. "Yep. It's also your birthday, ya know?"

I nodded. "I know, I just want to make sure." Now I just needed to make sure the others were coming too.

"It's nothing to worry about, Beautiful. Miles probably just wants to make sure we aren't going to kill each other as soon as we all get together. A test run is always a good idea. Besides, there'll be cake. Who fights when there's cake?"

I snorted. Of course, I knew that wasn't the case. At least, not completely.

"What are your plans for the rest of the day?" Ethan put his napkin down. "Want to hang out?"

"My job today is to check in with everyone, one on one and make sure they're coming."

His eyes grew dimmer. "Oh. I thought you wanted to see me."

I met his eyes. "I do."

"That's not what you said." Ethan's voice was hurt. A little too hurt.

I narrowed my eyes at him. A grin spread across his face.

"You shit." I threw my napkin at him as he laughed. I picked up my plate and put it in the sink. "Now, I need to go ask Isaac if he's coming."

"You're checking in with everyone?" He set his napkin down.

"Yeah, it's my job today." As I walked past, he reached out and snagged me around the waist. He pulled, I landed in his lap sideways.

His eyes were warm as he settled me on his thighs, his arms around me. "I want to say happy birthday first." His nose brushed mine as hot shivers ran through me. He dipped his head, bringing his lips to mine. It was a soft sweet kiss that was completely out of his norm.

When I pulled back, I raised an eyebrow.

He smirked. "You're going to my brother's room. I'm not kissing you like I usually do, that reaction is just for me."

Reaction?

He chuckled as he let me go and I got off his lap. Hiding my smile from him, I left the kitchen and headed upstairs.

Isaac's bedroom door was closed. I should probably knock, but I never did with the twins. Opening the door, I peeked into the dim room. Isaac was out cold in his bed, on his side facing the inside wall. I smiled, closed the

door and quietly went to the other side of the bed. Thinking over my options, I decided not to scare the hell out of him today. Well, maybe not jumping on him scare the hell out of him. I carefully slid onto his bed and scooted up behind him. When I was close enough, I slowly moved my arm around him and rested my hand on his chest. When he still didn't move I shifted one knee over his hip. Limes filled my senses as he didn't move. I pressed my front against his back, and rested my cheek against the base of his neck. His hand moved to hold my hand to his chest.

"When did you wake up?" My lips brushed against his skin.

"When you opened the door." His voice was still half asleep as his other hand went to my knee on his hip. "You're not slick."

I snorted. "Never thought I was."

He let go of me and stretched. Groaning as he moved. When he stopped stretching I went right back to my spot.

He chuckled. "I like waking up to you in the morning." His hand pressed mine to his chest again.

"I kind of do too." I hated to admit it but it was the truth. "Are you coming to Miles' house tonight?"

He sighed. "Yeah. We need to know how big of a pain in the ass Zeke is going to be."

"Isaac."

He let go of my hand and shifted to his back so he could see me. "It's true."

I shook my head. "He's not the entire problem."

He looked shocked. "Who? Me?" He wrapped his arm around me and held me against his side. "I'd never start something like that."

"My bullshit alarm is going off." I said in a dry voice.

He chuckled. "Fine, all of us."

"Own it." I grinned.

He smiled as he shifted to face me. I hooked my leg over his automatically. His arms moved around me as he got closer. Everything was warm, safe and happy in that moment. I sighed and closed my eyes. His lips kissed my forehead, making me smile. Then my cheekbone. Then finally my lips, where he lingered. One small, sweet kiss after another. I forgot where we were, or what I was supposed to be doing. I just enjoyed his little kisses as he held me close. When he pulled back a little he kissed the tip of

my nose. He put his head back on the pillow and met my eyes. Amber light shined through the chocolate. It was uniquely Isaac. "Happy birthday."

"It is now." I smiled up at him.

"I think you need to stay the night." His arm tightened around my waist, pressing me against him.

I laughed softly. "I don't think your mom will agree."

"I could always sneak you in."

I shook my head. "No, Cookie Monster. As you said, I'm not slick. I'd probably fall down the stairs and into a drum set. Why would there be a drum set at the base of the stairs? I don't know but if I tried to sneak in, I guarantee that it would be there."

He chuckled. "Knowing your luck? Yeah. I don't see that being far off." His eyes ran over my face. "You going to hang out for a while?"

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and checked the time. "I still have to talk to Asher before Miles' house." I put my phone back in my pocket. "I actually have to go."

He pulled me closer and squeezed me tight.

I squeezed him back. "I'll see you in a couple of hours."

He let me go with a small smile. With my face warm, I climbed out of his bed and left his room. By the time I was outside, my face was back to normal.

When I reached Asher's house I didn't even knock. I simply opened the door and went inside. "Ash?"

"Kitchen!"

I headed across the foyer, through the pass through door and into the kitchen. Asher was in his apron and working.

"What ya doing?" I moved across the kitchen and hopped up on the island to sit.

"I'm making dinners for Jess for while we're camping." He put the lid on a casserole dish and put it away in the freezer.

"Doesn't she know how to cook?" I opened the cookie jar next to me and snagged a peanut butter one.

"Some, but it's reading the back of the box cooking." He grabbed a cookie himself, closed the lid then moved the jar away from me.

"Hey!" I managed around a bite of deliciousness.

He set the jar down on another counter and turned back to me. "You're not raiding the cookie stash."

I wrinkled my nose at him before finishing my cookie. "So, are you coming to Miles' house tonight?"

Asher stuffed the last of his cookie into his mouth and picked up a pot of water off the stove.

His non-answer was answer enough for me. "It's my birthday."

"It's a family meeting."

"One we need."

He poured the pot out into the strainer over the sink. "The last time we had a family meeting, I got in a fist fight with Zeke."

"And?" Yeah, that was messed up but...

He met my gaze. "I don't know what's going to happen if I see him again."

"Ash, he thought you were going to hit me." I tried to be patient. "He only pulled me back to sit on the couch."

Asher shook his head. "It wasn't really about that."

"I kind of figured." I kicked the heel of my sandal on the cupboards under me. "But, you two have been best friends since you were four."

He pushed away from the counter, moved to where the mixing bowl was and started adding ingredients. "I know."

"You can't let anything get in the way of that." Didn't he understand? "Especially not me."

He began mixing harder. "I'm still angry with him."

I raised an eyebrow. "But not at Miles? Or the twins?"

He shook his head as he poured the mixture into another casserole dish. He set the bowl down and went back to the strainer. "No, not the others." He picked up the strainer and went back to the casserole dish.

"Why?"

He stopped putting noodles in the dish and set the strainer down before turning to me. "Out of all of us, he needed to be the most honest."

"Um, what insane troll logic is this?" Was he serious?

Asher pulled the dish towel off his shoulder and began to fold it. "If anyone should have told us about his feelings, it was Zeke. We know his history. We know how hard it is for him to care about someone." He shook his head. "He should have fucking told us."

"Why should he have?" I wasn't getting this. "You didn't say anything; the twins didn't say anything. Neither did Miles. So, why are you really pissed at Zeke?"

"Because he's probably going to win." Asher met my eyes. "Because we know his history. We know how much it would take for him to care this much. It's going to come up and that'll be it. Everyone else will step aside for Zeke."

Stunned, I could only shake my head. "There is so much wrong in that answer that I don't know where to begin."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I know the guys. This is what's going to happen."

"First," I got off the counter and looked up at him, "I'm not something to win. I'm not a competition. Second, you have no idea what the others are going to say. Third, you're forgetting Zeke." I shook my head. "Zeke would never fucking agree to that. Plus, I don't even know if I can choose."

His eyes were rough as they met mine. "You can."

I scoffed. "Oh, I can? Really? 'Cause every time I even think about it, I start to have a damn panic attack."

Asher dropped his arms from his chest.

"Look. If you have to be pissed at someone." I raised my hand. "Be mad at me. Yell at me. But don't fucking let this destroy your relationship with one of your best friends."

He rubbed the back of his neck as he sighed. "I'll think about coming."

I met his eyes. "I hope you do." Because if the guys can't fix their relationships, I was walking away.

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stopped the Blazer in Miles' gravel circular driveway and shut off the engine. I leaned against the wheel and pressed my forehead against my hands. It wasn't even time for the trip and I was already tired. Coffee. Coffee would help. I pushed open my door and headed inside.

"I'm here!" I shut the front door behind me and headed for the kitchen.

"I'll be out in a minute." Miles' voice called from somewhere down the long hall. That worked for me, I made a beeline for the kitchen. Using Miles' fancy coffee machine, I made a cup of coffee for myself. I was sipping the liquid ambrosia when the mess in the sink caught my eye. Shards of ceramic were everywhere. Well, that's not good. I took another sip before setting down my mug and getting the garbage can from under the sink. I started picking up pieces carefully and throwing them away.

I was almost done when Miles came in. "What are you doing?"

"I'm picking up a broken mug. At least I think it was a mug." I sent him a smile over my shoulder.

He was frowning as he took the garbage can from me. "Here, let me get it."

"I'm almost done-"

"I made the mess then forgot about it." Miles stopped me from reaching into the sink again. "I'll take care of it."

"Alright, alright." I picked up my coffee and moved to sit on an empty counter. "So, it looks like the only one who might not come is Asher."

He continued cleaning the sink. "That's surprising. Did he say why?"

"Yeah, and it's a doozy." I explained what Asher had said and my response to it.

Miles was holding off a grin by the time he was done with the sink. "But he wouldn't say if he's coming or not?"

I shook my head. "If the guys can't fix their relationships..."

He put the garbage can back under the sink and turned to me. "I know. You'll leave."

My stomach knotted at the very thought. "I won't be responsible for destroying..." My throat tightened, cutting me off before I could even say the words.

Miles crossed the kitchen to stand in front of me. His hands went to my knees. "I know, Angel. And as difficult as it might be, I agree with you."

My eyes met his. "You do?"

His face was carefully blank as he rubbed his hands up the outside of my legs. "I do. Even if it's... painful."

"Are we even doing the right thing?" My shoulders rounded. "Should I even be here for this?"

His hands squeezed my legs. "Of course you should. You're a part of this family-"

"And why it might be torn apart."

His eyes were serene as they met mine. "We'll make it very clear that the relationships that come first right now are between the guys."

I nodded. "I'm sorry about all of this."

Miles leaned forward and kissed me gently. "I'm not."

I shook my head as my heart jumped. "Are you sure you're not crazy?"

Miles grinned. "So, tonight is about getting them talking again. I don't believe we should bring up the part with you until we're camping and they can't run off."

"Works for me."

"Happy birthday." His smile warmed. "How was your day? It doesn't look like you got much sleep."

Yeah, my under-eye baggage wasn't so great today. "Last night, I went over to Zeke's and threw my painting at his head. We fought."

"Have you spoken to him today?" His smile disappeared as he began tapping his fingers on my thigh.

"Yeah, he came over this morning and we fought some more." I summed up. If Miles ever learned what Zeke had said to me... I'm pretty

sure Zeke would be lectured to within an inch of his life.

He nodded. "And you've both dealt with it?"

"Yep." I picked up my coffee and took a sip. "So, how was your day?"

His eyes were shadowed as he smiled. "Not bad. Busier than I expected."

"Oh?"

"Something came up that demanded my attention." He looked down at my knee and ran his finger over a tiny old scar.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "That's answering the question without answering the question." I had noticed Miles doing it a few months back. He was extremely good at not answering questions he didn't want to answer.

"It is." His grin was back.

I sighed.

He smiled before leaning down and brushing my lips with his again. As always with Miles, I melted. My brain shut off as his hand held my jaw. Light, barely there kisses moved on to firmer, more insistent kisses. The tip of his tongue stroked my upper lip. I opened up to him and everything fell away. Miles could kiss... not just kiss but *kiss*. He did things with his tongue in my mouth that I'd never imagined. My fingers dug into his t-shirt and my breathing picked up as I kissed him back. Something dinged. Our kiss grew even softer until he pulled back.

His cheeks were pink as he met my eyes. "Someone's here."

"Um, uh, huh?" I couldn't even put a thought together.

He smiled down at me. "One of the guys is here."

"Right." I blinked hard, trying to jumpstart my brain again. "Guys..."

This time he did chuckle.

My face burned. "You only have yourself to blame for my memory loss."

He stepped back from the counter so I could get down. "I'll happily take the responsibility for that."

I got down as nervous energy ran through me. Needing to do something while the guys arrived. I looked through the cabinets and found a box of Club crackers. Ethan swore by them... I pulled them out and went to the fridge. Yep, cheese. I pulled out a couple of kinds, one of them, white sharp cheddar, Asher's favorite, then went to the counter with the cutting board. Miles, seeing what I was doing, pulled out a large platter and set it down for

me. He didn't say a word as the front door opened. My body grew tense. Miles squeezed my shoulders before going out to see who it was.

I focused on cutting slices of cheese and putting them on the platter. When I figured I had enough, I fanned out the crackers for easy grabbing.

The front door opened and closed again. A rock settled in my stomach. It really was a big platter. Maybe some meat? I took the cheese back to the fridge and pulled open the lunch meat drawer. Miles usually kept several kinds on hand. Turkey, chicken, oh salami... Isaac's favorite. I took everything back to the cutting board and started putting meat on the platter. Cutting some to the right size, while just fanning out the salami. When that was done, I started putting stuff away.

The front door opened and closed again. My heart jumped into my throat. Olives. We needed olives. I searched the fridge. Miles had a favorite... there. Garlic stuffed olives. I looked through the cupboards and tried to breathe as I found a small ramekin. Hell, that'll work. Voices came from the long hallway, I focused on putting olives in the container while my hands shook. I set that in the last free spot on the platter. I took several deep breaths as I tried to calm down. Was Asher here? Did I fuck everything up beyond fixing?

Yeah, I thought this would be easy. Get the guys together, talk shit out... I closed my eyes and took slow deep breaths. Yeah. Simple. Until someone loses their shit or doesn't show.

"Ally?"

I went still. The boulder left my stomach and I started to breathe again.

Asher moved next to me. "You made a platter?"

I took deep breaths as the weight in my chest eased. "I was stalling. Hoping you'd show up."

Asher's hand moved to my lower back. "I'm here."

I nodded, relief leaving me clutching the counter.

"Everyone is waiting for us." He kept his voice soft and low.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Asher picked up the platter and led me out of the kitchen. The guys were spread out around the living room. Zeke was standing behind the furthest couch with his arms crossed. Ethan was sitting on the arm of that couch while Isaac sat on the raised hearth of the fire place. Miles was standing at the head of the coffee table. The *glass* coffee table. Why did we pick this room?

Asher set down the tray and took a seat at one end of the couch closest to the hallway. Everyone's eyes were on me as I sat down in the other corner.

"Family meeting." Miles straightened to his full height. Everyone turned to him. "Some of us saw each other last night at the fair." Miles turned to Zeke. "Other's wouldn't even answer my calls."

Zeke didn't offer an explanation, his blank expression didn't even twitch.

Miles seemed like he wasn't expecting one either as he continued. "Right now, we need to get everything out in the open."

Asher frowned. "What? You want her to make a decision today?"

Miles shook his head. "No. Today isn't about that. Today is about our friendships with each other. More specifically, between us guys."

Most of the boys shifted in their seats.

"We're not just going to fucking be okay overnight." Asher scowled at Miles. "What do you want us to do?"

"Talk to each other." My voice was firm and slightly sharp. "Tell each other why you're pissed at them."

"We need to work on our communication, and we need to start now." Miles turned to Zeke. "Zeke, you haven't talked to me in a month. Why?"

Zeke's face didn't change as he lifted his eyes to Miles. "Not now."

Miles began to tap his thigh. "Zeke."

"You don't want this now." Zeke made it clear, his voice deep.

I looked around at the guys. Not one of them were talking. My stomach churned as my heart sank. "Guys?" No one budged. My throat grew tight as I turned to Miles.

His eyes were growing colder by the minute. "Isaac? How do you feel?"

"This might be too soon." Ethan's gaze stayed on the toe of his shoe as he tapped the leg of the coffee table.

"It's been a month." Miles' voice grew colder. "Now, I know I had to stop myself every day from calling each of you. I know it was the same for you guys."

Silence.

"Would it help to talk if I wasn't in here?" I asked, hoping that was what was holding them back.

Ethan shook his head. "That's not it, Beautiful."

"Yeah, it's just not easy to just tell someone what's pissing you off." Isaac leaned forward to rest his elbows on his legs. "We're guys, we usually throw a few punches and ignore each other until we get over it."

"Fine." I pointed at the front door. "Go outside and beat the shit out of each other. Get it out of your systems."

No one budged. My heart took a hard kick. I turned and met Miles' eyes, which were glacial at this point. They weren't talking. They weren't trying. This wasn't going to work. Eyes filling, I got to my feet, walked out of the living room and into the long hall. Tears fell down my face as I opened my bedroom door. I had to get my clothes...

Taking deep breaths against the weight growing in my chest, I started to empty out the drawers and fill the duffle bag that Miles had left on my bed. When my dresser was empty, I moved into the bathroom to get my shampoo and conditioner. Only to find that Miles had replaced them again with better brands. The tightness grew in my chest making it hard to breathe. I sat down on the rim of the tub and covered my mouth while tears poured down my face. I had to leave. Come on, Lexie. I wiped my face, sniffed and struggled for control again. I had to walk out the door. Get it together! Breathe and move!

* * *

Asher

ALLY'S CRYING CAUGHT my ear. I turned and looked at the hallway. The sound bounced off the walls and up the hall. It put me on edge. I looked around the room as no one said anything. She was upset. It *had* been a month... Her crying started to echo. She must be in the bathroom. She began to cry even harder; her breathing grew ragged as she tried to stay quiet. That, and only that made me say something.

"I'm angry." I turned to each of them. "I'm angry at Zeke for not fucking telling anyone how he felt about her. I'm angry at Miles because I'm pretty sure he's going to ask us all to step aside for Zeke to be with Ally. I'm angry."

"I would never ask anyone to do that." Miles' voice was cold and hard. "Not to mention I'd never make that decision for Lexie."

"She'd rip his head off if he tried." Isaac shook his head. Hell, Isaac had a point. I didn't even think of Ally in that...

Her crying intensified to practically sobbing. I turned my head to follow it with my ear. Wondering where she was, I stared at the doors to the hallway. "Talk, guys."

"Why?" Zeke started pacing on the other side of the room in front of the large windows.

Isaac shook his head. Ethan sighed.

I turned back to the others. "Because I can hear her crying her heart out in the bathroom." Suddenly everyone was paying attention.

"She's packing her things." Miles announced. Everyone turned to him with mouths gaping and wide eyes.

"What?" Ethan scowled.

"What do you mean, she's packing her shit?" Zeke's voice was hard and sharp along the edges.

Miles looked at each of us. "Since the beginning, Lexie has made it clear to me that if our friendships with each other are negatively affected, she'll stop hanging out with us."

Everyone but Zeke still had their jaws on the floor. Though the blood did drain from his face.

"She can't do that." Zeke crossed his arms over his chest. "She needs anchors."

"She'd be hurting herself." I shook my head. It didn't make sense...

Miles narrowed his eyes at me. "She doesn't care if she hurts herself. She doesn't care if her heart breaks. At this moment, she's terrified that she ruined our relationships. And if she sees that, she'll remove herself to try to correct it."

The blood drained from Zeke's face.

Ethan clenched a fist.

Isaac got to his feet and started moving. He dug his hands into his hair and paced in front of the fire place.

"So, unless we want that to happen. Talk." I started to rub my knuckle along my jeans as I concentrated on listening to Ally get it together in the bathroom.

Zeke began to pace again. As the silence went on he began dragging his hands through his hair every few steps as he cursed under his breath. The room stayed silent.

"Fuck." Zeke turned to us. "I hate this shit."

"We know." Everyone chimed in unison.

"Fine." Zeke clenched his jaw as he looked down at the coffee table. "I didn't say anything because of Ordin."

Everyone grew still and turned to him.

Zeke's eyes unfocused as he clenched and unclenched his fists. "That night, I was supposed to go over after work to talk about everything. But instead I let her go home alone and get taken." His voice was rough and raw as he refused to look at anyone. "After... She had shit she had to get through. Some serious shit."

"I know." I said without thinking.

Zeke's gaze snapped to mine. "You know? How?"

I nodded. "I overheard something in New Orleans. No details, just that something happened."

Zeke nodded that he got it.

"What happened?" Isaac stopped pacing as he looked between us. "Someone better fucking spill."

"We can't." I met Isaac's eyes.

Isaac clearly didn't like it but he understood.

"I wasn't going to bring it up until she got through it." Zeke crossed his arms over his chest as his posture grew rigid. "No point in bringing it up to you guys when she might not have felt the same way still."

Shit, I could understand that. My anger at Zeke fizzled a bit. It didn't disappear but it lessened.

Isaac cursed. "I didn't say anything because..." Isaac shook his head. "I thought there was no way in hell she'd feel the same way."

Ethan huffed. "I just figured I'd fuck it up."

"I was going to after I spoke to her if she felt the same way." Miles sat down on the arm of the couch.

"We're all pissed," Isaac sat back down on the hearth.

"We're all on edge." Ethan rubbed his eyes with one hand.

"This is going to be a disaster." Zeke summed it up for us.

Everyone chuckled. I shook my head. We were still friends, we always would be. This was just going to take time.

A door quietly closed in the hallway.

I turned to Miles. "She's on her way out."

Miles waited until she reached the foyer. "Lexie?"

She stopped with her hand on the door knob and a large bag over her shoulder.

"We're talking." Miles shifted on the arm of the couch.

Her shoulders sagged. She sniffed and took a deep breath before she wiped her face. Ally stepped back from the door and dropped her bag by the stairs on her way back in. Refusing to look at anyone, she went back to her spot. Miles shifted more so he'd face us. Her eyes were bright red, her nose almost raw. Shit...

"I think we need to start nightly family meetings to touch base with everyone at least for a while." Miles got to his feet. "And really try to communicate effectively during the day."

Everyone agreed. Ally even nodded.

"Now, it's Lexie's birthday." Miles' voice lightened.

Ally rubbed her eyes with one hand. "Forget about it."

Isaac straightened. "Hell no. It's your birthday. What do you want to do?"

She looked at each of us. "Well, if you guys can *not* kill each other..."

"We'll put it on the back burner for tonight." I promised.

She smiled the first real smile I'd seen today.

Hours later, I was laughing as Ethan went on and on about the glow-inthe-dark henna tattoo that Ally had put on him. Isaac had given her a kit for her birthday and none of us had escaped unmarked. Though Ethan was the only one who got a flower on the back of his hand.

"Really, Beautiful?" he groaned. "A flower?"

The others chuckled.

"It's a lotus blossom." I tried my best to keep my face straight.

"You gave Zeke a skull and crossbones on his arm." Ethan gestured at Zeke across the family room. "Why did I get the flower?"

"Because you're a sweetie." I smiled.

Ethan grumbled.

"Red?" Isaac picked up the box that Zeke had given her. "Can I play with your present from Zeke?"

She snagged it out of his hand. "No! If anyone gets to use the stun gun, it's gonna be me."

"Feel free to use it on Isaac," Zeke shot across the coffee table.

Isaac flipped him off.

She pulled it out of the box and eyed Zeke. "I don't know... you were an ass yesterday..."

Zeke's eyes narrowed at her. "Don't even think about it."

She chuckled and set it down.

"So, are you going to start a necro instruction book?" Miles asked as he picked up the brown leather-bound journal I had given her.

"I think so." She shrugged one shoulder. "I mean, it wouldn't hurt to have one around for Luca's kids maybe."

Not her own? Did she really not want kids? Huh. I took a drink of my soda as Isaac picked up the framed print that Miles had given her. "Where did you get this?"

"New Orleans." Miles shared a look with Ally. Something bristled inside me as she smiled back.

Isaac turned back to her. "When are you going to open Ethan's?"

"After you all go home." She smiled. Ethan had asked her to wait until we were gone to open it. A big part of me didn't want to know, another part didn't want to wait.

Ally pushed her plate away. "Ash, that cake was amazing."

Something eased inside me. "I'm glad you liked it."

Ally yawned and rested her head on the back of the couch. It was obvious that she was going to fall asleep. And after the crying she did earlier, no one was going to stop her.

Miles shifted forward on the couch. "Everyone is going camping tomorrow?"

There was a round of yes and yeahs.

"Then we'll see everyone here early in the morning." Miles dismissed us. Everyone got to their feet and headed for the door. Except Ally, she stayed on the couch already half asleep as we headed out. I reached down and squeezed her shoulder before heading for the doorway.

"Zeke?" Ally barely opened her eyes enough to catch him before he left. "Did you bring my painting back?"

His face was deadpan when he turned back to her. "No. You threw it at my head. I'm keeping it."

"Zeke..."

"Anything thrown at me, I get to keep. Remember that for the future," he called over his shoulder as we left the family room.

Ally gave a snort as she slipped under.

Miles' shoulders were rigid as he held the front door for us. No one bothered to say anything as we walked out into the driveway. A cool breeze moved over the grounds as Miles closed the door behind him and joined us in a circle.

"We can't let this get between us." Miles started tapping his leg.

"She really was walking out the door." Isaac shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it.

Ethan reached over and put his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"What do you expect?" Miles' eyebrows pulled together. "She has a big heart."

"Why didn't you tell us earlier?" It would have made things run smoother.

"She said it would have been emotional blackmail. She wasn't willing to do that." Miles shook his head. "I, on the other hand, don't give a damn what I have to do to make you understand what's at stake. I'm not willing to lose her just because all of you are being stubborn."

"You can't keep shit like that to yourself." Zeke's voice rumbled. "If she's going to leave, we have the right to fucking know."

"That's the only thing that she would leave over." Miles' shoulders relaxed. "It meant the most to her."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "More than who she's going to end up dating?"

Miles met his gaze and nodded. "She said she could deal with anything else."

Resentment bubbled in me. She shared everything with Miles. *Again*. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Deal with it later, Asher.

"Everyone, meet here around seven?" I wanted to go home. To get away from them for some quiet.

Everyone agreed and broke up the circle. Miles headed back to the house and went inside. I forced myself to get into my truck and start it. I needed to get home to pack. Maybe go for a run...

* * *

My mind running in circles, I closed the door and locked it. Then leaned my back against it. She was staying. Tension drained from me, leaving me shaking. The guys understand what's at stake if they don't work on their issues with each other. Lexie leaving was the only thing I could think of that would make them understand how upset she was.

I took a deep breath and straightened from the door and set the alarm before heading back into the family room. After leaving the living room earlier, everyone had acted as if no one had ever kissed Lexie. That nothing had been said. It was what she needed tonight. What we all needed to be honest. Time to remember who we were with her...

Lexie's eyes were closed, her head starting to hang. The relief had to have been enormous.

I smiled. Poor Angel, she hadn't slept much in the last month. She had been looking almost ragged lately. I'd never tell her but I had been worried. I knelt down on the floor in front of the couch and ran my fingers over her cheek.

She made a sleepy content sound.

"Angel, do you want to sleep in your room or mine?" I kept my voice low and soft.

She shifted to lean against my chest. I smiled. She always answered me when she was sleeping deeply. Slipping my arms around her back and under her knees, I lifted her against my chest. She slipped her arm around my neck and snuggled against the base of my throat.

I headed upstairs and down the hallway to my room. Her breathing was deep and even as I nudged the door open then laid her gently down on my bed. She curled up on her side. Carefully, I undid her sandals and slipped them off her feet. I turned on the lamp on my bedside table while watching her face. She didn't even twitch. She really was exhausted.

I opened my walk-in closet and closed the door behind me. After quickly changing into my night clothes, I opened the closet door and headed for the bed. I propped my pillows up against the head board and picked up the book on the nightstand. I tried to get into the book but it just wasn't working. And when she scooted closer I realized that it was useless. Setting my book down, I turned off the light and set my glasses next to my book. After shifting the pillows, I lay down beside her, lifted my arm over my head and waited.

It didn't take long, Lexie liked cuddling. She buried her face in the crook of my neck, her hand going to my chest, her leg hooking over one of mine. I brought my arm down to wrap around her. By morning, she'd be lying on me. I watched her sleep against me. My hand slowly running up and down her back. She was almost out the door today. I took a deep breath of rosemary and relaxed. That was the worst part for her, the only part she said she'd leave over. She was staying. Watching her sleep, I tried to come up with a plan to convince the guys to agree to my crazy idea. I wasn't going to lose her just because she also cared about the others. I couldn't...

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CHAPTER 6

AUGUST 17TH, 5:45 A.M.

gently closed the Blazer door. If Rory caught me sneaking into the house at this hour, he'd kill me in six different ways and then ground me for my afterlife. The lights flicked on. I froze. When the front door didn't open, I let out the breath I'd been holding, eternally thankful that Rory's room was at the back of the house.

I made it to the door and unlocked it slowly. Opening it, the small creak the hinge made seemed to echo through the house. I stepped into the family room and came face to face with a taller woman.

Light blonde hair, blue eyes, pretty face and a great rack. She jumped when she saw me. Something fell out of her purse and onto the porch. It was a lacy black thong... Oh my God... My mouth dropped open. She pressed her finger against her lips. I had to cover my mouth to stop from laughing. Her eyes were wide as she picked up her panties, grabbed my arm and dragged me back outside of the house then down the driveway.

"Lexie-"

"You slept with Rory," I whispered a little too loudly.

Aunt Susan's face was burning red. "Well, he is my ex-"

"Were booty calls covered in the divorce?" I snickered.

"We were talking last night and I slept on the couch." She tried. But she sucked as a liar.

"Bullshit." I snorted, trying to keep it down. "You wouldn't be sneaking out and your panties would be on."

"What are you doing sneaking in this early?" she demanded with a raised eyebrow.

That sobered me up. "My friends and I had a fight, we talked it out then I fell asleep."

Her eyes narrowed on me. "Bullshit."

"Hey, my panties are still on me just as they have been all night." I flat out told her.

She tried not to laugh but it didn't work. "Fine, I believe you. Rory got a text last night from some kid named Miles. He told him where you were and that you fell asleep. He even asked if you could crash there."

I smiled to myself. "Yeah, that sounds like Miles."

"Damn, it's good to see you, Lexie." She smiled as she shook her head.

"You too." I couldn't stop smiling.

Susan pulled me into a hug. I hugged her back. "I was so glad to hear that you came to live with Rory. I worried about you every day."

I smiled as I squeezed her back. "I'm okay. Not even dying anymore."

She let go and shot me a look. "That's not funny."

"Oh, yes it is."

Susan smiled again. "Please don't tell Tara."

"What? No epic getting back together?" I couldn't help but ask.

She sighed. "I love Rory. I always will. But we both know we don't work as a couple. Amazing sex, yeah, we have that down pat."

I cringed. "Oh, ew."

She smirked. "Amazing, sweaty, toe curling-"

"Nope, no, nada, not listening." I started walking away.

"-screaming sex," Susan finished as I shuddered.

I turned around and flipped her off.

She chuckled. "Take care of yourself, kiddo."

"You too." I turned back around and walked into the house, this time not caring if I made noise. Hades was on the couch, stretched out on his back. I smiled and headed upstairs. I still had to pack for the camping trip.

When I got upstairs, I put away my birthday presents. Well, all but Ethan's. I sat down and finally opened the wrapping. It was a book. A book of poetry. Love Her Wild by Atticus Poetry. I smiled to myself. Ethan was a constant surprise. Maybe this trip wouldn't be a disaster after all?

It was still early when I finally loaded my bags into the back of the Blazer and headed in for Hades' dog food. Rory was still getting his gear

out of storage while Tara had gone upstairs to pack. Yes, Tara and Rory were coming with us. Them coming will just make talking about the alternative relationship we all might be starting easier. And if I repeat it enough I'll eventually believe it.

I picked up the backpack with Hades' toys and bowls. "What time are you guys planning on meeting us?"

Rory set down the tent on the dinner table, that was already covered in lamps and fishing gear. "Uh, it should take us about a couple of hours after you guys leave. Tara is dragging her feet."

I shifted the large bag of dog food over my shoulder. "Okay. Can you bring extra sunblock?"

"Yeah, no problem." Rory called. "Tell the boys to drive safe!"

"I will!" I shut the door behind me and headed to my truck. I put the bag in the back. I made sure I had all my stuff before I closed the back gate. It wasn't long before I was climbing in and taking off. Hades sat in the front seat with his face out the window. But before I could go to Miles' house and meet the others, I had a stop to make first.

The cemetery had become a second home by this point. I could probably drive there in my sleep. It was just like every cemetery in most places. Headstones, grass and trees. Oh, and the huge group of souls waiting by the veteran memorial. I parked and left Hades in the car.

"All right, a few announcements before we get started." I got every ghosts' attention. "I'll be going camping for a week or so. Which means, I won't be able to cross anyone here."

Groans and complaints rang from the group.

"But when I get back, I'll do crossings in the morning and at night to make up for it." They all muttered about it but acted like they understood. I rolled my eyes as I moved into the center of the first large circle of dead. "How many are missing this morning?"

"Three more." A woman with glasses spoke up. "They all liked to stay out of town."

"Fuck." I muttered. We were still losing souls. And since the other night had shown me that they don't just disappear from the rotting... Where the hell were they? Shit.

"Okay, you all know the drill. Hold hands..."

I was still workying over those missing souls as I parked in front of Miles' house. I climbed down and let Hades jump out. Were the ghosts just deciding to go on one last adventure before crossing? No, that couldn't be right. I opened the front door and let Hades go in. Several of the ghosts were almost desperate to cross.

I started across the circular gravel driveway to the four-car garage that no one ever used. A large green Chevy Silverado truck, that I'd never seen before, was backed up to an open garage door. Asher's truck was in front of another garage door. I headed inside only to find a garage full of toys. One long trailer had four jet skis already loaded. One wall had five kayaks stored up and out of the way. In another bay there was a large cargo trailer. Asher was at the kayaks while Zeke was opening the back of the cargo trailer. Hades hurried over to him.

"Whose truck is out there?" I asked.

Asher chuckled.

Zeke turned in time for Hades to jump up onto his back feet to brace his feet on Zeke's waist. He roughed up Hades' ears and wrinkles. "It's Miles' truck."

"Miles has a truck?" I kept looking around the giant garage and just kept finding more toys.

"Yeah, he doesn't use it very often. Mostly when we go camping or climbing." He scratched Hades' ears.

"Holy crap." I muttered as I took in all the toys.

"Right?" Zeke signaled for Hades to get down. The giant dog dropped to his feet on the floor.

"Ally, come here, I need to see if we have one you can wear." Asher called from next to a rack of life jackets.

I stopped gawking and went to his side.

"What size are you?" Asher reached up and moved the hangers.

"It depends on the brand of clothes. I can be an eight in one thing and twelve in another." I admitted.

He frowned down at me. "How is that possible?"

"Brands make their own sizes." I shrugged. "But I usually range in the mediums."

He muttered under his breath about women's clothes as he pulled out a green and yellow life jacket. "This is a medium. Try it on."

I took the life jacket, slipped it on and clicked it closed.

Asher reached out and tightened the nylon straps around my waist and chest. "Lift your arms above your head."

I did as he said. His fingers hooked under the shoulders of it and pulled up. It slipped off, surprising me and almost taking my shirt with it. Luckily, I was able to stop it before the hem lifted over my bra. I pushed my shirt back down and looked up at Asher. He had grown still, his gaze on my side, where my scars were over my ribs and down to the back of my hip.

His face strained, he met my eyes. "Boulder?"

I nodded. Why was he so surprised? He'd seen them before.

"What about Boulder?" Zeke asked from the other side of the garage.

"Nothing." Asher went back to the rack of life jackets. He pulled out another one, this one smaller and still had the tags on it. "Where did this come from?" Asher checked the size on the bright green jacket. "Here, try it."

I slipped it on and zipped it up. Asher adjusted the straps on the sides until the vest was snug. "Okay, arms up again."

I did as he said. He tried to pull it off me, it didn't budge though it did pull on my chest a bit when he pulled hard. "Ow, Ash, I've got boobs, man."

He let go immediately, his cheeks turning pink. "Sorry. That one fits." I undid the zipper and took it off. "I got ten that Miles went shopping."

"I'm not taking that bet." Asher started pulling other life jackets off the rack. "Zeke, you need to make sure your vest still fits."

"Yeah, yeah," Zeke grumbled.

I smiled as I left him to go help Zeke who was at the back of the large cargo trailer.

"So, where's the camping stuff?" I asked. "Miles just told me to bring a sleeping bag."

"That's because we already have everything stored and packed away," he said as he looked at the back of one of the doors on the trailer.

What did he mean? I moved to stand next to him and my jaw dropped. The trailer was full of camping gear. "Wow. You guys need all this to go camping?"

"There're tents, futon mattresses, a barbecue, tables, chairs, lamps. Even a shower system..." he said absently as he took a piece of paper off the back of the door. "All the basic stuff you need while camping."

"Futon mattresses?" I looked up at him with an eyebrow raised.

He met my gaze. "Ethan needed one after the wreck, so Miles bought everyone their own."

Yeah, that sounded like Miles. "So... you guys don't go camping. You go glamping."

The corner of his lips twitched as he held my gaze. I smiled a big smartass smile.

"No."

I held up my fingers as I listed things off. "Showers, mattresses, a full barbecue I'm assuming..."

He grumbled wordlessly as he handed the paper to me. "Take this inside to Miles, it's a list of the stuff we ran out of last time."

I snickered, knowing full well he was getting rid of me so I'd get off the topic. Still smiling, I left the garage and headed into the house. Miles met me at the bottom of the stairs with a duffle bag over his shoulder.

"I have a list." I held up the paper.

Miles set the bag down next to the stairs and took it. "Batteries, propane for the barbecue and lamps..." he muttered as he headed to the long hallway and the pantry. He grabbed a canvas grocery bag and began to fill it. "I'll have to stop and get the propane but I have most of this stuff here," he said as he threw toothpaste into the bag along with floss.

"So, you guys just leave your camping gear in a trailer all year?" I leaned against the doorway to the pantry.

"Yeah, there was no real point in unloading everything but the ice chests, we never used that trailer for anything else anyway." He added batteries to the bag.

"I actually love that idea," I admitted. "Except the chance for spiders goes up."

Miles smiled as he put a lighter in the bag. "I'll kill any spiders you find."

"That's not what I meant." I smiled. "I can kill my own spiders. It's snakes I'm worried about."

He chuckled. "There's a shovel already packed for those."

"Wait, you see enough snakes at this place that you have a shovel dedicated to them?" That made me a bit nervous.

Miles chuckled. "Don't worry, they usually stay away because the twins are so loud."

I eyed him. "So, how did I get in your room last night?"

The corner of his lips lifted into a half grin. "I found you on the couch asleep and asked you if you wanted to sleep in my room or yours. You leaned into me, which I took as sleeping in my room."

Yeah, that sounded like me. I ran my gaze over his face. There were small shadows under his eyes. He looked tired. Hell, he didn't even wake up this morning when I climbed out of bed. And I woke up lying on top of him. He was just as worried as I was. I went to my toes and kissed his cheek. He looked down at me, surprised. I simply smiled and walked out of the pantry. We'd get it settled by the time we come home. We just had to.

WE REACHED the campsite on Swan Lake almost three hours later. Which shouldn't have surprised me. We lived in the mountains, why would we have a long drive to go camping? Apparently, our spot was further down from the others on the lake shore.

"Um, Miles, why did that sign just say group site?" I asked from the back seat. Zeke and the twins were up ahead in Miles' truck and the cargo trailer while Asher's truck towed the jet skis.

"Because I reserve the group site for us every year." Miles shifted in the seat.

"Why? There's only eight of us." I watched the woods go by as the road took a slow turn.

"Because of Zeke." Asher glanced at me over his shoulder. "If we're not far enough away then he can't relax or sleep."

That made sense. "But the group campground?"

"We're also able to hook hoses up for the shower system's hot water without inconveniencing anyone," Miles quickly added.

I snorted. "There's a shower system..."

"And a fully equipped kitchen, a full-size barbecue, futon mattresses..." Asher smiled.

"Yeah, Zeke told me. You guys glamp."

Miles looked thoughtful while Asher shook his head.

"I guess we do." Miles turned to smile at me.

"It's also the only campsite that has no neighbors," Asher explained. Okay, I could get behind that. One time when I went camping with Dad, some dickweed was drunk and hollering late into the night. Dad was pissed.

The trailer in front of us came to a stop, the brake lights flashed twice before staying on.

Asher put the truck in park and got out.

"What's going on?" I started taking off my seatbelt.

"We're at the site and there's not enough space for Zeke to easily turn around with the trailer. Asher is going to guide the trailer into a good out of the way spot near the boat ramp." Miles pushed his glasses up his nose. I ran my gaze over him. He had been unusually quiet during the drive.

"Are you okay?" I asked, my voice softening.

"Yes, I'm alright." Miles turned in his seat so he could look back at me. "Are you?"

"Yeah." But I wasn't lying. The strain was there around his eyes. "Miles, you're a bad liar."

He sighed and looked back out the windshield as Zeke pulled the truck forward. "I'm aware."

"Who do you talk to when you need to talk?" I leaned forward.

Miles began tapping his fingers along the console. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're always here for all of us when we need to talk," I said, hoping he wouldn't take it wrong. "But who do you talk to?"

He was silent long enough for the guys to get the other truck turned around and park the trailer.

"I guess, I don't talk to anyone," he admitted quietly.

"Don't you think you should?" I hoped I wasn't pushing too far.

His eyes unfocused for several heartbeats. "I'll think about it."

That was all I could ask. Asher headed back toward us and climbed in. Zeke got out of the other truck with a scowl.

Asher opened the door and got back in. "He's in a shitty mood."

"He's been in the car with the twins for over an hour." Miles took off his seatbelt.

I snorted. Yeah, that would be enough to drive him to the edge. "Did they survive the trip?"

"I didn't ask." Asher chuckled as he pulled into the gravel parking area. He used the mirrors, and Zeke's shouted instructions to back up into the spot.

Finally, we climbed out. The campsite was surrounded by trees, the air was filled with pine. I checked out the site while the guys opened the back

of the trailer. A large, flat dirt area with a fire pit stood in the center. Through the trees I could see the water, to left and to right, nothing but more trees. Yeah, the group site was definitely a good call.

Zeke and Miles walked past as they talked about where to put the tents.

"Hey, Red," Isaac said as he left the truck.

"Hey, did you two drive Zeke crazy on the drive?" I pulled my bag out of the back of Asher's truck.

Isaac chuckled. "Maybe."

I shook my head as we watched Miles and Zeke go over the campsite. "So, how long to set up? I want to go swimming."

"It usually takes us an hour, sometimes two." Ethan joined us on my other side. "If the two bosses agree on camp set up that is."

"Once it took them an hour to agree on where to put everything," Isaac stage whispered.

I snorted. Why would it take an hour?

Miles and Zeke agreed and headed back to us.

"Tents first," Zeke announced as he reached the back of the trailer then pulled out a large bag and handed it to Asher.

"Is Lexie crashing in our tent?" Isaac joined us at the back of the trailer.

"No, she has her own small tent," Miles turned to me as the others went to start setting up the tent. "I thought you'd like some privacy."

"And a place to change," I added. "Thanks, Miles."

"Of course." Miles left to help the others.

Zeke held out a teal nylon bag without looking at me. "That's a twoperson tent. It has a mesh roof but there's a rainfly inside that you can use to cover the roof if you want."

I took it from him. "Thanks. So, where am I putting my tent?"

"I'd say not too far from the fire ring." Zeke turned and surveyed the site. "But far enough that you don't have to worry about us walking by with the mesh roof."

Okay, that made sense; all the guys were probably taller than the tent.

"And since you hate snakes..." I shuddered dramatically while he smiled and he picked up another tent bag. "I'd say not far into the long grass."

"Aye, aye, captain" I saluted him before heading to the site to find a spot. I found a nice one under a couple of trees and across the way from the

tent Miles and the twins were putting up. Just on the edge of the long grass, far enough to give me some privacy.

Apparently Zeke had the same idea, only he was in the long grass further behind and to the left of the guys. I got to work setting up my tent.

By the time I had my small dome tent up the others were done. Zeke even had time to set up a hammock between two trees.

Isaac came toward me carry a big rectangle of something white and bulky. "Get the flap, Red."

I didn't even ask why, I just opened it. Isaac dropped what I was guessing was a futon mattress onto my tent floor.

Isaac squatted down and untied the bundle, then stretched it out. It was a twin-size mattress.

"Okay, that's pretty cool." I admitted.

"And comfy as hell." Isaac turned and dropped onto his back in my tent.

"How are you worn out? It's just past noon," I teased as I poked his leg.

"I'm not." He grinned up at me. "I'm just avoiding helping with the rest of the mattresses."

I smacked his leg.

He groaned dramatically as he got up. "I gotta help Zeke get his."

"I imagine that one isn't a twin." I got to my feet.

"No, it's like an extra-long queen or something," he muttered as he headed to the trailer.

It only took a couple of hours, but soon we had the camp set up. The deluxe barbecue with griddle plate was big enough to cook for our group and then some. The shower was set up out away from the tents with tarps and a hose running from one of the spigots. With everyone's stuff put away, and the camp chairs by the fire ring, everything was set up.

Asher made sandwiches for lunch and chips. We were eating around the fire place when someone broke the silence.

"Jessica asked to come with us." Asher wiped his fingers on his napkin.

Everyone went still.

"What?" Zeke's brows drew down.

"I second that, she hates camping." Ethan leaned forward bracing his elbows on his knees.

Asher shrugged as he picked up a chip off his plate. "I know. I asked why and she wouldn't say."

Zeke got to his feet, set his plate on his chair and walked away toward the lake as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. No one bothered to ask what he was doing. Why?

* * *

Zeke

JESSICA WANTING TO GO CAMPING? No, something wasn't right. I pulled out my phone as I moved down the sandy shore of the lake.

On the second ring, she answered. "Yeah?"

"Why did you want to go camping?" I growled.

"'Cause..."

"Why? You knew Lexie is going to be here, and we all know what you think about her." My shoulders grew tense as she didn't answer. Was Jason being a dick? Was there something going on that she didn't tell anyone about? My head ran with the worst case scenarios. "Is someone threatening you?"

"No!"

"Then why?"

The silence was thick on her side of the phone.

"J.J. Why?" I tried to stay as calm as I could.

She sighed. "I just... don't want to be alone in the house." That had some truth to it but that wasn't all of it. She had a certain tone when she lied.

"Why?" I hated this run around bullshit. "Maria is right next door. You know you can stay with her in the spare room."

"I just don't want to be here, okay." She wasn't going to tell me.

So, she didn't want to be there alone, and Maria's was too close to the house... "Pack a bag, and head out to my house. Sylvie can use the company and you can crash in my room. Just don't fucking spray that shit in there."

"It's perfume, Zeke," she teased, her voice lighter. "It doesn't smell like shit."

"Yeah, it fucking does." Didn't she have a sense of smell? She made an aggravated noise.

"And don't fuck up my room," I rubbed my eyes with one hand. "I don't want to come back and find glitter all over my shit again."

"We were eight." Her voice was dry. "Are you ever going to let that go?"

"No." It had been fucking glitter and all over my clothes. And Asher had said it was fucking pink.

She giggled. "I'll head over to Sylvie's. But I'm sleeping on the couch. Your room is probably creepy as hell." There was a long pause. "Thanks, Z."

"Yeah, yeah."

* * *

Lexie

ZEKE CAME BACK into camp as he tucked his phone away.

"Thanks, Zeke," Asher said out of the blue.

Zeke only nodded before he picked up his plate and sat back down again.

I thought about asking what he did but then thought better of it.

Rory pulled up and parked next to Asher's truck. The guys didn't even groan as they got out of the truck. Everyone got up and headed to help set them up.

Tara pulled a backpack out of Rory's truck and headed toward us.

"Where are you guys going?" Tara asked.

"We're setting up your tent and Rory's stuff." I pointed out. What? Did she think it was magically going to happen itself?

"Let the guys do that." Tara waved her hand.

I rolled my eyes and went to help the guys.

Rory pulled me aside while the guys worked to get his tent set up. "I want Tara to bunk with you."

"What?" I hissed. No, no, no way. Yeah, she'd been nice yesterday but that didn't mean it was going to last. "I'm sorry, I'd like to enjoy camping."

"Lexie," he said in his lecturing voice.

Ah crap.

"I want you two to get to know each other. Maybe do a little bonding." His face was serious.

"That's like oil and fire, they're explosive," I pointed out.

"Try," he ordered.

I growled. "If she ends up with a black eye, it's your fault."

"Thanks, kid."

It wasn't long before we had Rory and Tara set up. Though Tara bitched more than I did when she learned she was going to sleep in my tent.

Tired of listening, I turned to the others. "Can we go swimming now?"

"Now, that is a good idea." Miles started for their tent.

Asher got to his feet. "Sounds good to me."

Everyone headed to their tents to change. Everyone but Rory who was already in Zeke's hammock ready for a nap. With Hades stretched out in the shade below him, it was quite the sight.

Tara stomped past me toward the tent with her backpack. "I can't believe I have to share a tent with you and that flea covered mutt."

"Hey!" I glared at her. "He doesn't have fleas."

She huffed as she ducked into the tent.

"This is going to be fun." I took a deep breath and went inside.

Luckily, our tent was big enough for us to stand in, if we hunched over. Ten points for being short! I zipped the flap closed and went to my stuff on the right of the tent. I got an elbow in the back from Tara.

"Ow." I bit out.

"Get on your side," she snapped.

"I'm in the fucking middle." I shot back as I pulled off my shirt. "It's the only place to stand."

She huffed as we both worked on getting changed. I nailed her a couple of times with my elbow or clothes and she got me again. In the end, I said fuck it and sat on my sleeping bag to get dressed. When I was finally done, I just lay down and waited for her to be done too. I was watching the trees sway in the small breeze when Tara eyed me.

"What?" I was sick of being stared at.

"Nothing," she muttered before she held up an aerosol can. "Want to use the spray on sunscreen?"

I eyed her as if she was a pod person. "Sure. But outside, you don't want that stuff all over everything."

Tara smiled a little and unzipped the flap. We got out. I sprayed her first, making sure she was covered.

When it was my turn, she hesitated. "Where'd you get those scars?"

"It's none of your business." I put my hands on my hips

"You didn't have them at the beginning of the summer." She met my gaze.

"No. I didn't." I gestured at the spray bottle. "Are you going to spray me or do I have to go use my own?"

"Turn around." She gestured. I did. She sprayed me down thoroughly.

"I do like that it's faster." I grabbed my towel off the top of the tent.

"Yeah, but there's always the chance that you run out of sunscreen before the aerosol runs out. Then you just burn." She held up the can. "This is a brand-new bottle." Tara tossed the can into the tent, grabbed her towel and headed toward the lake. That was odd. Tara was... well, not pleasant but not hostile... maybe this won't be so bad?

I headed for the lake. The guys were already on the shore. I had to stop. Oh holy mother of muscles and tone... All of the guys, except Zeke were shirtless. Holy... muscle and definition... oh my.... I swallowed hard. Hard planes and nice lines... muscles... I pulled myself out of it before the guys noticed I was drooling.

I took my eyes off them as I started toward the guys as they continued to argue. There were at least two other groups in the water further up the shoreline. Tara was already with one and laughing. How did she do that? She just went up to people and said hi?

"Let's just get the skis in the water now." Isaac shifted from one foot to another.

"We do have most of the afternoon." Ethan flicked a mosquito off his arm. "Let's just relax."

"Will you guys just make a fucking decision?" Zeke crossed his arms over his chest.

"It doesn't really matter when, they're going to sit in the water the entire trip." Asher gestured at the lake.

"Just leave them for now." Miles' eyes found and ran over me. "They're still hooked up to the solar chargers..." Miles' lips pressed into a tight line, his eyes growing chilly. I looked down expecting something to be hanging out. But nope, my girls were still in my sporty blue suit top and my black boy short bottoms were exactly where they were supposed to be.

When I looked up, everyone but Isaac and Asher had a stunned expression. "What?"

Zeke clenched and unclenched his jaw as he turned away from the group to watch the water. Asher was rubbing his neck, Miles was tapping his leg as Ethan spun his rings.

"Your scars." Asher was the first to speak up.

"What? You guy have seen them before." Hell, they weren't gawking at all the thin scars on Isaac's chest. I tried to remember when the last time we went swimming was. "Haven't you?"

Isaac met my eyes and shook his head. Oh shit...

"I'm going to put the jet skis in the water." Zeke walked by without looking at me.

My heart sank. They kept staring.

Okay, enough. It was starting to get to me. "Alright, everyone get a good look?" I turned half way around so they could see they went all the way around to the back of my hip. I turned back to them and gestured at the scars on my thigh then pulled the strap of my top away so they could see the puncture scar under my collar bone. "'Cause if you don't stop staring, I'm going to put a shirt on and that'll just piss me off."

"That might not be a bad idea," Miles said as if he was thinking out loud.

My ego took a hit. I wrapped my arms around my stomach. "They don't look that bad." Yeah, they were thicker and more obvious than Isaac's but still...

Miles eyes focused on mine again as they grew wide. "Oh, no, no. That's not what I was saying. I meant…" His ears turned pink as he took a breath. "I meant, that way Zeke won't keep seeing them."

The others nodded.

I shook my head. "No."

"Ally..."

"No." I repeated, getting irritated. "I'm not putting on a shirt because I have scars. I don't care if people see them. It's my body and if I'm not fucking willing to hide them, then it's nobody else's business."

Ethan's lips lifted into a half grin. "Whatever you say, Beautiful."

I snorted as Zeke moved the trailer with the skis into the water at the boat ramp. He put the truck in park and got out. The guys went to help while Isaac stayed with me.

"They don't look bad, Red." His voice was soft as he smiled down at me.

"Thanks, Cookie Monster," I whispered back.

We headed over to the boat launch where Miles and Asher were in waist deep water and moving the skis off the trailer. Ethan and Zeke got the other two.

Isaac waded into the water and took Zeke's jet ski. "We'll go around to the shore." They started the engines.

Zeke waved, got into the truck and pulled the trailer out of the water. I walked back through the grass to the shore. The guys had turned off the engines, parked the skis on the sand and seemed to be waiting.

"So, you guys are going jet skiing..."

"Have you ever been?" Miles asked as he started rubbing sunscreen into his face.

When would I have had the chance? "Nope."

"It's like flying over the water, Red. You'll love it." Isaac grinned.

"But first, someone needs to show her how one works," Zeke declared as he reached the shore with an arm full of life jackets.

"I'll show her," Asher volunteered as he buckled his life jacket. "You keep an eye on Isaac."

"I don't need a babysitter." Isaac began to push one of the skis out to deeper water.

"Ethan, are you feeling up to coming out?" Miles asked.

Ethan clicked his dark red life jacket closed. "Hell yeah."

"Then you're with me." Miles began pushing his ski out.

Zeke snapped his black life jacket on and took another ski.

Isaac was on his first, he started the engine. Zeke moved faster, got on and started the engine. Isaac snickered and gunned it.

"Fuck!" Zeke growled as he gunned it so he could catch up with Isaac.

"Rude!" Ethan shouted from the back of Miles' ski. Miles left the shallows at a more reasonable speed.

I turned and looked up at Asher with an eyebrow raised.

"You're not supposed to accelerate until you're further out from the shore. The waves could be dangerous to swimmers," he explained as he brought the ski out to hip high water.

I left my sandals in the sand and walked out to him where the water almost passed my belly button.

He brought my attention to the handles. He tapped the right. "It accelerates when you pull the right lever, more pull means you go faster. And the left lever is your break and reverse." He pointed at the center screen. "This tells you how fast you're going."

I waited for him to continue, when he didn't, I looked up at him. "That's it?"

He smiled. "That's it."

"So, that's all the instruction I'm going to get before you guys let me ride a several thousand-dollar jet ski?" Were they fucking insane? They've seen me trip over my own feet!

Asher chuckled. "The trickiest part is knowing when to lean into a turn, and hit the brake because you're going too fast. That's all experience. Not falling over is rather instinctual."

"Again, that's it?" He was kidding, right?

He laughed. "That's it." He turned the ski so we were at the back. "Watch how I get on." He grabbed the handle on the back of the seat, lifted his knee to the back of the ski and pulled himself up. He settled on the seat and looked over his shoulder. "Come on."

I grabbed the handle and did as he did. Huh, it was easier than I thought it would be. I sat on the seat behind him and zipped up my life vest.

"Scoot closer, Ally girl." He started the engine. "And either hold on to my waist or the handle behind you."

"Did you plan this?" I scooted closer until his hips were between my legs.

"Of course not, why would I do that?" he said in an entirely too innocent voice. "Just to have you holding on to me? Pssh."

I smiled as my hands went to his life jacket. "You so did."

"This is a safety clip that attaches to your life vest." He held something up.

I looked around his shoulder to see it.

"If you fall off it shuts off the engine." He clipped it to his vest. "Now, let's catch up with the guys." He turned his wrist.

I held on tight but we weren't going fast at all. Asher was going pretty slow. "Um, is something wrong? Or are you the granny driver on the lake?" He chuckled. "I'm not a jerk."

I smiled to myself. It wasn't lost on me that this would also take us longer to get to the guys. I debated for a few seconds before asking. "Why

did you thank Zeke when he came back from making a call?"

"He called Jess and told her to stay at his place to keep Sylvie company," he said. "I guess she didn't want to be home alone."

"Oh." That was sweet of Zeke. But the bigger thought on my mind was that Jessica was at Zeke's house. Probably staying in his room. Jealousy sparked in my stomach. I pushed it away.

Asher apparently decided that we were out far enough. "Hold on."

I tightened my grip as he pulled the accelerator. The engine rumbled as the nose moved up as we started to move faster through the water. The seat vibrated between my legs as we leveled out over the water. I gasped as sparks shot along my nerves a heartbeat before I adjusted my hips. The fucking thing was like a giant vibrator... And way more expensive than mine. Hopefully, he didn't hear me over the rush of the wind in our ears. The water sped by as we flew over the water. My hair streamed behind me as I held on tight to Asher.

"We're going to turn," Asher shouted over his shoulder. "Lean when you feel like you need to lean."

I saw the bend in the lake coming up. Asher turned to the left. I automatically moved my hips to keep my center of gravity as we turned. When he pulled out of the turn, I moved them back.

"Just like that!" He accelerated even more. We were getting into the busier part of the lake. Several boats were out and leaving wakes. Asher slowed down a bit as we hit them. We hit the wake of a boat. The ski jumped, lifting my butt off the seat. Then I came down harder than I thought I would.

"Ow."

"Sorry! Use your legs when you come back down," he shouted over his shoulder. There was another engine close by. I spotted Isaac to our right in his lime green life jacket, jumping his ski through the wake of a boat. Catching at least four feet of air before slamming back down. I laughed as the others moved around us. Miles waved at Asher while Ethan held on to the handle on the back of the seat. Asher nodded. Miles sped up, everyone else followed. With Miles leading, we took another bend and accelerated. My heart pounded as a boat that was going in the same direction turned left in front of us.

"Shit!" Asher shouted. "Hold on!"

I did as he said while he slowed down a little. We hit the wake. The ski jumped, the seat was gone, my grip slipped and suddenly I was under water. I kicked to the surface and wiped the hair out of my eyes. The guys turned around and sped back toward me. I waved so they could see me. Zeke and Miles were the first ones to me.

"You okay?" Zeke demanded.

I laughed. "That was kind of fun."

Zeke let out a breath as he relaxed.

"How'd you land?" Ethan asked.

"Feet first." At least I think I did.

"Good, that's how you want to land." Miles accelerated out of the way of the others.

"Your back's the worst," Isaac added as he joined us.

Asher slowly moved up toward me. "Sorry, Ally girl. That guy turned in front of us without looking."

"Or you were just too close." Zeke shot him a look that would kill normally.

Asher glared back at him while I got to the back of the ski and pulled myself up.

"I'm not that breakable. Geeze." I pulled myself back on the seat behind Asher. I reached into my hair and managed to find my hair tie, pulled the curly mass into a tight messy bun, then wrapped my arms around his waist. "Let's go!"

The others laughed while Zeke and Asher glared at each other. Asher's hand came up and squeezed one of mine drawing Zeke's eyes to where I held onto Asher. Miles drove his ski between them cutting them both off.

It was another half hour of racing around the lake before I fell off again. Asher took a turn too fast and I flew off. I still came up smiling. This time Miles transferred Ethan to Zeke's ski and came to get me. I climbed up behind him and found a comfortable spot against him. His hands squeezed mine on his life jacket before accelerating.

The afternoon was amazing. Nothing but fun, laughing and Zeke occasionally threatening to kill Isaac if he didn't stop trying to jump wakes. Everything was perfect. It was as if I had never kissed them. When I fell off twice, Asher or Miles, whoever didn't have Ethan, came for me. Zeke even smiled a couple of times. Everything from the past few months fell into the background.

After coming up again, I wiped the water out of my eyes.

"Red!" Isaac reached me first this time and gestured for me to get on the back. Smiling, I swam to his ski and climbed on.

"No!" Asher shouted as he came toward us.

"Don't even think about it!" Zeke bellowed. "Not with her on the back!" But it was too late, my arms were around Isaac's waist and he was accelerating back out to the busy part of the lake. The others were right behind us.

"You sure?" Isaac shouted over his shoulder.

I saw the boats crossing in front of us further up. "Do it!"

Isaac accelerated, going faster than any of the others had with me on the back. The wake was coming up. We hit. We went up into the air, the seat disappeared and we came down hard. This time, I caught myself with my legs, but I still hit the seat. I held on as he kept going. Adrenaline pumped through my veins as we turned and started toward the wake of a bigger boat.

The wind rushed by my ears in a roar as he accelerated. We hit. We flew, the seat disappeared. I hit the seat hard and bounced. The sky and the water switched places then I hit the water on my back. Pain radiated up and down my spine driving the air from my lungs. I kicked to the surface and fought to breathe. I finally got a lung full of air and started looking for Isaac. The ski was upside down in the water further ahead.

"Isaac!" Where was he?

"I'm okay." Isaac answered as he swam toward me from the left. "You good?"

I nodded. "That one hurt."

"Sorry, Red." He reached me and tread water. "I thought it was smaller than it was."

Engines rumbled closer.

"Still fucking fun." I smiled a big smile. We both started laughing. By the time the guys reached us, Isaac already had the ski right side up again.

"Everyone alright?" Miles' voice was worried.

"Yeah, we're okay." I continued treading water as Isaac climbed back on the ski.

Zeke came to me this time. "That's it. You're with me."

I rolled my eyes before swimming to the back of his ski and climbing on. I found a good spot against him and put my hands on his hips. He accelerated back toward the less busy branches of the lake.

Then he drove into the shallows and stopped. "You're going to learn how to drive."

"I am?" I scooted back as Zeke got to his feet on the ski and dove into the water. As he came to the surface, he gestured for me to scoot forward. Holy crap, I am. I scooted forward until I was comfortable. Then I almost had a heart attack as the bow went up when Zeke pulled himself up onto the back. The bow dropped and he sat behind me.

His knees were past my hips as he reached around me. "Grab the bars." I followed his instructions. "Always first look ahead of where you're going. Make sure you're scanning the horizon in front of you because we're not the only ones out here. There could be a skier or swimmer in the water." He tapped the right lever. "Now, it doesn't take much to go so press carefully. The same goes for the brake on the left. Understand?" The others were ignoring us and started cracking jokes.

"Yep. Right go. Left stop," I said in a cheerful voice.

"Yeah, yeah. It's obvious, but I don't want you getting hurt just because I didn't mention it." He reached around me and started the ski. It rumbled to life. "Now, pull on the lever slowly until you get a feel for it."

I did as he said, we started going forward.

"Good, now a little more," he said over the noise.

My shit eating grin moved across my face a heartbeat before I pulled the lever even more. The engine revved, we took off like a shot. Zeke cursed as he grabbed the back of the seat. The wind was in my face as the others caught up. Miles pulled ahead.

Zeke pointed over my shoulder at him. "Follow Miles."

I did as he said. Miles led us on a rather tame route. Tame but it helped me get a feel for the controls. Hoping I wasn't about to break the damn thing, I took a hard turn, leaning in to it before I even started. I barely managed to hold on as Zeke cursed and flew off. I let go of the lever as I turned back to face him. He came up and flipped me off. Everyone else started cracking up.

I doubled over laughing on the ski, my sides hurting as Zeke swam toward me. I was wiping tears from my eyes when he reached up, grabbed my arm and tugged me into the water.

I came up still laughing. "Worth it!" That just set the others off again. This time even Zeke was laughing. Zeke climbed back up onto the ski then

waited as I climbed up behind Miles.

"Come on, guys," Asher said, getting all of our attention. "It's about time to start dinner."

The twins and I groaned but everyone headed back toward our campsite.

When we got close, everyone shut off the engines and coasted into the shore. I got off the ski with a big smile on my face. Everyone took the keys out of the skis and pulled them out of the water and onto the sand.

Tara was sitting on the sand with another girl around our age and some guy. She didn't acknowledge us even though we were right in front of them. Oh well. I found my sandals and towel before unzipping my life jacket.

"What's for dinner?" Isaac asked as everyone started toward camp.

"Food." Asher grinned.

I snorted as I took off my life jacket. Hades ran to me with his tail wagging. "Hey, baby, did you have a good nap with Rory?" I knelt down and gave him some scratches. He licked my cheek and sniffed my neck.

Miles took my life jacket along with Isaac's. "Go get changed, I'll put the jackets up to dry."

Everyone split up as I got to my feet. I headed for my tent with Hades as I used my towel to dry and get most of the water out of my hair. I was slightly afraid of what it would look like when it dried. Screw it, we were camping. I changed out of my swimsuit into a pair of shorts and a simple gray slouchy boyfriend shirt. I made a point to grab my hoodie in case I got cold. I also grabbed my bag with my drawing supplies too.

Hades followed me out of the tent while I took a minute to hang my suit up to dry on the tree. I headed back to sit in my camp chair next to Ethan as he dried his hair with a towel.

Tara walked back from the lake with the two people she was with earlier. "Hey, guys."

I sat down in my camp chair as everyone there said hi. "Where's Rory?"

"He went fishing." Tara's fingers started twisting together as she turned to her new friends. "Everyone, this is Danielle and Dean. They're camping a few sites up with their parents."

Miles began tapping that staccato rhythm on the arm of his chair.

"It's nice to meet you." Asher draped the towel over his shoulder as he took charge. He pointed at each of us and introduced us. "That's Isaac and

Ethan, they're brothers obviously. That's Miles with the glasses. And the redhead is Ally-sorry Lexie." He turned back to them. "I'm Asher."

Danielle was a few inches taller than Tara with long brown hair and a shy smile as she gave a little wave. "Hi."

Dean had the same brown hair, only short and a nice jaw. "How's it going?"

Zeke was on his way back toward us in his usual all black clothes.

"And the giant mountain of muscle coming out of the woods behind you is Zeke." I figured I'd better warn them. "He's a grouch so don't take it personally."

Danielle turned and looked up and up. Her eyes grew wide as she stepped back toward her brother.

Zeke stepped into the clearing with a scowl. "Who the hell are you?"

I snorted. "Tara met some people. Be nice."

Zeke shot me a look then muttered under his breath as he went to his chair and sat down. Puffft. What the... the twins burst out laughing.

Zeke was cursing as he got to his feet and pulled a whoopie cushion out from under a black towel on his chair. "You fucking little shits." He threw it at Isaac as everyone chuckled.

Zeke sat back down and continued muttering under his breath. Danielle and Dean sat down with us while Asher headed back to the kitchen area to start dinner.

"So, where are you two from?" Miles shifted in his chair to face them. Danielle was holding on to a beat up paper back.

"Spokane, Washington actually." Dean smiled at Miles. "We make a camping trip out here every year."

I crossed my legs and balanced my sketchbook on my lap. "What are you reading?"

Danielle looked up as if surprised someone was talking to her. "Oh, um. Bitten by Kelley Armstrong."

"Is it good?"

She shrugged. "If you like werewolf stories, yeah. It's good."

"I read everything." I chuckled. "I love how authors have different interpretations of legends and myths. It keeps it fun."

That was all it took and we were talking about books and authors. Danielle got animated when she talked about Sherrilyn Kenyon. We ignored

everyone else and talked about our favorite characters, our favorite bad guys and whose book we were hoping for next.

We were laughing when Ethan draped his towel over my upper thigh. When I turned to him, Dean's gaze darted away from me and back to Tara's face.

I raised an eyebrow at Ethan.

Ethan leaned over and whispered, "He was staring at your scars."

Oh...

I winked my thanks, turned back to Danielle and continued as if nothing had happened. It wasn't long before the brother and sister headed back to their camp.

As soon as they were gone, I pulled the towel off my leg. "How often did he look for you to get mad about it?"

Ethan took his towel back.

"Enough that even I noticed." Isaac said.

I snorted at that.

Rory pulled his truck into the lot and got out.

"How was fishing?" Zeke called.

Rory shrugged. "Not bad, but not great."

"Dinner!" Asher announced.

After everyone was settled and eating around the picnic table, Rory looked down the table. "So, what are everyone's plans after graduation?"

Everyone stuffed food into their mouths, except for Miles.

Miles sent us a censoring look before turning to Rory. "I'll be applying for early admission at M.I.T this November."

Rory finished his bite. "Good for you. Physics, I imagine?"

Miles started tapping his fingers in that staccato rhythm. "Yes. And if I don't get in I'll be applying to Harvard, Cal-tech, Berkeley. Anywhere there's a great physics department."

Rory nodded and turned to Ethan. "Ethan?"

Ethan shrugged as he swallowed his food. "I don't know yet, I was thinking of checking out a few music programs at universities. But it's not set in stone. With the band and all four of us, well, we haven't talked about it yet."

Rory turned to Isaac. "What about you?"

Isaac's eyes unfocused. "I don't really know yet. I'm still figuring it out."

Rory smiled. "That's okay, you don't have to know what you want to do when you graduate high school. Hell, Lexie's dad was an underwater welder for several years before he decided to become a firefighter."

"I didn't know that." I looked at him down the table.

Rory nodded. "He traveled all over the states doing it. Even had work in Hawaii before he met your mom."

"Underwater welding?" I didn't even know that dad liked scuba diving...

Rory smiled before he turned to Asher. "Asher? Culinary school?"

His mouth full, Asher simply shrugged. "I need to see how this year of football goes first."

I rolled my eyes and repressed the urge to groan.

Rory turned to Zeke. "Zeke, what are your plans?"

Zeke kept his eyes on his plate as he answered. "I'll probably drive to the community college in Missoula a couple of days a week while still working in the garage." Something in Zeke's voice bothered me and I wasn't the only one.

Rory watched Zeke with narrowed eyes. "Well, by then Kita should be ready to be adopted, right?"

Zeke nodded, his gaze still on the table. "About then, if not sooner."

"Hell, Tank loves Sylvie. You could leave him with her, he'd be a great guard dog for her." Rory surveyed Zeke.

Zeke said nothing but his shoulders grew rigid. He wanted off this topic, now.

I turned to Tara. "And what are you planning to do?"

Tara caught on quickly. "I'm honestly thinking the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn."

"Pratt?" Miles head snapped up. "That's a competitive school."

"Yeah, but my grades are great and so are my extra curriculars." She played with her food a little. "I might have a shot."

"Are you sure you want to go to Brooklyn?" Rory asked. "It's across the country?"

Tara rolled her eyes but didn't say anything.

"What program are you interested in?" Miles set his fork down.

Tara's eyes grew slightly wider as she turned to me. "So, Lexie. You haven't told us what your plans are."

Nice dodge, Tara. I started bouncing my knee. "Well, I'm behind on research and haven't even taken my SATs, so, I guess I'm aiming for the best art school I can get into. And looking for an apprenticeship."

"Well, you know you'll have to move to a bigger city." Miles picked up his water bottle. "That'll give you a place to start."

My face warmed. I really wanted off this topic. I sent a pleading look to Miles. He raised an eyebrow. I sighed. He didn't get it. "Miles, how many years of school are you going to have to have?"

Understanding finally lit Miles' eyes as he turned the conversation to a much safer subject. With the fading light, I forgot about why we were here other than to have fun.

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CHAPTER 7

ull house." Tara set her cards down. "Read 'em and weep, boys."

The guys groaned as they all dropped their cards on the table. Rory chuckled from his spot by the fire.

"She's cleaning me out," Isaac groaned.

"She wouldn't be if you stopped eating your trail mix," Miles countered.

"It has chocolate, what did you expect me to do?" Isaac shot back.

Tara and I chuckled. The guys had been playing poker for the last couple of hours and Tara was just wiping the floor with them. Well, most of them; Miles was doing surprisingly well.

"You could have been roasting marshmallows, but no, you guys wanted to play poker," I taunted before popping my burnt marshmallow into my mouth. Sugary deliciousness...

"Screw them. More for us." Ethan unwrapped a chocolate bar.

"Good point." I took the half Ethan was handing me before putting another marshmallow on my roasting stick. "How are you doing, Snoopy?"

Ethan grinned as he put his marshmallow over the fire. "Pretty good. Got a fire, we've got marshmallows." He leaned closer. "I've got you. All is right in the world."

"Can you not?" Asher groaned.

"It's not my fault you've got sensitive hearing," Ethan snapped. "Pretend you don't hear anything."

"Not exactly possible," Asher muttered under his breath as he shifted on the bench. I turned back to Ethan. "So, you're not hurting?"

Ethan stopped to think about it. "No, not really."

"Good." I smiled up at him. "I was worried you wouldn't be able to do your guys' climb tomorrow after the skis today. I didn't realize how jarring they were."

Ethan grinned. "You're not getting rid of me that easily. I've got no pain and no stiffness."

I raised an eyebrow and bit back a smile as my dirty side came out to play. It took him a minute before he snorted and shook his head.

When I sobered, I lowered my voice. "I'm nervous about tomorrow."

His eyes grew warm. "You're going to do fine."

"Yeah but..."

"If Asher says you can climb this route, you can climb it." His voice softened.

"I know, I'm just worried I'll fuck up." I started picking at a cuticle.

Ethan leaned closer. "You know how to free climb. You've been doing it for almost a year."

"Yeah, that's inside with plastic holds." I shook my head. "It's not the same."

"You might fall but as long as you tie in to the anchors, you'll be alright." His smoky toe curling voice rolled through my ears.

I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip. "I know."

"Besides, Asher is going to climb your route first to make sure the permanent anchors are up to his standards before you even go near that cliff." Ethan's gaze moved over my shoulder before he pulled back and started putting his s'more together.

Okay, that made me feel better as I caught my marshmallow on fire. "He is?"

Ethan nodded. "Asher does it every time before the rest of us climb a new sport climbing route."

That made sense. When it came to climbing Asher was just as fanatical about safety as Zeke.

"Whoever is burning their marshmallows, can you please stop?" Asher asked from the table. "The smell is messing with my stomach."

I eyed Asher's back at the picnic table ten feet away. "But they're yummy that way."

"They're gross." Asher shot over his shoulder.

I blew out my marshmallow. "Fine, snooty chef."

The guys chuckled. I gave this one to Hades. The big lug licked his wrinkles happily.

"I'm hitting the bathroom." I got to my feet. Hades got to his and trotted beside me as I turned on my small flashlight.

"I'll go with you." Tara called.

I stopped, watched her leave the table and walk toward me. Seriously? "Um, okay..."

The walk to the bathroom in the dark was uncomfortable. Tara kept opening her mouth as if to say something but instead, stopped herself and kept walking.

I used the bathroom and was washing my hands when I finally broke. "So, what's up?"

She turned off the water in her sink and pulled a paper towel from the dispenser. "Dean and Danielle."

"What about them?" I shut my water off and reached past her for a towel.

"I don't want you to get to know them," Tara said with a slight cringe. "Well, Dean, specifically."

I grew still. "What?"

She rushed to explain, "Look, it's just... With Asher... and then with Zeke... I..." Her cheeks turned pink.

"You're the one who brought them to the camp." I started drying my hands.

"I know... It's just that the last two guys I've liked have liked you more," she finally said.

"And you think that has something to do with me?" I asked slowly.

"I'd like just one guy to like me more." Her voice sad enough that it pricked my heart.

I shook my head. Had Tara always been this clueless? Or did Zeke and Asher not liking her really rattle her? "Tara, during the hour that those two were here, Dean was mostly talking to you while Danielle talked to me and the guys."

Her eyes grew brighter. "He did?"

"Yeah." I threw my towel away. "Don't worry so much about how much someone likes you, just have fun."

She smiled. "You might have a point."

We headed back to camp in a less tense silence.

Miles met us halfway there. "Are you ready for that talk?"

"Um, yeah." My heart instantly dropped. I turned to Tara and handed her my flashlight. "I'm going to take a walk around the loop with Miles."

Tara grinned a bit. "Sure. Have fun on your... walk."

Miles' ears turned pink as Tara strolled toward camp.

"Hades, guard Tara." I ordered. The large dog trotted after my cousin and out of sight. "Where are the guys?"

"They're meeting us." Miles took my hand, turned on his flashlight and led me right into the trees and tall grass.

"Where?" I looked around at the grass, hoping there weren't snakes or ticks.

"On the trail to the right of camp that goes around the lake. There's a picnic area far enough away from the camp that we can't be overheard." He stepped out onto a trail and used his hand to help me get out of the grass. I immediately began feeling my legs. No ticks. Yay! We kept moving as Miles kept his flashlight on the trail. The light from the waxing gibbous moon was pretty as it shined down through the trees. Miles...

"I just thought of the moon as a waxing gibbous moon." I shook my head.

Miles fought not to laugh. "It is the proper term."

I narrowed my eyes at him playfully. "This is your fault."

He grinned. "I'll happily take the blame."

I squeezed his fingers.

"Where are they?" Isaac's voice from ahead.

Miles squeezed my fingers once before letting go.

We walked around the bend and found the guys waiting around a picnic table. Well, most of them, the twins were actually sitting on top of the table.

"Let's have tonight's family meeting." I announced as Miles stopped. I went to the table and hoisted myself to sit between the twins.

"What are we doing tonight?" Asher's voice was already defensive.

"We need to start considering our options with Lexie." Miles' kept his voice calm.

Everyone turned to him.

Thick silence filled the air as no one moved. It was almost as if we didn't want to say the words. That if we did, that would make this real and then we'd have to deal with it. We couldn't stay like this...

"In New Orleans," I shattered the silence and suddenly had everyone's attention. "I admitted that I had kissed all of you."

"We remember," Isaac absently cracked his knuckles. My stomach knotted.

"We can't continue this way." Miles grabbed everyone's attention again. "We need to figure this situation out."

"Situation?" Asher scoffed. "We all know what's going on. So call it what it is."

"A clusterfuck?" I offered.

The twins chuckled. Asher didn't. Miles sighed while Zeke shook his head.

"Maybe we need to go over everything again." Asher rubbed the back of his neck as he looked at the ground.

I took a deep breath and let out. "I care about all of you. The same amount, the same way-"

"Even though you do spend a lot of time with Zeke." Isaac shifted on the table.

Ethan rolled his eyes. "And you say Zeke is the jealous one."

Isaac reached around me and shoved Ethan off the table.

Ethan landed on his feet, holding his arms out. "I'm not wrong."

"The first time I saw her since New Orleans was the night before her birthday." Zeke moved around the table behind us, picked up a rock and skipped it across the water.

"You were with Zeke the night of the fair?" Asher's eyes shot to me. "You said you were tired and wanted to go home to get some sleep."

"I did go home. Then I ran into that serial killer ghost and crossed his motherfucking ass." Silence fell. "By the way, ghosts don't disappear. They just keep rotting until they're skeletons."

Zeke came back around the table, scowling. "Wait, you crossed that piece of shit? The one from the bowling alley?"

I turned to him. "Yeah. It was how I realized how fed up I was with your silent treatment." I turned back to Asher. "And let's focus here."

"That's the problem though, right? You can't decide who you want to be with?" Isaac leaned forward and braced his forearms on his legs.

The guys started arguing among themselves what the problem was. Though I thought it was pretty obvious. In fact... "Shut the hell up!"

The guys stopped arguing and turned back to me. "The problem is that I care about all of you equally. It's not that one person is pressuring me, it's not that another spends more time with me. It's this!" I gestured around the circle.

"Which brings us back to the point." Miles looked at each of them. "Our options are: Lexie chooses one person to date, Lexie dates all of us at the same time, or Lexie dates no one."

"You're not fucking trying that 'all of us dating her' thing again?" Isaac's head rolled back until he was looking at the sky. "She said no already."

"Perhaps we should ask her," Ethan said as he rubbed his temple.

All of the guys turned to me. My heart leapt in my chest.

"You said no, Red." Isaac lifted his head and met my eyes. "Right?"

I needed to make myself clear. So, I spoke slowly and carefully. "Over the last month, I haven't seen four of my five best friends. And one of you, I hadn't even spoken to until two days ago." I glanced at Zeke, met his eyes then looked into the trees over Miles' shoulder. "I've spent that time thinking things over, crying, regretting that I didn't say something sooner. But the one thing that became clear to me is... I will take whatever road I have to... to save your relationships with each other. No matter if it's choosing, dating all of you or just... not being with anyone." I looked down at my hands fidgeting with my fingers. "Whatever choice we make, saving the relationships between you guys is the priority. Nothing is more important than that. Not to me."

"No one's saying that we'll leave if you don't choose us." Asher stepped closer, creating a semi-circle.

"I would have to take some time." Zeke's gravelly voice had everyone turning.

Ethan raised his hand. "Me too."

"Taking some time, fine. But that doesn't mean you wouldn't come back." Isaac looked between the two.

"I probably wouldn't." Ethan's eyes were shadowed as they met mine. "I mean, I'd still be friends with everyone. We'd still hang just..."

"It would be without me." I finished for him as my throat tightened.

"Not for a couple years at least." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Beautiful."

I gave him a strained smile as I fought to keep my voice even. "I understand completely." I turned to the others. "I did something that irrevocably changed our group. And we can't pretend that it didn't happen."

"It wasn't just you." Miles' voice was soothing. "It was all of us."

"If I had fucking said something..." Zeke met my gaze. "If I told them about... the rest wouldn't have happened."

"I should have spoken up too," Isaac muttered. "Instead of just letting it all..."

"We all should have said something," Asher added.

"Everyone had a hand in creating this situation. Now, we need to find a way to move forward," Miles pushed his glasses up his nose. "We need to consider every choice. We're having a family meeting every day. This is one of the things we'll be talking about all week. Each of us need to think about what we're willing to work on. What your limits are. By the end of the week, we'll make a decision together."

I kept my gaze on the ground as I struggled to keep control.

It was several heartbeats before anyone started back down the trail. But one by one, they left. Leaving me with Miles.

Miles sat on the table beside me as the tears started to fall. I buried my face in my hands as I tried to breathe.

"Slow deep breaths, Angel." Miles said in that silky-smooth timbre that I loved. He ran his hand up and down my spine as I trembled.

Sniffing one last time, I dropped my hands and wiped my face. "I'm fine." I managed through a tight throat. "It's just real. It's really happening and..."

"You're scared it's going to get worse," he finished for me.

I chewed on the corner of my lower lip as I nodded. Taking deep breaths and letting them out slowly. Eventually, I got my control again.

"It'll get worse before it gets better." Miles wrapped his arm around me, I turned and rested my cheek against his shoulder. "But it's going to be alright."

"How do you know?" I rasped.

"Because I know them." He kissed the top of my hair. "And not one of those guys would do anything that might hurt you."

I met his eyes. "Miles, you need to think about this too."

"I have." He started tapping his knee.

"But have you really?" I hated to do this but... "Or have you been so concerned about convincing the others to agree that you really haven't thought about what it would be like? What you would be giving up?"

"I don't want to lose you, Lexie." His voice was soft as his arm tightened around me.

My throat grew dry. "I don't either but you can't make your decision just based off that." I looked out into the trees. "I want everyone to make an honest choice. Including you."

His lips brushed my forehead. "I'll think about it."

I looked up at him. Wintergreen filled my lungs.

"But don't be surprised if the answer is the same," he warned.

"As long as you honestly think about it."

He leaned down and brushed his lips against mine. It was a sweet, simple kiss that I felt all the way to my toes. His eyes were warm as they met mine. "It'll be alright." I hoped so. I really truly hoped so.

THE FLAMES GREW HIGHER, the smoke filled the hallway. Coughing racked me as I tried to find a way out. The floor under me was getting hotter by the second. The skin on my hands and knees started to blister as I found the stairs.

"Don't go down, sweetheart..."

I jerked awake, looking for that voice. My heart pounding, my breathing heavy. Sweat poured down my face and neck. Dad...

Whimpering came from my right. Still half asleep, I reached for Hades. Only he wasn't next to me. There was another whimper. I turned to look for him and found him cuddled up to Tara. My cousin's arm was around my dog's belly, her face buried in the fur at his neck. I was tempted to take a picture for blackmail but my bladder had its own ideas.

Half asleep, I stumbled out of the tent. The campsite was empty, the fire out completely. The cool breeze dried the sweat on my skin as I shuffled toward the bathroom.

When I came back, I was a bit more awake. Maybe that's why I didn't spot Miles in the hammock earlier.

Wrapping my arms around me trying to fight off the chill, I crossed the camp and found him looking up at the stars.

"Hey." I kept my voice low, not wanting to wake the others.

He smiled up at me. "Can't sleep?"

I ran my hands over my arms. "Weird dream."

Miles noticed me rubbing my arms, moved over and lifted his unzipped sleeping bag that he was using as a blanket. I climbed in and snuggled up to his warm body. He chuckled softly as he covered me with it. "What about?"

I opened my mouth to tell him then stopped myself. Miles had enough on his plate right now. Besides, it was something I'd rather talk to Asher about. "Um, just weird." He wrapped his arms around me as I lay my head on his shoulder. "Mmm. Miles cuddles."

He turned his head and kissed my forehead. "I missed you."

I smiled against his shirt. "I haven't exactly been far the last couple of days."

He pressed his cheek against my hair. "I missed being able to touch you without over analyzing."

I smiled a big girly smile in the dark. "Oh, really?"

He looked up at the stars through the treetops. "I got used to touching you at the house."

I looked up at the stars. "Me too."

His arms squeezed me before he raised one arm and pointed. "There's Sagittarius."

I lifted my hand and pointed. "Cassiopeia."

"Good catch." He pointed at the Milky Way. "Without the light pollution, you can see so much more."

"It's dark at your house, but not this dark." I kept my voice low as I rested my hand on my stomach.

"After all of this is worked out, I'd still like you to keep coming over for stargazing." He turned to meet my eyes.

Warmth spread out from my chest to fill my body. "I want to too."

He gently cupped my face and gazed at me with warm eyes. My face grew warm. He leaned in and kissed me gently. Everything faded but his touch, his lips.

Eventually, he pulled back a little and met my eyes. "Stay with me tonight?"

"Of course."

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CHAPTER 8

AUGUST 18TH. EARLY MORNING

Asher

eart pounding, I ran through the brush. The dirt was soft between my toes as I moved through the darkness. Breathing heavy, I ran. Muscles bunching and extending. Working together to run. The scent hit my nose, a rabbit burst from the brush to dart through the grass. I picked up speed, following my ears and nose as I gave chase. Heart pounding in my chest, body working, it wasn't long until I had its neck in my teeth. Blood coated my tongue... Asher!

I jerked awake. My breathing ragged, I looked around the tent. The others were still out cold. Crickets chirped as Mom's voice echoed in my ear. Sweat poured down my face, my hands shook as I wiped it away. What the hell? Something inside me wanted to move, needed to move... I got to my feet and pulled on my sneakers. I had to get out of here... Run. I needed a run.

I got out of the tent and started toward the road. Something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. I stopped. Ally was in the hammock with Miles, both of them dead asleep. Jealousy boiled in my stomach. He shouldn't be touching her. She shouldn't be cuddling with him that way! I took a step toward them but forced myself to stop. What the hell is wrong with me? I don't fucking own Ally... Energy ran along my skin. Run. I needed a run...

Lexie

BIRDS CHIRPING WOKE ME UP. I came to the surface slowly, with the scent of wintergreen surrounding me. I sighed, content. Oh, he was warm...

His lips brushed my temple. "Angel, I need to get up."

I grumbled in protest. He smiled against my skin.

"Okay..." I pulled away and stretched.

Miles got out of the hammock and smiled down at me. "Morning."

I smiled back. "Morning."

He leaned down and brushed a kiss over my cheek. When he straightened, I handed him his sleeping bag. He folded it up as I climbed out. He headed to his tent.

The sun was barely up, creating a fog everywhere. I picked up my hoodie off my chair and pulled it on then headed for the bathroom. Today was climbing day. I chewed the corner of my lower lip as I made my way through the fog. Oh come on, Lexie. You know what you're worried about and it isn't the damn climb. I spent most of the night worrying and obsessing over the family meeting with the guys. What I could have said better, what I should have done. I was so far into my head that I walked past the bathroom.

"For fucks sake," I muttered as I turned back.

Asher came out of the fog. His shirt off, sweat glistening on his muscular chest as he ran. His blue mesh shorts hung low on his hips, the line of his Adonis belt was defined... I pulled my eyes to his face before he caught me drooling. Asher's ocean eyes met mine. He slowed his jog down until he was walking. "Hey."

"Hey."

He stopped inches in front of me. "Are you nervous about climbing today?"

I shook my head.

His eyes ran over my face. "You're worried about last night."

I nodded.

His eyes met mine again. "You didn't sleep much."

I shook my head.

"Ally," he chided.

I shrugged. "I spent most of last night running over shoulda, coulda, woulda's. What I could have said to make it easier on everyone... Why did

I kiss all of you... the whole gambit. And then when I did fall asleep, I had a weird dream."

Asher rubbed the back of his neck. "You made yourself clear about what you wanted. And that's all you could do."

"Maybe." I looked down at the road feeling crappy.

"You love all of us, Ally." His voice growing softer. "And you know I love you."

I looked up and met his eyes. That anvil in my chest eased a bit. "Even after New Orleans?"

"No matter what." He bent down and kissed me. My heart grew lighter as I moved my lips with his. My hands moved to his hard waist. He groaned low and deep in his chest as his hands moved to hold my face. He pressed harder, demanding access. My lips parted, he didn't waste a heartbeat as he moved in and took over. My body throbbed as he explored my mouth with his. Finding every corner, and every nerve, making my body throb. Wait... there's a reason we shouldn't... what was it? His hand slid from my lower back over the curve of my butt. Blood pounded in my ears as warmth washed through me. His fingers tightened and pulled me against him, forcing me to go to my toes. His hard body pressed into my soft belly as his kiss sent a fog through my head.

There was... reason... caught... getting... Oh, shit! I dropped flat on my feet, pulling away from him, my heart racing, my breathing heavy.

Asher's eyes seemed to be lighter as he met my gaze. His hand loosened on my ass, his fingers still holding. "Sorry." He looked away from me to the trees as he stepped back and cleared his throat. "I'm going to go shower and start breakfast."

"I'm, uh... going to get dressed," I added quickly a bit too cheerfully, making sure to keep my eyes above his waist.

"I'll start the coffee." He turned and headed back toward camp. I couldn't help but watch the way he moved, smoothly and easily. It was impressive. And those two dimples... He glanced over his shoulder and caught me staring. Unashamed, I smiled before I turned and headed for the bathroom.

By the time I was finished in the bathroom, gave up on my hair and got dressed I could smell the coffee. My climbing clothes were just like my work out clothes, only with more durable fabric. Black capri Rockland leggings, with a black y-back tank and black sports bra. I pulled my hoodie

back on before slipping on my sandals and leaving the tent where Tara was still out cold.

Asher was in the 'kitchen' making breakfast. Snagging a mug, I poured coffee and fixed it the way I wanted it. Then sat down by the fire and yawned.

Miles was in one of the camping chairs in his climbing clothes. He was wearing a pair of Prana Stretch khaki cargo climbing shorts and a gray sleeveless shirt. He was also wearing his contacts. "Morning."

"Morning." I took a sip of my coffee.

"Don't forget to put on sunscreen today." Miles poured himself a cup.

I nodded as I continued sipping my coffee, trying to wake up for the day.

Zeke straightened from the other side of his tent. For some reason his tent was facing the woods. Zeke started walking over. He was wearing, surprise, black climbing pants and a sleeveless black shirt. The morning was nice and quiet until Zeke smacked the side of the other tent. Isaac yelped then cursed inside.

"Get up!" Zeke walked into the cooking area with a satisfied half grin on his face.

"Why?" I tilted my head to the side.

Miles sat down in his chair a couple of chairs away. "The twins always sleep in on climb day."

"They stay up too late talking about it then forget how early we have to get up." Zeke poured himself a cup of coffee then topped off Asher's.

"That wasn't funny." Isaac shambled out of the tent still in his lime pajama pants and white shirt.

"No, it isn't. But you two do this every time." Zeke left the kitchen area as Ethan joined us in his red bottoms and black undershirt.

"One day, we'll get even." Ethan's eyes were barely open as he walked around the chairs.

"The day one of you two get up before I do, is the day I'm dead," Zeke muttered before taking a sip of coffee.

"Just because we don't get up at five thirty every morning doesn't mean we can't." Isaac picked up an apple from the cooler and bit into it.

"Breakfast is right here." Asher tapped the griddle with the spatula.

"And I'll eat that too." Isaac grabbed a mug and poured coffee for himself.

"If you're starting another growth spurt, I don't think we have enough food. The town is still recovering from your last one," Asher mumbled under his breath.

"Ha ha." Isaac picked up his coffee. "You're so funny."

Someone's tent unzipped behind me.

"Is it morning already?" Rory ducked out of his tent, also still in his sweats and undershirt.

"Did we wake you up?" I turned a bit in my chair so I could see him.

Rory stretched his arms over his head. "Not really, this is sleeping in for me."

"That sucks." Ethan blew on his coffee.

"Come and get it." Asher picked up a plate and put a good size helping of eggs, sausage and potatoes.

Everyone, well almost everyone, Tara was still sound asleep, got their plates from Asher and sat down in their chairs around the fire ring. It took most of us until our second cup of coffee to finally perk up.

"So, Red." Isaac leaned forward. "You excited for your first outdoor climb?"

"Sure." I played with my potatoes. "That's the word for it."

The guys chuckled.

"What's wrong, kid?" Rory shifted in his chair.

"Nerves, I guess." I got to my feet.

Asher eyed me. "Do you want me to braid your hair?"

"Yeah." I set my dishes in the sink. "I've given up on learning how."

"You need to have it tighter than that or it'll just get in the way." He gestured toward my tent. "Grab some leave-in conditioner and come over here."

I shook my head and went into the tent. Tara was now facing the tent wall with Hades' back pressed against her spine. Staying quiet, I got what Asher wanted then headed back out and sat down in the dirt in front of Asher. He took the stuff from me. I was facing the guys as Asher took off my hair tie and undid my messy attempt at a French braid. The smell of rosemary drifted over me a heartbeat before he moved his fingers through my hair, spreading the conditioner as he worked. The others were quiet as they watched Asher begin to braid my hair tightly. Their stares were getting to me so I looked down at my lap as Asher worked. Maybe this was a mistake... I should have just fixed the braid myself.

Ethan noticed and started talking about their climb today. What equipment they'd need, what to expect. I didn't care, as long as they stopped watching me.

When Asher was done, I didn't waste any time. I got to my feet and wiped the dirt off my butt. "Thanks, Ash." I headed back to my tent.

"Lexie, can you change your shirt to something brighter?" Zeke called.

I turned around and looked at him as if he were an alien. "Excuse me?"

"I want someone to be able to track your progress from the bottom of the cliff. It'd be easier if you were wearing a brighter color." Zeke took a drink of his coffee.

"Oh." That made more sense. "For a second there I thought you were a pod person." The guys chuckled as I went to change.

When I came back out I was in a sunshine yellow tank top. "Better?" I picked up my coffee and sat back down.

Zeke's eyes ran over me, sending a curl of heat through me. He nodded.

"So, Rory." I turned to him. "What are your plans with Tara today?"

Rory sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We were planning on a hike but I have a feeling we're going to have company on it."

"I have that feeling too." I couldn't help but grin.

Rory turned to the others. "Boys, are you climbing today?"

Miles leaned forward. "After Lexie goes, we'll be doing the same route."

Rory's brow furrowed. "Okay, you guys have all your gear?"

"Yep," Isaac chimed.

"Have you guys checked to make sure everything is in good working order? Good condition?" Rory asked, looking at each of them.

"Twice before packing and twice again when she goes up." Asher promised.

Rory nodded. "And your second climb?"

"It won't take long." Zeke got up and put his coffee mug in the sink.

"That area is a lower level than we're used to." Asher leaned forward in his chair. "It'll be a fun climb."

"Have fun." Rory's voice was serious. "But stay safe. I don't want to get a call that one of you got hurt."

I smiled to myself. Rory had his 'dad' voice going and the guys were paying attention.

"So, triple check before you climb." Rory wasn't asking.

There was a round of yeahs and yes, sirs.

Warmth spread from my chest. Rory was pretty amazing. More than ever, I realized how lucky I was to have him.

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took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Oh boy... why does the cliff look bigger outside? I was looking up the hundred-foot-tall limestone cliff face that Asher was currently rappelling down. A hundred feet... shit. I swallowed hard and went back to the truck. My harness was already on and ready, all I needed were my quick draws. I went to the back of the truck and found the two carabiners attached to a length of strap. Counting out ten, I put them on my belt on my left side. I always had an easier time tying in on that side during practice.

Ethan came over and sat on the tailgate of the truck. "You're going to do great, Beautiful."

"As long as I don't get myself killed." I muttered as my stomach fluttered.

He chuckled. "If Asher didn't trust you to go up there alone, he'd be going with you."

I nodded. He was right.

"Thanks, Zeke." Asher said at the bottom of the cliff.

"How's the route?" Zeke began pulling the rope back through the bolt at the very top of the cliff.

"Good." Asher took his helmet off and wiped the sweat from his face. "All the bolts look great and there are plenty of hand holds in her reach. Should be somewhat easy for her."

Zeke shot him a look. "Are you sure about that?"

Asher's shoulders straightened. "I wouldn't be letting her go up there if I didn't think it was safe. You're not the only one who cares about her."

Asher untied himself from the rope and left Zeke to finish setting it up for me.

"Let me see your harness." Asher set his helmet down on the tailgate next to me. I raised my hands so he could check my harness and the knot I used on my belay device which oddly looked like a strange padlock. The concept was simple really, the rope looped through the metalwork and created friction to help as you rappel back to the ground. It was the same device that Asher would use on his harness to keep me safe in case I fell.

"Good knot." Asher said absently as he checked my quickdraws. "On your left, good. Chalk bag?"

I reached to my right hip, stuck my hand in the open bag, squeezed the bag there and brought my chalk covered hand back out.

He smiled. "Good. Now your bluetooth."

I slipped the bluetooth on my ear and made sure my phone was attached to my harness. "Call Asher."

There was ringing in my ear as Asher's cell rang. He answered. "Good, let's get you tied in." Zeke had insisted on the bluetooth. He didn't want me getting up there and forgetting how to get back down because I was tired. Normally they'd use radios but Zeke didn't want me having to let go to communicate with them on the ground. So, it was this or he'd be climbing with me. Which I wouldn't mind right now. My pulse pounded in my throat, my fingers and toes tingled. Everything seemed too bright and too loud at the same time.

"Breathe," Asher reminded me, his voice echoing in my ear. "The principle is the same as in the gym."

I took deep breaths as I smeared chalk over my hands. He buckled the chin strap on my helmet then moved to the rope coil. Zeke hesitated to hand him the rope.

"Zeke." Asher's voice was hard and sharp. "I know how she climbs. Move."

Zeke handed the rope to him before coming to me. He towered over me as his gaze ran over my body. It wasn't sexual, he was just checking to make sure I had everything.

I lifted the corner of my lips into a half grin. "I'll be okay, Tough Guy."

He ran his hand through his hair. "If your arms get tired, take a break. We'll have no problem holding you until you're ready to go again. If you start reaching your limit, rappel down from there-"

"Because it'll take energy and muscle to keep me coming down at a safe pace." I finished for him.

Zeke nodded. "Be careful."

"Come on, Zeke," Isaac called from the shade. "Come stress yourself out over here and let the girl climb."

"Belay on," Asher announced.

Zeke turned away and went over to sit with the others.

I turned to the wall. Okay. I moved to the wall and looked up. Oh, crap. I made a figure eight knot with the rope.

"Climbing." I ignored everything else and found a nice hand hold. Then a good foot hold. I focused on each movement while keeping the rope straight below me. When I reached the first bolt it was a surprise. The steel was flush with the wall along with the metal plate for a carabiner. I made sure I was stable with my feet and right hand before I reached for a quick draw. Hours of practice made it easy to clip onto the hanger and slip my rope into the lower carabiner. I took a deep breath. Okay, if I fell now then the bolt and quick draw would give Asher a way to keep me from falling just like at the gym. Making sure the clip was facing left, I looked up and searched for my next hand hold.

"Good job, Ally girl." Asher's voice spoke in my ear.

"I didn't realize"—I moved to the hand hold—"how rough the rock would be."

"Killing your nails, huh?"

"Go to hell."

The guys laughter rang in my ear as I grinned. Apparently, I was on speaker phone. I kept moving, the guys staying quiet to let me concentrate. Losing track of time, I focused on moving right and clipping my rope through my quick draws.

"Ally, how are you doing?" Asher asked as I tried to catch my breath some time later.

"Just out of breath."

"Do you want to rest?"

I looked up at the cliff. Wait, that was only like twenty feet. That couldn't be right. I looked down. The world spun. "Shit." I closed my eyes as the world twirled while I clung to the rock.

"Ally, talk to me." Asher's rich baritone was comforting.

"I was fucking stupid and looked down." I looked up for my next hand hold.

"Are you dizzy?"

"I was, but as long as I don't look down, I think I'm fine." Which wasn't going to do shit for when I come back down. My heart pounded in my chest, sweat rolled down my back. My fingers started to ache. "My hands are starting to ache."

"Loosen your grip, that's usually where you have trouble first."

Loosen... I focused on relaxing my fingers a bit. The pain in my hands eased. "Oh, yeah..."

"Do you want to come down?" Zeke asked.

"No." I scoffed. "I want to fucking finish this climb."

The guys chuckled.

"Staying in one place isn't going to do it," Asher reminded me.

I cursed, took several deep breaths and started moving again. When I reached the next bolt, I couldn't pull enough rope to get it into the carabiner. "Need some slack." The tension on the rope eased and I managed it. "Tension." The slack disappeared.

I kept moving and focused on not looking down.

"Hey, you guys going to be done soon?" A man's voice sounded in my ear.

"She's almost to the top." Isaac answered.

"Sure she is, we'll just sit here for another hour and wait as the line gets longer." The voice said.

"It's her first climb, asshole." Ethan's voice was loud. "And we're climbing after her."

My temper sparked as I pulled myself up. "Who the hell is that?"

"Some rude jerk. Ally, ignore it. Focus on what you're doing." My bluetooth crackled.

"Tell that asshole to go find a pinecone then sit on it and rotate." I grunted as I grabbed another hand hold.

Laughter erupted in my ear. Asher told everyone to shut up or they'll distract me. I found a good toe hold and moved. My other foot found a ledge. I pulled myself up and found two bolts. One above the other. It was the lower off. I was at the top. "I'm at the top."

The guys cheered in my ear.

"Good job, Ally. Now, don't forget to quick draw yourself to it before you undo that knot."

"I don't think I'm going to forget that." I muttered as I pulled my last quick draw. I snapped one end to the main load loop on my harness then snapped the other to the bolt. Taking a deep breath, I started pulling rope from below. I made a loop and moved that through both bolts, created the figure eight knot that Asher had drilled into my head so much I could probably do it in my sleep. Then I clipped another carabiner on the end. After hooking that to my main load bearing loop, I began to untie the original figure eight knot that kept the rope attached to my harness. I unclipped the quick draw. I checked the knots and clips again. "Okay, am I rappelling or are you lowering me? 'Cause I need to set up my belay if I'm rappelling."

"Did you double-check your knots?" Asher asked.

"Yep."

"Lower her." Zeke's voice ordered in my ear. "She doesn't have a lot of experience rappelling."

"How is she going to get that experience if she never does it?" Isaac asked.

"I agree with Zeke," Miles said. "It's her first outdoor climb, let's not risk the chance that her arms are more tired than she knows."

The guys continued to debate until I had enough. "Guys! I'm on a fucking cliff! Make a decision."

"I'm lowering you." Asher made the call.

Well, that made it mostly easy. I leaned back away from the rock. "Okay, I'm ready to go."

"I'm ready for you," Asher promised.

I leaned further back and trusted my weight to the rope and Asher. He began lowering me down the rock face, my job was simply to make sure I didn't hit anything and pick up my quick draws on my way down. I slowly spun away from the cliff face and had to catch my breath. The forest was below, and the sun high in the bright blue sky. It was stunning. Okay, maybe the height wasn't so bad. I was smiling when I turned back to the cliff face.

By the time they lowered me to the ground my arms were aching. I unclipped from the rope. "Off belay." I turned and smiled up at Asher. His eyes were bright, his smile was huge.

I threw my arms in the air. "I did it!"

Asher picked me up and hugged me. "I'm proud of you, Ally girl."

Isaac took me from Asher and hugged me tight as he set me down on the ground. I squeezed him back. Isaac let me turn to his brother.

Ethan pulled me close and kissed my cheek. "Great job, Beautiful."

When Ethan pulled back, I turned to Zeke. I didn't hug Zeke, he wasn't a public display of affection kind of guy. Instead I showed him my arms and hands. "See, all in one piece."

His lips lifted into a half grin. "Good. I would have been pissed."

"What would be different?" I snickered as he smiled and shook his head.

* * *

Isaac

When we got back to camp, Tara was sitting in camp at the table with Dean and Danielle playing cards. They were laughing, just having a good time. I froze as I went to close the truck door. Danielle... black shadows moved over her face in a strange ripple pattern. As she laughed the color faded, when she stopped it was back. Despair poured through me, filling me until I struggled to keep my head above water. I waited for anyone else to notice but everyone was acting as if they didn't see it. No... no... it was like with the demon all over again.

My throat grew dry, my stomach rolled and bile rose. Not again.

"I'm going to change and take Hades swimming." Lexie headed for her tent jerking my attention away. That black sinking feeling disappeared.

Shit, what the hell was that? I put my hands in my pockets and made a point to sit down out of arms reach of everyone. Lexie will change, come back out and she'll tell me if she sees it... I took an emotional inventory. I wasn't mad, at least any more mad than I should be about the dating thing. I wasn't wanting to hurt anyone... I eyed Danielle. Could she be possessed? Maybe... then why the hell would I see it and not the others?

As minutes rolled by and I didn't attack anyone, I slowly started to relax a bit. No emotional surges, no voice in my head... I eyed Hades. The dog simply continued lying on his back with his belly in the sun and his tongue lolling out. Okay, he wasn't reacting.

It wasn't long before Ethan came over and sat down in his chair.

I was about to open my mouth when Lexie got out of her tent in her swimsuit. Bolting to my feet, I went straight to her and took her arm. "We need to talk."

* * *

Lexie.

ISAAC DIDN'T GIVE me a chance to answer, he simply pulled me through camp and onto the trail. Worry knotted my gut. I hadn't seen him this way since New Orleans...

"What's going on?" I pulled my arm from his grasp just in case Zeke was watching and thought Isaac was hurting me.

"I'm seeing shit." He ran his hands through his hair, his eyes grew wide. He kept his gaze on the ground as we walked deeper into the woods.

My chest grew tight. "What are you seeing?" Please, please don't let it be another demon... It would tear him apart a second time.

He swallowed hard. "There was a shadow on that girl, Danielle, it was on her face."

My stomach dropped. "What kind?"

He stopped in the trail and looked at me like I was insane. "What?"

"What did it look like?" I struggled to keep my voice down.

He shook his head as his eyes unfocused. "Um, kinda like when you look at the bottom of a pool when the suns out. That weird rippling effect."

The tension in my shoulders eased. "Okay, that's not what I saw when you were possessed." I took his hand in mine. "That could mean something different. Was it constant? Did it behave in anyway?"

His eyes focused again on me. "Yeah, it would almost disappear when she was laughing and when she stopped it came back."

That was freaky as hell... "Okay, that has to be something else. The shadow on you affected your emotions and spread. This sounds like it reacts to it."

He thought about it. "It kind of looked that way."

I took a deep breath and tried to think. Evie had said something... "What did Evie tell you when you two talked? About side effects?"

His eyes unfocused as he pressed his lips together. "That... um... something about seeing shit other people won't."

Relief let me almost limp. "Okay, then it might be something completely normal that people just don't see."

He nodded several times, his color coming back. "Yeah, that feels..." He met my eyes. "When I first saw it, I felt..." The amber in his eyes faded a little.

I stepped closer until I pressed against him. "You felt what?"

He swallowed hard. "I felt like I did before Boulder. Hopeless and... in a pit I couldn't get out of. It was so deep that I couldn't even scream. It was... I was alone. Really fucking alone."

I reached up and held his face in my hands. "You're not there anymore. You weren't alone then, and you aren't now. Just talk to me."

His hand held one of my hands to his face. "I don't think it was me."

"What do you mean?"

"When I looked away from her, the feeling was just... gone." He shrugged. "It disappeared."

"Maybe you should talk to her. Or we can call Evelyn?"

"Maybe..." He let my hand slip from his face.

"You're going to call Evelyn, right?" I needed to be sure that he wasn't going to keep it to himself.

"Yeah, she gave me her number in case something weird happened." He looked out at the water. "I'll call tonight."

I tugged his shirt to bring his attention back to me. "Come on. It's a beautiful day and I want to go swimming."

Isaac smiled then turned around on the trail and we headed back to camp. Asher and Miles were in their suits and walking away from the back of the trailer.

Miles shifted a coil of rope over his shoulder. "I'll find a higher and further out branch this year."

"I don't know." Asher grinned. "Seeing Zeke hit the water early would be kind of satisfying."

Miles chuckled.

"What are you guys doing?" I eyed them playfully.

"We're hanging the rope swing." Asher gestured toward the lake. "Can you go tell Zeke we're going to hang the rope, and if he's not there he's going to have to deal with our decision."

I chuckled. "I'll go tell him. Come on, Hades."

I headed across the campsite and through the long grass. The crickets started jumping away. Hades gave chase. I smiled as he jumped and ran through the grass. The crickets kept evading him and he'd change direction only to slide in the grass. I reached the back side of the tent. Figuring Zeke was inside, I walked around the side to the front, "Hey, Zeke..." I froze.

Zeke's back was to me as he was finishing tying his board shorts. "God damn it, Lexie!" He grabbed a shirt off the top of the overhang. Scars covered him from the base of his neck to his lower back. I saw everything in a heartbeat but at the same time saw none of it. What drew my eye and kept me looking were the lines of his body. The hard muscles of his shoulders and back, his firm wide waist... The line of his spine going down that muscular... My body throbbed. His black shirt covered his back and I was hit with the urge to genuinely pout for the first time in my life. Instead I met his furious gaze.

"What the fuck are you doing?" The veins in his neck began to bulge. "Get a good long fucking look?" He grabbed his sandals and started walking away.

Then it hit me what he was thinking. "Zeke!"

He didn't stop.

"I already knew you had scars." I started after him. "Remember?"

He stopped, the skin on his neck turning red, his clenched fist shaking.

Stay patient, Lexie... I walked around to stand in front of him. His jaw was clenched so much I was sure his teeth would crack any second. "That's not why I was staring."

He refused to look at me. He just glared over my head. "Sure, it wasn't." His sarcasm was so thick it was practically dripping in the air.

"Zeke, you might not understand this so I'm just going to tell you flat out." My face grew warm. I can't believe I was going to have to point this out... "You're hot."

His brow wrinkled, he looked down at me. "What?"

"You're fucking sexy as hell." A big girly smile spread across my face as my cheeks burned. "I wasn't staring at your scars, I was... staring at what was under them." Oh, God, did I just fucking say that?

It was almost as if I hit him with a board. The stunned look on his face had me biting back an embarrassed giggle. I backed up a step and then

another. Any second the heat from my face would catch the woods on fire. "I, uh, should go help the guys with the rope swing."

I turned and started to walk away.

"You're not going to ask?"

I turned back around but kept walking toward camp. "You'll tell me when you're ready. Hades, come on." Turning back around, I walked back to the lake with as much dignity as I had left.

At the lake, I found Asher and the twins further down the east side of the shore. Where was Miles? Hades and I reached them only to find everyone looking up at the tree. Looking up, I found that Miles was pretty high in the branches. He was out on a thick limb around fifteen feet over the water.

"Is that water deep enough if he falls?" Worried, I tried to judge from the shore.

"Yeah, it's a steep part of the lake." Isaac continued to watch Miles as he tied a knot around the thick branch. He threw the rope over the branch. Instead of climbing down, he jumped. He came up and wiped the water from his eyes before I even had a chance to worry if he was all right or not. He snagged the rope and swam to the shore. Hades picked up a stick and hurried to me with his tail wagging.

I smiled as I took it from him. "Want to swim, baby?"

He wagged his tail even more. While the guys did whatever they were doing with the rope. I turned to the lake and chucked the stick out as far as I could. Hades ran full speed into the lake and swam out to pick it up. I was smiling as my baby started back with the stick in his mouth. Hades swam back and climbed out before he immediately shook the water off and raced past me. Turning, I watched Zeke bend down and take the stick from Hades. He straightened and threw the stick further into the water than I had. Hades was ecstatic, he barreled back into the water and swam out.

"I'll test it." Isaac chuckled grabbing my attention again. He backed away from the shore and climbed up on a large rock. He swung out on the rope, let go and splashed down.

"Well, that works." Ethan reached out and got the rope on its way back. Isaac surfaced. "Hell, yeah!"

I shook my head as Hades swam back to me. When he got out, he was a mass of soaked wrinkles. "Good, baby." I took the stick and threw it again.

Zeke moved next to me and held out my towel. "You left it on your chair."

"Thanks." I took it without looking at him. "Still pissed?"

He sighed. "No."

Hades ran to Zeke. Zeke praised him and threw it again.

I turned, looked up at him and smiled. "Good. 'Cause I'm gonna do a flip." I spun and ran to the boulder before he could try to stop me. But instead of stopping me, he laughed.

Miles handed me the rope when I got to the top. I got a good grip on the rope above one of the knots and jumped off. I swung out with my knees bent. When I almost reached the furthest point, I swung my legs forward then up and back. I let go of the rope as the world spun then righted itself right before I hit the water feet first. The water closed over my head, I swam back to the surface.

I came to the surface to hoots and whistles.

"Damn, Red!" Isaac shook his head.

"Impressive." Asher smiled.

I chuckled as I started swimming toward the shore. Everyone started swinging off the rope and swimming. Even Tara, Danielle and Dean came down the shore and joined us. All my worries fell away. Everyone relaxed and had fun as we tried to outdo each other by flipping off the rope swing.

A couple of hours later, I got out of the water, sat in the sand and watched everyone keep swimming. Hades seemed to have limitless energy as he swam with the guys and occasionally brought me his stick to throw as I dried in the sun.

My mind wandered back to last night and my dream. I'd been having that dream over and over since the fire in New Orleans. Ever since I heard Dad's voice... Missed the sound of his voice, how loud it was when he sneezed... My chest ached with an old dull pain that never really went away. Usually I didn't think about him, I tried not to. But since the fire, he kept creeping back into my thoughts.

Asher walked out of the lake and snagged his towel. He was drying his hair as he sat down beside me in the sand. "Having fun?"

I blinked quickly to clear my eyes before looking up at him. "Yeah."

His eyes narrowed. "Ally?"

I swallowed hard. "I'm fine."

He frowned at me, obviously not believing me. He reached down and offered me his hand. "Let's go for a walk."

I let him pull me to my feet. He held on to my hand as he moved down the shore.

Ethan was coming back from the bathroom when his eyes snapped to our hands. He shot a look at Asher. "And you bitch when I just say something to her around you."

"Go to hell," Asher shot back. I pulled my hand from Asher's as the knots in my stomach grew tighter. Were they even going away anymore?

Ethan shook his head as he walked by. "You can't have it both ways, man."

We were silent as we walked down the shoreline. We eventually walked through the campsite and down the west trail and when we were far enough away, he took my hand again. "What put that look on your face?"

I squeezed his fingers. "Ever since the fire, I've been having these dreams."

"What kind of dreams?" His voice was soft.

"About the fire."

He looked down at me. "Tell me."

"We're in the hallway, crawling toward the stairs." I swallowed hard. "And when we reach them, I hear him. Dad's voice. And I wake up looking for him, positive he's there."

"Ally..." His eyes were warm.

"I stopped looking for him years ago." I shook my head. "I know he's gone, so, why do I wake up looking for him?"

He let go of my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. I moved my arm around his waist as he pulled me closer.

"How do you feel when you hear his voice?" His touch was calming, helping me to think.

I thought about it. "Like I did when I was a kid. Happy, safe, loved..."

His hand on my shoulder squeezed gently. "Could you be wanting to hear him?"

"I thought I forgot his voice." It sucked to admit it, but it was the truth.

"And now you hear it whenever you dream." He held me against his side.

I shook my head "It's not hearing his voice that bothers me, it's waking up looking for him."

"You want him to be there, Ally. There's nothing wrong with that."

"It just blows." I muttered.

He kissed the top of my hair. "I know. I've been having weird dreams too." He sighed as he took my hand again. "And every time, at the worst part, I hear my mom's voice yelling my name. And I wake up."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'll take the weird dreams if it means hearing her."

"But, don't you wake up looking?"

He shook his head. "I watched my mom slowly wither away. She was in a lot of pain at the end." He met my eyes. "When she died, it was the worst moment of my life so far. But I knew it was coming. She wasn't hurting anymore." He shrugged. "I'm just glad I get to hear her."

Huh. I hadn't thought about it that way. It wasn't something to reach for, it wasn't something to hate. In a way, it was a gift. I got to hear him again and instead of wanting more time, more words, maybe I should just appreciate what I hear when I hear it.

"I like the way you think, Ash." My voice was warm and soft as I smiled up at him.

* * *

Miles

Zeke started back toward the camp. After weighing my chances, I decided now was the best time. Asher and Lexie were walking down the lake shore further down, he wouldn't be able to overhear us.

I got out of the lake, grabbed my towel and headed back to camp. We needed to deal with this and now was better than later.

When I reached camp, Rory was loading his truck with his sleeping bag and talking to Zeke. "I'm leaving the tent for the girls, but I have to get on the road now."

I crossed the campsite to stand beside Zeke. "You're leaving?"

Rory sighed. "One of the guys on the force had a baby and I need to head back to cover his shift."

Rory went back to loading his duffle bag as he avoided looking at us. "Could you guys pass that along to Lexie?"

"Yes, of course." I eyed him. His face was flushed, his eyes sharp. He was furious about something... Rory hurried into the truck and sped off.

Zeke turned and started toward his tent in the tall grass.

"Zeke." He stopped. "We need to talk."

"What's there to talk about?" He didn't even turn around.

"Zeke."

He turned and glared at me. "This is not what you want to do right now."

I started tapping my leg. "I should have said something-"

"You of all fucking people... yeah you should have," he growled, his hands clenched into fists.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't going to say anything then-"

He shook his head. "You know everything about me. You know my history. You know all of my shit." His eyes were hard as they met mine. "You knew I cared about her. You knew what she..." He turned away, his shoulders rigid. "You had Autumn. You've had other girlfriends..."

"So, because of your past, you should get any girl you want?" That cold anger filled my chest.

He turned back to me, his eyes blazing. "Fuck you! This isn't about Lexie!"

"Then what is it about?" I've been racking my brain for a month trying to figure out why he wouldn't talk to me.

"You didn't tell me. You didn't warn *me*!" His fists shook. "I could have dealt with it. I could have fucking managed to get over it. But you didn't give me the option."

Stunned, I could only gape at him as my stomach dropped.

Zeke ran his hand through his hair. "You know I would have walked away. 'Cause you'd be better for her than I ever could. But you didn't fucking tell me."

Shit. I understood now... I got it. Zeke was pissed that I didn't trust him as *my* friend to understand... Son of a... "It didn't even occur to me that I was doing that." I swallowed hard, my mind racing. "Put me on probation. What do I need to do?"

"Just stay the fuck away from me for a while." Zeke turned away and stormed toward his tent. I closed my eyes. I'm the biggest idiot on the planet.

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CHAPTER 10

Lexie

hen Asher and I walked back into the campsite, Miles announced that Rory had gone back to town for work.

Then Ethan spoke up. "We've got beer."

Tara had gotten upset because we wouldn't let her take beer to her friends but she perked back up when we told her to invite them for dinner, beer and marshmallows.

Dinner was three hours ago, and I had to admit that nice Tara was kind of fun. She cracked jokes, she relaxed, she was a completely different Tara. Or maybe that was the beer?

It was well after dark when we finished the board games and started the fire.

Everyone was arguing over how the best marshmallow is roasted when Danielle spoke up. "How about we play Never Have I Ever?"

I eyed the others. "With this crowd?"

Everyone chuckled.

"Come on, it'll be fun." Tara raised her right hand. "Nothing will ever leave this campsite. I swear on my new school wardrobe."

"Whoa." I was impressed. Tara loved her clothes. As in crazy loved. "That's a promise we can actually count on."

The others shared a hesitant look.

"This could be fun." Isaac took a bite out of his s'more.

"I hate that fucking game," Zeke groaned, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

"You hate all drinking games," Ethan pointed out.

"Alright," Miles said. "But we do reserve the option of not answering by finishing our drink if we aren't comfortable."

"Deal!" Tara chirped.

"Who's going first?" Asher asked, shifting in his chair.

"Lexie." All of my friends said at once.

I flipped them off. "Assholes."

They chuckled.

"Fine, I'll go first." I looked around the group and had my first one. "Never have I ever kissed a girl."

The guys groaned. Us girls laughed as they drank.

I turned to Danielle. Her face turned pink. "I can't think of anything. So, skip me."

Everyone turned to Tara. She looked around the group with a mischievous grin on her face. "Never have I ever peed standing up."

I chuckled. "Nice."

"So, that's how this is going to play out?" Ethan shook his head before taking a drink.

Everyone turned to Dean. "Never have I ever kissed a guy."

"Oh, copycat." I took a drink of my beer.

"It's strategy," Dean countered.

"Never have I ever gotten a ticket," Miles offered.

Isaac flipped Miles off while he and I drank.

Everyone turned to Zeke.

Zeke sighed. "Never have I ever played the guitar." Both Asher and Ethan drank.

"You play?" I crossed my legs and shifted in my chair.

"Badly." Asher's cheeks tinted pink. "Ethan gave me five lessons and then made me promise never to touch another guitar."

Everyone chuckled as we turned to Ethan.

"Never have I ever worked in a garage." Ethan grinned at Zeke. Zeke muttered wordlessly before he drank.

Everyone turned to Isaac.

"Never have I ever had two girlfriends at once." Isaac looked pointedly at Ethan. Ethan glared at him and drank. So did Asher.

My mouth dropped open. "Really, Asher?"

He held his hands out and shrugged. "One relationship was ending as another started there was a couple of days overlap." Asher cringed "I didn't mean to, it just kind of happened. I told each of them about it and I apologized though."

"See, now we're getting to the fun stuff." Danielle smiled.

We went around and around like that for at least an hour. Eventually, it was my turn again. My face was warm, my head fuzzy. "Never have I ever slept next to a girl in bed."

Each of my friends shot me a look and took a drink, so did Tara, Dean and Danielle.

"Tara!" Isaac's eyes grew wide, his jaw dropping.

Tara waved her hand. "Sleepovers when I was, like, six."

"Same here!" Danielle looked around the group again. "Never have I ever gone commando."

Fuck. Zeke, Ethan, Isaac, Asher and Dean took a drink. So did I.

"Wait, wait!" Ethan stopped Tara from speaking. "I've got to hear this story!"

"Remember that winter formal dress?" I shrugged "I could *not* wear panties in that thing. It ruined the line of the dress."

The guys chuckled. Miles' ears turned pink while Zeke shook his head.

"Never have I ever made out with a guy." Tara announced. I went still... what? Wow. I didn't see that one coming...

"Oh, damn, she's bringing out the big guns," Isaac said.

I took a drink along with Danielle.

It was Dean's turn. "I've never had a one-night stand."

Ethan cursed then drank. "I can honestly say we both knew it was only one night though."

I just shook my head.

Zeke took a second. "Never have I ever meditated."

I groaned and took a drink.

"Never have I ever rebuilt a perfectly good engine just because I was bored." Ethan grinned at Zeke.

I laughed as Zeke drank.

"Don't try picking on Beautiful. She's smaller and it doesn't take much to make her drunk." Ethan lectured. Zeke nodded that he was right.

"Never have I ever gotten freaky at school," Isaac announced.

"Define freaky." Ethan raised his eyebrow.

"Anything beyond first," Isaac answered.

Ethan grumbled and drank. Everyone laughed.

"Where?" I asked, unable to figure out how he could have pulled it off.

"A car, in the janitor's closet..." Ethan shrugged. "There are a hundred little places."

Everyone turned to Asher.

"Never have I ever gotten arrested." Asher looked at me.

"I was never technically arrested, I was just brought home in a cop car." But I drank anyway.

"From my house." Asher smiled.

"Hey! I warned her." I had warned Jessica that if she ever hit Asher again, I'd hit her. I don't bluff.

Everyone turned to me.

"Never have I ever played strip poker." I took a shot.

Unsurprisingly, Ethan drank, but so did Isaac and Asher.

"So, this is what you guys do when I'm busy on game night?" I snickered.

Everyone laughed then turned to Danielle.

"Never have I ever, known what I'm going to do with my life." Danielle said. When no one drank, she explained. "I don't know what I want to be. So, if you do..."

Zeke, Ethan, Miles, Asher and I drank. So did Tara.

"Tara?" I grinned as I scratched at the label on my bottle. "Spill."

Her face turned pink. "I... want to be a fashion designer. I like designing clothes, sewing them and making something new." She shrugged awkwardly before looking down at her lap. "It's stupid."

"No, it's not." She turned to me. "I want to be a tattoo artist. It's no stupider than that."

"I want to make puppets and dance with them," Isaac chimed in.

I gestured toward Isaac with my bottle. "Now that's stupid."

Everyone burst out laughing. Isaac winked at me, making me smile.

"Never have I ever gone skinny dipping." Tara looked around the group as Ethan, Isaac and I all drank.

"When was this, Beautiful?" Ethan demanded as soon as he finished his sip.

"Southern California, there are city pools everywhere and not a lot of security." I shrugged. Everyone chuckled.

"Pass me another beer, Zeke?" Asher asked.

"Yeah, me too, this one's about to kick." I looked at the little bit I had left. The guys passed everyone another beer then we continued.

"Never have I ever said I love you to a girlfriend, or boyfriend for you girls," Dean posed to the group. Ethan and Miles drank.

"Wait, as in an established dating relationship?" I asked carefully.

Dean nodded. I didn't drink.

"Really, Beautiful?"

"If I don't feel it, I don't say it. I'm more surprised about you guys. Isn't that the go to for getting laid?" I asked, looking at each of them.

"I've been close, but there was always something off," Asher admitted.

"We just use our bodies." Isaac shrugged. "Take off the shirt and the girls come running." I chuckled and looked at Zeke, eyebrow raised.

"I don't lie. Fuck, that's why Riley and I broke up," Zeke took a drink from his beer anyway. Fair enough.

We all turned to Miles.

"I've never watched porn," Miles announced.

"You have to say never have I ever." I stage whispered. Dean and Danielle started giggling.

"Oh, right. Never have I ever watched porn." Miles looked around the group. All the guys drank. Including me.

The twins gaped at me, while Asher eyes grew wide.

"What? Girls have hormones too! Well, I like to read it in books actually." My shit eating grin spread across my face as I looked at Isaac. "Why do you think I wouldn't let you open that middle drawer on my desk."

Isaac's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "I'm so opening that drawer when we get back."

"No, you'll stay the hell out of her room." Zeke's voice was hard and sharp. The others chuckled while Zeke and Isaac glared at each other.

I was really starting to feel those beers now. The world seemed warm and fuzzy. And by the look of it, the others were too.

Zeke's eyes were unfocused for several heartbeats. He shook his head. "I've got nothing, pass."

Ethan grinned. "Never have I ever beaten the shit out of someone for pushing a girl." Zeke and Dean both drank. Tara bit back a smile as she watched Dean with warm eyes. If she swoons, I'm outta here...

"Never have I ever stayed up all night and day working on cars." Isaac smirked at Zeke. Zeke narrowed his eyes at him and drank.

"Never have I ever rode a motorcycle," Asher chimed in laughing.

"Seriously? I'm already drunk, guys," Zeke grumbled in a suffering voice.

"Suck it up," I told him grinning from ear to ear. His eyes were glazed and warm when they met mine. A shot of heat curled through me and I had a wicked idea.

"Never have I ever slept naked," I announced.

Us girls chuckled as all the guys but Miles drank.

"Why don't girls sleep naked?" Ethan asked.

"For me, it's boobs." I shrugged. "I like to have the girls under control."

Almost everyone chuckled while Zeke rubbed his eyes with one hand and Miles turned red.

"I don't want my dad or brother walking in. They never knock." Danielle opened her next bottle of beer.

"Same," Tara chimed in. "Plus, as a girl, you get judged for it."

"By who?" Isaac scowled.

"Other girls." Danielle, Tara and I chimed in unison. We shared a look and chuckled.

"Now that we've answered that question. Danielle, you're up." I reached down and scratched Hades' ears.

"Never have I ever had feelings for a guy friend." Danielle smiled around the group.

"Neither have I." Ethan chuckled.

The guys laughed as I drank.

Danielle looked like she wanted to ask more but Tara got a sparkle in her eyes. "Never have I ever... had sex." Tara and Danielle giggled as everyone looked at everyone else.

"That's no one's fucking business." Zeke chose not to answer so instead drank his entire bottle down and picked up a fresh one.

Everyone else looked at Ethan. Ethan drank, then Miles, and Asher. Then, finally, I took a drink. Hoots went up from the twins, while Zeke and Asher sat frozen with their mouths partway open.

"Red! You're not lily white!" Isaac teased, making me smile.

"Don't fucking tell me it was Dylan." Ethan looked ready to kill.

"God, no!" I threw a bottle cap at him but it was way off the mark. "It was an old boyfriend down in San Diego."

"When did you live in San Diego?" Miles frowned as he turned to me.

As I was about to answer Asher turned to Miles. "*That's* the question you want to ask?"

I snorted.

"I want to hear about this." Tara leaned forward eagerly.

"What? My mom was on the back end of a bender. I was going through a really hard time and he was there for me like no one else. At least, I thought so at the time." I took another drink and continued, "A couple of weeks later I was in L.A."

"Were you in love with him?" Danielle propped her chin on her hand.

Very aware that the boys I was in love with were listening, I chose my words carefully. "I wanted to think I was, but I knew deep down I wasn't. I was just... lonely, I guess."

"Okay, now I feel bad," Tara announced.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Why?"

"Because you regret it," Danielle answered for Tara.

Oh, shit... I was going to have to explain. "I don't regret it." Knowing everyone's eyes were on me, I focused on Tara. "I mean, yeah, I didn't love the guy, but at least he knew what he was doing." I refused to be embarrassed. My past was mine and I didn't regret a minute of it.

"Lexie." Miles' ears turned red, his eyes widening.

I shrugged and sent him a smile.

"But no one since?" Danielle asked.

For fucks sake! "No, I haven't been in a relationship with anyone. Well, no one that I would have trusted that much."

"Aw, Beautiful is having a girly moment." Ethan pointed out in a cutesy voice.

I burped.

"And the moment is gone." Isaac winked at me. Everyone laughed.

"Never have I ever had sex in a car," Dean announced. All the guys drank except for Miles, Isaac and Zeke. Even I had to take a sip.

Miles grinned. "Never have I ever gotten caught by a parent or sibling while I was fooling around."

"Define fooling around," Isaac said.

"Anything past a kiss." Miles shrugged. Isaac and Ethan drank.

"You two are entirely too close to each other for comfort sometimes." I grinned as everyone laughed.

"Never have I ever lied," Zeke offered as if he couldn't quite think straight. I groaned and drank. So did everyone else.

"Never have I ever gotten into a fist fight at a party. That I started." Ethan leaned over and got in Isaac's face. Isaac snorted and drank along with Zeke.

"Never have I ever gotten up on stage and performed." Isaac leaned over and got in Ethan's face. Ethan chuckled as we both drank.

Asher blinked and shook his head. "Um, never have I ever thrown Ally over my shoulder or smacked her on the butt." Zeke, Isaac, and Ethan drank.

"Never have I ever...." I couldn't come up with anything. "Oh! Never have I ever worn a cheerleading uniform!"

Tara giggled as she drank. So did Isaac.

"It was a dare!" Isaac shouted after drinking.

I snickered. "Tell me there're pictures!"

Ethan shook his head as everyone sobered.

Danielle watched me out of the corner of her eye. "Never have I ever had a stalker."

My smile disappeared. The circle was dead silent. To keep the game going I drank.

"You're up, Tara." Miles shifted in his seat.

"Never have I ever had a super romantic moment, you know, like in the movies." Tara tried to save the game.

"Like what? Kissing in the rain? Dancing? You've got to be a bit more specific." I barely resisted the urge to squirm.

"If you've seen it in a romantic comedy or drama it counts," Tara answered.

My eyes met Zeke's across the fire for a second before I looked up at the sky. I couldn't meet Asher's eyes either, or Miles, or the twins. So I took a drink. Everyone on our side drank.

"I want details." Danielle announced looking around the group.

"No!" The six of us shouted at the same time. Our side chuckled at her wide-eyed expression.

"Okay, let's play something else." Dean suggested. "Truth or Dare?"

"That's not a drinking game." Isaac pointed out.

"You can have the option to finish your drink instead of doing the dare, or telling the truth," Ethan suggested. Everyone agreed.

Dean turned to me. "Lexie, truth or dare?"

"Truth, I guess." I didn't really want to get out of my chair.

"Where did you get those scars?" Dean asked.

I smiled and drank the rest of my beer. I didn't owe this guy anything.

"Aw, come on." Dean watched as the guys passed me down another beer.

"Miles, truth or dare?" I asked. Miles took a deep breath before answering.

"Truth, I guess." His shoulders were tense. I couldn't embarrass Miles.

"How did you really do at that gaming tournament this winter?" I asked smiling. Miles chuckled in relief.

"It was awful, my best cards were in my suitcase that got left on the tarmac." Miles shook his head. "I was out in the first round."

Most of us at least smiled.

"Asher, truth or dare?" Miles leaned forward.

"Truth." Asher stretched his legs out in front of him.

Miles pushed his glasses back up his nose. "Do you want to play football our last year of high school?"

Oh, that was a good one...

Asher thought about it. "Yes and no. A part of me doesn't want to because it's not as fun as it used to be. And the other part of me doesn't want to let down the team that I've been playing with since peewee football."

"That makes sense." Miles leaned back in his chair.

Asher turned to the blank faced Zeke. "Zeke. Truth or dare?"

"Truth, I'm too drunk for a dare." Zeke lifted his head off the back of the chair.

"You're drunk?" I couldn't believe it, he didn't seem any different.

Zeke glazed eyes met mine. "Completely wasted."

"Who do you like the least here?" Asher asked. I chuckled. This should be good.

Tara shifted, as if bracing herself for his answer.

"Danielle." Zeke said without hesitation.

"What? Why?" Dean scowled at Zeke.

Zeke turned to him with a stone face. "She brought up stalkers and made Lexie's smile go away."

My face burned. Okay, he *was* drunk. "It might be time to put Zeke to bed." Before he said something he'd regret.

Ethan got to his feet. "Come on, fat ass."

Zeke eyed him. "I don't wanna go to bed with you. You're not pretty enough."

Everyone cracked up.

Miles turned to me. "Lexie, could you assist?"

I was still smiling as I got to my feet. The world wobbled a bit. "Whoa."

"Does the assister need an assist?" Isaac chuckled.

"Not if I don't have to hold him up." I started around the outside of the circle.

"Can you stand on your own?" Miles turned back to Zeke.

He nodded and got to his feet. He blinked several times but kept on his feet.

"Come on, Zeke." I grinned up at him.

Zeke rubbed his hand down his face before stepping out from between the chairs toward me. He seemed fine as he walked beside me across the campsite. It was still hard to believe he was drunk.

* * *

Asher

ALLY GUIDED Zeke into the trees toward his tent. Miles pulled out a couple of water bottles then followed. Now that Zeke was gone...

I turned to Danielle. "Why did you bring up stalkers?"

Danielle's smile faded a bit around the corners. "It was just something that popped into my head."

I shook my head.

"Bullshit." Isaac leaned forward in his chair.

Tara shifted in her seat, making a point not to look toward us.

"Tara?" My voice was hard.

"What does it matter?" Dean slipped his arm around the back of Tara's chair.

Ethan scoffed. "It matters."

"They asked me how Lexie got her scars." Tara cringed as she lifted one shoulder. "I told them it was when she was kidnapped by her stalker."

"Then why did you ask?" I turned to Dean.

He shrugged. "I wondered how they happened."

Warmth that had nothing to do with the alcohol washed through me as Isaac cursed.

"Did it not occur to either of you that it might have been bad and she wouldn't want to talk about it?" Isaac scowled at the three of them.

"What's the big deal, it was, like, in January?" Danielle's question had the heat spreading from my stomach to my chest.

There obviously had been a whole lot more talking than just one question. That was clear. I got to my feet. "I think you two need to leave."

Dean shook his head while he got to his feet. "No problem." He turned to Tara. "Let's go to the lake by our camp."

Tara nodded, still not looking at anyone she got to her feet.

"Sit your ass back down, Tara." My growl had her freeze.

Tara sat back down, her eyes wide. Hades got to his feet and moved in front of her knees.

"You can't boss her around like that." Dean took a step toward me.

Something moved inside me, something I'd never felt before. Back and forth in my chest, waiting to strike out. Hades' fur rose, a low warning growl emanating from him.

"I'd leave before you leave with broken bones." My voice was deeper than ever as it rumbled in my chest.

Dean took a step back, then another. "Come on, Dani. I'll call you, Tara."

"Sorry." Danielle winced as she passed me and went to her brother. They hurried down the shore of the lake.

My fists clenched as I turned to Tara. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Her head snapped up, she opened her mouth to answer.

"What happened to Ally is none of their fucking business." I barely kept my voice down but it was a struggle. An odd hot chill ran down my spine, I began to pace back and forth to work off the feeling. "I only told them so they wouldn't ask her directly about her scars." She held her hands up. "I was trying to help."

"Help?" I pointed at her, the veins in my forearm bulging. "It's not your history! You don't fucking tell strangers one of the most traumatic events in someone else's life! It's their life, their story and they decide who the fuck they share it with!" My voice echoed through the trees. I snapped my jaw closed as my stomach rolled. Red tinged my vision. The urge to tear the little bitch into pieces ripped through me out of nowhere. Hades' growl grew louder.

Ethan got to his feet and moved between the two of us. I hadn't even realized I had moved. "Easy, Asher. It was a mistake-"

"A mistake?" My face began to ache, my eyes stung. "She's always been jealous of Ally. She keeps trying to tear her down and I'm fucking sick of it."

Ethan's eyes narrowed on my face as he dropped into a stronger defensive stance. "I am too, but this time I think she actually wasn't trying to."

"I didn't think they'd ask her or mention it," Tara squeaked from behind Ethan. "Why would someone do that? That's just fucking mean."

The tremble in Tara's voice hit me, sending another wave of rage through me. I met her gaze over Ethan's shoulder. "Your jealousy over Ally stops now. She didn't steal me from you, I never fucking liked you to begin with. I was only being polite. And Zeke? You've got to be kidding, anyone with fucking eyes can see he's hung up on Ally. Stop blaming everyone else because people don't like you!"

Ethan pushed on my chest, getting my attention. When did I move forward? Ethan's drew down as his eyes met mine. "Are you on something?"

"What's going on?" Miles jogged back into the campsite.

"Uh, Asher's gone off at Tara in a big way." Isaac moved behind Ethan but in front of Tara. "And he keeps getting closer to her."

It was like a bucket of ice water was dumped over my head. My friends were standing between me and a girl I was growling at. What the fuck was I doing? I took a step back, then another. The anger pulled back, letting me think again. "What the hell...?"

"That's what I was about to ask." Isaac moved beside Ethan. Hades stopped growling but didn't move a muscle.

"I just..." I couldn't even begin to figure out what happened.

"Go for a run." Miles' eyes were glacial.

I nodded. A run. A run would be good. I didn't say anything as I walked around the fire and out toward the road. What the fuck was wrong with me?

* * *

Lexie

WE WERE HALFWAY to Zeke's tent when he leaned against a tree. "Hold on."

"Need to take a leak?" Assuming so, I was already turning around.

"No. The world is tilting around. It's like I'm on a ride I can't get off of." He shook his head. "I fucking hate this feeling."

"You didn't have to drink this much." Hell, I don't think I'd ever seen Zeke drunk before.

"You guys wanted to play the game." His voice slurred. "You guys were having fun. I didn't want to be the one to say no for once...."

Miles made his way over to us to stand behind Zeke. His face was somber. What was he worried about?

I stepped closer to Zeke and took his hand. He looked down at me with warm eyes.

"Come on, Tough Guy." I gave his fingers a squeeze. "Let's get you to bed."

He shoved himself off the tree and started moving again.

"Do you feel sick?" I made a point to keep him going.

"No. It's just... it's just noisy."

Noisy? We couldn't even hear the others from here. "What do you mean?"

Miles' brows drew down, his mouth a tight line. It was his worried face. Zeke tapped his temple. "In here."

Oh, that I understood.

Voices echoed from around the fire. Miles turned to look then turned back to me.

"Go. I've got him." I sent him a smile.

Miles nodded, handed me a couple of water bottles then headed back toward the campsite.

When we reached the tent, Zeke moved around to the side facing the woods. It was a large green dome two-person tent with a small overhang. His beat up black duffle bag was under the overhang outside.

"Why's your stuff outside?" I stopped at the overhang.

"'Cause I can't stand up and get dressed inside," he said as if it were obvious.

He crouched down to go under the overhang and immediately fell on his ass. I chuckled.

"That didn't work." He sat back up while I smiled. I wish I had that on camera.

I bent down, slipped in under the overhang and unzipped the flap. "Come on, your bed is waiting."

Zeke shook his head and blinked hard several times. He lay down where he was in the grass. "World is spinning, I'll just sleep here."

I bit back a laugh before I crawled out and moved to his side. "Zeke, you can't sleep out here."

He closed his eyes. "Why not? Its comfy."

I couldn't help the snicker that slipped out. "Zeke, please?"

He shook his head.

I knew how to get him moving. Smiling, I stretched out on the grass beside him and made myself comfy.

"What are you doing?" He didn't even bother opening his eyes.

"Well, I can't exactly leave you alone out here all night." I shifted as if trying to find a comfortable spot. "So, I'm going to sleep."

He looked over at me. "Go to your tent."

I smiled. "Nope."

"Go use my tent." He tried again.

I shook my head.

"The world is moving."

"Then crawl into your tent and I'll go back to mine." My voice grew soft.

Zeke cursed and forced himself to sit up. I don't know how but he managed to get to his feet again, crouch and get into his tent. "There. Happy?"

"Ecstatic." I moved to the doorway and found him half curled across his bed. I started on his boot laces. When I pulled them off I set them just inside

the door. I reached over and patted him on his firm yet soft ass. "Lie on your bed the right way."

He grumbled and cursed under his breath as he moved until he was lying parallel to the door on his back. "I shouldn't have drank."

I set the water inside next to his boots. "There's a bottle of water here if you want before you go to sleep."

He pressed his palms to his forehead and cursed. "It's too close. I shouldn't have drank..."

I pulled one of his hands down so I could meet his eyes. "What's too close?"

He closed his eyes and dropped his other hand. "I know better than that. Thirty-eight days away... Shouldn't have been drinking."

Worry pushed away even the thought of smiling. I set my hand on his chest. "Zeke, what's wrong?"

He opened his eyes and held my hand to his chest. A note in my voice seemed to clear the glazed look from his eyes. "Just bad memories, Baby. It's fine."

My fingers curled around his. "Do you want me to stay with you tonight?"

His other hand came up and held my face carefully, the tip of his thumb stroking my lower lip. "More than almost anything. But it's probably not a good idea."

My body warmed with his touch. That heat moved through me as I looked at his lips. Okay, he might be right... "Okay, I'll go to my tent. But first I want to make sure you're okay."

His hand moved to the back of my neck. "Come here."

I lay down half across him, my head on his chest and his arm around me. I rested my hand on his chest again. He pressed his nose into my hair and took a deep breath.

"You make it quiet," he sighed.

"You told me that before." My voice was soft as I smiled to myself. "Do you want me to stay until you fall asleep?"

"If you're here, I won't fall asleep." He lifted my hand off his chest and pressed a kiss against the back of my knuckles.

I smiled.

Footsteps in the grass had me sitting up. Miles bent lower so I could see him, his lips were pressed together.

"Miles is out there. Isn't he?" Zeke asked.

"Yeah." I smiled down at him.

Zeke's arm dropped from me. "Fuck off, Miles."

"Zeke?" Miles frowned.

"I'm fine. She pulled me out of it for now." Zeke squeezed my fingers before letting go. "Go to bed."

Not thinking, I leaned down and kissed his cheek. "Sweet dreams."

I crawled out then zipped up the tent as he started shifting around on the bed. Probably taking his pants off to be comfortable. I got to my feet and moved out from under the overhang.

When I straightened, we started walking toward camp.

"What did he say?" Miles put his hands in his pockets.

"Something about its thirty-eight days away, shouldn't have been drinking. Something is too close." I turned to him. "What's he talking about?"

Miles wrapped his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder. "I can't tell you."

"Why did you follow us to his tent?" Please tell me he wasn't jealous...

"When Zeke drinks a lot, he has flashbacks." Miles met my eyes. "He'll have a couple of beers once every few months but that's usually it."

"Because of the flashbacks." They must be about his dad... Zeke's father had been an abusive son of a bitch. He abused his family before killing Zeke's mom and then committing suicide. Zeke had found them. He was eight.

Miles nodded. "That will probably be the only time you'll see him drunk in at least two years."

"Damn it, Zeke." He didn't have to drink for us to have fun. He could have just drank a soda... "I'm yelling at him tomorrow."

Miles grinned. "Good."

BLOOD. Pain. Terror tore through me as Clay held me down. "You're mine."

No, no, no! I hit him across the face but it did nothing. His hand pinned my wrists down as his other punched me over and over. The cold from the snow seeped into my back as blow after blow rained down. Desperate, I

pulled on my wrists, I screamed, I tried to get away but it was no use. I was pinned under him. Then I reached for something else...

Shouting had me bolting up in my sleeping bag, my heart hammering as sweat ran down my face. Ordin. Nightmare... Fear tore through me, was he here? I took a deep shaking breath as the shouting outside grew louder. I jerked open the zipper on the tent, something jammed and the zipper wouldn't budge. I crawled out into a nightmare. The twins and Miles were backing up away from the fire ring as something prowled toward the light. My eyes grew wide, my stomach dropped as two gold flames came into the light.

Bone. A blood covered, brown skull. Attached to something huge on four legs. Claws... teeth. My throat tightened. It... it was moving. The huge skeleton moved around the chairs.

"What's going...?" Tara climbed out of Rory's tent followed by Hades, and screamed.

Miles grabbed her, pulled her further away from it and covered Tara's mouth to stop her from screaming again. "Lexie, you need to put it down."

Hades placed himself between Tara and the skeleton, his fur up and a growl coming from him.

"Huh?" I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"Angel, that's the skeleton of a black bear. It's dead. You raised it. You need to tell it to go back," Miles said in a smooth calm voice.

My teeth chattered as I looked in the eyes of what had been an animal. "Go." My voice was barely a whisper. "G-G-Go back to your grave and rest." The bear continued to come toward me. "I don't know what to do, Miles."

Hands went to my shoulders, limes filled my nose. "Breathe, Red. Deep breaths. If you freak out, it might too."

"It's. A. Fucking. Zombie. Bear." I slowly shook my head. "I..."

"How long has it been up?" Miles asked, moving Tara even further away.

"Since we saw it?" Ethan made a flabbergasted sound. "Two minutes? Three?"

"It shouldn't last much longer." Miles said.

The energy from the bear finally hit me. It was cold. Like dipping into a freezing pool of water. But the way it moved over my skin... like electricity crackling. I was rooted to the spot, my feet unable to move.

The flames in its eyes went out. The skeleton dropped to pieces. The energy from the bear washed back into me. I gasped as I dropped to my hands and knees, my fingers digging in the dirt as I experienced a high I'd never felt before. Everything was good, happy, all the fear and sadness was gone. I was just me... I rode that energy like a wave.

Eventually, it faded away and the world came back.

"You guys are fucking psycho!" Tara shouted, the tears obvious in her voice. "How could you even help her?"

Miles' voice was calming. "She doesn't have a choice-"

"Bullshit! Keep that freak away from me!" Tara shouted. A car door slammed.

"At least she'll shut up now," Isaac murmured as he nudged the pile of bones with his shoe.

"What the fuck happened?" Zeke jogged into the campsite.

"Lexie raised a dead bear." Miles' voice was soothing and calm as he moved beside me.

I couldn't take my eyes off the skull and its empty eyes.

"Beautiful, what do you remember?" Ethan knelt between me and the bones.

I looked up and blinked. "Huh?"

His hands went to my face, they were really warm... "What do you remember before this happened?"

My nightmare flashed through my mind as I wrapped my arms around myself. "Nightmare," I whispered as I met his eyes. "I just wanted to get away."

His filled with understanding. "Was it an Ordin one?"

My vision blurred as I nodded. Something was wrong, it was cold. The others seemed fine... why was I cold?

"What the hell is going on?" Asher ran into the camp, sweating bullets. "I heard shouting all the way across to the other campsites."

"Notice the bones, Asher." Isaac gestured at his feet.

"What the... Huh?" Asher was getting his breath back.

"Lexie raised a bear." Ethan looked up at him behind me. "And she's not talking."

"Get out of my way." Asher shoved Ethan away from me before he squatted down and lifted my chin so he could see my eyes. "Ally, are you cold?"

I nodded slightly.

"She's going into shock." Asher brushed my hair off my face. He pulled me close and lifted me off the ground. Vanilla and cinnamon surrounded me, I buried my face into his shirt. He was so warm...

"Hand her over." Zeke reached out to take me.

"Go to hell." Asher's chest rumbled as he carried me away from him and to the fire. He sat down and shifted me in his lap. He let my legs hang over the arm of his camping chair as he held my face. "Come on, honey. Look at me."

I rested my cheek against his shoulder as he tried to rub some warmth back into my arm. Something covered me, wintergreen tickled my nose.

"Knock it off." Asher shoved the hoodie down.

"When she's upset, she likes wearing our clothes." Miles' voice was strained as he reached out and pulled the hoodie back up. I caught it between my fingers and pulled it up to cover me.

"Isaac, what are you doing?" Ethan asked.

"I'm getting our stuff from her bag." Isaac snapped. "She usually brings them on trips."

"Everything burned in the fire." Miles reminded him.

Isaac cursed.

I don't know how long it was, but suddenly I was aware of where I was. I looked up at Miles who was standing near my feet. "How's Tara?"

"Hades is with her," Miles sighed. "She's scared and she said some things I'm sure she doesn't mean."

I met his eyes. "Yeah, she did."

"She's in my truck at the moment and refusing to come out." Miles turned to the others who were standing around Asher's chair. Everyone clearly worried. Except Zeke, he wasn't there.

"Sorry, guys." My face burned as I shifted to sit up on Asher's lap. "I don't know what happened... I was asleep..."

"Then you had a nightmare." Miles knelt in front of Asher. "One about Ordin?"

I nodded. "All I remember is wanting to get away and reaching for something."

"Your ability must have reacted to your fear." Miles' voice was calming, making those scattered pieces in my head softer.

"I know Rory's been burying dead mice every morning before I came downstairs." My body felt hollow, like a pit or an empty shell.

"There was a squirrel under the hammock this morning." Miles met my eyes. "I'm going to call Evelyn and Atticus. And see if they could help."

I nodded. Miles got to his feet and stepped away.

Isaac took his spot.

"I should talk to Tara." All my strength seemed to drain out of me. I leaned against Asher's shoulder, my forehead resting against his throat.

"I'll talk to her, Red." Isaac reached over and touched my knee. "See if I can calm her down."

I nodded, my eyelids getting heavier. "You might need Ethan too."

"We'll take care of her." Isaac got up and went toward the parking lot.

"Where's Zeke?" I wanted to look around but I couldn't seem to lift my head.

"He's getting rid of the bones." Asher's arms moved around me again before he got to his feet. "I'm taking you to bed, Ally girl."

"Hmm?" I was barely aware of anything more than his arms and body heat.

We were moving. Something soft was under me. Something rustled and zipped. Strong arms moved around me, pulling me back against a hard body. "Sleep. I've got you." Cinnamon and vanilla surrounded me, I slipped under.

* * *

Miles

I hung up my phone and sat staring at Lexie's not even almost closed tent flap. It looked like Lexie broke one of the zippers in her rush to get outside. The flap was stuck halfway up the right curve of the door. Asher had taken her into her tent while we were taking care of everything else. Ethan said he thought he saw Asher's eyes dilate or something but he wasn't sure. He was aggressive, and angry. I started tapping my fingers on the back of my phone. Hell, it sounded more like Zeke. Something was wrong with him.

But what the hell was going on? He'd been running every morning and every night. He was still not sleeping well.

Zeke strode back into the campsite with the shovel over his shoulder. He scanned the campsite then turned back to me. "Where is she?"

"Asher put her to bed." I made a point to keep my voice calm.

His jaw clenched and unclenched. "Where is she?"

I gestured to her tent and its closed flap.

He followed where I was looking. "And where is he?"

"In with her." I watched him carefully as he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Zeke set the shovel against a tree. "You're worried. What's bothering you?" He turned away from the tent and took Asher's seat across from me.

I met his gaze. "Besides the bear?"

He leaned back in the chair. "What did Evelyn say?"

"She said help was already on the way. Apparently Astrid and Ranulf brought someone up to meet with Lexie while they help some of the displaced supernaturals from New Orleans settle in at the house." I met his eyes. "They'll be here in two or three days."

"Good." Zeke watched Lexie's tent. "The sooner the better."

"We were expecting it." I'd had several conversations with her about it. But the reality...

Zeke turned back to me. "Nothing as big as a bear."

I nodded. He wasn't wrong. I was expecting something the size of a dog maybe. "She completely froze."

He sighed. "She has no clue how she even raised it, she wasn't going to have any idea how to put it back."

There was a long silence.

"Asher went after Tara." I leaned forward.

His eyes narrowed at me. "What do you mean 'went after?"

"The twins said he was all but yelling at her and walking toward her." I still couldn't believe it. "Ethan and Isaac got between Tara and Asher. He didn't seem to know what he was doing."

Zeke grew still. "And Lexie is in there, right now, with him?"

I nodded.

Zeke shook his head. "They can't have the flap closed."

"It's not." I gestured over his shoulder. "Lexie broke it in her rush to get out here."

"Good." Zeke sighed. "What the hell is going on with him?"

"Ethan thinks his eyes were pinpointed." It was an indication of opioid use.

Zeke shook his head. "No... Remember when he found pot in Jessica's laundry?"

I nodded. "He yelled at her and took her car keys for a month."

"Besides, football practice will start in a couple of weeks." He went to rub his face but cringed.

I pulled out my small container of hand sanitizer and handed it to him.

He used just about all of it. I couldn't blame him. "They do drug tests before every season. He'd never jeopardize that."

"Sorry you had to deal with the bones." I leaned back as Ethan came out of our tent in his red sweat pants.

"It's fine." Zeke muttered as Ethan grabbed a chair and moved it to join us.

"Are you guys talking about Asher?" Ethan asked as he sat down.

"Yeah." Zeke continued to rub the stuff into his hands.

"How sure are you that his eyes were pinpoints?" My head really started throbbing.

"Not completely." Ethan leaned back in his chair. "It could have been a trick of the light. But he's off. He shoved me out of his way to get to Lexie."

"But is it the stress of our situation or is it something else?" I couldn't seem to think. It was probably the alcohol. Why did we drink tonight?

"Why don't we ask him?" Ethan rubbed his eyes.

Lexie's tent flap opened on the opposite side of the broken zipper. Asher stepped out already fuming. "Do you guys have to be so loud?" He turned and strode toward the road.

"Where are you going?" Ethan turned in his chair.

"For a run." Asher's back disappeared into the night.

"That's his third run today." I started tapping my fingers on my leg.

"Did he just leave Lexie alone in her tent?" Ethan turned back to us.

I nodded. That was more than strange. With everything going on no one really got any alone time with her. And everyone was watching everyone else when we were together.

"She already had an Ordin dream tonight." Ethan got to his feet as he frowned at Asher's back. "I'm crashing with her."

I wanted to argue and say I would, but I had slept in the hammock with her already on this trip. Jealousy was a rock in my chest. Zeke clenched and unclenched his fists as Ethan went into her tent and closed the flap as much as he could.

Lexie had been right, I really hadn't thought much past getting the guys to agree. This was going to be harder than I thought. Crap...

"I need a fucking shower." Zeke got to his feet and headed toward his tent leaving me to wait for Asher.

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CHAPTER 11

AUGUST 19TH

picy cologne filled my senses making me smile. I brushed my nose against the skin of his throat.

"Hmm..." His fingers flexed on my butt.

"Huh?" I shifted, my thigh brushing against him.

"Mmm." His chest rumbled under my ear. His hand moved down my leg to my knee. His lips pressed into my hair. "Beautiful..."

"Beautiful isn't here, try again at a decent hour." I didn't even bother opening my eyes.

"Your knee is on my junk." His fingers tightened on my knee then let go. His rigid length was nestled under my leg against his thigh.

"Sorry." I carefully rolled over.

"I didn't say move." He rolled over and wrapped his arms around me. His body pressing against the curve of my ass. He buried his face into my hair at the base of my neck.

"I didn't want to nudge you." I smiled to myself as I pressed back against his chest, enjoying his warmth.

"Nudge away." He chuckled against my hair.

I smiled, waking up completely. "When did you come in?"

"After Asher got pissed at us for talking at the fire, so he went for a run." He squeezed me one more time before rolling on his back and stretching.

"Another one?" I shifted to my other side until I was facing him.

Ethan's shadowed eyes met mine. "Something's wrong with him but he's not talking to anyone."

I ran my fingers over his shirt tight against the muscles of his chest. "I'll try to talk to him."

His fingers stopped mine. "Lexie, he went off on Tara."

No way... "Asher?"

He nodded. "I had to stop him from getting too close to her."

My heart dropped. "Are you serious? I vaguely remember him shoving you, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But he didn't seem to know that he was getting closer to her."

That was... insane. "Asher? As in, won't tell a girl he's not interested because he doesn't want to hurt her feelings, Asher?"

He nodded again.

"Holy shit." That just...

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking too." He reached over and brushed my hair out of my face. "I'm not saying don't talk to him. I'm saying be careful."

My chest filled with warmth as I met his eyes. "So, where's Tara?"

He moved a little closer on the pillow. "Last I heard, she was locked in Miles' truck with Hades and is refusing to get out. She slept in there."

I winced. "Shit."

"I think she called Rory to come get her today." His voice lowered to a whisper.

"She'll probably have to wait until after his shift." My voice got softer as I held his warm gaze.

I moved a little closer. His breath moved over my lips. He moved closer...

"Breakfast is ready!" Asher bellowed right next to the tent making both of us jump.

Ethan cursed. I chuckled.

"That was just rude." He muttered as he sat up and got to his feet. He sent me a smile before he left the tent, closing the flap as much as he could after him.

Asher had done that on purpose, I had no doubt. The guy's hearing was extraordinary.

Sighing, I quickly got dressed. Since my tent door didn't close all the way, I stayed on the side that did as I got dressed. Shorts and a blue gray

slouchy boyfriend shirt was all I was willing to wear today. I pulled my gray hoodie on before slipping out of the tent.

My eyes were immediately drawn to the spot where the bones were. No. Nope. Nada. I wasn't ready to even face that yet. Forcing myself to turn away I went to the kitchen set up. Everyone else was around the fire already. Except Tara.

"Where's Tara?" I asked, already guessing.

"She's still in the truck with Hades." Miles supplied. "She says she's not coming out until Rory gets here."

That wasn't good. Before anything else, I grabbed some toast and made a breakfast sandwich from the scrambled eggs and sausage. Then wrapped a paper towel around it. I headed for the parking area.

"Lexie, she was rather..." Miles struggled to find the words. "Rude last night."

"Yeah, and I can't blame her." I headed back toward the parking area.

Tara was in the front on the passenger side. Her eyes had deep bags under them, her hair was a mess. It was the most real I'd ever seen her. Hades' head was in her lap, her fingers scratching his ears. I tapped on the window.

She jumped, her head snapping around to watch me. Hades' head lifted as he wagged his tail.

I held up the sandwich. She scowled at me.

"Tara, I know you're freaked out by last night. Hell, so am I. But it's actually pretty safe to come out now since I'm awake..." I didn't know what else to say.

"You're a freak," she snapped.

"Yeah. And?" It wasn't as if I didn't know it.

"No one should be able to do that." Tara's lip trembled as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"You're not going to get an argument from me." I sighed. "Look, I'm sorry about last night, it was a complete accident. I don't even know how I did it. To be honest, it scared the fuck out of me too."

She started to pet Hades, refusing to look at me.

Fine. I held up the sandwich. "Do you want this or not? You don't even have to leave the truck."

She eyed me and then the sandwich. "Yeah, okay..." She slowly unlocked the door and opened it a little. Hades jumped over her and

shouldered the door open further.

I handed her the sandwich and stepped back. She looked down at Hades, as if she expected him to jump back in. When he didn't, she closed the door and locked it.

Trying to be understanding, I headed back to camp. Coffee, coffee would make everything right...

I fed Hades, dished up a plate, poured my coffee then went and sat in my camping chair. I settled with my plate on my lap and my coffee in my hands.

After that first euphoric sip, I looked around the circle. Everyone was in varying stages of waking up. Asher, however, seemed wide awake. "So, how is everyone this morning?"

"Alive." Isaac took a sip of his coffee.

"So...anything else exciting happen this morning?"

"No one raised a bear, if that's what you mean." Ethan grinned playfully.

I shot him a teasing look as Hades trotted to Zeke's side and immediately was rewarded with a piece of bacon from Zeke's plate. He was such a sucker.

"There also weren't any more animals in camp this morning," Asher supplied.

"That's good." I started using my fork to push my eggs around, my appetite almost disappearing.

"I talked to Evelyn last night." Miles drew my attention from my plate. Miles explained about how Astrid and Ranulf were heading to Spring Mountain and the surrounding towns. "So, they'll be here in a couple of days."

I nodded. I could *not* raise the dead for a couple of days. Right?

Miles shifted his gaze to Asher. "Before anything else, we all need to talk about last night."

Now my appetite was really gone. I set my plate on the ground for Hades. The big lug hurried over from Zeke's side to scarf it down.

"About me," Asher said.

Miles nodded. "What's going on?"

Asher shrugged. "I don't know. I can't sleep because I have so much extra energy, I don't know what to do with it."

"You're getting mad a lot." Isaac leaned forward.

Asher nodded. "I know. And I know I shouldn't have gone after Tara last night. She made a mistake-"

"What happened?" I shifted in my chair as eyes turned to me.

Asher nodded. "When those guys asked Tara about your scars, she told them it was from your stalker so they wouldn't ask you."

"She thought she was helping." Isaac got up and went to the picnic area.

"And I lost my temper with her." Asher shook his head, his gaze on the fire ring. "I was wasted and I yelled at her." He ran his hands over his face. "I don't even remember what I said."

"You don't want to know." Isaac finished pouring his coffee.

"I probably don't." Asher dropped his hands. "I owe her a huge apology."

Isaac came back and sat back down.

"So, what do you think is going on?" Miles began tapping his leg.

Asher shook his head. "The only thing I can guess is this whole decision thing." Asher met Miles' gaze. "It's stressing me out, that's gotta be it."

"Not sleeping, unusual stress which can cause restlessness..." Miles eyes focused on Asher again. "How long did you run yesterday? What was the total time?"

"About two hours." Asher shrugged.

Miles nodded. "Have you gone for a run this morning?"

Asher shook his head as he cringed. "I didn't want to walk past Tara."

Miles pointed at him. "I want you to go for a two hour run this morning. And stay physically busy all day. Then you'll run another two hours tonight."

"You want me to exhaust myself." Asher guessed.

"Yes, because you're supposed to be the lead with Zeke on the cliff in a couple of days, and if you don't get any sleep your judgment will be impaired." Miles' voice went from calm and understanding to practically military. "And I will not risk you placing a bad nut, or making a bad anchor that will get either of you killed."

Asher nodded. "I agree. If I don't get any sleep, I'll stay on the ground." "Now, go for a run." Miles' voice was sharp.

Asher, already in his running clothes, headed out of the camp. Everyone waited until his footsteps disappeared.

"Do you think that's all it is?" Isaac asked.

"I hope." Miles rubbed his temple. "This is a stressful situation but he's not acting like himself."

"You didn't ask about drugs." Ethan pointed out.

Miles turned to Ethan. "That's because he seems to genuinely not understand what's happening."

"So, what are the plans for today?" Isaac grinned.

Miles smiled. "Something fun."

* * *

Rory

Cursing under My Breath, I hustled up the stairs of the courthouse. They fucking changed the date... It hadn't been the D.A. who called and told me that Ordin's sentencing hearing was moved up to today. It had been a friend who worked in administration at the courthouse. I hurried across the marble floor and up the cement stairs. My friend had also told me several other interesting things that hadn't been made public. I pulled open the door to the court room and strode down the center aisle to the front row. I stopped at the barrier and watched District Attorney Jones get his files in order.

"Hi, Larry." I couldn't keep the anger from my voice.

Larry Jones turned around, his eyes growing wide. "Um, Rory... Good. Good, you got my email about the change."

Rage tore through me. "No, I fucking didn't. And I'm damn sure that I won't find one."

Larry sighed. "Look, Ordin's parents petitioned and won to keep it quiet."

"Not from the victim," I bit out. "I also learned a few more things. You told me he plead guilty. You didn't tell me you offered him a fucking deal."

"The kid's parents are influential, Rory," Larry whispered. "They have a lot of local pull."

"So you sold out a traumatized seventeen year old girl." I clenched my fists, barely resisting the urge to hit him.

Larry shook his head. "To be frank, what he did wasn't that bad."

"Sexual assault isn't that bad? Kidnapping with the intent to take her out of the country? That's a human trafficking charge right there. Not to mention the beating he gave her." I couldn't believe this son of a bitch.

"Rory, the kid is fucked up." Larry tried again.

"No, Larry." I stepped closer to the low barrier. "My kid got fucked up. That piece of shit is sick."

His eyes narrowed on me. "It's done. There's nothing that can be done now."

"Yes, there is." I shook my head at him. "You're going to let me play her victim impact statement."

Larry sighed. "It's not going to do anything."

"It'll let her have her say and make it extremely clear what's happening here." If Larry thought he could avoid looking at what he was doing, he was sorely mistaken.

Larry frowned at me. "Alright. We'll start in a few minutes."

I sat down and waited, bouncing my knee as time went on.

The door on the left side of the court room opened. A deputy led Ordin out in chains. The fucking little shit seemed perfectly healthy. He even waved at his parents and his friends in the two rows behind his table. My fingers itched to pull my Glock. One shot, that's all I'd need. At least I had the foresight to leave my sidearm at the house today.

The judge came in and everyone got down to business. I zoned out of most of the usual court bullshit as I stared at that piece of shit. It wasn't too long before Larry announced that I had Lexie's victim statement to give. The judge seemed surprised but agreed.

A stone settled in my gut as I got to my feet, opened the gate and strode to the podium. "Your honor, I have two digital recordings I'd like to play."

"Are they both from victim A?" the judge asked.

"They are. But one is a recording of her singing." And she'd never sing that way again.

"Is it relevant?" Judge Turpine asked.

"Very, your honor." And hopefully enough to piss off the judge.

"I'll allow it."

I pulled the digital recorder out of my shirt pocket and looked directly at Ordin. His face grew pale and he swallowed hard. He was scared? Good.

"I'm here today for my niece. And to understand in full how she was impacted, you need to hear her sing." I went over to the sidebar where a deputy handed me the cord to the speakers. I plugged it into the recorder and turned around. I wanted to see his face. I selected the file Ethan had

given me. Lexie's beautiful voice filled the room. Ordin froze. I watched him as his eyes unfocused. A small smile appeared on his face. I waited until it played for a solid minute before shutting it off. I pulled up the next file. "And this is her statement and voice after the damage to her had been done by the adult defendant."

God help me, I hit play. Lexie's rough sandpaper voice filled the room. "Uh, this is victim A and I guess, I'll direct this to the judge 'cause that piece of shit isn't worth my time." Ordin's eyes shined. "I'll keep it short and to the point. As you can hear, my throat hasn't healed yet and it's been four months. My singing voice is gone. I can't hit any of the higher notes anymore. And I loved to sing. But he took that from me." Lexie sniffed on the recording. "I used to perform with a band every couple of weeks. But he took that from me. I haven't left the house alone since that night in January. I'm scared all the time. Jumpy. My shrink says my sense of safety is gone." She huffed. "I'd say shattered is more like it." Her voice trembled. I kept my eyes on Ordin as rage boiled in my gut. "The nightmares... For a month or so, I couldn't sleep alone without waking up and screaming. I had nightmares almost every night for months. I wake up and before I am even really aware, I'm running to the bathroom to shower because I feel it all over again. When he grabbed my... breast and between my legs, it was the most disgusting I've ever felt in my life. And I hope I'll never feel that again." Tears began to fall down Ordin's face as I dug my nails into my palm. "But I do, whenever I have a nightmare, or a flashback, I relive it all. Over and over again." She coughed, then there was the sound of a glass being put down. "The beating he gave me, the choking, I relive it all at least once a day." Her voice cracked again.

A smile lit his face up as he turned to his lawyer. "See, she still thinks about me. I told you it was a misunderstanding."

His lawyer turned to him. "Be quiet."

Lexie's voice cracked again as she continued. "That's about as much as I can talk at once. So, thank you for letting me be heard." I turned off the recording. I glanced at his parents. His father at least had the decency to look contrite.

I turned to the judge. "Thank you, your honor." I left the podium and walked through the barrier. I took my seat and waited for the judge to collect himself. Whatever deal they'd made was set in stone. But I'd be

damned if they're going to feel okay about selling Lexie out. I waited for the judge to announce his sentence.

* * *

Lexie

"Whose IDEA was This?" I continued laughing as I hung from a cable fifteen feet in the air.

"Miles'!" The guys answered in unison from their spots around the rope course.

"You guys thought it was a good idea." Miles shot back from across the course.

"Why can't you guys keep your feet on the ground?" I groaned as I reached up and grabbed the cable above me. The guys laughter echoed back to me through the trees. Pulling up, I set my feet on the long horizontal board. As I set my weight on the two by four, the ropes holding it above the forest floor grew taut. I moved my sweaty grip to the rope in front of me. I reached for the next rope with my hand and snagged it. Stomach in knots, I carefully moved a foot out onto the next board. I kept moving along the boards, keeping a good grip.

Ethan watched from the next platform with a smile. "Doing good, Beautiful."

"We're climbing tomorrow." I reached the end of the last board. "Why are we climbing now?"

"I think he wanted to see how everyone is working as a team." Ethan reached out. I took his hand and trusted my weight to him while I moved my foot to the platform. He pulled me to the platform and against him. Snoopy smiled down at me. "Hi."

"Hi." I smiled up at him.

He tilted his head toward the next section. "Lead the way, Beautiful."

I edged past him to the enormous ladder made of two by fours and ropes that would take us higher into the trees. The damn thing looked like a ladder for giants.

I put my hands on the second board above and put my foot on the first. It took a bit of effort but I climbed up to the second two by four. I eyed the

distance to the third run. "Looks like I'm going to need a hand."

Ethan stepped onto the bottom rung and easily climbed to join me on the second. "How high can you get?"

The third rung was at my chin. "Let's find out." I reached up, got a good hold, and hooked one foot over the wood. I pulled and shifted until I was almost up but couldn't get enough of my leg over the wood. With no other choice, I had to let go.

The giant ladder went one way, and we both went another.

Frustrated, I lay back in the harness. "Argggh!"

Laughing, Ethan snagged my cable and pulled me back. "We're supposed to work together, remember?"

"Is that why we're in pairs?" I shot him my smartass grin as I put my weight on my feet again.

He reached behind me and smacked me on the butt. I just laughed.

"How about I give you a boost?" Ethan looked up at the rest of the giant ladder.

"Are you sure?" I turned to him. "I don't want to fuck your back up."

He shook his head. "Relax, I'm not going to do anything I shouldn't. Besides, why do you think they put me with you? You're light."

I chuckled. "Can you give me a knee?"

"I'll give you anything you want, Beautiful." He sent me a sexy grin.

I shook my head. "You're horrible today."

"Nah, you love it." He kept one hand on the third rung and widened his stance before dropping and balancing one knee on the board. He braced his other so I could use it as a step.

"Yeah, I kinda do." I couldn't help it. But the way his smoky toe-curling voice softened every time he called me Beautiful... It was hard not to love him. It. Hard not to love it.

"Well, we don't." Asher's voice echoed from further back where he was working with Zeke. By all the cursing they were both doing, it couldn't be going well.

"Don't you think you should stop eavesdropping and focus on getting your asses through the course?" Ethan shouted back as I braced my foot on his thigh and stepped up. The ladder swayed as I shifted my weight.

I pulled myself up onto the third rung, got my balance back then turned to Ethan. Who was looking at my ass with a smile. "Hey, focus on climbing."

He winked at me. "You're going to have to give me a hand."

My mind went straight to the gutter. I started laughing and couldn't stop. "You're such a shit." I reached my hand down to him.

Ethan took my hand. I pulled as he climbed up to the third rung. "So, you're not a virgin."

I started laughing again as I shifted to my knee and braced my other just like he had. "Is it really that surprising?"

"No." Ethan used my leg as a step and climbed to the next rung. "You were entirely too comfortable with my morning hard on."

I shook my head as I got to my feet. The giant ladder continued to sway with our movement.

He reached down to me. "So, he was good in bed, huh?"

I chuckled as I took his hand. He pulled while I climbed. "Do you really want to know?" When I got on the board, I turned to him.

He smirked. "Yeah."

I smiled and shook my head. Then I leaned in close and whispered, "He was good in bed, and car, and field, and on the roof..."

He chuckled as he got down on his knee and braced the other. "And there's been no one since?"

I used his leg as a step. "Nope." I grunted as I pulled myself up and climbed up on the platform. "Do you really want to talk about numbers?"

He looked up at me and thought about it for a minute. "You'd be surprised."

I reached down to him. "'Cause your number would be so high?"

His smile was sad as he reached up and took my hand. "It's not nearly as high as you might think."

I pulled him up. "Sure, it's not."

He sat down next to me on the platform, his smile fading. "I know I've made mistakes."

My smile disappeared. "Ethan, you know I'm just teasing you. Right?"

He looked down at the forest floor. "I know, I was trying to figure something out... I regret a lot of it."

I bumped my shoulder against his. "Snoopy."

He took a deep breath and let it out before turning to me. "Nine."

I didn't understand. "Nine what?"

"I've slept with nine girls." He watched me closely.

"And I've slept with one guy." I met his gaze. "I don't care how many girls you've slept with."

The shadows in his eyes lightened. "You don't?"

I shook my head. "As long as you're safe and healthy... Nope."

His smile came back with full force. "Once I figured... There hasn't been anyone for a year."

I couldn't help but smile. "So... not Faith?" I had hated his ex...

"No." He smiled. "And not Dylan?"

I scoffed. "No. No. No. He tried to get to second once and every alarm I had went off."

"Alarm bell?"

I tilted my head. "Don't guys have alarm bells? He tried to pull down my cami strap and everything in me screamed to stop."

"Oh. I didn't have that for a long time. But eventually..." He shrugged. "After a few crazy exes, I started being able to see the signs."

I looked at him closely. "Why can I talk to you like this?"

He raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

I looked down at the forest floor. "If I was having this conversation with, like, Miles, I'd be blushing. Zeke? I wouldn't even talk to him about this. Isaac..." I shook my head. "We'd probably be drunk. And if it was with Asher, yeah, I don't even know how that would go."

He shrugged. "If anyone's made mistakes, it's me, Beautiful."

And that was the heart of it. Ethan would never judge me for fucking up, or doing something stupid. He'd just shrug and move on.

"Hey! Get moving, you two!" Zeke shouted from below where he was standing with a frowning Asher.

I looked down and waved. "Finally caught up, huh?"

Zeke flipped me off. We chuckled as we got to our feet and moved on to the next section. This one had a rope swing into a vertical cargo net that was around ten feet away. This was going to be interesting.

"You want to go first?" I turned to Ethan.

"Looks like just a swing and grab." He reached out and got the rope and pulled it back. He clipped his line to the safety line, then grabbed the rope and jumped. He swung out and hit the net. He grabbed the net, got on it and sent the rope back to me.

I clipped onto the safety line and waited until he moved enough out of the way. "Shit, Zeke!" Asher cursed from below.

"I told you that wouldn't fucking work!" Zeke's voice was rougher than usual. Irritating him was fun. I smiled to myself as Ethan moved far enough over. I swung out across the gap and hit the net. I snagged the ropes and focused on moving onto it. Ethan started moving right and I followed at a distance.

"Shit!" Isaac's voice echoed through the woods. I looked past the net and found Isaac in the middle of a line, swinging his feet. It looked like he was stuck.

"You hit the brake too early!" Somehow Miles' voice was serious while we laughed so hard tears slipped down our faces.

It was the middle of the afternoon when we headed back to camp. On the way, Asher wanted to go into town to pick up more groceries since the twins still seemed to be in the middle of a growth spurt. Asher pulled into a space on the main street of Polson and turned off the truck.

"I'll hit the store." Asher took off his seat belt and opened his door. "Should only be ten minutes."

"Let's pick up lunch while we're here." Isaac opened his door.

"Oh, lunch." I got out. "That sounds great right now."

"What are we doing?" Zeke stuck his head out of Miles' truck window from the spot beside us.

"Asher needs grocery stuff and we want lunch." I closed my door and started for the raised sidewalk. Zeke shut off the truck as Ethan got out on the other side. I hopped up on the sidewalk and looked around. It was a small town, pretty, picturesque even. Tourists walked down the sidewalks, moving in and out of stores. The place was bustling. But something was off... I looked through the crowd, I couldn't put my finger on it...

"Red?" Isaac stopped beside me. "What's wrong?"

I looked up and down the street again. But I still couldn't put my finger on it. "Oh, nothing." Turning, I followed the others down the street to a pizza place.

"We're lucky Tara refused to leave camp," Isaac said. "She got to watch Hades."

I snorted as I followed Ethan through the door and almost ran into his back.

"Six, please," Asher told the waitress.

"Right this way," The waitress said. We didn't have far to go before we stopped at a u-shaped booth across from the front window "Here we go."

"Where is she?" Zeke's voice came from the front of the group.

I didn't bother to answer, I just raised my hand.

"Come on, you're in the middle." Zeke gestured to me as the guys moved so I could see.

"Sir. Yes, sir." I made my way past the guys as they chuckled. After sliding in to the very center, the guys got in the booth with Zeke and Asher on the ends.

"Can I get everyone something to drink?" The waitress smiled. She was pretty, brown hair, shining hazel eyes and an oval face. Everyone ordered. After she left, the debate began.

I squinted at my menu then held it further back. Miles pulled something out of a pocket on his shorts and handed me a hard case. "You need to start carrying your glasses."

I grumbled under my breath as I opened the case. "I can't believe you ordered another pair just to carry around."

"I can't believe you keep forgetting them." Miles grinned at me as I slipped the narrow black rimmed rectangular glasses on.

"We need to get one of those beaded things that hook up to her glasses." Isaac turned to Ethan and gestured at his neck. "The thing that Grams has."

Ethan chuckled. "The granny eyeglass necklace."

I picked up my menu. "Fuck you both."

The guys snickered.

"Meat lovers," Zeke started the voting.

"Supreme, I like the peppers and onions," I countered.

"Canadian bacon and pineapple," Miles threw out.

"Oh, that sounds good today." I sent him a smile. He winked.

"Pineapple doesn't belong on a pizza," Asher muttered under his breath but still loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Does too." Miles and I said in unison.

"We'll get two pizzas." Miles set the menu down. "That way everyone can get what they like."

"No pineapple." Asher looked over the top of his menu.

"On half of one," I offered.

Asher shook his head then looked across the table to Zeke. "I'd like tomatoes."

Zeke cringed. "Once those get on something, everything tastes like tomatoes."

"There're tomatoes in the sauce." Asher pointed out just like he always did whenever this conversation came up.

Zeke nodded. "Yeah, but not big chunks of it."

"We could do a half meat lovers and half Canadian bacon and pineapple." I turned to Zeke.

Zeke shook his head. "It's the same thing with the pineapple."

"I can't believe you guys are such pineapple haters." I rolled my eyes. "What if we do a supreme instead, Miles?"

Miles shook his head. "The peppers just steam the pizza."

"I'm with Zeke on the meat lovers." Isaac raised his hand.

Ethan shook his head. "I want the classic peperoni."

Sighing, I looked over the menu again. "Oh! They have personal pizzas."

"Thank God," Asher sighed dramatically. "Saved from pineapple hell."

I stuck my tongue out at him. He chuckled.

Everyone put down their menus. Almost immediately, the waitress was back with a big smile. "What'll it be?"

Everyone ordered, starting with Zeke. When it got to Isaac beside me, she looked at him through her lashes. "What will you have, cutie?"

Isaac lifted his head and started ordering while I suddenly had the urge to clock her.

When she turned to me her smile faded. "And you?"

"A personal supreme pizza, please." I kept my voice civil. Very 'no, I don't want to bash your face into the table.' I was proud.

After she left, Ethan leaned forward so he could see me around Isaac, chuckling. "I thought you were going to blow a gasket there, Beautiful."

I shot him a look. "I'm not... that bad."

Ethan shook his head. "You should have seen your eyes."

"Shut up." I pretended not to know what he was talking about.

"What are you two talking about?" Isaac looked between his brother and me.

Ethan grinned. "The waitress was hitting on you. And Lexie got jealous."

"Really?" Isaac turned to me.

I ignored them both and looked out the window. "So, what are we doing the rest of the day?"

"Hiking?" Asher looked at the others. "There's the natural hot springs on one trail.

"That sounds like a plan." Ethan took a drink of his soda.

I turned back to the guys. "So, who fell the most?"

"Zeke," the guys chimed.

"Screw you guys," Zeke growled.

Everyone chuckled then started talking about the hardest part of the course.

It wasn't long before the waitress came back. "Can I get anyone a refill?"

Several of us pushed our glasses toward her and said please. She reached for Isaac's first, brushing her fingers against his before she took it. Isaac pulled back while I took a deep breath. Jealousy ate through me. Did he think she was pretty? Was she more his type? Hell, I wouldn't blame him if he asked for her number. I had kissed four other guys. His best friends. Yeah... I wouldn't blame him.

We were talking about our favorite parts of the course when the waitress started back toward us with the tray of drinks. Isaac reached over, took my hand and rested them both on the table. Silence dropped like an anvil. Tension rose from everyone. I tried to pull away but he wouldn't let go. Zeke opened his mouth to say something only to hesitate when the waitress arrived.

"We have four sodas and an ice tea." When she set down Isaac's her gaze moved to our hands. Her smile faded around the edges. But it was back by the time she set mine down.

When she was gone, I pulled my hand from his but it was too late. The guys were glaring at Isaac.

"Don't fucking use her as a shield." Zeke growled.

"What are you trying to do, claim her?" Asher shook his head. "Really?"

"I'm just trying to get that chick to leave me alone." Isaac put his hands in his lap then moved his hand over to mine.

"The same thing would have happened if you held Miles' hand." Ethan grinned.

I snorted. "That's true."

"I'm not sitting next to Miles." Isaac shook his head.

"You're not that sneaky, blue hair. Hands on the table." Zeke's voice was hard.

Isaac sighed, squeezed my hand, let go then put his hands on the table.

Yeah, he probably should have thought twice but... Being jealous sucks; hell, I wasn't even handling it well lately but still... "You guys..."

"Don't encourage him, Lexie." Asher rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Now it's my fault? "How the hell am I encouraging him? I'm just sitting here."

"You held his hand under the table." Asher shifted in his spot.

"Yes, what a crime." My voice was thick with sarcasm. "The dreaded holding of a hand, it's a capital offense. Get the noose."

"Lexie..." Miles pushed up his glasses.

"No." I shook my head at him. "I was just sitting here. That's encouraging him?"

"You let him hold your hand under the table." Asher leaned forward. "That's participating."

"Okay, yeah. I held his hand. But would you feel differently if you were the one she was hitting on?" I met his gaze and waited for an answer.

Asher hesitated.

"It'd be different, right?" I turned to Miles. "What about you? If you were getting hit on and you wanted it to stop it, would it be different?"

No one answered. I shook my head. "Let me out."

Zeke got out of the booth and waited for Miles to follow.

"Ally..."

"Let. Me. Out." My voice was hard and clipped.

Ethan glared at Asher. "Move, man."

"Why are you upset?" Miles frowned at me.

Needing to get away, I shifted and got to my feet on the booth seat. "Zeke?"

Zeke reached across the table to grab my hips. He easily lifted me over the table and set me down.

"Thanks." I turned and headed further into the restaurant. They should have an arcade or something... Hell, even a bathroom would work. I just needed to be somewhere else until I calmed down.

Miles

Why was she upset? I ran it over in my head again and still didn't get it.

Zeke sat back down. "Move in." I scooted in automatically

Zeke took my spot, leaving Lexie the end. "Why didn't either of you get up?"

I shook my head. "I don't understand what just happened."

Asher shrugged.

The twins shook their heads.

"Well, let me explain it," Zeke growled. "You just told Lexie that it's her fault that Isaac held her hand even though we all saw that she tried to pull away."

Did we... oh, no. I closed my eyes and dropped my head back. "I didn't mean it like that."

"How else was she going to take that?" Isaac shook his head.

I lifted my head. "I just meant..." What had I meant? What had I been thinking when I saw that? I couldn't really remember just... that I wondered if she'd rather have Isaac touch her than me... Geeze. "I was being stupid."

Zeke turned to Asher. "What's your excuse?"

Asher swallowed. "I don't have one."

Zeke shook his head. "Frankly, I don't care. But she wanted to leave and you both wouldn't let her. That will *never* fucking happen again." Both Isaac and Ethan nodded in agreement followed closely by Asher and I.

If we can't even watch one of us hold hands with Lexie... We really aren't going to be able to deal with her choosing.

"And here are your pizzas." The waitress arrived. She set each personal pizza on the table in random order. "Enjoy."

Everyone thanked her before she left.

Isaac shook his head. "It wasn't something we haven't done before."

"That was before New Orleans." I started tapping. "Things have changed."

"She just needs to choose," Asher said. "Then everyone can move on."

"Do you really think, after what just happened, that any of us can watch her date someone else?" I met each of their eyes. "Even if it's one of us?"

* * *

Lexie

I HIT the flippers on the pinball machine and sent the ball flying. Keeping my eyes on it, I ignored everything else. Well, I tried to. The guys... what do I do? How the hell do I fix this? I hit the side of the machine a little too hard. Tilt flashed on the display. The machine shut down and my ball fell through. Great.

"Ally."

I ignored him and pulled the lever to shoot the next ball out and back into play.

Asher appeared beside the machine. "The pizzas are at the table."

I hit the flipper harder than I needed to. "Don't bother waiting for me."

"I'm sorry, I'm..." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Miles is sorry too, he just didn't understand why you were angry."

"I figured." I hit the right flipper. "I just needed to calm down."

"I wasn't trying to blame you." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"You're right, it is my fault." I hit the flipper again. "But what happened at the table..."

"Come on."

I stopped playing. "I don't know how much longer I can do this."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head, already tired. "You guys are at each other's throats. Over the smallest things-"

"What did you expect to happen?" His hard voice had me looking up at him.

It wasn't hard to answer. "I had hoped that it wouldn't get this bad."

Asher shook his head. "Everything is going to be different, Ally. You said so yourself."

"I know. But I didn't think..." I met his gaze. "I didn't think you guys were going to change, at least not this much. But you're so angry..." I shook my head and looked down at the pinball machine.

"That's what happens when the girl I'm in love with is also in love with my best friends. I get angry." He shook his head, as if he couldn't believe he had to explain it to me.

I turned to look up at him. "Then be mad at me. But don't be a jerk. And not to them. They're just like you right now. Angry and frustrated. But they're your best friends. You guys seem to keep forgetting that."

"Bring it up tonight at our meeting." He gestured toward the front of the restaurant "Now, come eat lunch before Zeke storms over here and drags you back."

We left the arcade and headed back to the table. The guys were talking about the climb tomorrow when I sat beside Zeke on the outside of the booth. I didn't say anything, I just tried to eat my lunch. Asher sat down across from me in silence. The guys talked, the twins cracked jokes while I stared out the window and watched the people walk by. As I waited for my anger to fade, I tried to figure out what was bothering me about the street to distract myself. I slowly ate lunch. Well, tried to. I ended up getting a box to take back for Hades.

We were on our way back to camp when it hit me. "That's it!"

"What's it?" Zeke asked as he turned off the highway.

"Something has been bugging the crap out of me since we were in town." I shook my head. "What was missing from that crowd?"

Miles shrugged. "I... don't know."

"What have you guys seen in *every* crowd since Boulder?" I waited for them to get it.

"How could I not see that?" Miles got it first.

"There weren't any ghosts." Zeke was the first to say it.

"Exactly." I looked through the window at the woods. "I haven't seen a ghost since we got here. Where are they?"

"They could have left," Miles offered. "They're not forced to stay put anymore."

"Every single one?" I shook my head. That's too out there for me. Where would ghosts be... I snorted. The last time I had to hunt down a ghost was... Never. I've never had to find a ghost in my life. They always found me. They always found me... "They're just not here. If they're not finding me... They're not here."

Zeke followed Asher's truck into the parking lot and parked next to Rory's truck. "Rory's back."

Back? Oh, yeah. Tara. "At least Tara will be gone soon." I got out of the truck. Hades ran toward me and skidded to a stop so I could give him loves. I opened the box and handed Hades the rest of my pizza. He wiggled his butt and ran back to sit next to Zeke with his prize.

When I started toward the campsite, I spotted Tara fuming at the picnic table.

My uncle got out of my camp chair and gave me a strained smile. "Hey, kid. How're you feeling?" The guys sat down in their chairs.

I shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I'm worried about what I'll raise tonight."

Rory gestured at my tent. "Since your tent flap is busted, I'll leave you my tent for the rest of the trip. It's got more room anyway."

I gave him a smile. "Thanks."

"We need to talk, kid." Rory's voice was dour. The sound of it alone made my stomach drop.

"Sure." I gestured at the trail around the lake. "Let's take a walk."

"Good idea."

I joined Rory on the trail. Hades caught up and rubbed against my hip. Rory shoved his hands into his pockets as we walked down the path. The silence hung thick in the air.

Which was fine with me. Something told me, I didn't want to know what he was going to tell me.

When we reached the picnic table he stopped. "Sit down, kid."

My stomach became a rock as I sat on top of the table. I rested my elbows on my knees and waited. Hades jumped up and sat on the bench between my legs, his head immediately nudging under my hand for scratches.

Rory took a deep breath and met my eyes. "Ordin's sentencing was today."

I tried to take a deep breath. "How long did he get?" My skin crawl as I waited.

"You remember how his hearing was closed to the public?" Rory's face was carefully empty. I recognized it, it was his cop face.

I nodded slowly. "Yeah, his family wanted to keep it quiet, supposedly to avoid causing me further distress." It was complete bullshit, they just didn't want their precious name smeared around town.

Rory's shoulders rose as he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It wasn't a trial. It was plea hearing. He made a deal with the D.A."

That couldn't be all. Rory wouldn't be this angry if that was it. I tilted my head to the side and surveyed my uncle. His eyes were harder than I'd ever seen before. "Why didn't they tell us?"

Rory crossed his arms over his chest as he clenched his jaw. "His parents have some political pull in town. That's how. They wanted the media circus gone, and to keep everything quiet so as not to affect his future."

"His future?" It was a hit to the chest driving all the air out of my lungs. "What?"

His raging eyes met mine. "I know, kid."

If this was what they were concerned about... "I'm the one who got the shit kicked out of me. I'm the one who was in the fucking hospital, and they're worried about *his* future?"

"It's fucked up, Lexie. It's so fucked up." He stepped closer. "I'm sorry, the DA and the judge agreed. There's nothing we can do now."

My eyes burned. A heavy weight settled in my chest as the shadow of a nightmare loomed over my shoulder. "How long did he get?"

Rory's eyes met mine. "I'm sorry, Lexie."

A low ringing began in my ears as I moved past Hades, put my feet on the ground and stood up. "How long?"

He unclenched his jaw. "Five years in a psychiatric hospital."

Five years? That's it? Use your head, Lexie. Think! "And he has to serve all five years?"

Rory's face became pained, the lines around his eyes grew deeper. "Not if they determine that he's not a danger to anyone."

Rage boiled inside me, white hot and roaring. It was different than all the other times... Where before I would have felt eerily quiet and calm... now there were flames charring the inside of my chest. Threatening to engulf me, burn me from the inside out. I'd never felt anything like it... The ringing in my ears continued as my eyes unfocused.

"With his parents' influence, he'll be out in two years at the most." Rory stepped closer. "I spoke to the judge and he has promised me he will serve at least a year."

"In a hospital," I rasped through my dry throat as I wrapped my arms around my stomach.

"Yes. In a hospital."

I shook my head as it hit me. "So. It didn't make a difference." My eyes filled as I looked up at him. "It didn't matter that he had my passport. That he beat me. That he cracked my skull. That he drugged me. That he was going to take me out of the country. None of it fucking mattered."

His eyes were dark as they met mine.

"It made no difference that he touched me." My voice cracked.

"It did, Lexie."

"I might as well have kept it to myself for all the good it did." I gestured wildly as the first cracks forming in my control. "I could have not been humiliated. Kept some fucking dignity and not had to go into a fucking station and say it over and over for no fucking reason." I shook my head. "The damage he did... none of it mattered when his parents waved their money."

He stepped closer. "It did. I think that's the only reason he got a sentence at all."

I shook my head. It really didn't fucking matter...

"I'm sorry. If we had known sooner..." Rory stopped talking. There wasn't much he could say anyway.

I tried to push it all back behind a door. So, I gave him an empty smile. "It's fine. It's over. It's time to move on."

"It's okay to be mad, kid." Rory's voice almost broke me. Almost broke my sliver of control.

"I know." I don't know how I kept my voice steady, but I did. "You should, uh, get Tara home. She was really freaked out last night and most of the day."

His eyes ran over me. "Lexie."

"I just need some time alone."

Rory clearly didn't believe me but he gave me a long tight hug before he started back down the trail. I sat back down on the table, my hand finding Hades' ears as I counted. One, two, three, four...

I needed to hold my shit together. That white hot flame was roaring inside me, wanting out. Needing an out or I'd burst into flames. A hundred and five. A hundred and six.... Not yet. I needed to know what I was going to do before I stood up.

By the time I reached two hundred and forty-three, I was ready to move. No, I needed to move. I got up and headed back down the trail toward camp.

Miles jogged toward me and stopped in front of me. He didn't hesitate, he came straight to me, his hand finding my face. "Rory told us."

"I'm fine." Even my voice was flat.

"You're not fine." Isaac jogged toward us. Miles dropped his hand from my face. "No one would be fine after hearing that shit." Miles moved out of the way so Isaac could reach me. Isaac hugged me tight.

The rage was still there. Scorching me from the inside out, I needed to get away from everyone. I pulled back from Isaac only for Ethan to shove his brother out of the way. Ethan hugged me too.

I took a deep breath of his spicy cologne and stepped back. I didn't want to be touched anymore. "It's done."

Ethan's eyes were worried as he dropped his arms.

Zeke and Asher both came down the trail. I couldn't look at Zeke. He knew what Ordin did. I just... I couldn't deal yet.

"It's over and now I can move on with my life." My voice was a bit too normal. "I'm going to go for a swim."

* * *

Isaac

Lexie was still in the tent changing after pinning the broken flap closed.

"This isn't good," I muttered.

"You think?" Asher kept rubbing his neck.

"How could they fucking do that?" Ethan began to spin his rings. Zeke was still silently looking out at the lake.

"I don't know." Miles' voice was cold.

I didn't care how they could do it. Right now, I was worried about Lexie. She was probably pissed as hell. Her being quiet like this... it wasn't good.

Lexie opened her tent flap and climbed out of the tent. She didn't lift her gaze from the dirt as she headed for the lake. Slipping off her sandals, she folded her towel and left it next to them. She went into the lake and began to swim out. Her body made long strong strokes through the water.

Something about the way she moved... I recognized it. "Miles, swim with her."

Miles turned to me and frowned. "She might need to be alone right now."

Lexie swam out past the no wake zone.

"Miles." I turned to him and met his eyes. "Trust me. Swim with her."

"You think she'll do something self-destructive?" He toed off his shoes and socks.

I shook my head. "Not on purpose. If she's as angry as I think, she's not feeling anything right now."

Nodding, Miles took off his glasses and his shirt. "She'll swim until she can't anymore and she won't realize it."

"Then she'll..." Ethan turned to look at her swimming out further.

"I'll follow further back with the ski." I headed for the skis.

"You'll need two." Asher headed for the skis too.

"Stay far enough back to give her the feeling of being alone." Miles handed Zeke his glasses then ran for the water.

"Then catch up to her fast." I moved the ski into deeper water. Miles took off like a shot. It was impressive how fast he could swim. I turned and slowly made my way out, giving Miles enough time to get closer. I followed Miles deeper into the lake. When he was within ten feet of that copper hair, both Asher and I backed off. We idled after them, simply watching as she kept swimming. How far could she go?

* * *

Lexie

FIVE FUCKING YEARS! I kicked my feet harder. Pulled myself through the water a little harder. He won't even see two in there! I turned my head to the side, breathed then moved back.

Bone deep rage coursed through me with my pulse. It didn't matter what he did to me! It didn't matter if he fucked up my throat! It didn't matter that he was guilty! It was his future that mattered! Resisting the urge to scream, I swam faster and harder. My mind shut off as my body worked harder.

The only thing I could feel was the rage driving me to keep moving. More. I needed to move more. My arms and legs moved in a rhythm that helped the white hot flames go lower.

Eventually, it pulled back leaving nothing. I welcomed it as it began to seep in. Dulling the fury, bit by bit. I slowed down, my arms getting heavier, my breath a little harder to get. My calves started to stiffen. My kicks grew sluggish. I stopped swimming and moved to tread water. Suddenly, nothing wanted to move. Shit! I shifted to float on my back and focused on getting my breath back. The nothing seeped through me. It washed over me, making everything seem further away. I looked up at the blue sky and took several deep breaths. Everything was quiet for now.

"Lexie." Miles' voice was garbled by the water in my ears. His arm moved around my ribs, his shoulder moved under my head and lifted, making everything clearer. He pulled me against him. "Lexie?"

"I didn't realize how tired I was," I whispered as he held me close. "Give me a few minutes and I'll be able to head back." At least, I think I could. The tightness in my thigh was telling me I was damn close to a Charley horse.

Miles kissed my temple as his legs kept us at the surface. "That's alright, rest."

I closed my eyes and focused on getting my breath back. "Where are we?"

"Little over two miles from camp." His arm around my ribs squeezed me.

"Only two?" Huh. "I need to work on my cardio." The rumble of engines came closer.

Miles chuckled as he lifted his other arm and waved.

The engines got louder.

"How is she?" Isaac pulled in close to us.

"Out of breath." I couldn't stop myself from being a smartass.

I pulled away from Miles and started keeping myself above water. He kept a hand on my ribs as I swam toward the back of Isaac's ski. I reached up, grabbed the handles and tried to pull myself up. I managed to get my knee on the back and out of the water. Barely. I climbed onto the ski while Miles swam toward Asher's. I sat behind Isaac and draped against him. My forehead rested between his shoulder blades, already worn out again. I pressed my front against his back and wrapped my arms around his waist.

He squeezed my hands. "You okay?"

"I swam too far." I moved to press my cheek against his back.

"I know." He ran his hand up and down my arm. He took his hand back and hit the accelerator. He didn't try to go fast. In fact, I don't think he even got the back of the ski out of the water. Which was fine with me. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth radiating from his back.

Asher took off with Miles back toward camp.

"You're pissed." His voice carried over the engine.

"Not anymore. Now, I'm just..." That numbness still filled me. Cold and welcoming. "Tired."

"You can take a nap when we get back."

I shook my head. It wasn't that kind of tired.

We rode the rest of the way back in silence. When Isaac pulled up to the shore, Ethan was waiting. Isaac shut off the engine and let me off. I waded through the water and onto the sand. Ethan handed me my towel. I wrapped it around me.

"Go get changed. We moved your stuff into Rory's tent." Ethan's eyes were warm as he handed me my sandals.

I nodded, then headed for camp. Not looking at anyone, I went into Rory's tent and closed the flap. When I turned back, what I found on my bed had me smiling a little. Hades was waiting, lying next to a pile of clothes. A giant black hoodie, a green t-shirt with a math equation, and two mismatched socks. A blue one with broomsticks and a red one with golden snitches. The guys... I sat down on my bed and fingered the clothes. My mind was mercifully blank for once. My anger was gone for now but it would only come back.

"Lexie?" Miles called from outside of my tent.

"I'm dressed, Miles."

Miles unzipped the flap and pushed it aside as he came in. "Are you alright?"

I nodded.

"Why don't you lie down and rest?" His eyes were warm as they ran over me.

I shook my head. I didn't want to. I could just imagine the kind of dreams I'd have.

Miles slipped off his sandals, then closed the flap. "If you lie down, I'll stay with you."

Not caring that I was still in my swimsuit, I scooted over to give him room before lying down. He lay beside me and turned to me. His fingers

stroked my face. The warmth radiating from him had me moving closer. He wrapped his arm around my waist and held me against the front of him. "Just rest for a bit."

I breathed in wintergreen and relaxed against him. Everything else disappeared but his body heat, his touch. Over the last month, I had seen a side of Miles I never knew existed. Confident, sure of himself, he'd changed practically overnight. Since then, I'd been over at his house almost every day. I kept wondering if he'd change back to my shy Miles. But with every touch, every kiss, he showed me the side no one really got to see. A happy, relaxed Miles. Warmth filled me as I looked up at him. I loved him. There was no doubt. I didn't want to rest. I wanted to feel... him. Warm and alive. My voice was barely a whisper. "Touch me."

His fingers on my back flexed. His emerald eyes blinked as they grew warmer. "Pardon?"

I brushed my lips against his. "I don't want to feel his touch, I want to feel yours."

He hesitated. Those eyes ran over my face again before he kissed me gently, his lips taking mine. Reaching up, I wrapped my hands in his shirt and slipped into his mouth. Wintergreen mint danced across my tongue as he kissed me back. His arm tightened around me pressing my breasts against his hard chest. Everything fell away. All there was, was Miles' touch. His kiss, his heat. Those long fingers stroking the skin of my lower back. Needing more, I raised my knee to his hip and pressed against him. His hand left a trail of sparks as it slid up my spine slowly. His tongue drove every thought from my mind. I wrapped my arms around his neck as his kiss grew firmer, more sure. The nothing inside me began to fill. Every touch, every stroke of his tongue, every kiss filled me with waves of heat.

I moved against him, shifting my hips. His hand slid back down my back to my hip. His fingers wrapped around my thigh and squeezed a heartbeat before he moved me to my back. His hips moved between my legs, pressing me down into the sleeping bag. I flashed on the cabin. I stiffened, my fingers balling in his shirt.

He instantly lifted his head, and took some of his weight off me. I opened my eyes to see Miles above me, against me. It was his hard body pressed flush against me. His weight over me. His asking eyes met mine, his question clear. I nodded that I was okay before I slipped my fingers under the soft fabric of his shirt. My fingertips found hot skin over hard

muscle. His eyes glowed as my fingers trailed over his abs to his chest. I kissed him again, showing him how good I felt. He held most of his weight off me on his forearm. His other hand running up my side as he kissed me back. Heat rolled over me as his fingers brushed the side of my breast. I flashed on snow. I stiffened again.

He pulled back again and met my eyes. "Don't push yourself, Angel." Those worried eyes... holding his gaze I reached down to his hand and slowly brought it to my breast. Nerves sparked and fired as his eyes changed. Filling with heat and understanding. He understood what I was showing him, understood what happened in the snow. He understood what I needed. His touch didn't hurt. His fingers were light, soft, warm as he gently cupped my breast in his palm. His eyes never leaving mine as my breathing grew heavier. I reached up and kissed the line of his jaw lightly. A whisper of a groan left his throat. His lips took mine again gently, carefully. His thumb stroked over my aching nipple, electricity shot from my breast to pulse between my thighs. His mouth quieted my gasp. My skin grew tighter as my blood pounded in my ears. I kissed him harder, our kiss grew hungry. More, I needed more. My hips moved against him as his fingers gently stroked me over my swimsuit. His lips left mine to trail down my jaw to my throat. Soft kisses, that left me wanting more. I pulled his shirt up his body. His skin pressed against mine. Need shook me as I shifted my hips, rubbing my core against his hard length through his shorts. His breathing grew heavier as his hips shifted. Fireworks shot through me as he hit me just right. A small, barely audible moan slipped from my throat as we moved together.

Clang! Metal hit metal hard making Miles jump and pull away from me. "What the hell, Asher?" Ethan shouted.

"Just starting dinner." Asher's voice was clear through the quiet.

Miles' hand moved down my ribs, his hand burning against my skin. My hands moved down the ridges of the muscles of his chest and slipped out of his shirt. Miles shifted off me to lie beside me. I moved to my side to face him, and rested my head on his arm. He tucked a stray hair behind my ear then wrapped his arm around me. I pressed against him with my body still singing, still needing to feel him.

I breathed in his wintergreen scent and relaxed. The heat rolled back, leaving the numb and that was okay. That's what I needed right now.

"Are you with me?" His voice was soft as he brushed a kiss to my hair.

"Yeah." I looked up at him and met his eyes.

"I know that was mostly about you," he whispered. "And that's alright."

"No, Nemo." I kept my voice low. "It was about you too."

He ran his thumb over my cheekbone. "Me?"

"I trust you, Miles." My voice was barely a whisper. "You make me feel as if it never happened. You touch me and I forget. My mind stops and all I know is you."

"Was that everything that happened?"

I shook my head.

His eyes flashed from warm to cold then back again. After several slow deep breaths, he met my eyes. "When you're ready, I'll be here. It'll be about you and only you."

My eyes burned. Damn, he was sweet. "I love you."

He grew still.

Oh, God... "I mean... shit." I covered my eyes and hoped I was hallucinating.

Miles chuckled and pulled my hand from my eyes. "I love you too." Light burst through me as I smiled up at him with a pink face.

He kissed me gently before lying beside me. I rested my cheek on his chest. Asher had heard us. There was no way he didn't. What fresh hell did I open up now?

I ROLLED BACK OVER and pounded my pillow into submission. It didn't matter how tired I was. I had been tossing and turning for a couple of hours now. After Rory had taken Tara home, the guys had kept watching me carefully all through dinner and s'mores. As if I was going to explode or something. The twins just kept trying to make me laugh. Zeke kept the fire going so I wouldn't get cold. Asher ignored me and Miles. Which hurt, but wasn't surprising. I hadn't meant for him to hear, it was just... what I needed at the time.

The guys had gone to bed an hour ago, at least that's when the fire was put out. I shifted on to my side and pulled my sleeping bag up to my shoulder as the numbness began to roll back.

It didn't matter. I pressed my palm to my forehead trying to make everything go away. I'm fine. I'm alive. I'm safe. Yeah, but for how long?

A year? Maybe? I rolled on my back and stared up at the sky through the mesh ceiling.

Everything ran back through my mind. Being kidnapped, being groped and beaten. Then healing. Fuck... it had taken so long. Tears leaked out of the corner of my eyes as I took a shaky breath. But it didn't matter.

He would be out in a year. All because his parents knew the right people... That numbness pulled away even more, leaving me raw and aching inside.

Ordin had thought of me as a thing. Something to possess, something to control. He treated me as if I didn't matter. And the justice system... the fucking judge and D.A... they just showed me that I didn't matter too. It didn't matter that he hurt me, it probably wouldn't have mattered if he had killed me. It didn't matter if he permanently fucked up my voice. He was still going to get a slap on the wrist. Everything I was shook. The world as I knew it was gone. The icy touch of fear slid through me as I tried to breathe around the rock in my chest. Would he come after me again?

I got up, pulled on my hoodie, unzipped the flap and stepped outside. The fire was out and the moon shined above. I wrapped my arms around me as I started across the campsite. Hades moved beside me in the quiet, his shoulder pressing against my hip as we walked. Hold on. Hold on. That numbness was almost completely gone. All I wanted to do was curl up and cry.

I took deep breaths as I passed the guys' dark tent and walked through the grass barefoot. His tent was dark too but it didn't matter. He wouldn't be asleep. Not after the news today. I walked around to the front and bent under the overhang. Hades dropped to his belly and crawled with me.

I unzipped the flap. Zeke was already moving to the other side of his mattress, he took an extra pillow and set it next to his. Hades stretched out across the entrance under the overhang after I crawled inside. I quickly pulled down the zipper and closed the flap most of the way.

When I turned back, he was on his side, lifting the blankets up for me. I climbed in and pressed against his warm skin. His arms slipped around me, one for my pillow. The other held me close to him as the tears started to fall. He kissed my forehead and held me tight as I sobbed into his shirt. All the fear I had been holding back poured out of me in tears. Not wanting to wake anyone, I cried silently against his chest. His arms keeping me safe.

His body holding me tight. He didn't ask what was wrong. I didn't ask if I could stay. We understood each other perfectly.

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CHAPTER 12

AUGUST 20TH

woke up slowly. With my eyes feeling gritty and my throat raw. Lying on something hard yet soft at the same time. I took a deep breath of engine grease and leather. Zeke... I slowly became aware of the arms around me. One over the middle of my back, holding me to him. The other hand cupping my thigh in his big calloused hand. I eventually became aware that I was on top of Zeke.... My knees were straddling his waist, my legs straight down from there. How did I get here? All I could remember was I wasn't comfy... It didn't matter. He was breathing deeply and I wasn't going to move.

I floated in warmth and the scent of him. The pain in my head started getting louder and louder. I shifted a little on his chest.

Zeke's hand tightened on my thigh as his arm tightened around my back. Something started buzzing.

He shifted and reached over his head to the pocket where his phone was. I refused to budge as he shut off the alarm. His hand came back under the covers to my back. My cami was pulled up to my ribs again, his fingers ran over my bare skin.

I rubbed my eyes, hating the gritty feeling. He ran his hand up and down my back slowly, letting me know he wasn't in a hurry to get up. I tilted my head back and opened my eyes.

His sky-blue eyes were warm as they met mine

I sat up a little, my hands resting on his chest, and smiled a small smile.

He reached up and held my face, his thumb brushing over my cheekbone. Warmth and love poured through me. He knew I was coming to

his tent last night. He hated it when I cried. It killed him every time but he held me as long as I needed to get it out. All without saying a word.

I shifted further up his body, leaned down and pressed my lips to his. My heart pounded in my chest as his lips moved with mine. My hands moved up his chest as his lips parted. I didn't hold anything back, I kissed him with all the love I had. His hands held my face as our kiss grew softer. Slower. When I pulled back and opened my eyes, I met his again. His hands trailed down my back to my hips. His fingers squeezed gently. I climbed off Zeke then opened the flap. I slipped out into the predawn light and headed back to my tent before the others woke up.

Hades walked with me on my way back from the bathroom when Asher ran by. I expected him to stop but he didn't. It was like a hit to the stomach. He had definitely heard me and Miles yesterday. Guilt ate at me. But I shouldn't feel guilty... right? Grrr.

I walked back into camp and found it still empty. The others would be up soon. Hades went into my still open tent and disappeared. Going to the picnic table area, I started the coffee and pulled out everything I'd need to make breakfast. That's when I found the food dye. What the hell were we doing with food dye?

I lit the barbecue and started cracking eggs. When I was sure I had enough for everyone, I put in the dye.

Miles was wearing his swim trunks and toweling off as he walked back into camp. He probably just finished his morning swim. God, would I ever get tired of seeing him shirtless? I highly doubted it. He slipped his glasses on as he reached the other side of the griddle. He smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"Better." I started slicing meat. "I'm still trying not to think about it too much."

Miles eyes were shadowed as he watched. "So, you're trying to cheer yourself up with green eggs and ham."

"Yeah." I smiled. "Sorry I was so quiet last night.."

He shook his head. "Angel, there's nothing to apologize for."

"I just... I couldn't face it yet." I wanted him to understand. "I didn't want to think about what it would mean."

He walked around the barbecue and pulled me into his arms. "You don't have to explain."

I took a deep breath of wintergreen and relaxed. Everything inside my head grew quiet.

"He'll never come near you ever again." His lips brushed my ear. "I promise."

"Thanks, Nemo." I pulled back a bit and kissed his cheek. "Now, go get dressed, breakfast will be ready soon."

He smiled a small smile and headed toward his tent.

I felt the griddle, it was hot enough. After scrambling, I poured the green eggs on to the griddle. As they began to cook, I tossed the slices of ham on too.

Ethan shuffled out of the guys' tent, still half asleep and in his pajamas. He zombie walked over and grabbed a mug. "Have you had coffee yet?"

"Not yet."

Ethan grabbed another mug and poured coffee for both of us. I was flipping the ham when he put cream and sugar in mine.

I smiled to myself as Ethan handed me the mug before fixing his own.

He leaned against one of the tables and started to wake up. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm better." I moved the eggs again. "Sorry for going silent."

Ethan moved behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. He buried his nose in the crook of my neck. He took a deep breath and sighed. "I don't care if you're silent, just throw something at me when you're hurting."

I leaned my head back on his shoulder and smiled. "I promise."

He lifted his head. "What the hell did you do to the eggs?"

I chuckled as I grabbed the bread and handed it to Ethan. "Start the toast and I'll get plates."

Ethan nodded and took the loaf of bread.

Zeke made his way into camp, smacking the guys' tent as he went.

"Fuck off!" Isaac shouted from inside.

Zeke walked into the kitchen area. "Green eggs and ham?"

"Yep." I smiled up at him. "They make me smile."

The corner of his lips lifted into a half grin as he picked up a mug and poured himself coffee.

I grabbed several paper plates and got the eggs off the griddle. Then I began pulling the ham off.

Miles came out of the guys' tent in his climbing clothes. The same kind of climbing pants that all the guys wore when they climbed. "Then set an alarm."

"It wouldn't matter if I did." Isaac followed Miles out of the tent fuming. "He'd just fucking wake up earlier."

Someone snorted. I glanced over my shoulder to see Zeke fighting not to laugh. I shook my head as Ethan began to take the toast off the griddle. Isaac must not have been wrong.

"Breakfast is ready." I set the plate down and moved out of everyone's way. I was starting to feel naked in my hoodie, cami and flannel pajama bottoms.

"Where are you going?" Isaac asked as he reached the kitchen.

"I need to get dressed." I turned around and walked backward as Asher walked into the campsite but didn't look at anyone.

"I don't know, I think that's a good look for you." Ethan smirked.

"Yeah, I can totally see Zeke agreeing to me going climbing in this." I gestured at my pajamas.

Miles shook his head. "Please don't try."

"You should be getting dressed before you even go to the bathroom." Zeke shot me a look.

He didn't seem to mind last night or this morning... I rolled my eyes and climbed into my tent.

When I came back out, I was in my climbing clothes and sandals. The guys were talking about the climb as I grabbed my breakfast. Well, most of them. Asher's face was somber as he picked at his breakfast. I sat down in my chair in time to catch his hard eyes.

"Thanks for breakfast, Red." Isaac tossed his paper plate into the fire ring to burn later.

"No problem." I refused to turn away from Asher. I hadn't done anything wrong... I couldn't take that look. I put my plate down for Hades, my appetite more than gone.

Everyone was cleaning up when Asher finally spoke, "Are we going to talk about what happened yesterday?"

I went still. Zeke and Miles turned from the sink where they were cleaning silverware. Isaac turned from the grill where he was scraping the griddle. Ethan set his coffee mug down.

"You mean about the sentence that fucker was given?" Ethan asked as he leaned against the table.

"No. I don't mean that." Asher met my eyes. "It's time to choose."

My heart slammed in my chest, my stomach rolled. "W-what? We were waiting until the end of the trip." I turned to Miles. Were we really doing this? Now? Before the big climb?

"That's what we agreed to." Zeke eyed Asher. "What's crawled up your ass?"

"I'm tired of games." Asher met my eyes.

"Games?" Was he serious?

"She's not playing games, Asher." Miles began tapping his fingers on his thigh.

Asher turned to him. "You, out of all of us, I don't want to hear from. I fucking heard enough yesterday."

My face caught fire. Oh, God...

Miles' eyes grew icy. "Asher, let's talk in priva-"

"You think of that now?" Asher shook his head. "I was fifteen feet away!"

"What the hell are you two talking about?" Zeke crossed his arms over his chest.

As Asher opened his mouth to tell them. Miles silently strode across the space separating them and clocked him.

Asher fell back as my jaw dropped. A stunned heartbeat passed before Asher went after Miles. They fell back into the picnic area knocking the barbecue over. Ethan grabbed my arm and pulled me away from them. The dull thud of punches landing filled the air as the guys hit the ground and started grappling. Hades bolted out of the tent, only to get between me and the fighting, a growl rolled from his throat.

"Stop it!" My voice cracked. It didn't matter; they couldn't hear me over the fighting. Miles... had hit Asher....

Hades barked as Zeke and Isaac moved in and struggled to get their hands on them. Finally, they pulled the two apart. The whole food prep area was destroyed.

Asher strained against Zeke's hold on him. "What the fuck did you think I would-"

"Stop!" Miles pulled at Isaac's grip, his glasses gone. "It's none of your damn business!"

"What the fuck is wrong with you two?" Zeke bellowed before pulling Asher back and shoving him away from Miles. He put himself in the middle and scowled at Asher. "What are you two fucking talking about?"

"He made out with Ally yesterday." Asher announced. Silence fell like a bomb while tension skyrocketed. Hades didn't move from his alert pose.

I couldn't fucking believe this. "Asher, stop talking."

"I'm tired of this. I'm tired of hearing everything and not knowing how I should feel about it." Asher shook his head. "Fucking hearing you ask him to touch you? Do you think that's easy for me?"

"Stop talking." Miles strained against Isaac again, his face furious. "For your own sake, shut up."

"I know what I fucking heard!" Asher shot at him.

"You didn't seem to fucking mind in New Orleans." I couldn't keep the bite from my voice.

Asher's face turned red. The anger in his eyes fading.

"Or is that different because it was you?" I waited for an answer.

"Answer her fucking question, Asher," Isaac demanded.

"Oh, fuck you!" Asher went to open his mouth again.

Zeke's hand wrapped around Asher's throat cutting him off. "Stop. Fucking. Talking."

Miles slipped Isaac's grip. "Zeke."

Zeke's face was hard as stone. His eyes furious. Zeke shoved Asher back as he let him go.

"You're just as pissed as I am!" Asher spat, his eyes lightening.

"No shit, I'm pissed." Zeke ran his gaze over Asher.

"Asher. Stop." I couldn't fucking believe this. What the hell was wrong with him? Miles had just decked him! "So, you know what happened yesterday. You don't have to announce it to everyone!"

"It concerns them too. You're supposed to be making a choice." He turned to me. "Or have you?"

Miles adjusted his glasses. "This isn't the time-"

"Yeah, I have." I looked at each of them and shook my head. "I can't choose."

"You mean you won't," Asher bit out.

"No. I mean I *can't*." I lifted one shoulder into a shrug. "I care about each of you so much. And I'm watching you tear at each other already. Do you guys really think it'll stop if I choose one of you?"

I shook my head. I needed to rethink this. Rethink everything. Rethink what I was doing to them. "Maybe I just shouldn't fucking be around you guys at all." Not knowing what else to do, I walked out of the camp with Hades and down the trail.

* * *

Miles

I WATCHED Lexie disappear on the trail before I turned back to the others and focused on Asher. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

The blood drained from Asher's face.

"Do you even know what you just did?" I bit out. Cold rage spread from my chest.

Asher shook his head.

"First, you violated our privacy." I fought to keep from shouting.

"I couldn't help-"

"You couldn't help but hear. I know." I began tapping my thigh. "But you announced what you heard to everyone! That's what I mean by violating our privacy. What is going on in your head?"

Asher shook his head again. "I don't know..."

"You better fucking figure it out," Isaac growled. "'Cause you might have just fucked us all over."

Asher pressed his hands against his face hard.

"Lexie isn't going to choose," I stated. "It wasn't just Asher that caused this, it's been all of us."

Asher dropped his hands and met my eyes. The lost look on his face... "I... I feel like I'm losing my mind."

Everyone grew silent.

"What do you mean?" That could mean a lot of things.

Asher shook his head, walked over to the picnic table and sat down. "I get furious over fucking nothing. One of you touches her and... I lose my shit. Not just over yesterday." He met my gaze again. "You touch her hand and I want to knock you away from her."

We moved to stand in a semi-circle in front of him. Zeke planted himself directly between Asher and the trail that Lexie took. It didn't go

unnoticed. Asher glared at him but said nothing.

"That's not a normal response." I was out of my depth here. Not even Zeke was this bad. What did I know? I searched my memory for anything that might apply.

Asher shook his head again. "Isaac makes her laugh, and I want to hit him. That's not normal. She goes off with one of you and I..." He shrugged.

"Does it only happen when she's involved?" I had to know. If he was obsessed then we needed to know.

"No." He met my gaze again. "I just can't seem to control myself when it's her."

"When else?" Zeke crossed his arms over his chest.

"I almost lost my shit with Jason last month." He swallowed hard. "He was trying to pull Jess off the stairs and make her go somewhere with him."

"That would have set me off too." Zeke frowned, not understanding.

I shook my head and met his gaze. "Not like this. I dragged him out of the house and threw him off the porch."

I stopped tapping. That was strange for Asher. He'd normally just ask him to leave. He would be intimidating but he'd never get physical first.

"She cried for a while. Then I wanted to pound my fist into his face until he stopped breathing." His voice rasped. "I... I ended up running four miles that night."

"Anything else?" I needed to know it all.

"Besides weird dreams?" He shook his head. "I'm wanting to hit something a hundred times a day."

Maybe it was physical? "When we get back, we'll have the doctor look at you. It might be a problem with your adrenal system... It could be a lot of things." I made a point to keep my voice calm. There was no use in speculating when we didn't have a clue.

Asher swallowed hard. "That'd be good." He looked up at and met my gaze, his right eye already turning dark. "Maybe, we should keep me away from Ally until we know what's going on."

Isaac and Ethan chuckled darkly and shook their heads.

"What?" Not getting it, I wiped my fingers over a cut under my eye and winced at the raw skin. That was going to be a bruise.

Isaac turned to me. "He just hurt Red's feelings or at the very least pissed her off." Isaac turned back to Asher. "There's no keeping you away from her. When she gets back, she's gonna rip you a new one."

"And you deserve it," Ethan added.

"I know." Asher's face was resigned. What was wrong with him?

* * *

Lexie

Furious, I followed the trail through the woods, not paying attention to where I was going.

Miles had hit Asher. Hit him! Sweet, mild and polite Miles! Out of everything that I thought could happen on this trip, that sure as hell wasn't on the list. What the hell was happening to us? To everyone? Miles had hit him...

It took two hours for me to finally cool down enough to look around and realize I was lost. Oh, shit.

Great. I was lost. The lake wasn't in view through the trees. I couldn't hear anything. I pulled my phone and tried to get a location, only to find I had no signal. Perfect. At least I was still on the trail or... a trail. I turned around and started back down. If the guys had to come out and look for me, I was never going to hear the end of it from Zeke. I could already hear his lecture, "What do you mean you weren't paying attention? How could you not be paying attention?" I muttered under my breath. "Do you know what could have happened to you?"

Hades strolled happily beside me as I rolled my eyes and kept walking. Only to realize I really had no memory of walking through here. "Oh, shit."

I tried to retrace my steps for the next hour and I still didn't recognize anything. I had passed several other path connections but none of them looked familiar either. "Okay, I might be in trouble." The trail had taken off west and went around the lake to the east then into the woods.... right? So, if I keep going west on a path then I would run into the lake or another trail... right?

I checked the time, it was around noon. Great. I needed a damn compass. Cursing myself, I kept walking, hoping that I wasn't going the wrong way.

That chill ran down my neck. I stopped and looked around. "I know you're there."

The soul of a man stepped out of the trees. He wore green pants and a yellow button up long sleeve shirt, a hard hat and had a pack on his back. His shirt was smeared with black soot along with his face. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five.

"Hi." I gestured around me. "I'm lost. Can you point me back toward the lake?"

He looked at me, stunned. "You can see me?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I can see the dead."

"Well, that's new." He smiled as he came down the hill. "How?"

"I'm a necromancer." I shrugged. "We're kind of rare."

He stepped off the hill onto the path. "I'm Jack."

"Lexie. Nice to meet you." I gestured at the trees. "I have no clue where I am."

He chuckled. "What camp did you come from?"

"Um, the group campsite on the north side of Swan Lake?" I didn't actually remember the name of the campgrounds.

Jack shook his head. "I know the site, it's about three miles west."

"I was going in the wrong direction, wasn't I?" I cringed.

He held his fingers up barely an inch apart from each other. "A little bit. You were actually heading south."

"Can you please take me to the lake?"

"No problem." Jack led the way. "So, how did you get lost?"

"Oh, you know." I followed, watching my step. "My friends got in a fight, I yelled at them and walked off."

"And got lost."

"Yeah, not my finest hour." I chuckled.

"Don't feel so bad. People get lost on this trail all the time." He looked over his shoulder at me. "It's why I stick around."

"Oh, yeah?" We turned a bend in the path. The path split off, he led me to the right.

"Yeah, usually I manage to get people back on track with broken branches or weird noises." He chuckled. "You'll be a lot easier."

"It helps that I can see ya." I smiled. "So, you help lost people often?"

"Not as often as you'd think." His voice grew sad. "I was working with a crew fighting a wild fire in the sticks back there." He stopped at the next branching and waited for me to catch up. "It was my job to keep us on the right path." I reached his side. "I screwed up. Got us lost and when the fire got the wind behind it..."

"It overtook your crew." I had hoped this wasn't where he was going.

He nodded. "Yeah. Everyone died."

My heart ached. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "It was my fault. The others moved on, and I stayed to... help."

"And I'm sure you have." I tilted my head to the side. "You're saving my ass."

He snorted before gesturing down the trail to the left. "Which is why I keep doing it." He led me down the left path.

"Have you been to town?" I asked, hoping.

"Not since most of the other souls disappeared." He glanced over his shoulder at me.

"What do you mean, disappeared?" I stopped walking.

He turned and shrugged. "There were a lot of other souls around the lake, in town. It was busy. Then they started disappearing."

"I'm seeing that back home." I looked up at him. "So, no warning? No rotting? They're just gone?"

He nodded. "Yeah. And I don't think all of them moved on."

"Do you have any idea how long it took?" I needed answers.

"Um." His eyes unfocused. "It started slow. I'd say, a year and a half."

Wait... "A year and a half?" That was before I even moved here.

"Yeah, it started small. Just a couple here and there. Then groups started going missing." He looked out at the woods. "Now, the town is empty. And I'm the only one left."

The only one left? "Do any of them have anything in common? Did they interact with the same ghosts? Go to the same places?"

He turned to me and ran his eyes over my face. "Why do you care?"

I explained to him what the Veil was, how someone had closed it, and that I was trying to fix it.

His eyes narrowed on me. "There's one thing."

"What? I'll take anything at this point." I honestly had no idea where to start.

"The only thing I heard was about a ravine." He shrugged. "Rumors really."

"What kind of rumors?"

"The 'don't go there' kind." He shook his head. "I wasn't in town much but rumor was, ghosts were going in that ravine and not coming out."

A chill ran down my spine. "Where?"

When I reached the camp I didn't bother to say hi. "Get your hiking boots on."

Miles and Asher turned in their chairs to watch me head to my tent.

"Lexie." Miles' voice had me looking over my shoulder. "Asher has something to say to you."

I shook my head and started opening my tent. "Not now. We might actually have a chance to figure out what happened to the disappearing ghosts."

"How?" Miles' voice came closer as I sat on my bed and opened my bag.

"I got lost and ran into a ghost." I pulled off my sneakers. "He says the place was full of souls a year and a half ago."

"What happened?" Miles came to my tent as I pulled on a pair of socks.

"Exactly what is happening back home." I grabbed my boots and shoved my feet into them. "They disappeared."

"Asher needs to talk to you," he said again.

Anger boiled through me again. "Well, I'm not fucking ready to talk to him." I finished tying my boot and looked up at him. "And since you're telling me, I highly doubt he's ready to talk to me."

"He wants to make things okay between you two." Miles began to tap his leg.

I scoffed as I tied my other boot. "Right now, I'm still pissed. And have other things to do besides cater to everyone." I got to my feet and climbed out of my tent. "I'm not ready to talk."

"Ally."

I turned to look up at Asher. "Not. Now."

His eyes were rough when they met mine. "Okay."

I swallowed hard and unclenched my jaw as I turned to Miles. "I need your keys."

Miles pulled his keys out of his pocket and handed them to Asher. "Drive her."

"Miles!" I couldn't believe he just did that.

Miles turned to me. "The two of you are going alone. Work this out."

Without another word, I headed toward the parking lot. Jack was waiting next to the trucks.

"Who are you?" Asher headed for the driver's side.

"That's Jack. He's going to take us to the valley that ghosts are rumored to go missing in." I opened the back door. Jack got in and I closed it behind him.

"Where are we going?" Asher closed his door and started the car.

I climbed in and closed my door. "Back towards town."

On the drive, I was quiet while Jack and Asher talked.

What the hell was I expecting in that valley? The person that closed the Veil? Some great clue that will solve everything? It looked like ghosts had disappeared here first. So... the reason had to be here, right?

"Here. Pull over into that lot." Jack pointed between the seats.

Asher hit his blinker and pulled into the lot.

"It's not too far from the trail near town." Jack went through the door to get outside while I climbed out.

"How far?" Asher got out of the other side.

"Not even a mile." Jack started down the dirt path.

I fell into step behind him. Asher followed. The hike wasn't much of a walk..

We followed Jack through the woods to a spot where the hillside was split down the middle creating a ravine.

"This is it." Jack turned to us. "There's no way I'm going in there."

"You don't have to." I turned to him. "Do you want me to cross you over before we go in?"

Jack shook his head. "No, I have more that I need to make up for."

I smiled. "If you ever do, you can find me in Spring Mountain."

"Thanks." Jack started back down the path.

Asher eyed the small valley. "Do you know what we're looking for?"

"Nope." I started down the barely visible path. "Look for anything weird."

We walked into the ravine with our eyes peeled. The rocky walls were far enough out that getting through wasn't a problem. Trees had sprouted from the soft dirt floor and even from some ledges on the walls. It was rather pretty. Focus, Lexie. Geeze. A rock formation caught my eye. I stopped. Something about it nagged at the back of my mind. I didn't think, I started through the trees and toward it.

"Ally?" A stick snapped behind me.

"I have a feeling..." I walked through the grass and out onto dirt. The rock formation created an overhang around ten feet up. Further back underneath there was something... but it was too dark to see.

"What is that?" Asher stepped next to me.

"Let's find out." I headed inside and pulled out my phone. Asher wasn't too far behind.

The light from my phone danced over a large dome topped metal tank, rusted where the paint had chipped, it sat in an old metal tub. Weird. From the bottom of the tank, a rubber tube ran to a connector on the table that emptied into a glass tube to a large round glass flask with a Bunsen burner underneath. From there, whatever it was filtered through several loops of copper coil to empty into a smaller round flask that was connected by another tube to another large beaker. It looked like something out of chemistry class. Everything had a dull blue crystalized gunk crusted on the inside.

"Is this a still?" I looked at it carefully again.

Asher turned on the flash light on his phone and looked at the set up. "Maybe?"

"So, someone was making moonshine?" That didn't seem right. "You could buy moonshine in a store now."

"It's safer too." Asher bent down and looked under the tank. "You won't go blind from the stuff in the store."

"This part looks like a distillation set up." I pointed at the last half of whatever it was.

"Yeah, but what's this half?" Asher straightened and tapped the top of the tank. "There's a hose heading out of the overhang."

"A hose?" I started taking pictures for Miles. "What's it attached to?" Asher moved around the back of the tank. "The top of the tank."

I finished taking pictures. "Well, let's see where the hose goes."

Asher started following the line. We walked out from under the overhang and through the grass. The old gray hose snaked out into the woods. It wasn't far until we found the end.

A cold chill ran down my spine. "Holy..."

Drawn on a large flat boulder in faded and chipped paint was a giant triangle. Writing that I couldn't understand was along the outside of each side. Inside the triangle was a large circle. Around the outside of that circle, in worn and peeling paint, were three other words. In the center of that circle were dead, dry, narrow, golden brown stringy looking things.

"I think we just found something." I pulled out my phone and began to take pictures of the giant triangle.

"The paint is old and peeling." Asher pointed along the lines. "It hasn't been redone recently."

"So, whoever was doing whatever this is, stopped." I shook my head. What the hell was this? And what did the hose have to do with anything?

"What the hell is in the middle?" Asher stepped over the line, almost giving me a heart attack.

"Fuck, Asher!" I couldn't keep the panic from my voice.

He turned to look down at me. "What?"

"You know energy manipulation is real! And you just stepped over the fucking line of something without knowing what the hell it was!" I grabbed him by the shirt and jerked him away from the triangle. "You can't fucking do that!"

"Ally-"

"Don't fucking Ally me! You could have fucking been killed! Possessed! Something even worse!" Fear tore through me, making me shake.

His hands covered mine. "I didn't even think about it."

"You better start fucking think about it!" I shoved him. "This isn't a fucking game! Magic can fucking kill you!"

He grabbed me by the wrists and pulled me closer. "I'm sorry."

I tried to pull away but he wouldn't let me. "Sorry isn't going to help if you die!" My voice echoed off the rock.

His eyes grew softer. His hands moved to hold my face and pressed his forehead against mine. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

My eyes burned as my hands went to his forearms. "What is going on with you?"

"I don't know." He kissed my hair and pulled me against him.

His arms wrapped around me as I fisted his shirt and buried my face in his chest.

"I don't know what's wrong with me." He took several deep breaths. "Miles thinks it's something physical."

When I was calmer, I pulled away, wiped my face and glared up at him. "I'm still so pissed."

He swallowed hard. "I know."

"Why did you announce it to the others?" My voice cracked. "Would you have wanted someone to do that to you?"

"No. It was fucked up." Asher swallowed hard. "I was jealous and furious it wasn't me. I shouldn't have even opened my mouth."

I shook my head. "You know I love him too. Just as much as I love you."

He nodded but kept his gaze on our hands. "Why not me?"

I was going to have to explain. Normally, I shouldn't fucking have to... But there was nothing normal about any of this. "Did you hear what I told Miles?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I heard you ask him to-"

"Did you hear anything else?"

Frowning down at me, he shook his head.

"Ordin touched me, Asher." My voice was matter of fact but inside, I didn't want to talk about this. "That's what Zeke knew that no one else did."

Asher's eyes grew oddly lighter as his gaze met mine. "He touched you?"

I swallowed hard and kept talking. "Yeah. He groped me in a couple of fucked up places." I swallowed hard and dropped my hands. "Yesterday... I wanted to move on. I wanted to stop feeling... him. His touch."

Asher rubbed the back of his neck as he turned away. "But you chose Miles."

"I love him just as much as I love you." How many times did I have to keep saying it?

"I know you do-"

"I don't think you do." I narrowed my eyes at him. "You keep saying you do but... You know how you feel about me?"

His nodded.

"Imagine that you feel that way for four other women too. Four other, amazing, wonderful women that you just fit with." What was it going to take for him to get it? "That you feel like you're being torn apart by

different parts of you. And there's nothing you can do except wait for it all to fall apart."

Swallowing hard, he held my gaze. "Okay, I get it." He shook his head. "I just can't listen to it."

"And you don't have to," I promised. I shouldn't have made out with Miles with Asher nearby, I needed to start thinking about these things. "I should have thought about it. But at the time, I didn't. I'm sorry."

Asher took several deep breaths. "We should probably get back to the others."

I nodded. "And try to figure out what the hell that is."

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CHAPTER 13

ASHER

e pulled into the lot and found another car. Who the hell was here? My mind somewhere else, we got out of the truck.

As we got closer to camp, laughing echoed back to us. It sounded like the guys were talking. A new scent was in the air that made me take notice. It was weird... I knew it but I couldn't place it. Like a tune stuck in your head that won't go away until you figure out the lyrics.

We walked into the camp to find the guys sitting around the fire with a tall blonde woman with red streaked hair sitting at the picnic table facing them. Beside her was a rather large and tall Scotsman.

"Astrid, Ranulf, when did you guys get here?" Ally asked as she walked around the fire ring.

Astrid smiled and got to her feet. "About an hour ago." She pulled Ally into a hug. "How are you doing?"

Ally pulled back. "Could be doing better. You know, not raising dead bears."

"Aye, I can see how that would kill your good mood." Ranulf didn't bother to get up.

"Well, help is here." Astrid sat back down. "We're your back up."

"What?" That couldn't be right. "You're a werewolf and you're a gargoyle... how are you guys going to help? No offense."

Ranulf smirked. "Well, it's more that we brought you back up." Ranulf tilted his chin toward the trees.

Looking almost solid enough to touch, Louis was standing just outside of the trees. His black hair was cut close to his head, white silver at the temples. A strong jaw and the same sharp clear eyes. The last time we had seen him... he had died in front of us.

Ally smiled. I stepped up beside her and put my hand on her lower back. Her watery eyes met mine. She was remembering the same thing. The guys waved Louis over.

"We told you to come hang out," Ethan called.

"I needed to find a space." Louis met Ally's gaze. "We have some work to do."

Astrid's eyes narrowed as her gaze ran over me.

"We'll be in town for the night." Ranulf got to his feet as he watched Ethan. "We'll be back tomorrow to check in and see how you're doing."

"We have a climb tomorrow, so you might want to wait until the afternoon." Zeke leaned forward in his chair.

"For once we get to sleep in." Ranulf smiled as he took Astrid's arm.

A small frown appeared on Astrid's face before they left camp. What was that about? Ally headed toward Louis. We couldn't help but watch them disappear into the trees.

Miles turned back to me once they were out of sight. "How'd it go?"

"We found something." I sat down in my camp chair. "We took pics, but Ally has them."

"That's not what I'm asking about." Miles' voice grew icy.

I figured. "We talked."

"Are you going to still be an asshole?" Isaac turned to me. "I'd just like to know now."

"I don't know. I really don't know myself anymore." I met Miles' gaze. "I'm sorry, Miles. I shouldn't have said that. I don't really know what was going on in my head."

Miles watched me for several seconds. "You're struggling, I understand that. But you cannot use Lexie against us like that."

I nodded. He was right. But there was more... "Guys, I think we should have tonight's family meeting now, without Ally."

Miles grew still. "Why's that?"

"It needs to be about her." What she had said was going around in my head. And if I didn't really understand then the others probably didn't either.

"Fine." Zeke leaned back in his chair.

"What do you want to talk about?" Miles pushed up his glasses.

"She's not going to choose." From what she told me, she really couldn't.

"Yeah, she told us that." Isaac shrugged. "But I'm sure after she calms down, she will."

That's what I was afraid of. "No, she won't. She can't."

Zeke eyed me. "What are you talking about?"

"Guys..." I explained it the way she explained it to me. It was the only way I could think of to make them understand. When I finished, Isaac's face was paler.

"So, she really can't pick?" Ethan asked, his face carefully blank.

I shook my head. "No. She can't."

"Well, what does that mean?" Isaac turned to Miles. "Do we have to choose for her?"

Zeke sent Isaac a furious look. "Do you really think she'll go along with us deciding who she fucking dates?"

Isaac cringed. "Oh, yeah. She'd kill all of us. Forget I even thought that."

"Smart move," Ethan muttered.

"Our options are that none of us date her." Miles looked at each of us. "Or we all date her at once."

"Red's never going to go for that." Isaac scratched his arm. "We're all screwed."

Tension filled the silence.

"I think we need Lexie for the rest of this conversation." Miles leaned forward in his chair. "Asher, I understand why you wanted to talk to us without her. Several of us didn't quite understand that she really felt that she couldn't choose."

"No one's going to go along with this." My heart sank. It was over.

Miles shared a look with Ethan.

Ethan turned to us. "I would."

Everyone eyed Ethan.

"You would agree for all of us to date her?" I couldn't believe it. Was he serious?

"I told Lexie to pick Isaac instead of me." Ethan met everyone's gaze. "The only way I'll get to be with her is if we all agree."

"How do you feel about her?" Miles' question had everyone glaring at him.

"I haven't told her but..." Ethan licked his lips. "I love her."

It was like a kick to the gut. Something inside me didn't like it. I closed my eyes and took slow deep breaths. When I was able, I opened my eyes to find the others watching me closely. "I'm okay."

Miles looked at each of us. "I'm going to assume that everyone here feels the same way."

Silence was his only answer.

Miles nodded as if he expected it. "Then we each need to start figuring out if we can do this."

"Share her, you mean?" Zeke growled.

Miles shook his head. "Each of us would have our own relationship with her. And we'd have to work together and be understanding of everyone else's relationships." He looked at each of us again. "And if not, we need to come to grips with the fact that we all have to let her go."

* * *

Lexie

STILL STUNNED, Hades and I followed Louis into the woods. The birds chirped, the breeze danced through the trees. I didn't ask questions, I couldn't even think of something to say. What was I going to say? Sorry you died for helping me? We walked for a while before I couldn't take it anymore.

"How's the family?" It popped out before I realized it. Damn it, Lexie...

"As good as can be expected." He stopped and turned to me in a small grove. "Uma has taken time off from her art gallery to spend more time with the kids right now."

"How's Juan?" Juan was Louis' necromancer son.

"He's being a teenager." He smiled a small smile. "I've been mostly talking to him at night before he goes to sleep."

"That's good at least." I didn't know what else to say.

His brown eyes met mine. "You raised a bear."

I nodded as I tried not to fidget. "I was asleep and woke up to the yelling."

His eyes ran over me. "Any outside influences? Stress? Drugs? Alcohol?"

"I was drunk." Hades moved over to a patch of grass in the sun and stretched out.

Louis' chest rose as he took a deep breath. Which seemed strange since he didn't have to breathe. Was it a habit? "No more drinking until you have your control down, alright?"

I nodded. I had already been planning on it.

He sighed. "I knew you'd be strong but I didn't think you'd be this strong so fast."

That didn't sound good... "And no control."

He nodded. "That's what you're going to learn now. At least the basics." He gestured for me to sit down.

I sat on a flat rock and waited.

"Necromancy isn't about collecting energy and using it. That's being a witch or warlock. The energy we use is ours. We're the battery."

A horrible thought occurred to me. "What happens if you drain the battery?"

His eyes met mine. "You die."

"Okay, let's not do that." I shifted on the rock.

"Necromancy is about will. You have to want or need what or who you are raising. You have to focus solely on that and nothing else."

"Then how the hell am I raising shit in my sleep?" I couldn't help the frustration in my voice.

Louis met my gaze. "That's instinct. Not control. If you want to raise what you're trying to raise, you have to concentrate."

Something about his words filled me with dread. "Why'd you say it that way?"

"What way?"

"As if I could raise something more than the dead?" The clearing grew quiet.

His eyes met mine. "Lexie. There are a lot of dead things on the planet. Not just humans but animals, dinosaurs, and other larger extinct supernatural races."

Oh, that didn't sound good.... I raised an eyebrow. "Larger?"

"Yes. You don't only raise dead humans. That's why you need to learn how to raise what you mean to." He walked over to a pile of sticks. "There's a dead squirrel here."

I looked and didn't see anything. "How do you know?"

"Because I can feel it." He turned back to me. "When you're alive, you have barriers. And when you're dead, you don't. So, first thing you're going to learn is how to sense the dead."

"And we're going to start with the squirrel." It made sense, start small.

"Exactly."

Oh boy...

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CHAPTER 14

growled and slammed my palm in the dirt. "This is fucked up. I can raise a fucking bear in my sleep but can't find a stupid squirrel!"

"Getting angry won't help." Louis called from the log he sat on besides Hades. "You're using your own will to get the job done."

"How does that help me connect to the dead?" I turned to him. "I don't want to have anything to do with them!"

His face softened. "And that's your problem."

I grew still. "What?"

"Being a necromancer is a delicate balance between living and death." He held his hands out, palm up. "If deep down you don't want to deal with the dead, you will never get control of those abilities."

I growled in frustration. "Can you blame me?"

He gave me a half grin. "No. I spent most of my life doing the exact same thing."

The frustration pulled back some. "You did?"

He nodded. "I had many bad years because of it. I wasted so much time being miserable and hiding because I didn't want to deal with the dead."

"What did you do?" My voice was quiet.

"I finally accepted that death would always be part of my life." He sighed. "So, do me a favor and learn from my mistake so you can be happy much sooner."

"What do I do?"

"You have to embrace the part of you that is connected to death." He got to his feet and started to walk around me. "All of us have it to some extent but necros can use it."

I cursed under my breath.

"This is never going to go away." Louis stopped in front of me. I looked up and met his eyes. "You need to accept it so you can control it. You will never not have death in your life. You can fight it, and raise the dead more and more in your sleep. Or you can finally accept what you are."

My throat grew dry as I looked down at the dirt. Accept it... It sounded so easy. Just accept that death will be in your life. Every day. All the time. A wave of weariness washed over me. I was so tired... tired of fighting to appear normal. Tired of not talking about it with my friends or Rory. Tired of the secret... I'd kept almost everyone in the dark about the dead. The guys had broken in and made themselves at home somehow. They brought in some light. It was dusty, stuffy attic light but light all the same. I trusted them more than anyone in my life. But not enough to open the doors and show them the darkness. I had avoided looking too deeply at it myself. The thought of showing it to them scared the hell out of me and made me want to run. But maybe... maybe it was time to at least accept that this darkness was there. Stop denying it and just face that it's there and never going to go away.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Okay, death is a part of me. That darkness inside me that's fascinated by zombies... Yeah, that scares the shit out of me but it's there. And denying it isn't going to make it not true. Death will always be in my life. For once, instead of hating it, I just... it was an odd feeling. It was as if your bully from grade school came to your home. You hated them, you despised them for years. But now... its years later and you understood now what you couldn't then. There was no point to hating him. It was like hating gravity. They just existed. They just were. So, instead of turning that person away... you give them a chair, a beer and deal them in for the next hand. I didn't *have to* hate necromancy.

I met Louis' eyes and nodded. "Okay."

Louis' smile was understanding. "Let's call it a day."

Thank God! We'd been at it for hours. I got to my feet as Hades hurried to my side. I scratched his ears as I looked around the grove and the fading light. "You know how to get back, right?"

"Um..." He scratched his head as he turned to me. "I thought you did."

"For fucks sake," I groaned.

He started to chuckle. "I'm just messing with you, Lexie."

Irritated, I flipped him off.

He was still laughing as we started back toward camp.

We were halfway back when I finally thought to ask, "So, did you guys fly in?"

He looked at me with a somber face. "No, Ranulf drove. I just hitched a ride with them. They had plans to come in to Spring Mountain when Evelyn called. They're planning on helping get the supernatural species settled and out of Miles' house as soon as possible. But we came here first."

"Oh, fun." I cringed. "Who's in town?"

"You have a few of Dupont's vampires and their blood donors." Louis walked through a log that had me climbing over it. "A couple of werewolves from Hollis who are finding housing for those coming to back you up. And there're a few other shapeshifters."

"I bet they're super fun." The sarcasm was thick in my voice. "Miles' house is going to be packed."

"Good luck with them." He smirked. "Miles tells me that you guys are considering polyandry?"

I stopped. "Well, it's an option, I guess. But I don't think the guys will agree."

He turned to me with knowing eyes. "And you can't choose."

I sat down on a log and sighed. "No. Is this a necro thing? Fall in love with several people at once?"

He chuckled. "No, no. Well. I don't think it is." His eyes unfocused. "My parents were monogamous, grandparents too. But there were rumors that they each broke several hearts by marrying my mother and grandmother." His eyes focused on me again. "Honestly? I think it's because of what we see every day."

"Dead people?" That could be it...

He shook his head. "We see people after they've died. We know that life ends. It's in our face every day. So, I think that's why we have such big hearts." He shrugged. "I don't think we can say no to love. We don't want to waste love. Because we know life is precious. It ends."

My chest ached. "I can't choose. I tried once. I had a panic attack and cried all night."

"I remember the feeling." He gave me a half grin. "Communication. You have to talk to them about how you feel."

"Most of them don't know that I... I'm in love with them." I hadn't told anyone but Asher and Miles.

"You should tell them that." He put his hands in the pockets of his pants. "It might help them make a decision."

"Influence them you mean." I shook my head. "Don't you think they should decide this on their own?"

His eyes narrowed on mine. "Do you want them to make a decision this big without all the information?"

Well, when he said it like that... "Isn't it... selfish? Or wrong?"

He sat in the grass across from me, long bits sticking out of him. "I felt selfish for a long time. Uma, Savannah and Rose had a hard time adjusting. They had never met before this. They had to create that friendship between each other. It took around a year before they were more secure in our relationships. Uma almost killed Vannah several times for using her rare spell herbs in dinner."

I snorted.

"But with communication and my time divided as equally as possible, this strange set up became our strength." He leaned forward. "If I couldn't pick the kids up from school, Uma, Rose, or Vannah would be able to. We learned to work together as a team."

"You didn't answer the question."

He sighed. "It looks selfish from the outside. But on the inside... A normal marriage takes a lot of work, communication and time. And I had three at once."

Shit. That would be tons of work. "So, you're saying it will be the hardest on me?"

He eyes met mine. "Every couple is different. Every partner has their own needs that need to be met for a successful happy relationship. That's a fact. Then there are your own needs. Taking care of yourself. Poly relationships are hard and a lot of work. As the center of it, you'll put more work in than the others. So, no, I don't think it's selfish. You're giving more of yourself than you know." His eyes shined. "I gave everything I was to my wives. All the time. To make it work, it took every minute of every day and everything I had."

"Do you regret it?"

"Not a second of it."

"Would you do it again?"

He smiled. "To be as happy as we were? Yes. I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat."

"They already had relationships with each other. And I'm scared those are going to fall apart." It was a relief to finally talk to someone about it who wasn't a part of it. Who understood what we were looking at if we went this way.

"They're not being destroyed," Louis reassured me. "They're being remodeled. It's a hard, painful process but in the end, it's worth it."

I leaned forward bracing my elbows on my legs. "When I met my true self, she told me to throw normal out the window."

He smiled and chuckled. "Well, this certainly will be doing that." I smiled a little. It would indeed.

"Come on, I'll take you back to camp then disappear until tomorrow afternoon." He got to his feet. "You guys need to work out your problems." Silently, I got to my feet and followed him back to camp.

When we stepped into camp, it was empty. I looked out at the lake and noticed the jet skis were gone.

"Looks like they went out on the lake." I turned back only to find that Louis was gone. I looked down at Hades. "Want a before dinner snack?"

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think it's crazy." Jake's voice chimed in my ear.

I was afraid of that. "I figured-"

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't try it." Jake's voice was matter of fact. "It's crazy but considering how you feel about these guys, it's worth a shot."

I finished shading Jack's face in my sketchbook. "Riley had a shit fit."

He huffed. "Riley is a closed-minded bitch."

My eyebrows shot up as I stopped shading. "Don't hold back, tell me how you really feel."

He chuckled. "I love the girl but she's got something up her ass about the whole thing."

"She said she left Zeke because he cared about me." I reached out and scratched Hades' head where it sat on my knee.

"He's in love with you. That's what she said." Something closed on his side of the phone. "And she broke up with him so he could go to you. But that's not what happened and she needs to get over it."

I went back to sketching. "She thinks it's crazy and she won't be alone." There was a long silence.

"Okay, yeah. There are going to be repercussions. And the guys will have to deal with them too. But that shouldn't stop you from trying to make it work." Jake's logic was exactly what I needed to hear right now. "You don't care what people think. Remember?"

"Yeah, but would the guys think the same thing?" I kept my voice quiet just in case Asher was around. Though I hadn't seen anyone since I got back with Louis.

"Ask them."

I paused. "What?"

"Ask. Them."

"Just ask them if they're going to think I'm a slut or something?" Ask them? Was he serious?

"Yeah." Jake's voice grew softer. "You need to know this if you're going to try. If what they think about you is going to change, then you should know ahead of time."

Was it crazy? Just ask them? I could give it a shot. Picturing it, I shook my head. "Maybe I'll talk to Ethan about it then maybe the others."

"Hey, I don't care if you talk to them one on one or all of them at once. But you should be able to ask these kinds of questions if you guys are going to try this."

He had a point. "I don't think I like it when you're right so often."

He laughed. "I'm just telling you what you already know."

"Do you think I should call Riley?" Something told me I should but the way we had left things...

"I think after you decide what you want, you should call," Jake said. "I don't want her getting in your head and making you do something you'll regret."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I think you're right. Again."

He snorted. "I'll love you no matter what you decide to do."

I smiled. "Thanks, Jake. It's nice to know I'm not insane."

"No problem." A door opened. "Derrick is here, I've got to go."

"Have fun." I hung up my phone and tucked it into my cup holder on my chair. Tapping my pencil against my sketchbook, I watched the trees sway in the slight breeze.

Was I going to try this? Could I do this? It was this or be with none of them. But I wanted the guys to stay friends no matter what.

I lifted my glasses to sit on top of my head and rubbed the bridge of my nose with one hand. What did I know? I was in love with the guys. There was no question about it. Asher loved me. Miles too. Isaac had said it once... Ethan and Zeke might too. I wanted their relationships to come first. But I wanted them too. I braced my elbow on the arm of my chair and rubbed my temple. If we tried this... it was going to be hard. People would think the worst of me. Hell, not just me, of the guys too. If I dated all of

them, it was going to be a lot of work to keep everyone happy. I sighed. Was I willing to do that work?

Throw normal out the window. That's what she had said. Happiness isn't just going to drop on your doorstep. You have to work for it. From what Louis said, this would certainly be working for it. But there was something else. Follow your heart.

What did my heart say? Love all of them. That was easy. I wanted them. All of them. My head immediately told me it was wrong. But why? Why was it wrong if everyone agreed? The answer was simple. That's the way it's supposed to be. People aren't supposed to date more than one person. They aren't supposed to be *in love* with more than one person at a time. Supposed to, supposed to, supposed to.

I stopped rubbing my temple. Was the only reason I thought it was wrong was because I was taught that it was? If I followed my heart... I'd be with all of them without hesitation. But would it work for us? Would it fit us? I pushed away everything I was taught and thought about what I knew about the guys and their relationships. Over the last year, they had worked together to keep me alive. They were there for each other... When Isaac was possessed, there wasn't even a question about if we should go to Boulder to find the Templars. And when Isaac tried to make things right with each of them, they were all there telling him to stop being an idiot. At least that's what he said. Maybe I needed to trust in their relationships more... Something in my chest told me I wasn't wrong.

I was still deep in thought when water hit my head. Jumping, I looked up to find a smiling Isaac.

"You look so serious, Red." Isaac started toweling off his hair.

"Yeah, serious thoughts require a serious face." I smiled. "I thought you were out with the guys on the skis?"

He shook his head as his smile faded. "Actually, I was talking to Danielle."

Jealousy reared its head. "Oh, yeah?"

He sat down in his chair. "Yeah, she was sitting on the shore alone when we were heading to the skis. She had that black cloud over her again."

In the middle of everything, I had almost forgotten about the black cloud. "How'd it go?"

"It definitely responds to her moods." Isaac draped the towel over his shoulder. "When she laughed it disappeared completely."

"So, what do you think it is?"

His eyes unfocused. "I think she's suicidal. Or is at least getting close."

"Are you still feeling those feelings when you look at her?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but I've noticed it changes with how dark the shadow gets. I'll talk to her again before we leave and see what she says."

Jealousy curled inside me. I chewed on the corner of my lower lip.

Isaac noticed. "What?"

"I'm a little jealous that you hung out with her." My face burned. "Is this how it feels all the time for you guys?"

He chuckled as his cheeks tinted pink. "Uh, yeah."

"It sucks." I made a face. "I don't like it."

His face grew somber. "Yeah, Red. That's how it feels right now."

"I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

"It is what it is." His smile came back. "But you don't have to worry about me, Red. You're the one I want."

That warm feeling of being loved washed over me. "Let's just hope we don't fuck it up."

He nodded. "That'd be good."

AFTER DINNER, everyone was sitting around the fire talking about the climb in the morning.

At least that's what we were doing before Miles put down his roasting stick. "Family meeting."

The others set their sticks down. I took the opportunity to snag the marshmallow bag for myself.

The twins chuckled while I popped another marshmallow on my stick.

"Lexie." Zeke's voice was chiding but the look on his face told me that he wasn't even going to try to take my marshmallows.

"Sugar good." I smiled.

"Will you stop burning them at least, the smell is killing me." Asher grimaced and rubbed his stomach.

"Okay, I'll just try to get the perfect roasted marshmallow," I said in a haughty tone.

The guys laughed.

Miles sat down. "Family meeting? Remember?"

I put my stick down and gave him my full attention.

Miles gave me a gentle smile. "Lexie, what did you and Asher find this afternoon?"

"Well, first we found this overhang." I pulled my phone. "And found this weird set up." I pulled up the pictures and passed the phone to him. "Do you have any idea what that is?"

Miles adjusted his glasses before he looked down at my phone. "It's a chemistry set up..."

"Someone making drugs?" Zeke bit into a graham cracker.

I gestured for him to pass me some. The corner of his mouth lifted a little before he pulled out a few and passed them to the right to Isaac.

"No. This... it could be a still, I guess. This half looks like a distillery set up. The other half I'd have to see for myself." Miles lifted his head to meet my eyes. "I'm sorry, Lexie. This could be nothing."

Isaac handed me the crackers while I smiled at Miles. "Scroll to the next set of photos."

Miles did that as I watched him. I knew the second he saw it.

His fingers began to tap. "You found this? Here?"

"Yep. It's broken and faded but I think there is enough there." I leaned forward. "I've gone through all the research you've gotten me and then some. But I haven't seen this anywhere."

"I haven't either." Miles had his thinking face on. The one that put a little wrinkle between his eyes. "Where did you find this?"

"Not far from town actually." I picked up my stick and started roasting my marshmallow. "Now, there's a hose going from that tank to those markings."

"I think I better get out there tomorrow." Miles scrolled through my pictures a couple more times then passed the phone back to me. "Now, family matters."

"Ally." Asher got my attention. "I explained to them about you not being able to choose one of us."

"You did?" I couldn't tell if I was irritated or relieved. I decided to go with relieved.

Asher nodded.

"He made it clear that you really couldn't choose." Isaac handed me a chocolate bar for my s'more pile. I leaned my stick against the fire ring.

"Okay." My stomach knotted as I looked at each of them. "And what was everyone's reaction?"

"After talking about it, everyone understands why you can't choose." Miles took a deep breath. "And we started discussing the options."

"All of us dating, or no one." I nodded, oddly calm about it. The tension around the fire grew.

"We need to know if we should start considering if we could handle all of us having a relationship with you." Miles met my eyes. "To do that, we need to know if you are even willing to try that path."

"I actually thought about that a lot today while you guys were gone. Even talked to Louis about it. And I realized something that I hadn't before." I swallowed hard. "I wasn't trusting you guys. Not when it came to your relationships with each other. I was terrified of ruining them."

"What do you mean you weren't trusting us?" Ethan asked.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "I mean... You guys have been friends since you were, like, four. I wasn't trusting that to hold up because of me. I kind of realized how stupid that was."

"It's not stupid, Red." Isaac met my gaze.

"It's a legitimate concern." Miles started tapping his thigh. "So, what are you saying?"

I took a deep breath and was honest. "I'd love for us to try. I know I got us into this mess, and it's a lot to ask. But I can't imagine not trying just because it's different."

"Are you're saying yes?" Miles needed me to clarify.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Then all of us need to really put thought into if we can work on our issues and decide if we can try this type of relationship." Miles looked at each of the guys. "As you guys know, Louis is here. He's told me that he's willing to answer any questions that you may have about how it worked with his family."

Almost everyone nodded.

It wasn't long before everyone walked off to go to bed. Everyone except Zeke. He was watching the fire without really seeing it. Deciding I should at least try to get some sleep, I got up and started for my tent. Zeke's hand snagged my wrist as I went by. He tugged me to his side. His arms pulled me down and settled me in his lap with my head against his chest and my legs over the arm of the chair. He pressed his face into my hair and took a deep breath. He said nothing, he just held me. I wrapped one arm around his waist, rested my other hand on his chest and took a deep breath of engine

grease and leather. Why did he feel so good? He held me for... I don't know how long. Eventually, he pressed his lips to my forehead and moved me back on my feet. In silence, he picked up the bucket of water next to the fire and poured it over the wood. The wood smoked and hissed as the flames went out. He headed for his tent without a word. I stood there, my heart aching. Why did this feel like goodbye?

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CHAPTER 16

AUGUST 21ST

looked up at the cliff and swallowed hard. Four hundred feet at a 5.9 difficulty. And we weren't sport climbing today. We were setting our own safety equipment on our way up. Two teams, two routes.

Isaac wrapped his arm around my shoulder and looked up at the cliff side. "This is going to be fun."

I smiled, still a little worried. "If I don't fuck up."

"You're not belaying, you just need to climb." Isaac squeezed me. "Did you get enough sleep for this?"

I nodded as I eyed the cliff. I had done fine on my climb, I could do this. I looked up at him and met his amber eyes. "No stunts today. Please?"

His smile was warm as he squeezed me again. "No stunts today."

"Thanks." We turned and went back to the guys.

Asher watched as Isaac dropped his arm from around me. He shot a look at Isaac before going back to transferring his gear onto the sling around his waist. Not today, please? I stepped further away from Isaac. We were about to go up the cliff, I didn't want the guys being pissed at each other up there.

Isaac must have noticed because he stepped closer and rested his elbow on my shoulder. "So, two teams. Asher, me, Lexie. Versus Zeke, Miles and Ethan. The first to the top wins?"

"If that's what you want to do then go climb somewhere else." Asher's voice was sharp as he got to his feet. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

"I was fucking joking." Isaac dropped his arm from my shoulder.

Asher's eyes were hard as he struggled to control his voice. "Keep joking about climbing safety and Lexie will go on to their team and Ethan on to ours."

This was fucking ridiculous. I turned and headed back to the tree where we had been sorting our gear. I started to loosen the buckle at my waist and then began on my leg buckle.

Miles stepped between them. "Stop." He looked between the two. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"Nah, he's just being a jealous ass," Isaac muttered.

I undid the last buckle and stepped out of my harness. I walked back toward them.

"Neither one of you will touch rock if your heads aren't clear," Zeke growled.

"No. I'm not going." I threw my harness at Asher.

He caught it against his chest. "Ally?"

Everyone turned to me.

"I'm not going to be the reason one of you do something stupid and get yourself killed." I turned and headed back toward Miles' truck.

"Red!"

I stopped and turned around. "What?" I pointed at Asher. "You're pissy because"—I pointed at Isaac— "he had his arm on my shoulder. It's been happening all week between all of you and frankly, I'm sick of it." I dropped my hand. "Go climb the fucking cliff. I'll take one of the trucks back to camp and hang out with Hades."

Before I could turn to go to the parking lot, Miles stepped forward. "I propose that a no touching Lexie rule needs to be in effect when we're all together for now."

"Seconded," Asher sighed.

"Third." Isaac shifted on his feet.

"Passed." Miles looked at each of them with a stern face.

I snorted. "Yeah, because your last rule worked so well?" I couldn't help it. But they made a rule about not dating me and, well... look where we were now.

The guys looked at each other and chuckled. Just like that, the guys were the guys I knew again.

"Put it back on." Asher tossed me my harness. "And the teams are Miles, Isaac and Ally. Zeke and Ethan are with me."

"That's not what you said earlier." Ethan crossed his arms over his chest.

"That was before I was a jerk," Asher rubbed the back of his neck. "Isaac can belay for Miles. Miles and Isaac can take turns being lead while keeping Ally in between them. I can actually belay Zeke and his gian-"

"Fuck you." Zeke crossed his arms over his chest.

"While he can belay for me." Asher turned to the rest. "And if there's an accident, Ally should be able to belay both Miles and Isaac if she needs to."

Ethan turned to me. "Which means get your harness back on."

I smiled, stepped through the waist and slid my leg through the loop.

"Everyone have their radios?" Miles asked as I started clipping buckles. There were yeahs and yeses.

"Zeke, Ethan, let's get climbing." Asher started toward the cliff. Zeke went to the base and started setting up his belay.

"I noticed you took your radio off your harness." Ethan stepped up beside me as Asher started to climb.

Barely managing to keep a straight face, I looked up at him. "I was mad, that didn't mean I wasn't going to eavesdrop."

He chuckled as he walked away toward the cliff.

"Are you alright mentally for this?" Miles adjusted his radio on the collar of his old shirt.

I nodded. "Yeah, just tired of the bickering."

"That should stop most of it around you." Miles started walking toward the route that we were planning to take. Isaac was already there tying the rope to the belay device on his harness. I headed over. Miles tied in, attached another rope and began to climb. I stood back and watched his progress.

"Sorry, Red." Isaac gave Miles more slack as he climbed. Miles was a good ten feet up when he pulled a nut off his belt. A nut was basically a wedge of metal attached to a cable that you'd fit into a crack in the rock. Then you'd attach a quick draw and clip your rope in before moving on.

"More slack, Zeke." Asher's voice rang in my ear. I looked across the rock and found him already setting his second and clipping in. Asher was fast.

"Tension." Asher's voice rang in all of our ears.

"These push buttons are a little annoying." Ethan's voice chimed in.

"Next time I'll take the time to find voice activated." Miles was almost out of breath.

I looked up at him some fifteen feet up and hit my button. "Pay attention to what you're doing, boys."

"She's right. More slack." Miles was setting another nut.

Isaac let out the slack for him.

"Tension." Miles started to move on.

Time went on. Miles and Asher climbed. They set the safety gear and moved on. It wasn't even an hour later when Miles reached the first belay station.

"Belay off." Miles' voice was out of breath.

Isaac took Miles' rope off his belay device "Belayer off."

"Belay off." Asher's voice crackled in my ear.

Zeke did the same on the other route. "Belayer off."

Miles rope was taken up as he coiled it from the belay station. It didn't take him too long. "Lexie, tie on to your line."

I moved to the rope Miles had trailed behind him. I started tying the line to my harness while Isaac tied a line on the back to trail behind me. On the other route Ethan was doing the same.

I looked up and touched the button on my ear. "On belay?"

There were several heartbeats before Miles' voice chimed in my ear. "Belay on."

"Climbing." I looked up at the wall. Oh boy...

"Climb." Miles' voice crackled in my ear.

I found my first hold and started climbing. My ear piece crackled in my ear as Ethan and Asher ran through the same routine.

I ignored Ethan climbing some twenty feet away and focused on every hand hold, every foot hold. Since Miles was belaying from above me, I didn't have to use the quick draws that Miles had placed. They were there for his safety to get up the cliff. I simply climbed.

"You're going fast today." Asher's voice was impressed.

"I'm feeling pretty damn good." Ethan's breathing was lighter than mine as if he was only walking quickly.

"At this rate, you'll decimate your old record." Asher clicked on.

"Don't get cocky," Zeke's growl moved through my ear.

"You're doing great, Red." My earpiece came to life.

I had to stop to catch my breath. I hit the button. "Miles, how far am I?"

- "Around sixty five feet."
- "Ally, be careful of your grip," Asher grunted.
- "I just broke my record." Ethan breathed heavily into the radio.
- "Show off," I teased.
- "You know it." Ethan's breathing was almost back to normal.

When I was ready, I started moving again. It was another thirty minutes before I spotted Miles' leg over the ledge. He stayed put until I could climb up on the ledge and move back. I leaned back against the rock face and caught my breath.

"Lexie?" Zeke's voice barked in my ear. "Anyone have eyes on her?"

I started to untie the trailing rope from my harness as Miles pressed the button on his ear. "She's here, she's just catching her breath."

"Go, Red!"

I handed the rope to Miles and made sure I was against the cliff and out of the way.

Miles ran Isaac's rope through the belay station and into his belay device on his harness. He sat back down on the edge and hit the button at his ear. "Belay on."

"Climbing?" Isaac asked.

"Climb." Miles put both hands on Isaac's rope.

As I got my breath back I noticed Asher and Zeke on a ledge higher up. Zeke was belaying for Ethan while Asher waved down to me. I smiled and waved back.

As Isaac climbed, I looked out at the view. It was amazing. The trees below, the mountains out on the horizon. And nothing but blue sky in between.

"Ethan?" Asher's voice caught my attention.

I kept my back to the rock and moved to the left of the wide ledge. Wind blew tendrils of my hair back as I spotted Ethan. He was cleaning up the route on his way but he was further off the right and evaluating his options.

Ethan reached up and hit his earpiece. "Tension."

"You good?" Asher clicked in.

"Lock it off," Ethan bit out in our ears.

"What does that mean?" My heart sank as I turned to Miles.

"Locked off," Asher answered.

Before Miles could answer me, Ethan fell. A girly scream ripped from my throat.

Ethan's rope went taut, he swung back further down and hit the wall with his feet. It wasn't even a minute before he was climbing again and laughter rang in my ear.

I tapped my earpiece. "I hate you all."

The laughter got louder as it bounced off the rock around us.

"You're assholes." I shook my head. "You're all assholes."

"Are you sure you want to date all of us?" Miles couldn't stop smiling.

"I'm seriously rethinking it now." The shitheads...

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I was halfway up the second section of the cliff. Isaac was the belayer below me to give Miles a break.

The wind battered at me. My fingertips were getting raw and I was almost out of breath. The holds I found had gotten smaller until I was struggling to find another. There. I stretched a sweaty hand up as far as I could. My right foot slipped. My stomach jumped into my throat as I fell.

"Shit! Shit!" I screamed in as high a pitch as my voice went. Adrenaline shot through me. Panicking, I scrambled blindly as the rock rushed by. I skidded down the cliff, hit something hard and flipped upside down. I jerked to a stop and swung into the cliff face with my back. I was suddenly looking down over a hundred feet toward the ground. Blood pounded in my ears drowning everything else out as I swung out from the cliff. Gasping, sweat rolled down my face to drop off my nose into the air.

"Lexie!" My name echoed off the rock. Everyone was shouting in my ear as the sound came back. Alive. I was alive...

"I've got her! I've got her!" Isaac shouted over the others. The yelling in my ear quieted as I swung back to the cliff.

Move, Lexie. You have to get back up there. Instinctively, I reached for the rope and swung my legs to bring me right side up. Heart galloping in my chest, my entire body shook as I came to rest on the cliff face.

Get on the wall. You have to hold your own weight. Taking deep breaths, I spotted several good holds and reached out a trembling hand. When I could, I took my weight off the rope and on to my still shaky legs. Breathing heavy, cold sweat running down my skin, I pressed my forehead against the rock and just tried to get my shit together.

"Ally?" Asher called.

"Fucking answer!" Zeke's voice was loud.

"Isaac, do you have her?" Miles demanded.

"Yeah, she's on the wall again," Isaac reported. "Let her catch her breath."

My muscles locked as I tried to work through what just happened. I fell. Okay. I fell. It happens. I'm okay. How far did I fall? What the hell did I hit? The back of my left leg throbbed as I clung to the rock. The guys continued to yell.

"Quiet!" Miles ordered.

The earpiece finally went silent.

I took several more deep breaths and let them out slowly.

"Lexie?" Miles' voice was the silky smooth one I loved. It helped me loosen my death grip on the stone. "I can see you from here. It looks like you fell maybe eleven feet. Nice catch, Isaac."

"Just about shit myself," Isaac admitted.

"You're not alone on that one," Zeke muttered.

"Whose fucking idea was it to teach her rock climbing?" Isaac demanded.

"Mine," Asher chimed.

"I hate you." Ethan's breath was heavy.

"Ethan, don't you dare go off the rope!" Asher's voice echoed off the rock and in my ear.

"Then give me some fucking slack!" Ethan snapped.

"Lexie, Ethan is making his way to you," Miles said in that voice.

That's it. I hit my mic button. "Can you all just shut the fuck up for a minute? I'm just trying to get my shit together."

The radio went silent. With the silence I was finally able to get my head together. Yeah, I fell. But that's what the belayer is for. It worked. Isaac had me covered from below. The nuts and quick draws held. See? I'm okay. When the shaking finally eased up, I hit my mic. "Dangling over a hundred feet in the air, upside down, kind of makes a girl stop and think."

"Lexie!" Ethan was below and to the right about fifteen feet away. As I watched, he leapt up and grabbed a ledge I hadn't even seen four feet above him. Before I could be impressed, he was moving again, scrambling over the rock face.

"I'm okay." I tried to get him to stop but he just kept coming. Soon, he was beside me on the rock, pulling on his belay rope.

"You okay?" he asked, his eyes raking over me.

"Yeah, I just banged my leg-"

"Lock 'em both. I want to go hands free," Ethan ordered into his mic.

"Locked." Asher's voice rang in my ear.

"Locked," Isaac chimed in. "Is she okay?"

"I'm fine!" I bit out as he took my hand off the cliff. I trusted my weight to Isaac as Ethan's hands ran over me. Having enough, I smacked his hands away. "Get your ass back on your route before you fuck up your belay!"

Zeke's laughter bounced up the stone wall. Followed by Miles' from above.

"Do it, Ethan," Asher ordered.

Ethan leaned away from the wall and looked at my back. "Your shoulder is bleeding."

I looked over my shoulder and found the scrape he was talking about behind my left shoulder. Blood and grit covered the skin. "Nothing I can do about it now." I turned back to him. "Back. To. Your. Route."

He smiled and headed back toward the other side.

I got back on the wall. "Climb?"

"Climb." Isaac's smile was in his voice.

Out of breath and hands burning, I finally climbed over the cliff edge at the top. Crawling from the edge a bit more, I dropped onto my side and tried to find the energy to move.

"Whose idea was this?" I asked.

Boots moved over rock and dirt.

"Ours. But you were a bit insistent," Miles said as he untied my rope and then the trailing rope.

"Sure, blame the girl," I quipped.

Miles chuckled as he started attaching Isaac's belay rope to the belay station.

Hands grabbed me under the arms and dragged me further back from the edge.

"What the fuck?" I looked up to find Ethan dragging me. "I can move." I just didn't want to at this point.

Ethan lowered me back to the ground. "Asher didn't like how close you were to the ledge."

"Yeah, sure, Asher didn't." I sat up and started trying to wipe the dirt off my clothes.

"Come on, I need to look at your shoulder before Zeke sees you with blood on you." Ethan sat down behind me and opened the field first aid kit that Asher always carried in his pack.

"Okay, but I want water too." I grinned over my shoulder.

Ethan handed me a bottle of water while the sweat started to dry on my face and neck. "This is going to sting."

I gritted my teeth as my shoulder burned. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. That hurts more than getting it."

"That's because you've got dirt and sweat in it." Ethan continued to clean the back of my shoulder. "You know, from lying on the ground."

I rolled my eyes and took a long drink.

"Red? Why is there blood on the wall?" Isaac's voice crackled to life in my ear.

"Um, I don't know..." I gave it a shot.

"She scraped her shoulder on the wall when she fell," Ethan said. "She's fine, I'm cleaning her up now."

"Just worry about yourselves. I'm off the wall and safe." I sighed. They were the ones still climbing. Geeze.

Ethan started cleaning up the trash. "Leave the air on that to dry it out. And don't lie down."

"Hey, blue hair." Zeke's voice rang in my ear.

"What, giant of the north?" Isaac grunted.

"Race you to the top."

My stomach dropped. "Don't you fucking dare."

"Go!" Isaac shouted.

Asher cursed as he began pulling up the slack in the line. Miles worked just as quickly.

It was about thirty minutes before Isaac was climbing over the ledge of the cliff with Zeke just reaching the ledge of his route.

Isaac climbed up, got to his feet and raised his arms. "I win!"

Zeke cursed as he climbed over the edge.

I was shaking my head when Isaac took off his line and strode toward me. "Let me see."

I didn't bother to move. Ethan shook his head as Isaac moved around me and looked at my shoulder.

"Oh, that's not so bad." Isaac's voice was edged with relief.

I rolled my eyes as Zeke started toward me. "Up."

I grumbled under my breath as I got to my feet. The back of my thigh aching, I turned around.

Zeke shoved my braid out of the way. He took a deep breath and let it out.

"It's not so funny when you're the ones scared, now is it?" I looked up at them over my shoulder.

The twins chuckled as Zeke let go of my braid.

Miles and Asher joined us. "Everyone alright?"

There was a round of yeses and yeahs.

"Let's set up to rappel down." I smiled at them cheerfully.

"No!" They all shouted in unison.

I fought it as long as I could, but eventually I started laughing. The guys shook their heads as we got ready to go down the path.

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rinsed the shampoo out of my hair. The hot water ran over my already sore muscles, finding new scrapes and bruises. I tilted my head back and just enjoyed the heat. Miles had said with the set up they used, I could take as long of a shower as I'd like and not run out of hot water. It was kind of great... I worked up a lather and started to wash up.

Hades lay down on the tarp floor in the doorway of the shower area. The guys had surrounded the small area in tarps so I'd have privacy. Apparently, they normally just did the separation for the camp. I shook my head. I didn't understand that.

My washcloth found bruises and scrapes I didn't know I had in addition to the big one on my thigh. I checked out the back of my left thigh. The bruise was about the size of a large hand, dark purples, dark blues, and lighter colors colored the area.

I cursed. That was going to be fun with shorts. Zeke was going to have a fit. I washed the scrapes and cuts on my legs, admiring the bruises I hadn't felt before.

I was still enjoying the heat on my back when Hades sat up.

"Red?"

I went still and looked up at the top edge of the tarp. "Um, I'm still in the shower."

"Still?"

"Yep!"

He chuckled. "Loving that hot water, huh?"

"I can see the benefit of glamping." I tried for innocent, but by his laughing I could tell I hadn't pulled it off.

"How're you doing?" Isaac asked, his voice tired.

I picked up my conditioner. "I'm okay. You?"

"Any bruises from the harness?" His voice was slightly rough.

I smiled to myself. "Nope, just from my own clumsiness."

The only sound was the water from the shower hitting the tarp floor. He was quiet so long I thought he'd left.

"Isaac?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?" I put the conditioner in my hand and rubbed them together.

"You scared the fuck out of me up there." A stick snapped as he shifted his feet.

"I didn't mean to, I was just being stupid, reached too far for a hold and slipped." I started to worked the conditioner through my hair. "You caught me."

He huffed. "Yeah, but I might not have."

"Of course you would." I stopped messing with my hair. "You even checked my knots twice before you let me start climbing the second pitch."

"If I didn't, Zeke would have killed me." He sighed.

"Zeke wasn't on our route." I ducked my head under the spray. "And you checked Miles' too."

"I guess..."

I stopped rinsing my hair and threw subtlety out the window. "You saved my ass today. I fell, you caught me. Don't pick it apart to make yourself feel like you could have done more. You did exactly what you were supposed to do."

His feet shifted in the dried needles. "Okay. You're right. I'm just picking at it."

I sighed. In some ways, Isaac was just as anxious as his brother. Just over different things.

"Is she still in the shower?" Ethan's voice joined Isaac's.

"Yeah, she's loving the hot water." Isaac ratted me out.

"Snitch." I finished rinsing my hair one more time.

The guys chuckled as I turned off the water.

"What do you guys want for lunch?" Asher's voice came closer until he was on the other side of the tarp.

"Food!" I grabbed my towel off the top of the tarp.

"Hot or cold?" Asher sighed.

"Hot," Ethan answered.

"Cold," Isaac said at the same time as I started drying off.

"What are you three doing?" Miles' voice joined them.

"Is Lexie still in the shower?" Zeke showed up.

Oh, shit. I held my towel to cover my chest. "Yes." Zeke is taller than the tarp went. Thankfully, he didn't move any closer to the barrier.

"We're talking about lunch," Asher said. "Hot or cold?"

"It's fucking hot out. Cold." Zeke didn't even have to think about it.

"Well, a hot sandwich and a salad would be a good compromise," Miles offered.

Were they really just going to stand there? They continued to debate until I realized they thought I was dressed. Ethan headed for the doorway and Hades.

Hades growled and blocked his way.

"Uh, why's Hades on guard, Beautiful?" Ethan called as everyone grew quiet.

Wishing I had a bigger towel, I made sure I was covered from chest to not quite mid-thigh and stepped into the doorway with my hand on my hip.

The guys' jaws dropped.

"He's on guard because I'm naked." Satisfied, I moved back into the shower area and put my towel up. I picked up my underwear and started to get dressed.

"That bruise is as big as my hand!" Zeke barked.

"That's what you focused on?" Ethan chuckled as he started laughing.

"Please get dressed, Lexie. We'll leave you to it." Miles' voice told the others not to argue.

"And my vote is for hot sandwich and fruit salad!" I started pulling on my bra as the guys chuckled.

"Anything in particular?" Asher's voice was getting further away.

I started to relax. "I would kill for a Philly cheese steak."

"Ally has spoken," Asher declared. "Philly cheese steak it is."

"And fruit salad!" I clipped my bra and slipped the straps on to my arms. After I pulled on my white tank top, I slid my feet into my sandals.

Being sure to pick up my stuff, I headed back toward camp. Asher was in the picnic area with Miles, cooking. While the twins were talking in their chairs. Zeke was coming from one of the coolers with a bag of ice and a towel. Frowning, he took my clothes from me and handed me the bundle.

I reached up and touched the tip of his nose. "Boop."

He didn't smile, but his frown disappeared to his usual grumpy face. "Sit and ice it."

"Sir, yes, sir!" I saluted. Hades left me to go sniffing in the picnic area where Asher was cooking.

Zeke made an exasperated sound before he went to my tent and tossed my clothes in. I sat down in my spot and put the ice under my thigh. Hissing as the cold began to take the sting out.

"Lunch!" Asher started dishing up plates.

When I went to get up Isaac got to his feet. "Stay put, Red."

"I can get my lunch." I fought not to whine.

"Stay." Asher pointed at me with the spatula.

I stayed in my spot.

Ethan brought me a plate, fork and paper napkin. "Here, Beautiful. Now behave."

I bit back a laugh as I took my plate.

Everyone sat down and started eating their cheesesteak and fruit salad. Hades came straight to me, begging for food.

"After lunch I want to head over to where you guys found that set up yesterday." Miles wiped his mouth with a paper napkin.

Asher nodded. "I'll take you."

"Louis should be here soon for our next lesson." I took a bite of my sandwich and rolled my eyes in ecstasy.

"How is that going?" Ethan asked.

I took my time eating. "I think I'll make more progress today."

"Well, there weren't any dead squirrels this morning." Asher got up and headed to the kitchen. "That's better at least, right?"

I nodded. I really didn't want to talk about it. And Louis walking into the campsite made it so I wouldn't have to.

"Ready?" Louis smiled. Seeing my food gone, Hades left my side and went to Zeke. His eyes riveted to Zeke's sandwich.

I nodded and tossed my paper plate into the fire ring to burn later.

"What's the plan today, Louis?" Isaac tossed his plate to join mine.

"Lexie, could you show Louis those pics? Maybe he'll have an idea what it is that you found." Miles added his plate to the fire ring.

That was a good idea. "I'll show him when we get to the clearing." I put the cap on my water bottle, got to my feet and headed for the trees. "Asher? You're taking Miles to the ravine?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it." Asher waved me off.

"Zeke?" I turned around while walking backward.

"I've got Hades." Zeke waved me off. I sent him a thankful smile.

We walked in silence. When we reached the clearing, I took out my phone and pulled up the pictures. I explained what happened and held up my phone so he could see.

He stopped when I got to the symbol on the stone. "You found this?" I nodded.

"I've never seen that before." He shook his head. "You might want to ask Uma."

"I'll send it to her to see if she knows what it is." I held my phone up, trying to find a signal.

He chuckled. "Stop stalling."

Sighing, I tucked my phone away and sat down in the same spot as yesterday. Taking a minute, I took several deep breaths. I needed to stop denying that death is in my life and just face that's it's there and never going to go away.

I met Louis' eyes and nodded.

"Close your eyes."

I did as he said and took several deep breaths.

"Now, you're going to sink. Take deep breaths, feeling the air as you take it into your lungs."

I followed his instructions and focused.

"Relax a little more. Keep taking slow deep breaths."

Everything fell away, my mind quieted.

"Now, lower your barriers all the way."

My pulse picked up. "Are you sure?"

"Trust me."

I took several more deep breaths then, finally, let my barriers come down. It was like getting out of a pool in the wind, it whirled around me before spinning off.

"Good." His voice was gentle and calm, an anchor in the windstorm. "Now, place your hand palm side down in the dirt."

I pressed my hand onto the ground. Instantly, I was thrown into more chaos. I was stretched and pulled almost as if I was being pulled apart. My pulse pounded in my ears as my energy spread out through the ground. Soft, the dirt was soft as silk... In my mind, I watched my energy spread out in every direction. Soaking into the earth, plants, trees. "Why do I feel the grass?" I whispered as I tried to understand.

"Because death is a part of everything in the world. Everything dies. Life springs from it and the cycle continues." His voice was soft as he squatted beside me. He was right. I could feel it. See it. That green energy moving into the stalks of the grass and spreading through the blade... it was warm and full of promise.

"Do you feel the cold spot?"

I did. About eight feet away, a dark spot over the green. I nodded.

"Move your energy closer to it. Feel it's shape."

I hesitated. "I don't want to." It was cold, and dead... I didn't want to feel that...

"You have to."

I inched my energy closer to that cold spot of darkness in a sea of greens.

"Move your energy into the grass and soil around it."

I swallowed hard then spread my energy further. The bones of the animal were broken. I could feel them on my fingertips. They lay in several places from scavenging animals...

"Now, fill those bones with your energy."

"How?" I really didn't want to do this...

"Reach out with your will and focus on making those bones whole."

I focused on wanting to make the squirrel whole again. Its bones not broken; its skull not crushed. Then I sent that tendril of will out. That gold ribbon carefully touched the squirrel's bones.

Ice cold washed over me. Darkness swept into me making me cry out. Alone... in the dark... cold... it was so cold it burned.... It filled my vision, my blood rushed in my ears. I didn't want to feel it... I slammed my barriers closed with an oddly physical clank.

I shook. I took deep breaths as the darkness receded and the grove came into focus again. When I could, I finally looked at him. "What the fuck was

that?" I had never felt anything like it in my life, and I never wanted to feel it again.

Louis sighed. "That's what a body feels like without a soul. It's usually only for a split second before you fill the body with your energy. I barely noticed it as I got older."

"That's what death feels like?"

"Only for a few." His voice was calm but it made me dread what he was going to say next. "My death was different. It was like falling asleep. I was warm, I was loved, I knew I wasn't alone and I knew everyone I cared about would be okay."

"What do you mean, for a few?" I needed to know.

"People who have betrayed everything they are. The people who kill, rape, and look for ways to hurt others. Those people have killed off their souls. They're nothing but... emptiness. They start to rot from the inside out, spiritually speaking."

My thoughts went back to the serial killer I helped cross. "So, what happens when they die?"

He gestured at the pile of sticks where the dead squirrel was. "They feel that when they die, and if they have anything of who they were left, it'll pop out. It'll look like a soul but won't be complete."

"I saw that before we left." I met his eyes. "I crossed this fucking psycho. And after the Veil pulled all the energy from him, he was almost just a shadow."

He nodded. "People's choices affect their souls. They decide what to put out there. If they spent their lives trying to cause pain or whether they were kind to people. If they tried to help or prey on others. Who they were in life affects the rest of their eternity."

"The psycho..." I met his eyes. "He was dragged through a door into blackness."

Louis nodded.

"Hell exists, doesn't it?"

"I won't know until I cross over." He shrugged. "Now, let's get back to your lesson."

"Yes, Yoda."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Drop your barriers and find the cold spot again, Padawan"

I closed my eyes and focused. It only took a minute and I was exactly back where I was a few minutes ago. My ribbon of will hovered over the body of the squirrel.

"Now, just touch the skull of the squirrel."

My heart pounded in my ears. "Then what?"

"Then you send your energy into it. And when it glows in your mind, you tell it to rise."

Bracing myself for the cold I lowered the ribbon and touched the skull. That ice began to seep into me. Instead, I pushed my energy against it. The cold went away as the bones began to glow.

"Now, let go of the skull. Pull back and you can close your barriers."

I did exactly as he said. When I opened my eyes the glow was still around the pile of sticks.

"Tell it to rise."

My throat went dry. "Rise."

The glow intensified but nothing else happened.

"You have to mean it, Lexie." Louis turned back to me. "Need or want, it doesn't matter but mean it."

I swallowed hard. I wanted control of my abilities. I didn't want to raise animals while I was asleep anymore... To do that, I needed to raise this squirrel. "Rise?" My voice was firmer, stronger.

But nothing happened.

"Lexie! It's not a question."

Irritation filled me, stupid mother fucking... "Rise!" It was my pissed off voice that finally worked. The pile shifted, a white skull popped out with gold flames for eyes.

"Tell it to come to you."

I point to a spot a foot in front of me and focused. "Come here."

The squirrel bounced over the sticks and grass just as if it was still alive. It even tilted its head to the side. Yeah, that's not creepy at all.

This close to the zombie squirrel, the hair on my arms raised. That gold energy moved over it like smoke. "Is... is it supposed to do that?"

"Only when you use too much energy." Louis knelt beside me. "Which is fine for now. You'll have to learn finer control before that stops."

I nodded. The thing was looking at me. "Can...can I put it down now?"

"Drop your shields like before, and reach out with your will again. I always found it easier to put my hand over them for this part."

I dropped my barriers. The freaking squirrel glowed in my head as if it was radioactive. Taking a deep breath, I held my hand out over it. My palm grew warm.

"Now, tell it to rest. All of your energy left will snap back to you."

Right. My energy. Only now it felt like warm, dead squirrel energy. "Rest." The light shot up and into my hand. The bones fell apart in front of me. A small wave of giddiness swept through me. It didn't last long but as soon as it was gone my stomach rolled. I turned and threw up.

Louis didn't say a word as he waited until I was sitting up and wiping the back of my mouth with my hand. "Everyone does that the first time too."

I shot him a look. "Are we done?" I enjoyed it... the rush had been... fun. What kind of monster enjoys that?

"For today? No." His eyes were kind as I sat back on my butt. "You're not a bad person for having that endorphin rush."

My eyes met his.

"We're necromancers. Our bodies are wired differently for that kind of thing," he reminded me. "It's okay to like the rush, it's not okay to love it."

That did make sense. I nodded that I understood.

"Now, again."

A COUPLE of hours of later Louis finally called it.

"Now, I doubt you'll be able to raise anything more than a fly. Not with how far your energy went."

"What do you mean?" A nap did actually sound really good right now...

"Your energy went out about fifteen feet in radius." He tilted his head to the side. "Didn't you notice?"

I shook my head and got to my feet.

Tired, and achy, I walked back into camp with Louis. Isaac was waiting next to the fire ring. When he saw me, his shoulders relaxed.

"Good luck," Louis whispered before heading back into the woods.

Isaac met me. "Lexie, we need to talk."

"Want to take a walk?"

"Yeah."

We started down the trail heading west out of the camp ground. "Where are the others?"

"Asher and Miles got back a while ago. Asher went fishing with Zeke and Hades while the others are at the rope swing." He took my hand in his. "I needed some time to think."

My stomach knotted. "You're avoiding the others."

"So I can think, yeah."

We needed to do better. "They're your best friends."

"And they all fucking kissed the girl I fell for, so what does that tell ya?" His voice was sharp and edged.

"That they have good taste?" I smiled up at him, hoping for a laugh.

His amber eyes met mine, I didn't get a laugh but I did get a grin. "I can't argue with that."

I squeezed his hand. "Do you know what really scares the shit out of me?"

"Snakes." He smirked as we walked around the bend in the trail.

"It's the way they fucking move." I shrugged. What was so wrong about that?

He laughed again.

I waited until he was done to tell him. "Normally, yes, snakes, but not this time. The thing that scares the hell out of me, that keeps me up at night, is worrying about you guys. That's what gives me nightmares. Your relationships to each other and that I might have messed them up."

He said nothing as we continued to walk.

"I would hold a thousand poisonous snakes if it would make everything alright between everyone again. I'd jump in a fucking vat of them. But I can't." I squeezed his hand.

"So instead, you want all of us to date you? At the same time?" He shoved his other hand into the pocket of his cargo shorts. "That's not fucking fixing the problem, that's adding to it."

"How do I fix this?" I stopped walking, forcing him to turn and look at me. "I fucked up so badly that everyone I care about is likely going to get hurt." I shrugged, frustration making me clench my fists. "So, please. Tell me how to fix this without losing everything. I'll try anything at this point."

"You pick someone." Isaac ran his hands through his hair, his fingers digging into his scalp. "You pick someone, the rest deal and move on.

That's how it's supposed to work."

I wiped my face we had already talked about this... "Could you do it?" He dropped his hands and narrowed his eyes at me. "Do what?"

"Could you choose? If you were me, could you hurt the best friends you've ever had? Your family, the people you love so much that you're willing to put the world at risk to save them. Could you point at one and say, I pick you? I care for you more than the others. Could you watch their faces as their hearts broke? Could you do that?" My head ached as indecision warred over his face. I simply waited. Because I needed an answer.

His eyes filled with unshed tears as his breathing grew heavier. "Am I not enough for you?"

Pain filled my chest, burning a hole straight through me. "More than any girl could ever hope for." I took a shaky breath as I moved closer, my hands gripping his shirt. "You're amazing. Sweet, funny, wonderful. You push me to try new things even if I'm scared. You remind me not to take life so seriously..." I had to take another deep breath through my tightening throat. "I love you and everything about you."

His arms moved around my waist as tears fell down his face. "Then why?"

"Because if I choose... How can I be happy knowing my happiness is at the price of their pain?" I took several deep breaths. He had to understand. "Because I love them just as much as I love you. And losing all of you... I can't even function from the thought." But I would. I'd rip out my heart and leave it shattered on the ground if it meant the guys would stay friends, would stay family. Trust them, Lexie. You have to trust their history, their friendships...

He pulled me close and buried his face in my hair as we both cried.

"You're more than enough, Cookie Monster. More than anyone I could ever want or ask for. I just royally fucked up." My lungs grew tight as I tried to breath.

He took several deep breaths with me as we both struggled for control. I don't know how long we stood there, clinging to each other. And I didn't care.

When he loosened his hold and stepped back he didn't even look like he'd been upset. Whereas I, well, I'm an ugly crier. He wiped my cheeks, held my face and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes and just felt him. "I need to think about this..."

When we were almost back to camp he squeezed my hand and let go. "I'm going to go on one of the skis for a while."

I nodded. Though my instincts screamed not to let him go.

He didn't even go change into his board shorts. He just walked down the beach and started pushing a ski into the water.

I wrapped my arms around myself, worrying that he was going to take some stupid risk.

"Are you alright?" Miles asked as he came to my side.

"Could you make sure Isaac doesn't do something stupid?" I asked in a quiet voice before turning to meet his eyes. Isaac sped off at high speed across the water.

He took in my tear streaked face and red eyes. "Of course." He squeezed my arm before heading down to the jet skis.

Ethan came to my side as Miles took off at full throttle after Isaac. I closed my eyes as my heart ached. Please, Isaac...

"What happened?" Ethan asked in that soft smoky voice I loved.

"We talked." Needing time alone, I turned away from the lake and headed for my tent. I needed my sketch book.

Two hours later, I was sitting on the sand. Trying to draw... something. Anything other than the fears running through my head.

And for the last two hours, nothing. Nada. I couldn't come up with anything.

I was about to give up when Ethan sat in the sand beside me. "Hey, Beautiful."

"Hey, Snoopy."

We both looked out at the water.

"Are you going to tell me why Miles ran after my brother?" His voice was soft as he turned to me.

"My chickens are coming home to roost." I turned my charcoal pencil in my hands.

"What?"

"Nothing, I'm just... nothing." I set the pencil down on my notebook and turned to him. "We talked, we both got upset and..." I gestured toward the water.

He reached over and wrapped his arm around my back. "How'd it go?"

I shook my head and started running my fingers through the sand. "You don't really want to hear about it."

"If it has to do with my brother, I do." His arm disappeared before he grabbed me behind my knees and carefully spun me to face him. Careful of my bruise on my thigh, he set my legs over his lap. My toes curled in the sand on the other side. "Now, I can hear you."

I gave him a half grin. "He thought he wasn't enough for me." My eyes filled as I looked at my hands in my lap. "I never wanted to make him feel that way..."

Ethan's hand ran up and down my back again. "I know, Beautiful. It's not your fault."

I sniffed and looked up at him. "But look what I'm asking him to consider, what I'm asking you to do? What else is he fucking going to think?"

He tucked a stray curl behind my ear. "You didn't mean to make him feel that way."

"No, but..." I shook my head. "I should have thought about how what I was asking would make you guys feel. And I didn't. What kind of friend does that?"

"The ones that aren't perfect." He gave me a soft smile. "You can't predict how we would react or feel."

"I should have realized you guys would feel like... like you aren't important to me or something." I took a deep breath against the weight in my chest. "I should have thought of that first."

"Beautiful, that's how Isaac reacted." His fingers on my knee made comforting circles on my skin. "You haven't asked how I feel about it."

Stomach knotting, I lifted my head and met his eyes. "How... how do you feel about it?"

He looked at me in confusion. "About what? You need to be specific."

I snorted. "How do you feel about the me dating everyone option?"

He smiled a warm smile. "Relieved."

Everything stopped. Did he just say... "You're relieved?"

He nodded. "Yeah, because it meant I have a chance not to lose you."

His eyes were warm as I met them. The pain in my chest eased back little by little. "Snoopy..."

He leaned in a little closer, our hair cutting off the rest of the world. "I only have one reason. You."

I shook my head. "But you'd be sharing me..."

"So? I'd rather have part of you than none of you." His warm hand rested on my knee. "Besides, I'm not exactly good at normal."

I smiled. It was that simple for him. He wanted to be with me. But I still had to ask... "Why did you tell me to pick Isaac?"

His eyes grew shadowed as he took my hand and kissed my knuckles. "Because I want my brother to be happy." He met my eyes again. "After all the shit that he went through, with Sophie, with girls, with that demon... He deserves it more than I do."

"You're a good brother."

"I'm an amazing as fucking hell brother," he countered, making me laugh again. "But the only way I can be with you is if everyone agrees to give this thing a try. So, I'm all for it. We just have to get the others on board."

Love filled me, leaving me just staring at him. Amazed that someone like him existed. I leaned forward and kissed him softly. It wasn't long, it wasn't passionate, but it was still filled with love.

I pulled back and felt lighter than I had all day. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He pulled back even more. "Now, we've established how awesome I am. What are you working on?"

I chuckled as I pulled my legs out of his lap. "Nothing, I couldn't even come up with an idea."

"So, use real life." His wicked smile was back. "Draw me like one of your French girls."

I burst out laughing as he leaned back against the tree and picked up his notebook.

"Draw the lake." He gestured at the water. "It doesn't have to be a masterpiece."

He was right. The lake wasn't that interesting though... I eyed Ethan as he started working in his notebook using one of my knees as a table. Smiling to myself, I started sketching his face. His general outline first... then the details...

* * *

I was getting ready to cook the fish that we caught for dinner when Astrid and Ranulf arrived. The pair split up. Ranulf headed over to talk to Zeke at the fire ring with Hades, checking the dog for ticks. Astrid came toward me.

The tall blonde werewolf picked a bottle of water out of the ice chest. "Hey, little brother."

Brother? "Um, hey?"

She leaned against the barbecue and gestured at me as she took a drink. "So, what happened?"

I pulled the burger meat out of the cooler. "What?"

"Well, last time I saw you, you were human." Astrid reached over and snagged a chip out of the bag before popping it into her mouth. "So, how did this happen?"

I pulled out the seasonings I need and set them on table. "I don't know what you're talking about."

When I turned back she eyed me her face puzzled.

"What?" I looked down at my shirt, thinking I had dropped something on myself. When I found nothing, I met her eyes again. "Okay, you're starting to creep me out."

She grew still. "When did you get bitten?"

I shook my head. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Her mouth opened. "You don't know."

"Know what?" She wasn't making any sense.

"You haven't..." Her eyes grew wider. "Oh, fuck."

At this point, I didn't know what the fuck was going on. "Ranulf." Ranulf turned toward us, smiling. "Do you know what Astrid is talking about?"

Ranulf walked over, his smile fading. "Goddess?"

"He hasn't shifted yet," she whispered, her eyes wide.

Ranulf's shoulders grew rigid. "It's in a couple of days, isn't it?"

Astrid nodded slowly.

"What's in a couple of days? And what are you talking about?" This was really starting to get on my nerves. If they didn't make any sense soon, I was walking away.

Astrid turned to me, still stunned. "You're a werewolf."

"Okay, yeah, sure." I stepped around Astrid and walked away. "Which one of the guys put you up to this?"

"Asher..." Astrid followed me. "I'm not messing around, this is serious."

"Extremely." Ranulf followed as we reached the fire ring.

"Okay, was it you who asked them to pull that prank on me?" My gaze went straight to Zeke as he continued to check Hades' fur.

"This isn't a joke, kid." Ranulf shifted to the side while Astrid moved to stand across the fire ring.

"What isn't?" Zeke looked up at us while scratching Hades' ears.

Astrid hesitated as I sat down. The twins, Miles and Ally walked back into the campsite from the lake.

"She's trying to tell me I'm a werewolf." I glared at Ethan, who I was sure set it up. "Nice try, Ethan."

Ethan raised an eyebrow as they stopped at the fire ring. "I'm missing something."

Ethan turned to Isaac.

Isaac shook his head.

Ethan turned back to me. "Um. Asher... We didn't set up a joke. If we were going to bring Astrid and Ranulf in on a prank, it'd involve Ranulf picking you up as he flew and have him drop you in the lake."

Ranulf pointed at Ethan. "That, I'd go along with."

Astrid moved around the cement ring and sat on it in front of me. "Asher, I'm not fucking around. I felt your wolf the second I walked into camp yesterday."

Now this was just getting annoying. "This isn't funny anymore."

Astrid scoffed. "Well, considering the full moon is two days away, and you'll have no control over yourself... You're right, it's not fucking funny." She looked at everyone else. "He would have killed at least one of you if not more."

My stomach dropped. She really didn't look like she was kidding. But a werewolf? No, no way...

"What would cause someone to turn into a werewolf?" Miles stepped up to my side and moved to the side of my chair.

Astrid shook her head. "Being born to wolf parents, or being bitten. It's all about D.N.A."

I relaxed and chuckled. "Well, I've never been attacked and my parents are human."

"Asher." Isaac's face was serious as he got my attention. "You let a werewolf pup chew on your fingers last month in New Orleans. Remember?"

Astrid groaned and covered her face with her hands. "How old?"

"Not even two, I think." Miles scratched his eyebrow.

Astrid cursed, dropped her hands and met my eyes. "When we're that young, our teeth are as sharp as needles. You might not have felt it or even seen it but that kid had to have drawn blood."

They all stood over me, looking at me in stunned silence. I didn't like it, something about it... I got to my feet and stepped out from between all of them. "This is crazy." I started out for the road.

"You've been moody, right?" Astrid's question stopped me in my tracks.

I turned around. "So? It's stress." It had to be. Cause this was insane...

She got to her feet and walked out from between everyone. "Let me guess. You have so much energy you can't sleep at night. You are running for hours but it's still not enough. Something still tells you to run."

I swallowed hard as my heart pounded against my ribs. But she wasn't done.

"I'd bet everything I have that you've been more aggressive. Losing your temper more. Doing and saying things you normally wouldn't. Fighting more?"

The blood drained from my face. "That could still be stress." It couldn't be true... No. It was crazy...

She shook her head, her eyes understanding. "A minute ago, you didn't like anyone standing over you. Something about it was wrong but you can't pinpoint it. Things like that have been happening more and more."

Holy shit... but it couldn't be... "Yeah. So? I've been on edge with this whole Ally thing."

"Then there are the dreams." Astrid met my eyes. "Running, the feel of dirt under your feet. A heartbeat gets your attention, a rabbit, deer or something runs out of nowhere. And you chase it. The taste of blood in your mouth is so real you can still taste it when you wake up."

Bile rose in the back of my throat as something moved inside me.

She stepped closer. "That was your wolf. That weird shifting inside. I can tell because your wolf... you're not bonded yet. You're not in control.

The bond will happen after you shift two nights from now. Until then, you're dangerous."

My pulse pounded in my ears... dangerous. Werewolf.... "Is there any way to tell for sure?"

Astrid's eyes were understanding again before she turned to the others. "Anyone have any real silver?"

Ethan walked forward and pulled off the big silver ring Ally had given him a long time ago. Ranulf held his hand out. Ethan hesitated but still gave it to him.

Ranulf strode toward me with a somber face. "Hold out something you're willing to scar."

"What?" Scar? This couldn't be happening...

"Silver burns and scars wolves." Ranulf held the ring up to show it to me. "This will hurt if you're a wolf. If not, you're human and Astrid's off her game."

Small tremors shook my arm as I raised my forearm.

Ranulf pressed the silver ring into the meat of my am. The heat was scorching, I jerked away cursing just as he was lifting the ring away. I looked at my arm. A heavy weight settled on my chest. My skin stopped smoking. In my arm was a perfect burn mark of Ethan's ring.

No. No, no, no. This wasn't happening... I took a step back, and another. Something inside me snapped. I turned and ran.

Everyone shouted my name.

"Keep them here!" Astrid shouted. But I didn't care. My arms pumped, my legs moved. I didn't think. I didn't know where I was going. I just ran.

* * *

Lexie

ASTRID RAN AFTER ASHER, faster than my eyes could follow. Werewolf. Asher was a werewolf.

Unable to process it, I turned to the others. Hades left Zeke and came to lean on my hip. My fingers automatically going to his fur. "What exactly happened in New Orleans?"

"Asher was bitten by a werewolf pup." Miles said as he turned to the rest of us.

No... that wasn't right. "He... he wasn't hurt in New Orleans. When did this happen?"

I turned to the rest of the group, his face pale. "After we found the kids on our way back. He was carrying a two-year-old that shifted, she was anxious and scared..."

I closed my eyes. "Oh, fuck... He let her chew on him, didn't he?" That was so Asher... Give anything you needed to make you feel better and not think about what it would cost. I loved it about him but... "Fuck!" I broke out in a cold sweat. It was all my fault. I took several deep breaths and tried to push my emotions back down. Asher. This was about Asher. I got control again and met Miles' eyes.

"We need to go find him." I couldn't just sit here. His entire life was just... His fucking species... He had to be freaking the fuck out. I forced my stiff legs to move.

"Hold it, Lexie." Ranulf got in front of me, forcing me to stop. "Right now, he's scared and his wolf isn't under control. It's a bad combination. You guys need to stay here."

My eyes grew hard as that solid feeling filled my chest. "He's family." "I get it." Ranulf sighed. "But the risk..."

The guys gathered around us. Hades pressed against my hip again.

I shook my head. "We... we can't just sit here."

Ranulf ran his eyes over all of us before meeting mine again. "Even if he hasn't shifted, he can still tear each of you limb from limb without even working up a sweat."

"He knows us, not you." Zeke shifted on his feet.

Ranulf turned to him. "Right now, he's not him. His wolf might be the one driving the bus. And that wolf doesn't know any of you."

My heart dropped. That wasn't good... "We can't just... Haven't you ever had someone you cared about go missing? Would you be able to stand around and do nothing?"

The gargoyle took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I have." His voice was warm and understanding. "I've also seen what happens when a human thinks their family member's wolf will know them when they haven't met. It's usually bloody and ends in the suicide of the werewolf."

Tension filled the silence. "So, unless you have experience dealing with wolves, you're going to do more harm than good."

"Alright." Miles began tapping his leg. "We'll stay here. It would destroy Asher to hurt any of us."

Everyone mumbled an agreement. Ranulf relaxed.

I pretended to keep looking at the ground, tilted my head a little and met Zeke's eyes out of the corner of my eye. He nodded, it was barely a movement but it was enough. Everyone went to their chairs and sat down. Hades rested his big head on my knee as my stomach continue to knot and unknot. Ranulf pulled his phone out and stepped away.

"This is bullshit," Isaac muttered.

"We don't know what we're dealing with." Miles shook his head. "Astrid is a werewolf and Ranulf's her husband. If he says it's safer here and out of the way, then we're safer here."

I looked around the group. None of them looked okay with this. I eyed the distance between us and Ranulf. Deciding to go for it, I leaned over to Ethan.

He turned to me with worried eyes. "Beautiful?"

"We need a distraction," I barely whispered.

A grin spread across his face as he glanced at Zeke then back to me. He raised an eyebrow. I nodded.

He smiled. "Oh, Beautiful."

I smirked.

"Let's see if I can get a head start." Ethan watched as Ranulf turned away. He got to his feet, stretched drawing attention to himself, then ran for the trail.

"Ethan!" Miles shouted.

"I'm going to kill you!" Isaac got to his feet and glared after him.

Ranulf cursed and took off after Ethan.

When they were far enough away, Zeke got to his feet.

"Promise me you'll bring him back." It slipped out before I realized it.

Zeke's face was hard as he met my gaze. "Promise." He turned and took off at a run for the trail.

Isaac turned to me and smiled. "Sneaky, Red."

I watched Zeke's back disappear down the trail. "Let's hope it's not a huge mistake."

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CHAPTER 18

ETHAN

t didn't take long for Ranulf to catch me. But hopefully it was long enough for Zeke to get out of camp.

The big Scotsman had me by the back of the shirt and was marching me back toward camp when he stopped and let go.

"So, what happened to you?" Ranulf's voice was gruff.

I adjusted my shirt as I stepped further away and looked up at the big guy. "Shouldn't you be out with Asher or something?"

Ranulf's gaze ran over me. "My mate is with him, so he's as safe as he can be. What I'm worried about right now, is you."

"What? Why?" Was it my back he was worried about?

"Because you're not completely human anymore," he snapped, his brow drawn down.

My world stopped. My pulse began to pound in my ears. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Ranulf surveyed me. "Something happened to you and changed you into... I don't know what."

"What do you mean, not human?" I swallowed hard as I started to spin my rings. This couldn't fucking be happening... not to me too.

Ranulf shook his head. "I meant it exactly how it sounds. What the fuck happened?"

I gaped at him for at least a minute before I could even think. New Orleans... "I... the Witch's Council took me and tortured me for, like... a day or so."

His eyes narrowed on me. "What do you remember exactly?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Not much. Needles, some liquid they kept injecting me with, pain. A lot of fucking pain."

"How have you felt since?"

"Fine. Great?" I shrugged. How the hell do you answer that? "What are you looking for?"

"Anything out of your usual routine."

My throat went dry. "My back. I have two slipped disks and since...."

"The pain is gone?" He shifted on his feet.

I nodded. "I haven't had to take my meds in almost a month."

"So, there's some healing going on." He ran his hand through his hair. "Anything else?"

I swallowed hard. "Lexie fell during the long climb. I was on a different route but around the same area." I made myself look at him. "I pulled off a dyno today."

He raised an eyebrow. "I don't climb, what does that mean?"

"It means, I jumped up the cliff to another hand hold." I took a breath and let it out. "This one was around four feet above me. And was barely big enough for the first joint of my fingertips."

Both his eyebrows were up. "That's not your usual?"

I shook my head. "I didn't even realize I did it until I started climbing again."

"So, you're stronger, I'm going to say better reflexes, and coordination?"

I nodded. "I'm having some weird ass dreams."

"What about your dreams?"

"That's the thing, I can't fucking remember." I ran my hands through my hair and tugged on the ends. "I wake up and all I remember is that it was weird and freaky."

"Did you come into contact with any shifters?" Ranulf asked, his brow drawn down.

"Yeah, but I didn't let anyone gnaw on me." Was this really happening?

"It was a long shot, you don't smell like a shifter." He eyed me again. "I'm 1800 years old, and I have no idea what you are. That worries me."

I dropped my arms. "What the fuck do I do?"

He shook his head. "I'm going to talk to Evelyn and Atticus and figure it out."

"Should I even be around people right now?" Was I going to hurt the guys? Lexie?

"Do you feel an increase in aggression?" He crossed his arms. "Are you having any mood swings?"

"No, just..." I shrugged. "I'm me..."

He shook his head. "You need to tell your friends and have them keep an eye out for new aggression, any behavior that's out of your usual."

Who the fuck could do that? Asher was a fucking werewolf and he needed more help than I did right now... I was going to have to tell Isaac. "I'll take care of it."

He nodded. "We'll figure it out. It just might take some time."

Take some time? Right. 'Cause patience has always been a virtue of mine. I shook my head. One thing at a time. "Let's head back to camp."

* * *

Asher

My breathing was shaky as I rocked back and forth. Everything was too loud, too much, too bright. The tips of my toes and fingers burned, my jaw ached. Taking deep breaths, I tried to get through the next heartbeat. The next minute.

Werewolf... A fucking werewolf. All because a little girl was upset. You stupid son of a bitch!

I held my head in my hands and tried to breathe through the vise in my chest. Wolf.... Werewolf... Something kept moving inside me... but that couldn't be real... could it?

"Asher?" Astrid called from her spot on the boulder outside the cave I had found. "It's going to be alright. *You* are going to be alright."

"Dangerous," I muttered, my eyes burning. "You said I could have killed everyone."

"Yeah, you could have. But you won't now, I'll be here when you shift and I'll keep you from doing any damage." Her voice was matter of fact. It helped. A little.

"My life is over." My throat grew tighter.

"Your life isn't over." Astrid shifted on the rock. She kicked a pebble that bounced off another stone. I could tell because I couldn't seem to stop hearing everything!

"How?" I bit out. "How is this going to be okay?"

"It'll only be like this until tomorrow night." Her voice was quiet. "Once you create the bond with your wolf, it'll be easier. He'll be able to communicate with you, he'll work with you instead of against you like this."

"It feels..." I swallowed hard. "It feels like something is moving in my chest."

"That's your wolf pacing. It's weird the first month or so." Her voice was still calm and soothing. "You'll be able to control your hearing, your sight... It's the last twenty-four hours that are the worst before your first shift. Being with your friends will help."

I kept rocking back and forth. "I need to stay away. I'm dangerous." Then it hit me. "Ally... shit..."

"Breathe, Asher." Her voice had an odd calming effect, it was new and not, all at the same time. "Talking helps."

I shook my head. I didn't know Astrid. "How dangerous is it for a werewolf to date a human?"

She sighed. "There are things you need to know before it's a good idea. I'd suggest not dating a human until at least a year from conversion. To be safe."

I closed my eyes and took a shaky breath. That was it. I couldn't be with her...

"But if you have open and honest communication with your mentor then I can see them agreeing, as long as some rules are observed."

"Mentor?"

"Yeah, it's a werewolf that's your teacher. Usually you stay with them for the month after your first shift. Work with them, live in their house. You know, the whole teacher and student thing."

I shook my head... I couldn't imagine it. I couldn't imagine my future... Did I even have one?

"Asher! Astrid!" Zeke's bellow was unmistakable. I closed my eyes and pressed my head back against the rock.

"Up here!" Astrid called.

Zeke's path through the woods was loud and easy to hear. Well, maybe just for me... God, what the fuck was I going to do?

"Where is he?" Zeke bit out.

"He's just inside the cave." Astrid sighed. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I have experience with wolves," Zeke muttered. Zeke always did hate explaining himself to people.

"Okay, you can stay but I wouldn't get any closer."

The scent on Zeke reached me. Rosemary and engine oil. Ally... He had to have touched her today or been extremely close to her... A growl rolled out from between my lips. The urge to tear him apart tore through me.

"Don't move," Astrid ordered.

"Where's Ally?" My voice was an octave deeper.

"Ranulf got her to stay in camp with the others." Zeke leaned against the rock wall outside.

For several heartbeats I forgot about my life being in pieces on the ground. "How?" Ally wasn't here? Knowing her, I thought she'd be running through the woods looking to yell at me.

"Ranulf explained how dangerous it was for anyone without experience with wolves. Miles made the call." He sighed. "She made me promise to bring you back."

I snorted. Of course she did... I shook my head. "I fucked up, Zeke."

"Maybe. But can you fix it now?" Zeke asked. The knot in my throat grew even bigger.

"No." I still couldn't fucking believe it. "My life is over..."

"Planning on offing yourself?" Zeke shifted against the rock.

"No..."

"Then your life isn't over." Zeke's clothing rubbed together. "It's just changing. It's fucked up. You didn't want it to. But it's just change."

Tears flowed down my face. "It's my entire species. I'm not human anymore."

"A lot of humans aren't human," Zeke countered. "There are truly fucked up people out there."

If anyone would know he would but...

"You're still breathing. Your heart is still beating. And we can always work with that." Zeke's matter of fact tone helped, I wiped my face.

Zeke walked slowly into the cave and sat down across from me. Something about him was calming, solid. Something about him just helped me get a handle on myself. Just a bit more.

I met his eyes. "I'm dangerous."

"You're Asher."

I shook my head. I'm not me anymore...

"You're going to get through this, man." His eyes softened and grew warm. "We just need to know the new rules."

New rules? I scoffed. "You think it's that easy?"

"I don't think it's going to be easy." He refused to turn away. "It's going to be hard. You're a werewolf. It's a new... everything, a different life. But you are still Asher."

"I could kill and not even mean to." Didn't he understand that?

"That's nothing new." He stayed still as a rock. "There was always that possibility."

"But now I'd say the odds are against me."

"Astrid?" Zeke looked out the mouth of the cave. "How many people have you hurt or killed by accident?"

"By accident? None," Astrid said. "If you have a pack for support and guidance and you take care of your wolf, you'll never do it on accident."

"What about on purpose?" I bit out.

"Only in self-defense," she admitted.

Zeke turned back to me. "You're one of the kindest people I know. If anyone can go through this and stay himself, it's you."

I met his eyes. He had to understand. "Are you telling me, that right now, you'd trust me alone with Ally?"

He didn't even flinch but his eyes did grow harder. "Tonight? No. Tomorrow night? No. When you've got your shit together and you know your limits? Yeah."

I huffed. Zeke always did have a way of laying shitty situations out so that they didn't seem so impossible. Hell, he'd had enough practice. I met his eyes again. "Do you really think I can do this?"

His eyes narrowed on mine. "You don't have a choice. It's done. The choice you do have, is how you handle it. Do you roll over and let this change everything about you and rule your life? Or do you fucking fight to stay you?"

I swallowed hard, the pressure in my chest easing. He was right. I am a werewolf. There's no cure, there's nothing I can do but move forward. Roll over? Or fight?

I met his eyes and nodded.

* * *

Lexie

IT WAS LATE when Asher and Astrid walked out of the parking lot. Asher's shirt was drenched with sweat as he went straight to the guys' tent. He didn't even look at us.

Zeke had walked in from the trail hours ago. When I saw he was alone, I wanted to kill him. Before he even reached us, he was explaining how Astrid was taking Asher out on a run that would satisfy his wolf. That had been four hours ago.

Astrid let the cooler lid drop, walked over to the fire, and sat in a chair. She was chugging down water as Asher left his tent with a towel and a bundle of clothes. He didn't even look at us before he went out of the campsite toward the shower. And he didn't go alone. Hades got to his feet and hurried after him. Good boy.

"How'd it go?" I finally broke the tension.

"He'll be alright until tomorrow. And now, he knows a way to calm his wolf down." Astrid put the lid back on her bottle of water. "The night of the full moon, I'll help him shift and take him on a run." Astrid turned to Ranulf. "Then he's coming to stay with us for a month.

Ranulf nodded. "You're going to mentor him?"

"What?" I sat up straight in my chair and I wasn't the only one. Everyone else sat up straight too.

Astrid nodded. "Hollis is in the middle of moving his pack into Canada. And I don't know any other pack alphas that I'd trust with him."

"What do you mean, he'll stay with you for a month?" Miles asked as he leaned forward.

Astrid turned back to us. "Asher's life has completely altered. His body has changed too. Traditionally, after a first shift, if the wolf doesn't have pack family, then they have a mentor they stay with to teach them."

"But he has to leave?" I asked.

Astrid me my gaze. "Yeah, he does. But only for a month so he can at least begin to start understanding his wolf."

"Then he'll come home?" Ethan asked.

Astrid nodded. "He'll know the basics of what he'll have to do to control and take care of his wolf. He won't be completely safe but with the other wolves in town he'll be safer."

"What do we do when there is a full moon?" Zeke, at least, had the balls to ask what we were all thinking.

Astrid turned to him. "He'll need other wolves to keep him safe for... maybe six months or more? It depends on when the bond is deep enough that he starts to remember being a wolf." Astrid turned to Miles. "The only reason he'll be coming home in a month is because of those wolves that just moved to your town. They'll keep him in check."

The silence stretched.

"What can we do to help?" Miles asked.

Astrid opened her bottle and took another drink. "He's going to have aggression trouble, jealousy, anger, he's going to struggle for a while. He has to learn everything all over again. So, just be patient and understanding with him. And listen. If he says back off, do it. If he says that he needs to leave, get him out into the woods and away from people."

"So, just like Zeke." I couldn't help it.

The twins snorted. The others shook their heads.

"A more deadly version, yes." Astrid's face let me know she didn't think it was funny but she understood what I was going for.

All of us nodded.

"We're going to head back to the hotel. We'll be back tomorrow for another run." Astrid got to her feet. "But, Lexie, I need to talk to you alone first."

I got to my feet and crossed the campsite with her.

"When will he shift?" Miles asked.

"A couple of hours after sunset on the day after tomorrow," Ranulf answered. "That's generally the rule I've noticed."

When we were at the back of the trucks, she pulled the tailgate down on Miles' truck and sat down. I sat next to her.

"I'm going to take a wild guess and say that you and Asher are dating." Astrid turned to me.

"No... Um." I was going to have to explain. I gave her the CliffsNotes version. "So, that's one of the reasons we're here."

She sighed. "If there was any possibility that he had a mate, then it'd be a disaster just waiting to happen. But it's still going to be a difficult and dangerous situation."

"Mate? What do you mean?" What was she talking about?

She shook her head. "If he was a born wolf, there'd only be one wolf he'd have healthy children with. But since he was bitten, he won't. He can't pass it on genetically. So, no mate. He can still bond to someone and that's a whole different discussion we'll have another time." She shifted on the tailgate to face me. "What I'm trying to tell you, is that right now he's dangerous."

"Okay, you've said that to the guys and me. And you're repeating it to me. Why are you warning me again?" Screw beating around the bush, just come out and tell me.

"You're in a different kind of danger." She gestured at my body. "Let's say you two are making out, if he reaches a certain point it will be a struggle to stop himself."

My heart dropped as the blood drained from my face. "Are you saying he'd try to rape me?"

Her eyes grew wide. "No, no. Not that. If he'd never do that, his wolf would never do that. I'm trying to illustrate the fact that dating a shifter is different. There are different rules if you are human. And I'm really bad at this."

Relief filled me. "Okay, rules I can follow."

"Again, Lexie." She met my eyes. "It's a new body. He has to learn how he reacts to *everything* again."

"Oh." A horrible thought hit me. Was she...? "You're going to..."

She sent me a look. "Fuck, no. I'm not going to sleep with him."

We both chuckled at how fast she shut that down.

"Screw being P.G." Astrid met my eyes again. "He's going to have to learn how he's going to react sexually as a werewolf. And that needs to be done extremely carefully. And slowly."

I nodded. "Okay. That, I understand."

"I'll send you a list of rules and advice but basically, you can't be physical with him until at least he comes back."

"Can I kiss him?" He was going to leave for a month...

"Until he's got his wolf under control? Only on the cheek." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Lexie. That's the way it has to be until he comes back."

I shook my head. "No, no. This is the shit I need to know. He really has to relearn everything? Controlling his temper? All of that?" Guilt ate at my insides. I shoved it behind a door for now.

She nodded. "His body has changed completely, all the way down to his D.N.A. And that takes time to adjust."

That made sense.

"Now, until he shifts he's going to get worse. Be angrier and more agitated. The last twenty-four hours before shifting are the worst."

"How do we help?"

She smiled. "Try to avoid making him jealous until he can shift. Distract him, you're on vacation so have fun. Just remind him, he's still Asher."

I nodded.

Ranulf came around the truck. "We good, ladies?"

"Yeah." Astrid got to her feet. "We'll see you tomorrow." Astrid and Ranulf headed for their car.

I went back to camp and sat in my chair.

Isaac rubbed his eyebrow. "Shit."

"You can say that again," I muttered.

"Shit," Isaac repeated.

I grinned a little.

"We should get some sleep." Ethan got to his feet.

"I'm going to talk to Asher." Miles stayed put.

Everyone else got to their feet and headed to their tents.

I changed into my flannel pj bottoms and cami before lying down. Hades wasn't back yet, so he must be planning to stay with Asher... I picked up a book and muttered under my breath as I reached over to pick up my glasses and book light.

An hour later, Miles' voice came from the fire ring. "Do you want to talk?"

"No." Asher's voice was firm.

"You know I'll listen," Miles tried again.

"Not tonight," Asher snapped.

I waited to see if he'd change his mind.

"What are you doing?" Miles asked.

"I'm crashing in the hammock."

"Why?" Someone got out of a chair.

"Just... let me finally get some sleep." Asher's voice was an odd mix of lost and pissed.

"Alright, good night," Miles said in a calm soothing voice.

"Night," Asher said.

I put my glasses back, shut my book and turned off my book light.

Struggling to get comfy, I rolled to my side and punched my pillow.

I didn't like how Asher hadn't look at anyone when he came back. I didn't like how quiet he was either.

I needed to see him and know he's okay. Worried, I got up, slipped on my sandals and opened my tent. I walked across the camp toward the hammock.

Asher was still awake and looking up at the sky. The unzipped sleeping bag over him, his hair was still wet from the shower. His eyes shined reflecting the moonlight like a predator watching prey as I walked toward him. My pulse jumped at the reminder. He wasn't human anymore. The hand hanging over the side and buried in Hades' fur stopped scratching. "You should be in bed."

I didn't even pause in my stride. "I'm staying with you."

"That's dangerous, Ally." His voice was so lost it made my heart ache.

"Tell me to go and I'll go." I stopped at the side of the hammock.

His eyes were rough as they met mine. Anger, fear, everything was fighting it out inside him. He didn't say anything.

I started to climb into the hammock. "Let me decide how much I'm willing to risk." He moved over a little to counter balance as I got in next to him. I sat up, moved his arm and lay back down against him with my head on his shoulder and the front of my body pressed against his side. "So, what are we looking at?"

"Being gone for a month, no football in the fall, and a thousand other things." He wrapped his arm around me as my leg hooked over one of his to lay between his. He covered me with the sleeping bag.

I tilted my head back and met his eyes. "I meant, what are we looking at in the sky?"

His lips twitched as I lay my hand on his stomach.

"I wasn't really looking." He took my hand from his stomach to hold against his chest. His pulse pounded under my fingertips.

"How do you feel?" I whispered.

He swallowed hard. "Better. I'm not restless anymore. Instead, I'm pretty exhausted."

My fingers stroked his. "Then why are you still awake?"

He looked back up to the stars. "What's going to change keeps running through my mind."

"So, no football?"

He shook his head. "Which isn't a huge loss but I'd rather have it be my choice."

"That does suck." I kept stroking his fingers with mine. "Not having a choice."

"No baseball in the spring either." He sighed. "Forget MMA and sparring. Hell, even my diet has to be different. It was already high protein but now..."

I looked up at him as a tear ran out of the corner of his eye. Squeezing his hand, I listened as he ran through what he knew was going to change. It wasn't just a lot. It was almost everything. There was nothing I could say so I just listened. Because that's what happens when someone you love is in pain, you share it with them.

Eventually, his fingers squeezed mine. "Everything has changed."

"Not everything." I met his eyes. "Your family still loves you."

He took a shaky breath. "I'm scared, Ally."

"Me too." I swallowed hard through the hard knot in my throat. "But I'm not going anywhere. Neither are the guys."

He looked down at me, his eyes as rough as waves crashing in a storm. He let go of my hand to hold my cheek in his hand.

His breathing grew even more ragged. He rested his forehead against mine and cried. We both did. We quietly cried for what he lost, what he'd never do again, fear, all of it. And he didn't do it alone.

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CHAPTER 19

AUGUST 22ND

hirping birds brought me to the surface. Warm, safe, comfy...
Vanilla and cinnamon surrounded me. Asher... I started to sink back under. My bladder, on the other hand, had other ideas.
Muttering under my breath, I opened my eyes. Asher's eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even. At least he finally got some sleep. I carefully untangled myself from him, got out of the hammock, and almost stepped on Hades in the process. The big lug didn't even budge as I stepped over him.

Asher took a deep breath and opened his eyes. "Where are you going?" I smiled. "The bathroom and getting dressed."

He reached out and took my fingers in his. "I need to go for a run." "Already?" He just woke up...

He gave my fingers a squeeze and let go. I stepped back, giving him room as he got out of the hammock. "Astrid said it's better to go for a run before you *have* to go for a run."

I looked up at him "Do what you have to do to take care of yourself, Ash."

His eyes were warm as he leaned down and brushed his lips against mine. After a heartbeat I pulled away and stepped back. His brow drew down as pain flashed in his eyes.

"Astrid said I can only kiss you on the cheek until you get back." I rushed to explain.

His face relaxed. "Oh.... Okay." He stepped closer, leaned down and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes and enjoyed his touch. I breathed in cinnamon and vanilla before he stepped back and headed for the guys' tent.

On the way to the bathroom, I stopped by my tent, and grabbed my toiletry bag.

After I washed my face with cold water, I looked at the mirror. My eyes were a little swollen but not so bad after we spent most of the night crying. It could be worse. Sighing, I brushed my teeth. Asher was a werewolf. What could we do to help him today? Get his mind off things. Have fun. That's what Astrid said. Hell, that's about all we could do. I packed my stuff up and headed back to camp.

When I got there, Miles was in the picnic area and it was a disaster. He had a puzzled look on his face as he flipped a still gooey pancake. The batter splashed across the griddle. The top of the pancake was half burnt and half raw. There was a mess of too burnt and too raw pancakes already in the trash. I smiled to myself as Miles pushed his glasses up and scowled at the barbecue.

"Need a hand?"

He jumped then gave me a small smile. "I thought I'd try to make breakfast." He looked back down at the griddle. "But I believe I've overestimated my ability."

I held my hand out to him. "Hand over the spatula and step away from the griddle."

He handed me the spatula and stepped back, clearly relieved. "Please, take over."

I turned down the heat on the griddle. "Can you follow the directions on the box for more pancake batter?"

He nodded. "That is one thing I don't screw up in the kitchen."

"Batter?"

"And most microwaving." He picked up the now empty batter mixing bowl and moved to a nearby table. "I just thought it'd be nice for Asher not to have to cook."

"It was a good idea." I couldn't stop smiling as I scraped the remnants of Miles' attempts off the griddle. Most microwaving? What did that mean? "But now I understand why the guys don't let you cook."

He pulled eggs and milk out of the cooler. "Do you want the bacon?"

"Is there more bacon or sausage?" I slid the burnt pieces onto a paper plate then threw it into the trash.

"There's more sausage."

"Then sausage it is." I turned and took the packages as he handed them to me. "The eggs too."

"That's a lot of food." He set the eggs on the table beside the barbecue.

"Asher said his diet needs to be even higher in protein now. And the twins are still eating enough for two each." I started to open the sausage. "So, I figure we'd make a ton this morning and get an idea of how much."

"Then we'll probably need to go to the store again." Miles set the fresh batter next to me.

I ran a stick of butter over the top of the griddle. It sizzled as I used a ladle to put the batter on the griddle in several places. While those cooked, I pulled out another mixing bowl and started cracking eggs.

"How was he last night?"

I paused. "We talked, and he got some sleep." I went back to work.

"Thank you, Angel."

I turned to him with a raised eyebrow.

"Thank you for being there for him, when he wouldn't let us." Miles turned away and picked up two mugs.

Needing to change the subject, I turned back to the griddle. "You never did say why you call me that."

"I thought it was obvious." Miles began to pour coffee into the mugs.

"Well, I don't have any wings so..." I smiled as the bubbles finally popped on the pancakes. I flipped all of them.

He finished adding cream and sugar to my coffee and handed it to me. "Because you have one of the biggest hearts I know."

I went still and simply watched him.

"You're always considerate of others, and are always willing to help people even if they don't deserve your help. And if it's family, it doesn't matter what it will cost you. Not to you at least." He shrugged. "That's amazing to me."

"You're the same way." I went back to cooking while hoping he didn't notice how much my face was burning.

"You were right." Miles' voice grew softer. "I hadn't truly thought what this plan would mean to me."

My shoulders grew tense. "I was hoping you would think about it."

"I have, or at least I thought I had." He leaned against the table next to me. "The other night, when Ethan went to your tent... I was jealous. I wanted to go in and stay with you, to make sure you were alright." I concentrated on putting the done pancakes on a plate and covering them with a towel.

"Until then, I'd never really, truly been jealous of the others." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "That's when it really hit me."

I focused on pouring more pancakes as cold dread filled me. He changed his mind. Of course he did, how could anyone ever agree to this?

He reached up and squeezed my arm

I turned to him, fully expecting to have my heart ripped out. "It's okay, Nemo." His eyes met mine. "If you've changed your mind, I'll understand completely."

His eyes narrowed on mine. "I realized I'm not perfect either. More often than not, jealousy happens because of insecurity or low self-esteem. So, I surmised that I was feeling insecure. I was wondering what Ethan could do for you in a relationship that I can't."

"Nemo." I set the ladle back in the batter. "That's not the situation at all."

His eyes met mine. "I know. I stayed up most of the night thinking about it logically. And I believe I figured it out."

"It's not a competition-"

"Angel." His voice was the silky smooth one that I loved, that made all the ragged edges inside me smooth. "Ethan encourages you to be passionate. He encourages your art, he talks about it with you, you talk about his music. Besides the fact he's a good person, this is what Ethan does for you that I can't."

"You encourage me." How could he think he didn't? "You gave me professional grade pastels for Valentine's day. I'd say that's encouragement."

He smiled. "But I can't experience art with you. I never really understood what was so important about it. But the way you talk about it, the way you get excited... I support you and I love your work, but I can't understand it like he does."

Was he...? "If you tell me to pick Ethan, I'm going to smack you upside the head with the spatula."

He chuckled.

"I'm not kidding. I've already got Ethan doing that crap for Isaac. I don't need it from you too." I'm not choosing. I'll walk away first.

"No, I'm not saying that." He shook his head, smiling. "I'm saying I think I can work with this new perspective. It's not going to be easy, everyone will make mistakes and step on everyone else's toes but... I think I can accept you dating the others."

"Are you sure?" He was saying yes? Stunned, I could only look up at him.

He smiled and leaned forward. His lips moved against mine, his hand moving to hold my neck. His thumb settled in front of my ear. I couldn't think as I parted my lips. He kissed me slowly, deliberately, as if time didn't matter. Only me and him. Slowly, the kiss grew softer. He pulled back a little, leaving small kisses on the corner of my lip. Then my cheekbone. Followed closely by my forehead.

When he smiled down at me, I couldn't quite think... or breathe. I needed to breathe, right?

"I'm sure."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him tight as my eyes filled. Even if none of the others agreed, Miles and Ethan had.

"Angel." He pulled back and met my eyes again. "Have you really thought about this? Truly imagined what dating all of us would be like?"

My hands dropped from his shoulders as I turned back to cooking pancakes. "I've tried to. But some things are bugging me."

"What are they? I can't help if I don't know."

I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip. "Actually, I think I want to talk to Ethan about this one."

He smiled. "Alright."

I went back to cooking while I tried to process his answer. He wanted to try... I thought it would take a miracle to convince one of the guys let alone two. It didn't seem real.

By the time the others got up, breakfast was almost done. All that was left was the eggs.

Asher came back into the campsite with sweat running down his face. "You didn't have to make breakfast again, Ally."

I smiled up at him over my shoulder. "I was salvaging what Miles almost destroyed."

The others chuckled.

"I think I've finally given up on trying to cook," Miles said from his chair.

The twins clapped with enthusiasm. I laughed as I poured the eggs onto the griddle.

"About time." Asher started pouring coffee for himself.

Zeke strode into the campsite with a frown already on his face. I moved the eggs around.

"What the hell, Lexie?" Zeke scowled at me as he stopped at the table we were using as a counter. "Lexie, get a hoodie on, you're fucking... It's cold out here!"

My face burned as I looked down. Oh shit... I was putting down the spatula when the sound of breaking ceramic stopped me. I turned back to Asher who was bracing his arms on the other table. His head hung as he took slow deep breaths.

"Ash?" I reached up and touched his shoulder.

He jerked as if I had shocked him. "Don't touch me."

I dropped my hand as he continued to take deep breaths, his body radiating tension. The world was silent as we watched him struggle.

Zeke gestured for me to come toward him. I shook my head. I wasn't moving. Asher needed some normal today. Not people who were afraid of him.

"Sorry." Asher's voice was deeper than usual. "It's just going to get worse until..."

"Until you shift." I kept my voice matter of fact as I seasoned the eggs. "Astrid told me. Could you hand me a big plate, please?"

Asher took a couple of heartbeats but eventually grabbed a paper platter.

"Thank you." I started taking the eggs off the griddle and putting them on the platter. "Now, clean up your mess or no breakfast for you."

I set the platter down on the makeshift counter, picked up a clean mug and filled it with coffee. When I turned back, he was looking at me with a look of disbelief on his face. I handed him the mug then the paper towels. "Hurry up, I want to see if you can out eat Zeke now."

The others chuckled as they relaxed.

"I want to see that too." Isaac got out of his chair and headed toward us.

"I have twenty on Asher winning." Ethan followed his brother.

While the guys started taking bets, Asher kept looking at me as if he couldn't believe what he saw. I smiled up at him and winked before going to get my hoodie on.

In the end, Asher barely out ate Zeke by one sausage link. Isaac pulled out his wallet and paid his twin. Ethan gloated. Zeke just shook his head. It was a normal morning.

* * *

Isaac

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'm doing this. Sighing, I walked up the shore toward Danielle who was simply sitting in the sand and watching the water. That black shadow was moving over her face again, darker than before. If we were wrong, then I was going to look like a nut case. Oh, fuck it.

I sat down next to Danielle in the sand.

She eyed me. "What do you want?"

"To talk." I made a point to keep my eyes on the water.

"About what?" She turned back to look at the water.

"Why you're sitting alone on the shore, sad." I took a shot.

She looked down at the sand between her toes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's a beautiful day. But instead of swimming or having fun, you're sitting here being miserable." I turned back to the water and watched her fidget with her fingers out of the corner of my eye.

"Why the hell would I talk to you about it?" She stared down at her knees.

"Because sometimes it's easier than telling your friends or family how deep into a hole you've gotten." I took a shot in the dark.

"How could you tell?" she whispered.

"I've been there myself." Holy shit, Lexie and Evie were right.

"It's just..." She sighed. "Nothing I do is ever enough. If I get straight As, it's why didn't you win the student council president election. If I get second place in the four-hundred-meter sprint, it's why didn't I get first?" Her eyes grew wide as she slapped her hand over her mouth.

"That's fucked up." I shook my head. "Want to talk about it?"

She hesitated for several heartbeats. Eventually, she met my gaze and nodded slowly.

Lexie

I was in the middle of sketching in my chair when Ethan came out of the guys' tent.

"Where'd they go?" Ethan sat down with his notebook in the chair beside me.

"Jet skis." I smiled. "They want to keep Asher moving today to keep his mind off tomorrow."

He opened his notebook as he shook his head.

"What are you working on?" I tried to peek at his notebook.

His cheeks darkened. "Something."

I perked up. "What kind of something.?"

He sighed and handed me the notebook. It was the rough draft of a poem.

I smiled. "I didn't know you wrote poetry."

"Yeah, it's not something I really advertise." His cheeks grew even darker.

"I love my book by the way." I leaned over and kissed him quickly while no one was around. "Thank you." Hades turned to me and started barking.

"You're welcome." Ethan frowned at the dog.

"Hades? What's wrong?" Why was he barking at me...? A loud horn blew, rattling me down to my bones. My heart dropped. No...

"Lexie?"

"The Veil." It was all the explanation I had time for. I closed my eyes and dropped. I hit the grass and rolled to my feet. Then I smelled the smoke. Rage coursed through me as I spotted the black billowing cloud. Running, I dropped my barriers and pulled the energy from the Veil. By the time I spotted the intruder, I was ready to kill.

A black robed figure was surrounded by scorched earth and flames. Oh, no, you don't! I pulled more energy and threw a ball of ice. It hit in the center and spread out to smother the flames. The figure turned toward me with fire in its hand. I hit it with a lightning blast that shot it off its feet and back a good ten feet. I didn't stop running. As easy as swiping at a fly, I

changed the Veil. Rain poured down in torrents, soaking everything. Then I lowered the temperature. The Veil became an instant blizzard.

I skidded to a stop on the ice with a focus I'd never felt before. "You. Do you have any idea what you've done?" I watched the black figure with its hand of fire in the sea of white. I stalked closer, changing my clothing to white camo as I moved, pulling the hood over my hair. "You've put the entire world at risk! For what? A little extra energy? A little extra power?" I shook my head as I pulled the weather back. The blizzard faded to almost nothing. The Veil was covered in ice and snow. And silent. As if even it was holding its breath. The cloaked figure turned to me, fire still crawling over its hand. I filled my hand with lightning. "Did you think this place wasn't protected?"

The figure seemed to be considering its options; it really didn't have many. I threw another lightning bolt, it managed to dive out of the way in the last second. Only I hadn't stayed put. I ran toward it, conjuring a sword on the run. So when it dodged, I was already there slicing at it, keeping the figure on the move. It dropped backward to the ground, out of the path of my blade. It somersaulted backward to its knees then threw a ball of fire. I took the hit to my hip before I could shield, it knocked me to my knee. Hissing, I brought my blade up just as its newly conjured blade came down. The clang of metal on metal echoed across the Veil. There was nothing there. No face, only shadows. Whoever this was, was hiding...

I smiled, and it wasn't my nice one. I pulled energy, changed it and threw it up at the intruder. The wall of force sent it flipping back away from me and the center of the Veil. I strode through the frosted grass and snow, refusing to take my eyes off that black figure.

Another fireball came at me. I threw my shield up in time but I was blasted back off my feet by a wall of force. Pain shot through me as the ground knocked the air out of me. I struggled to get to my feet. A boot came out of nowhere and hit my stomach, I immediately wanted to puke. Instead I tried to roll away. A blade came down toward my face. Instinctively, I brought my blade up and blocked. The black figure's face was covered except for its eyes. Everything else was shadows. That's fine, I didn't need to know who this was to kick its ass. Shoving its blade away, I rolled to my feet and I brought my sword up to face it as my hood fell back.

It hesitated.

"Do you even understand what you've done? The repercussions? People are dead because of you!" I went after it. Blades clashed, punches were thrown, kicks dodged. We went after each other. The stench of burnt skin and ozone filled the Veil. Blood splashed across the snow as I caught it along the side. It dropped to the snow, its arm going to its ribs.

Wiping the blood from the corner of my lips, I limped over to the figure as it struggled to its knees. I reached down and grabbed the cloth. Suddenly, the figure shimmered and disappeared. I was left with a handful of nothing. I screamed in frustration. Then groaned from the bruises that seemed to cover me. I closed my eyes and pulled myself out.

I opened my eyes to a body that hated me. Gasping, pain rolled over me. "Fuck!" The coppery taste of blood covered my tongue. Everything hurt.

"Lexie?" Ethan's worried face came into focus.

"I hate that fucker." I sat up and bent in half at the aching hell running over me.

"What the fuck happened?" Ethan's arms wrapped around my back and under my knees. He lifted me out of the chair and against his chest.

I whimpered. "The Veil was attacked again."

He carried me into my tent and gently set me down in my bed.

I cringed and rolled onto my side. "Shit!"

"You're bleeding."

"I remember burns..." I shook my head as I tried to focus.

"Stay put while I get the first aid kit." Ethan left my tent while I tried to breathe through the pain around my stomach. Fucking hell... The fucker *had* to hit me in the stomach...

Ethan was back with the first aid kit. He set it down, tore it open and looked up at me.

"Let me get the bleeding to stop." Ethan poured something that burned over my bicep. I gritted my teeth then cursed. Eventually, the burning eased as the rest of my pain pulled back a little too sharp throbbing aches.

When he was done bandaging my arm, he looked down at me. "You said burns."

"My hip." I reached down and shoved the side of my shorts down along with my R2D2 panties until my hip showed. From the left hip bone to the curve of my hip was deep pink and irritated. I stopped moving simply because it hurt so much.

Ethan started cleaning the burn and spread a cooling ointment over it. "Any more?"

I shook my head. "The rest are bruises."

"Stay awake for me, okay?" Ethan's hand brushed the hair out of my face. An odd muscle in his jaw twitched.

"No problem." I was in too much pain to fall asleep.

Ethan left the tent. Hades came inside and curled up around my head with his body. He put his head on my shoulder pressing against the side of my face.

I reached up and scratched his ears. "I'm okay, baby."

He licked my shoulder and settled back down.

"Just get back here." Ethan hung up his phone as he climbed back into my tent with a bowl of plastic bags filled with ice. He knelt down next to my bed and set the bowl down. "Here, where are the bruises?"

I pulled my shirt up to show my stomach. Ethan cursed as he set an icepack on my stomach. I grabbed one to press against my face.

Ethan grabbed the last one and carefully set it on the burn on my hip. "What happened?"

"Whoever closed the Veil went back." My head pounded. "They tried to burn it up again."

"Tell me you kicked some ass."

I smiled. "Oh, yeah. All over the place."

"Did you get a good look at him or her or it?" Ethan shifted to sit beside my sleeping bag.

I shook my head. "It had a mask or something on. When I went to tear it off, it left the Veil."

Ethan shook his head as he examined my face. "It punched you?"

"Rattled my teeth, yeah." Hopefully, the headache would go away soon. "Is there anything for a headache in that kit?"

Ethan opened the kit again and handed me a small packet. "I'll get you some water."

"Thanks." While he was gone I ran over everything again in my mind. Who the hell was that? I'd had my hands on the intruder. I was so fucking close...

Ethan came back and handed me a bottle of water. I took the pain killer and lay back down. Voices came closer.

"We need to find this fucker." A wave of exhaustion rolled over me.

"We will, Beautiful." Ethan took the water bottle from me and put the cap on it.

The tent flap was torn open, the zipper snapped, breaking it. Well, there goes this tent too.

Asher ducked into my tent. His eyes burning bright blue with silver mixed in. "Ally?"

"I'm okay." I was finally getting used to the pain. My eyes grew heavy. Ethan moved out of the way.

"What happened?" Asher dropped beside me, his hand brushing my hair from my forehead and pulling the icepack away. He cursed.

"Ethan will tell you, I'm going to pass out." I reached up and squeezed his hand. "I'm okay, I promise." I slipped under.

When I woke up the sun was at a different angle through the trees. It had to be around late afternoon. For the moment, I wasn't hurting. I knew that as soon as I moved, that was going to change.

"How're you feeling?" Louis' voice had me turning my head.

"Like I got in a fight." I carefully rolled to my side. Hades moved away from my head to lie down against my back.

He smiled. "Feel up to raising some dead today?"

I groaned.

He chuckled. "Did you raise anything last night?"

"No." I sighed. "Do I have to raise something every day?"

"Not if you're not raising something every night." He shook his head. "If you raise something at night then you need to raise that day."

I met his gaze. "For the rest of my life?"

He nodded.

"Joy," I muttered.

"That or roadkill will follow you home." His face told me he wasn't kidding.

"I hope I stick to squirrels."

"Lexie, I need you to understand how strong of a necro you are going to become." Louis' voice was dour. "I didn't get to this point until I was in my early twenties. You're just barely eighteen."

"How strong do you think I'm going to be?" I didn't want to ask but I needed to know.

He clenched and unclenched his jaw. "I think by the time you're in your mid-twenties... I think you'll be able to raise entire graveyards."

My heart dropped. "That's not frightening at all."

"I know. But you need to know 'cause I'm not going to be around forever." He gave me a sad smile.

Something about the way he said it had me forcing myself to sit up. "What?"

"Lexie, one of the reasons I came with Ranulf and Astrid, is because I want you to cross me over."

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CHAPTER 20

ou what?"

Louis met my gaze with calm eyes. "I need you to cross ne."

Stunned, all I could do was gape at him.

"What... what about your family? Juan? Everyone?" How could he want to leave them?

"They're alright." He shook his head. "The only person who can see me is Juan and he can't heal until I'm gone. I don't belong here anymore."

My mind went back to what he had said. Necros had a choice after moving on. "Are you going to become a Reaper?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"If you did... you'd be able to see your family. Right?" He'd be able to be with his wives, he'd be able to be there.

He shook his head. "That's not how it works. As a Reaper, you're in this strange dead but not dead state. It doesn't mean you can go back to your life."

"Seriously?" I couldn't imagine what that would be like. To be alive but not, to be able to see your family but not...

"My life is over, Lexie. My family needs to heal and move on. It's the way it's got to be."

My throat tight, I nodded. "Give me a couple of days?"

He smiled. "Thanks."

I pushed myself to my feet, groaning as my bruises objected, loudly. "Now, I'm starving." Hades hurried out the tent flap. The hanging, busted

tent flap. I shook my head and climbed out. The guys looked up from their spots at the fire ring. Asher was busy at the barbecue. "Hey, guys."

"Sit," Zeke barked from his chair.

Isaac got out of his chair so I could take it since it was closer. "Ease up, man."

I sat down in Isaac's chair. "So, how bad is it?"

Zeke got to his feet and headed for the picnic area. Oh, that must be bad...

Isaac sat on the fire ring. "Not bad, you don't have a black eye but you do have a good bruise on your jaw."

"Your stomach is pretty colorful," Ethan added.

"Well, that fucker will be hurting just as much if not more." It was a small comfort but one all the same. Something slammed behind us. Everyone turned. Asher was taking deep breaths again. Zeke was beside him looking just as pissed.

"Time for a run." Zeke tossed a bag of ice to Isaac.

Asher nodded and pushed away from the table. "You can't keep up."

"I wasn't talking to you." Zeke turned and headed for the road.

Asher pulled his shirt off and followed. Isaac handed me the ice bag.

I held it to my face. "I guess it's not that pretty, huh?"

"It's not only about you." Miles leaned forward in his chair.

"I know." I met his gaze. "We never talked about it, but Asher took you to the site. Did you find anything new?"

Miles nodded. "Well, I know what the set up was. The left side with the tank was rigged to create condensation. Basically, it would turn any gas into a liquid. It was attached to a distillation station. Where whatever it was, was condensed down."

"So, not drugs?" Is that what he was saying?

Miles nodded. "Not drugs or alcohol."

"Then what the hell were they doing?" Isaac got to his feet and sat in an empty chair.

"We need to find out what that triangle thing was. That'll tell us what they were doing." I tried to my feet and failed.

"What do you need?" Ethan demanded as he watched me.

The bruises convinced me it wasn't worth it. "Something to munch on, I'm starving."

Ethan got to his feet and headed into the kitchen. "Are we sure this has anything to do with ghosts? The markings could mean nothing."

I shrugged. "All I know, is there is only one ghost around here and he said that there were rumors of ghosts disappearing in that ravine."

Ethan brought me back a bag of chips. I smiled gratefully before stuffing a few in my mouth.

"So, it could be nothing?" Isaac asked. Ethan winked at me before going back to his chair and sitting down.

I swallowed my bite before asking, "What else do we have to go on?"

Miles turned to Isaac. "She's right."

"We need to find who did this. Or at least figure out what they're doing." I ate another chip.

Miles nodded then met my eyes. "There's something I need to talk to you guys about."

That didn't sound good. "Okay, what did I do?"

The twins chuckled.

Miles didn't. He held my gaze, his expression serious. "Zeke already knows about this, but Asher doesn't." He turned to the twins. "And with the way Asher is reacting to anything regarding Lexie, I think it's best we don't tell him until he's back home."

Isaac's and Ethan's smiles disappeared.

"That doesn't sound good." I closed the bag of chips, my appetite gone.

"It's not." Miles cleared his throat. "The day we came out here, I went downstairs and found my father in the house."

The twins cursed.

My jaw dropped. "What happened?"

Miles began tapping his fingers along his thigh. "He wanted to talk. During the conversation, he mentioned you."

"He knows about her?" Isaac leaned forward in his chair.

Miles nodded. "He knows your name and where you live. So, he might have someone following you."

Anger sparked in my chest. "Why?"

"It's his usual motive." Miles' voice grew colder. "He always needs to know everything about everyone in our lives."

"Do you think he'll do something?" I struggled not to yell. Another fucking asshole following me... Yeah, that's fucking great.

Miles met my eyes. "I don't know. But I know him being interested is not a good sign."

"So, what the hell do we do?" And how big of a threat will he be? I took several slow deep breaths to keep the panic in my stomach from rising.

"For now, you need to be aware of people and cars around you," Miles explained. "I put someone on it before we left, so we should know if you're being followed by the time we get home."

I nodded as I simmered. "Okay, you take care of that and keep me in the loop. I'll try to take care of the fucker who closed the Veil."

"I can help with that too." Miles assured me. "At the moment all we can do is wait on the problem of my father. In the meantime, I can hire more graduate students to do more research."

"Miles-"

"I know. You don't want me to spend money on you." Miles smiled. "But we need to find the person who did this and stop them."

I hated to admit it, but he was right. "Alright. You have a point."

"So, when we get home, how are we going to find this guy?" Ethan asked.

I thought about it. "I think we need to start looking around town and out in the woods for more of those set ups."

"Sounds like a plan." Ethan scratched his arm

"Well, since we are all checking in right now, I talked to Danielle." Isaac turned to me.

"How'd that go?" I rested my chin on my hand.

"We were right," Isaac said. "She's suicidal. Or at the very least on the road to it."

I nodded.

"Okay, I'm lost." Ethan turned to each of us.

"You're not alone." Miles pushed up his glasses.

Isaac quickly explained what he had seen and Evelyn's theory. "And that's what's going on."

"You didn't tell me you saw anything." Ethan watched his brother carefully as his hand clenched into a fist.

Isaac shrugged. "I thought I was going nuts. And we've had more important things going on."

Ethan's eyes stormed. "You're my brother. There's nothing that is more important than that."

Isaac met Ethan's gaze. "That's not what I meant-"
"Let's go for a walk." Ethan got to his feet as he spun his rings.

* * *

Isaac

I FOLLOWED Ethan out of camp and onto the trails. His shoulders were rigid as we walked further away from camp.

"I can't fucking believe we have to have this fucking conversation again." Ethan turned on me, furious. "You agreed to tell me if shit is going on!"

"I didn't know what was going on." I shrugged. "I thought I was going nuts."

"All the more reason to tell me." His eyes narrowed on mine. "We talked about this in New Orleans. We need to be there for each other! We need to trust each other!"

I eyed him. His hands shook slightly, his eyes were storming, the muscles in his forearms stood out as he clenched his fists... "What are you not telling me?"

The blood drained from his face.

Oh yeah, he was fucking hiding something. "'Fess up."

He swallowed hard. "I... I didn't know anything was wrong."

"But something is wrong?" I stepped closer to him.

"Ranulf told me yesterday after I ran off as a distraction for Zeke." He let out a deep breath. "He says I'm not completely human anymore."

My blood turned cold. "What do you mean, you're not human?"

He shrugged, his eyes filling. "I don't know. He doesn't know what I am. He's gotta talk to the other gargoyles."

Fucking shit. "Brother..."

He shook his head. "It looks like the witches did something to me. Changed me. We don't know what but..."

No. I wasn't going to lose him too! I grabbed and pulled him against me and held him as tight as I could. As if I could keep all this from happening now... Ethan... My eyes burned as a weight began crushing my chest.

He hugged me back, and took a shaky breath. "It could be good..."

It could but the chances... I pulled back but kept my hand on the back of his neck. "Why didn't you tell us?"

He lifted his head to meet my eyes. "It happened in New Orleans."

"Yeah?" That wasn't a good enough reason...

He shook his head slightly. "Asher was bitten in New Orleans."

If he didn't fucking answer me, I was going to kill him. "Brother..."

"We were in New Orleans because of Lexie." He spelled it out for me.

"Oh, fuck." She would blame herself just like she probably already was with Asher.

He shook his head. "I can't do that to her right now. She might be able to handle one of us changing... Not two of us."

"Three," I muttered. "I'm seeing shit no one else can now."

He held his hands out to his sides. "See?"

Shit. He had a good point but... "Why did you tell me?"

He hesitated. "I need you to watch me. Look for anything out of the ordinary. Aggression, mood changes, weird behavior... anything."

Fuck... "Well, yeah. But we're going to have to tell the others at some point. We're working on our communication, remember?"

"I know. But there's nothing to tell them right now." He twirled his rings. "I just want to give her some time to adjust."

"And for you to adjust." He wasn't fooling me. This was... fucking insane.

He nodded. "Yeah. And to get some time to figure out what the hell I am now."

"Wait. The full moon is tomorrow." This wasn't good. "What if you're a shifter?"

He shook his head. "Ranulf said I didn't smell like a shifter."

"At least we know that. Anything else?"

He cringed. "I haven't had my pain meds in a month."

My brain stalled out. "A month?"

"Yeah. And I carried Lexie into her tent after that fucker went after her in the Veil."

My eyebrows shot up. He hadn't been able to lift more than his book bag for years. "Are you fucking with me?"

"I wish," he huffed. "I also pulled a dyno the other day. Four feet from hand hold to hand hold."

My jaw dropped. "So, your back isn't a problem anymore...."

He snorted. "No, Ranulf suspects that I'm healing and that my strength and agility are better, but we've got a whole fucking mess of other problems now."

"What the hell are we going to do?"

* * *

Lexie

IT was after dinner and Asher wasn't back from his run yet. The twins had kept dinner simple. Hot dogs, chips and salad. Miles had gone for his evening swim with Isaac for company while I sat with Hades and roasted marshmallows with Ethan. I stared at the fire, not really paying attention. Tonight we were going to have another family meeting, to talk about how dating would work if I dated all of them.

Dating. All of them. At the same time. Miles wanted me to think about what my concerns would be about it. Besides the guys staying friends, there was only one thing... I watched as Ethan popped a piece of chocolate into his mouth. Well, there was only one way to know the answer... "Snoopy?"

Ethan got to his feet and stretched. "Yeah, Beautiful?"

I hesitated. Come on, it's Ethan. "I've got to ask you something."

He came over and sat in the chair beside me. "Ask away."

"You know how we're talking about me dating everyone?"

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "Yeah?"

"If we do this, and its works, eventually sex will become a factor." I don't know why but it was easy talking to Ethan about this.

"Yeah?" He raised an eyebrow.

"If I date everyone then this is going to be a... different set up." I swallowed hard. "You know I don't care what people think of me."

His eyes narrowed on me. "Except the people you care about."

I nodded. "If we even get that far, if I did end up sleeping with all of you... Would your opinion of me change?"

He grinned. "Are you asking me if I'll think you're a slut?"

I shrugged. "I was gonna to say easy."

He smiled a big smile. "Look who you're asking, Beautiful."

I snorted. "I know. But with guys there isn't a huge stigma. Hell, I just stepped on campus and Jessica started calling me a slut."

"Yeah, I know." His eyes were warm as they met mine. "My opinion of you will never change, Lexie. You're amazing. And that's all I'll ever think."

Relief almost left me limp but that wasn't the entire problem... "You know the guys better than me. Do you think..."

His face filled with understanding. "You think the guys opinions would change."

I nodded. "I don't want to think it."

"You're going to have to ask them." His voice was soft.

"Ask us what?" Asher and Zeke walked into the campsite, both drenched in sweat.

My face burned. "Um, nothing."

Ethan shot me a look before looking across the fire ring to them. "Lexie is wondering if her being physical with all of us would change our opinions of her."

The silence was deafening. Only the crickets told me that time hadn't stopped. Ethan turned back to me, grinning.

"You're a dead man." I was going to kill him.

"If it's worrying you enough to ask me about it, then you need an answer from everyone," Ethan said.

I shook my head. "You're still dead."

"What did my brother do?" Isaac and Miles walked into camp using their towels to dry off.

My face caught fire as Zeke and Asher stood in stunned silence while Ethan repeated himself.

"Oh." Isaac's cheeks turned pink.

Miles' ears quickly followed. "Are you actually worried about this?"

I met Miles' eyes and nodded. "Yeah, it's... been on my mind."

"Then we should talk about it." Miles looked at the others before moving to a chair.

The others followed suit.

"You guys don't have to." I looked down at the fire to avoid looking at them. "I know I'm just being stupid and insecure."

"It bothered you enough to ask." Isaac set his towel down in his chair before sitting down.

"What exactly are you worrying about?" Miles continued to dry his hair as Zeke and Asher sat in their chairs.

I looked at each of them and said fuck it. "Alright, here it is. If we all do end up dating, time goes by and things become physical... Will the way you guys think of me change? Will you think I'm easy or-"

"Fucking son of a-" Zeke bit off whatever else he was going to say.

Isaac took a deep drink of water.

"You never care what people think of you." Zeke clenched and unclenched his fists on his thighs. "Why would you care now?"

"I care what the people who matter to me think of me. Everyone else could go fuck themselves." How the hell could I explain this? "I need some outside perspectives here, because half of me is telling me that is exactly what I'd be. But the other half of me is saying fuck what everyone thinks and trust my own judgement." I shrugged. "I don't know what's right or wrong in this situation."

The tension was thick enough to taste.

"I'll go first." Miles met my eyes. "I've already thought about how this part of the relationships would play out. But I never thought that you were worried that how we think of you would change."

"Like I said, I know I'm being stupid-"

"You're not." Ethan's voice was sharp. "It's a valid question. There's a huge social stigma on any girl who sleeps with several guys. And you deserve to know what we'd think ahead of time."

I sent him a thankful smile.

"My opinion of you wouldn't change." Miles brought my attention back to him. "It never would have."

"Thanks, Miles." I sent him a smile then turned to the others.

"I don't think it would. I mean, you have a big heart, Red." Isaac shrugged. "You... you don't sleep around..." His face turned dark red.

"Thanks, Cookie Monster."

Asher sighed. "My opinion of you wouldn't change, Ally. Something tells me it should but... I know you. You value yourself."

"Thanks, Ash." My throat was tight as I turned to Zeke.

Zeke's face was blank as stone. He shook his head.

"No, your opinion wouldn't change? Or no, you're not answering the question?" Miles asked.

Zeke's eyes met mine. "No." He got to his feet and started toward his tent. Everyone was silent until he was out of earshot.

"He didn't clarify." Miles pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I got my answer." Zeke's opinion wouldn't change but he was done with this conversation. Hell, we were lucky he stuck around for it with the others here. He was just a private guy.

"How?" Isaac turned to me.

"I speak Zeke." I shrugged.

The guys chuckled.

"Lexie, I have a follow up question." Miles leaned forward, his ears already red. "When the time comes, whenever the... physical aspect of the relationships advance. Do you think you could...?" His face turned beet red. "Trust us enough to... enjoy yourself without worrying that our opinions of you would change?"

"Fuck, Miles." Ethan shook his head smiling.

"Wow, that was hard for you to say." I couldn't help but smile as his face began to cool off.

"It would have been easier if it was one on one but it still needed to be asked." He met my eyes again. "Because if you won't trust us with you in that way, then this will never work."

He was right. It came down to trust. Did I trust the guys enough to not think of me as less? Why did it always come down to trust and communication? I sucked at it. I bit back a groan. I racked my brain trying to think of a reason I should or shouldn't do this. It could work or it could be a disaster. I could lose everyone or I could keep everyone and be happy. It was pretty much fifty-fifty at this point. Wait... happy. I closed my eyes. Happiness isn't going to going to arrive on your doorstep, you're going to have to bust your ass for it. Well, this would be busting my ass... But it wasn't.... Forget normal. Throw normal out the window. Well, shit.

I opened my eyes and met his. "Yeah, I think I can."

The smile that spread across his face was the best smile I'd ever seen from him.

"Do you feel better?" Asher asked.

I nodded. "Sorry to put everyone through that."

"It's communication. We've been needing to work on it," Miles reminded me. "Let's get cleaned up and we'll start the family meeting after."

"This wasn't the meeting?" Isaac asked.

The others chuckled.

"Nope." I smiled at him. "We've only just begun the awkward conversations."

I didn't realize how right I was until after Zeke and Asher took their showers and came back to the fire ring.

Miles got to his feet and looked at all of us. "We need to talk about how it would work if all of us were to be in relationships with Lexie. At the same time."

Crickets were the only reply.

My head started pounding, the guys weren't going to make this easier. "How would it work day to day?"

Miles started tapping his fingers against his thigh. "We'd all hang out as usual during the day and school. Homework together as usual. It'd be hanging out after that would change."

"So, until after homework, nothing would change?" I asked simply because the guys weren't asking questions.

Miles nodded. "Right. No touching in front of each other like we've already agreed. Just like usual. Then if it was Isaac's date night, they'd go hang out or we'd leave. Then the next day it's someone else."

"Guys?" I looked at each of them. "Any questions? Concerns?"

"No one's going to go for this," Zeke announced. "So, there's no reason to even ask questions."

It was like a blade to the heart. Was he really this against it? I didn't even know what to say. I looked down at the fire while trying to keep control. If Zeke wasn't going to even consider... There was no point. Hades put his head in my lap. I focused on running my fingers through his fur. I took several deep breaths as the silence stretched.

"I'm thinking about it." Ethan's voice alone wasn't enough to make me lift my head.

But Miles' voice agreeing with him, was. "I am as well."

"I don't even know where to start," Isaac sighed.

"Zeke, I know it's not normal." I met his eyes and was honest with myself for the first time about this. "Everything I've been taught, and everything I know is telling me this is wrong. That it's not the way it should be."

His face softened. "Then why do it?"

"Because it doesn't feel wrong." I spread my hand over my chest. "In my heart, it feels right. It feels like... us. All of us. It..." I didn't know how to explain it. "It fits. Like a piece in a puzzle. This weird, crazy, strange piece... Just fits."

"It would never work," Zeke repeated.

"Give us an example of why, Zeke." Miles started tapping his leg. "And we can work through it."

"If Zeke isn't even willing to consider it..." I turned to Miles. "There's no point. I won't date anyone." That's it. It was done. I swallowed through my tight throat and got to my feet. "I'm going to take Hades for a walk." I started toward the lake with Hades trotting beside me. And tried to remember how to breathe.

* * *

Ethan

RAGE BOILED through me as Lexie walked away from the camp. She was hurting when she left, there was no doubt in my mind.

When she was out of earshot, I glared at Zeke. "Well, thanks for taking all of two seconds to make this big of a decision for all of us."

Zeke's eyes narrowed as he turned to me. "No one was going to agree with it to begin with."

"I was." My voice was boiling and furious. "You never even considered it. Did you?"

"I'm not going to pass Lexie around," Zeke bit out.

"For fucks sake!" Isaac snapped. "That's not what we're talking about!"

"She's not going to choose this." Zeke surged to his feet.

"She already has!" Miles got to his feet too. "And you need to face that."

Oh, shit... Miles yelled! Zeke took slow deep breaths.

I got to my feet and walked up behind Miles. "Maybe the question shouldn't be, if we can all do this. Maybe it should be, does it have to be *all* of us?"

Miles turned to me. "As in?"

"If Zeke doesn't want to date her as a group but the rest of us do, maybe that's the way it should be?" I met Zeke's gaze. "'Cause I'll be damned if I'm going to lose her because you're a prude."

Zeke surged toward me. Miles tried to stop him but got knocked to the side. Isaac stepped between us and was knocked back into me. I don't know how, but I twisted around as I fell, my hands going out to catch myself. One hand right onto a white-hot ember covered log. Adrenaline shot through me, I jerked my hand away expecting agony. Only there wasn't any. I looked down at my hand in shock as shouts about a fire erupted. The guys scrambled to put it out. My hand glowed as if I was holding it over a strong light. My veins stood out but so did... Under my skin, a glove of scales glowed brightly from my fingertips down to my wrist where it faded away. My blood pounded in my ears as the glow began to fade just as quickly as it had appeared. Icy cold water poured over me, jolting me back to reality.

Isaac and Zeke pulled me off the fire ring to the ground.

"Ethan!"

"Are you burned?" Zeke barked.

I curled my fist and shook my head. Zeke face was pale, his eyes wild, a cold sweat had broken out on his forehead.

"No, no, I caught myself on the ring." The lie slipped out easily enough. I got to my feet and looked up at the giant. "I shouldn't have gone after you like that, man. I'm sorry."

Zeke shook his head, still pale as hell. "It doesn't matter, I shouldn't have fucking pushed you guys."

Asher eyed me. "Are you sure you're alright? Your shirt caught fire."

I looked down. Sure enough, the sleeve of my shirt was burnt. I hadn't even noticed... "Yeah, I'm fine."

Miles shook his head. "Zeke, take another run or a swim to cool off. Take some time alone. Do whatever you have to, then come back and talk to me."

Zeke's eyes were haunted as he headed back toward his tent. Probably to change.

Miles turned to me when he was out of earshot. "You can *never* say that to him again."

"What?" Why would that... "Oh, fuck."

Miles nodded. "It's a trigger."

"Prude?" I had to be sure.

Miles nodded, his eyes cold.

Guilt and rage hit me hard, bile rose in my throat. I sat down on the ring and tried not to be sick.

"Anyway, I don't think Lexie will go for dating only those who agree." Miles changed the subject. "It'd be too much like choosing for her."

I sighed. I didn't care at the moment. "Should someone be with Zeke right now?"

Miles shook his head. "He's not having a flashback, otherwise he wouldn't have stopped when he pushed you. He needs some time to settle."

"Should we get Red?" Isaac shifted on his feet.

Miles thought about it then shook his head. "If he needed her, he'd have gone after her."

I shook my head. "This really is a clusterfuck."

"We have one more day before we make a decision," Miles reminded us. "Let's take some time."

Time. Yeah, that's easy to say. I looked around the campsite. "Where the hell is Asher?"

Miles scratched the back of his head. "He might have needed another run."

"Everyone should take some time to cool off." Miles started walking back toward the lake. Isaac sighed and headed for the tent.

I sat down and looked over the overturned chairs. Who knew that figuring out group dating would be the easy part of my life. I glanced back down at my hand and flexed it. What the hell am I now?

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CHAPTER 21

AUGUST 23RD

hand on my shoulder brought me to the surface. "Lexie."

I opened my eyes and looked up to find Zeke in my tent kneeling beside my bed.

"Want to go fishing?" He smirked down at me.

I nodded and started trying to get out of my bed. Zeke reached down and held out his hand. Still half asleep, I said fuck it and took his hand. He pulled me up quickly. Where was Hades? I held on to Zeke's hand as I shuffled my feet while trying to wake up. "Coffee?"

"I'm making it now." He let go. "Put on some layers."

I nodded with half closed eyes, and grabbed my clothes as he left. I threw on jeans, a bra, shirt, sneakers and Zeke's hoodie. When I stumbled outside, Zeke handed me a hot thermal mug and a toasted bagel with cream cheese. I took a sip. Oh... heaven. Zeke led me to the water where a metal fishing boat with an outboard motor was on the sand. His gear was already neatly loaded in. The sky was streaked with pinks, purples and oranges. The sun was just starting to come up.

"Take the seat in the middle." Zeke took my arm to help steady me as I climbed in. The boat had to be sixteen feet long, with a mostly wide-open middle and storage everywhere. Three cushioned seats were inside. I found a cup holder next to my seat, put my travel mug there and sat down. Zeke pushed the boat back off the sand and walked it out until the water hit his knees. He climbed in and sat down in the seat next to the outboard motors.

I looked down at my seat and how high I was in the boat. "Do I need a seatbelt?"

He smiled. "No." He started the motor and began to steer us out onto the water. I ate my bagel as he drove.

When he turned off the engine we were in a wooded cove. Birds started chirping and the world seemed to still be waking up. Zeke didn't move. I turned in my seat to watch him look around at the trees. The tension in his shoulders melted away. His face relaxed, his perpetually grumpy face fading away. He seemed... relaxed.

I didn't want to ruin it. Tonight was the full moon. Asher was going to shift. I started bouncing my knee as I chewed on the corner of my lower lip.

Zeke's gaze snapped to my bouncing then to my lips. "Stop thinking about it." He got to his feet and started moving around the boat. I held on to the seat as the boat rocked with his movement.

Feeling the chill, I pulled my hoodie closed as Zeke pulled gear out of hidey holes. "Stop thinking about what?"

"About tonight." He pulled his tackle box out of a compartment. "We can worry tonight. There's nothing we can do right now."

Maybe he was right... "You do know I haven't gone fishing since I was eleven, right?"

Zeke came back toward the middle. The boat moved. I grabbed on to the seat without thought.

"Why is that?" Zeke sat down in the seat across from mine.

Hoping I'd get used to how the boat moved, I let go of the seat. "It was the last time I went camping with my dad before he died."

Zeke paused getting gear to look at me. "You didn't have to come if you didn't want to."

I smiled. He really was a sweetie. "I do. I'm just warning you that you're going to have to do a lot of teaching."

His lips twitched as he went back to going through his tackle box. He went to the side to pull the poles off the stand on the inside of the boat. The boat rocked.

"And I've never been on a boat," I muttered as I hung on again.

He handed me a pole, then sat down again. "It takes some getting used to." He set a pole against the side of the boat and turned around in the seat in front of me. "What do you remember?"

"I remember that you have to flip the metal thingy to cast then you flip it back to stop the line." I stopped because his face was turning red from trying not to laugh. "Fuck you."

He cracked and started laughing a big belly laugh.

"Asshole." My face burned. "I was eleven!"

He shook his head. "The metal thingy..."

"Shut up." I crossed my arms over my chest and looked around the cove.

"Sorry, but that was the most girly thing I've ever heard you say." He finally stopped laughing. "Okay, what kind of fishing do you want to do?"

I thought back over what I remembered. "I always liked the bobber, I kept losing Dad's lures on stuff underwater."

"Bobber it is." He bent over and reached into his tackle box. He pulled out the red and white bobber. "Do you remember how to put it on your line?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Give me the damn thing."

He chuckled as he handed me the bobber and pole. "We're in around eight feet."

I flipped the metal thingy on the reel and carefully pulled a little line before flipping it back. I went to the line end and attached the bobber near the top. Then I went blank. "And that is all I remember."

"Grab the hook end." Zeke leaned down and pulled a couple of little metal balls out. He got his Leatherman out and turned it into pliers while I carefully held the hook in one hand and the line in the other.

"These are weights," he explained as he showed me the balls of metal that actually had a space to grab onto the line. He used the pliers to pinch the weight closed and did the same to the next one. He tossed his Leatherman into the tackle box and pulled out a plastic little tub. He opened the lid and showed me that it was full of dirt. "Grab a worm."

I hesitated.

"Don't tell me you're squeamish." He looked at me as if he'd never seen me before.

"I always used the plastic ones," I admitted. "I didn't like the idea of hurting the worm."

He bit back a smile as his eyes grew warmer. "Don't worry, they don't feel pain. Their nervous systems aren't complex enough."

"Really?" I perked up. "Then why the hell do they wiggle?"

He smirked. "Well, they've got a piece of metal through them. Wouldn't you?"

I snorted.

"They wiggle around on reflex. There was actually a study in Norway on it when they thought about banning the use of worms for fishing." He reached into the dirt and pulled out a worm. "This is how you do this." I watched as he speared the worm and slid it up the hook then speared it again.

He held it up the hook and dropped it over the edge of the boat. "You remember how to cast?"

I nodded.

"Cast away." He reached into his tackle box as I turned my seat to face the side. I pulled my arm back, flipped the metal thingy, and cast. Once the bobber hit the water around ten feet out, I flipped the metal bar again.

"Nice." Zeke went back to setting up his own lure.

I leaned back, braced my feet up on the edge of the boat and took a sip of my coffee. "So, you woke up this morning and wanted to take me fishing?"

"I was planning on it all week." He glanced at me before tying his lure. "I spent the week fishing from the shore, finding several good spots."

I thought about it. "Ah, I see."

He chuckled. "How was your birthday?"

"Best one I had in years." I shrugged. "No one's remembered it for years. It became just another day until you guys showed up."

"You did nothing with your mom?" He got to his feet and cast out his line.

"Not after my dad died." I pulled on my pole. "She didn't call me a demon child as much on my birthday."

Zeke cursed under his breath as he slowly reeled his lure in.

"Well, you don't really like celebrating your birthday either." I pointed out before taking a sip of coffee.

"That's for a different kind of reason." His voice was quiet in the early morning silence.

"Sorry." I watched my bobber float on the surface of the water.

"It's okay." He shrugged as he pulled his lure from the water. "It's just a fact."

"Still doesn't mean that I like that you went through it." I took another drink of coffee.

"What do you want to know?" He cast again.

I turned to him. "What?"

He started to slowly reel his lure back in. "What do you want to know?"

My heart clenched as he straightened his shoulders as if bracing himself to answer. But that's not what I wanted. "What do you feel comfortable telling me?"

He looked down at me and met my eyes. The corner of his lips lifted as he turned back to the water. "You always do that."

"Do what?"

He shook his head. "You always know when I don't really want to talk about it."

I smiled to myself. "Well, you do kind of stiffen up, and look ready to kill someone. It's not that hard to figure it out."

He chuckled. "I guess you're right."

"Like I told you days ago." I met his gaze. "You'll tell me when you're ready."

We fished in silence for several minutes. The birds started chirping, some fish started jumping as the sun rose higher.

"It was my dad." Zeke's voice was harsh.

"What was?" I watched my bobber bob.

"My back." He pulled his lure in and cast it again. "Any time my mom had to visit Sylvie or her parents, he'd keep me home to make sure she'd come back."

"Zeke, you don't have to tell me." My voice was quiet even over the water lapping at the hull.

He shook his head. "You already saw my back, you might as well know."

"Only if you want me to. Otherwise, it's none of my business." I didn't want him to tell me because he felt like he owed me an explanation. No one owed anyone their past.

His eyes ran over my face before he started reeling his lure in again. "Cigars, cigarettes, he'd be pissed off all day. Eventually he'd drag me into the living room and force me to sit still while he burned my back. Over and over."

My throat grew tight as my heart ached. His voice was emotionless and matter of fact. And it just made my chest hurt more. The picture of Zeke as a kid filled my mind. That fucking asshole...

"And when he got bored with that, he'd pull out the pocket knife." He cast again with more force than necessary.

Tears ran down my face. "How long?"

"Once a month, since I was four until he died." He shrugged.

My heart took a hit. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry, Zeke."

He continued to reel in his line. "It was what it was."

I tried to wipe my face without him noticing. But of course, it didn't work.

"Lexie..." His gruff voice let me know I'd been caught.

"A bug got in my eye." I gave him the first excuse I could think of.

He set his pole down and squatted down beside my chair. He turned my chair around and brushed my hair off my face. When my eyes met his, I knew I couldn't pull it off. I sat up and wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in the crook of his neck.

One of his arms moved around my lower back. The other ran up my back, his hand holding the back of my head. "I didn't tell you to make you cry."

"I know. I'm sorry," I whispered, holding him tighter.

"I'm okay, Baby." His voice was the soft deep one that I loved.

"I know." I pulled back and wiped my face again. "So, that's why you always swim with a shirt on?"

He sat back in his seat, his knees resting on the outside of my thighs. "Yeah."

"You usually sleep shirtless, don't you?"

He nodded.

"Are you upset that I saw your back?" I whispered.

His eyes met mine. My heart thumped from the warmth there. "No. I thought I would be."

"You looked mad."

"I was pissed about what you'd think. That you'd think I was a victim or some shit. That you'd start treating me differently." He let out an agitated breath and ran his hand through his hair. "I know it's not pretty..."

"Zeke... Turn around."

His eyes shot back to mine. "What?"

"Turn around. If I'm going to tell you what I think, I need to see." My voice was calm as my face grew warm while I bit back a smile. "I was a bit distracted last time."

He didn't move. I met his eyes and waited for him to decide if he was going to trust me. I simply waited. The morning was still and quiet. Even the birds had stopped chirping as I waited. His eyes were dark with shadows as he made his decision. He turned around. The vinyl squeaked as he settled his weight again. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs. His shoulders were rigid, his body radiating tension. I waited several heartbeats before I touched the middle of his back. He jumped then stayed put, he took deep breaths as I ran my hand up and down his back in a soothing motion.

"It's just me," I reminded him softly.

"Yeah, it's just *you*," he rasped. "No one but the guys and Sylvie have seen my back."

"Do you want to know what I think?"

He swallowed hard. "Are you going to tell the truth?"

"Yeah." I kept my voice soft and low.

He thought it over again then nodded.

My fingers went to his lower back. I took the hem of his shirt and slowly pulled it up his back. Giving him more than enough time to change his mind. Without looking at his skin, I lifted his shirt up to his shoulder blades. If I was going to tell him what I thought, I'd need to see all of it. I took a breath and looked at his scars.

The round ones were everywhere, some had scarred up, and some had created dips. His back was a series of hills and valleys of burn scars. Interspaced over his muscles were wide, thick, short lines of scars. Almost as if his dad had been drawing the grooves on diamond plate metal sheeting.

"Can I touch your back?" I whispered, my heart in my throat.

He nodded slowly.

I reached up and ran one fingertip over a knife scar. The rigid skin had obviously stretched as he grew, making the scar thicker and longer. My heart ached. Everything he'd been through...

He waited, tense as a guitar string.

"You're right. It's not pretty." I trailed my fingertips gently over several of his burn scars in the middle of his back. "But not because they're on you. It's because they show all the fucked-up shit you've been through. Shit that never should have happened. It makes my heart hurt to know you went through that."

His shoulders rose and fell with his slow deep breaths.

My eyes filled. "That's why they're ugly." I ran my fingertips down his spine. "But you're not a victim, Zeke. You survived. And not just physically. You made it through all of that and came out as the gentlest, and most protective man I've ever met." I pressed a kiss between his shoulder blades on a particularly bad burn scar. "You're a survivor. And because of that, in an odd, twisted way... they're kind of beautiful." I lowered his shirt back down. Then wrapped my arms around his waist, pressed my cheek against his back and held him tight. "Because if you didn't have them, you wouldn't be here."

His big hand shook as he covered both of mine on his stomach and squeezed my hands. I held him until his breathing stopped shaking. Until his grip loosened on my hands. I kissed his back again, let go and sat up.

Needing a distraction, I looked out at the water. "Oh, fuck! My bobber's under water." I grabbed my pole which, amazingly, hadn't gone overboard and started reeling it in.

"How long was it under?" Zeke picked up his pliers and set them on his leg.

"How the hell should I know?" I grabbed the line and lifted the fish out of the water. It wasn't huge which was fine. An odd blend of yellow and gold scales covered its body.

"That's a perch. You see the dorsal fin, those are spines." He reached out and flattened the back fin down to its back. The fish wiggled and flopped around in his hand making me jump. "Now, take the pliers and get the hook out."

The fish kept gasping for air. "Uh, Zeke? Can you get this one? He's been out of the water too long, I don't want to kill him."

He bit back a smile as he grabbed the pliers and showed me what he was talking about. It wasn't actually as hard as I thought it would be. When he got the hook out, he tossed the fish back into the water.

"It's going to live, right?" I turned back to look up at him.

He smiled down at me with a big smile. One with teeth. Those were still rare. "Yeah, it wasn't in his gill so he'll be okay."

"What?" What was he looking at?

He just shook his head and picked up his pole.

Isaac

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, SCALES?"

Ethan gestured wildly. "I mean exactly what it sounds like. Scales like a fucking snake only bigger."

Hades brushed against my leg as we turned the bend in the trail. All I had wanted was a nice hike. Hell, Hades even wanted to come this morning. Then my brother had poked his head out of the tent.

I couldn't wrap my head around it. "You landed right on a log?"

He nodded, his face a little paler. "And not one fucking burn on me."

I shook my head. "Could it have been something in the fire in New Orleans?"

Ethan shot me a look. "I'm pretty sure it has something to do with that fucking crap the witches kept pumping into me."

"Yeah, that does seem more likely." I threw the stick in my hand up the trail. Hades ran after it.

"But I don't feel any different." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "My back is better, that's it." Hades ran back toward us.

"Maybe we should get a doctor to look at you?" I took the stick from Hades and threw it again. "That might get us some answers."

"Yeah, until someone tells someone else and I end up being dissected in a lab somewhere." He ran his hand through his hair. His anxiety practically vibrated off him.

"What about Miles' doc?" I tried again.

"No. No doctors." He shoved his hand into his pocket again as Hades ran back. "We should talk about all of us dating Lexie."

"I don't want to talk about it." I threw the stick again.

"We have to." Ethan kept in step with me. "We both fell for the same girl. We have only one day left and there's a decision to be made."

"I'm not going to make it with you." I didn't even want to think about it right now. Hades came back and gave the stick to Ethan.

"Which way are you leaning?" He threw the stick for Hades again.

I shook my head. Which way was there to lean? All of us dating her was crazy. "I'm surprised she didn't pick you."

He stopped walking. "I told her to pick you."

I stopped and turned back to him. What... "Why would you do that?"

He smirked. "Because you deserve someone like her. Someone who will appreciate you, and call you on your bullshit.'

I snorted. Red would do that without a problem. But... "You've never loved a girl before. Why would you step aside for me?"

"Because at the end of the day, you're my brother." Ethan moved to a large log at the side of the trail and sat down. "I want you to be happy."

"Then why are you trying to get me to agree to Miles' crazy idea?" It made no sense.

Ethan sighed. "Because she's not going to choose. And I won't get a chance to be with her in any other way." The resignation in his voice killed me. It was like he was giving up.

"She could still pick..." I sat beside him on the log. Though, from what Asher said the other day, there was no way for her to choose.

"She won't." He picked up a stick and broke it in half. "She can't."

"Fuck." I set my elbows on my knees and buried my face in my hands. "I can't even imagine how that would fucking work."

"I couldn't either." He took the stick from Hades and threw it again. "Then I talked to Miles and asked questions. When something worried me, I asked him and he said we'd have to work together to come up with a solution."

"You can't predict all the problems ahead of time." I repeated one of the things Miles used to say.

He nodded.

"Do you really love her?" I had to know...

"Yeah." Ethan tossed the stick across the trail. "More than I ever thought I could love anyone but you, Ma and Sophie."

Oh, shit. I tried to imagine it. All of us. Dating her. Kissing her... "I don't understand how it would work and I fucking don't want to ask Miles."

"Ask me." Ethan bumped my shoulder. Hades hustled back to us and sat down. Apparently he was done playing fetch.

I could ask him, I guess. Ethan sucked at keeping a secret, but when it was mine he usually kept his mouth shut. "So, she'd be your girlfriend one day, and mine the next." I tried to wrap my head around it.

"Not really." His eyes unfocused. "Your relationship wouldn't end, you just wouldn't hang out with her on one of the other guys' nights. At least, that's how I understood it."

I shook my head. "I'm not into group sex."

"How would you know? You've never had sex." Ethan smiled.

I drove my elbow into his side.

He chuckled. "That is so far down the road from where we are that we don't need to worry about it. Besides, do you think Lexie could ever do that?"

Lexie was rather old fashioned about some things. She didn't show a lot of skin, she didn't dress to look sexy, she was simply herself. "I don't know. But there's a fucking ick factor, man. You're my brother."

Ethan sighed. "Yeah. I've been avoiding thinking about that. You'll kiss my girlfriend, and I'd kiss yours..." He shook his head.

My stomach rolled. "I can't fucking watch that."

"What if you and I agree, no kissing Lexie on the lips in front of each other?" He took the stick from Hades. "And we just never talk about it?"

"Isn't this fucking wrong?" I popped my knuckles out of frustration. "Or something."

"If everyone agrees, then how could it be wrong?" Ethan countered.

Okay, he had me there... "Even if everyone agrees... Zeke's a possessive asshole."

Ethan chuckled. "And you're not?"

I shot him a look.

He shook his head. "If this happens, it's not going to be easy. Everyone will have to work hard to deal with their shit. Including Zeke."

"That'll be fun." I surged to my feet and started pacing. "What about Asher? He's already gotten worse than Zeke."

Ethan shook his head. "He's one of our best friends and he has had his world thrown upside down and out the door. It's going to take him time to get used to everything."

I dug my hands into my scalp and looked out into the trees. What it came down to was Ethan. He told her to pick me... My brother had never loved a girl before and he had been willing to give her up for me... Fuck. I growled to myself. Was I really thinking of doing this? "This is crazy."

"Yeah, but when have we ever been sane?"

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CHAPTER 22

LEXIE

t was just after midmorning when we got back. Zeke put the bow of the boat on the sand while the others spotted us.

"I want that hoodie back," Zeke warned.

I snorted. "Keep wishing, pal." I hopped out and shot him a smile over my shoulder. I so wasn't giving it back. He shook his head as his lips twitched. I stuck my tongue out at him and hurried back to camp.

Asher and the twins were on their way toward the lake in their board shorts.

"Hey, can one of you guys follow Zeke to the boat rental place? He needs a ride back," I called with a smile. It'd give me time to hide his hoodie in my bag.

"Yeah, I'll follow him on the jet ski." Isaac snickered.

Oh, God. Zeke on a jet ski with Isaac? Zeke will kill him. I shook my head as I headed toward the camp.

"I don't want anything to do with it." Miles' voice was so icy it stopped me in my tracks. Miles was in the picnic area, leaning against one of the tables with his back to me. "You have your answer and it's not going to change."

I leaned down and gave Hades some love from his spot in my tent doorway. The big lug was lying half out and half in the tent.

"I'm not relaying anything." Miles pushed away from the table, turned and spotted me. "No, if you want to get her a message call her attorney." His face was strained as he listened to, I was guessing, his dad. I smiled before going into my tent.

Miles' voice was quieter as I changed into my shorts and tank top. When I stepped back outside of my tent, he was putting his phone in his pocket and walking toward his tent.

"Miles?"

"Louis said he'd stop by tomorrow, he figured you had enough on your plate today." He tapped his leg as he walked toward his tent.

"Miles?"

He stopped at the tent flap.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm alright." He sent over his shoulder before going inside.

Alright? He wasn't alright. Having enough, I strode across the campsite and jerked the flap open.

Miles looked up at me from his sleeping bag. "Lexie? What-?"

"Did you think I'd never notice?" I snapped.

His eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "Um..."

I stopped in front of him. "You use alright like I use fine. It's your 'I'm really not okay' saying. At least, it has been lately."

"Lexie-"

"You want me to tell you everything when you won't even tell me the truth about how you're doing." I shook my head. "You don't talk to anyone. You're there for everyone but you don't let us be there for you."

His eyes were on the tent floor as he tapped his thumb on his knuckles.

I dropped to my knees on the floor and made him look at me. His emerald eyes were cold, but once he focused on me they grew warm again.

"Nemo, I know you were talking to your dad." I swallowed hard. "I'm not asking what you talked about, it's none of my business. I'm just asking you to tell me how you're feeling."

He licked his lips and took a breath. "I don't know how."

I sat back on my butt and crossed my legs under me. "How'd you talk with Autumn about this stuff?"

He met my gaze. "I don't know. I just did."

Oh, shit. "Miles. We're talking to the guys tomorrow and asking them to... go into a situation that requires a shit ton of communication. What were you going to do then?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I was more worried about everyone else."

I reached up and took his hand. "Sweetie, start small. Tell me how you're feeling after talking to your dad."

He looked at me.

"Miles." I tilted my head to the side. "You got in a fist fight with Asher. You need to talk to someone."

His mouth moved again but nothing came out. He started tapping faster.

This isn't going to work... I tried to think of when we'd talked and I got to my feet. I pulled him to his feet and out of his tent.

"Lexie, where are we going?" he asked as I led him to my tent. Hades was gone, though it wasn't surprising. The little booger had been running off to swim without his humans the last couple of days.

I opened the flap. "Get in, and lie down."

Still tapping that rhythm against his leg he went inside. I left the flap open for the breeze and followed him inside. He sat awkwardly at the foot of my bed.

I picked up my book, moved my pillow and sat down across the width of the bed. "Lie down." Reaching over, I pulled my glasses out of the pocket. He was watching me as if I'd lost my mind. "Lie. Down."

He sighed and finally moved. He started to lie down the length of the bed.

"Head on my lap."

He hesitated, then lay down and carefully set his head on my leg. I opened Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, slipped my glasses on and began to read out loud.

Miles relaxed against me halfway through the first chapter. With the breeze through the door, and the quiet, it was relaxing.

When I turned the page for chapter three, he sighed. "Why'd you pick Frankenstein?"

"I was reading it last night." I ran my fingers through his wavy hair that had just started to curl again. I started reading out loud again as my fingers continued playing with his hair.

It was around chapter four that he finally relaxed enough. "I hate him, Lexie."

I set the book down and continued playing with his hair. "That's understandable."

"I got access to my trust fund when I turned eighteen." He sighed. "One that had nothing to do with him. My mother made it completely mine, her name isn't even on it."

I didn't say anything, I just kept moving my fingers through his hair.

"He just found out about it when he realized I wasn't using the other trust fund that he had control of." He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "He wants to join them together."

"He wants to give you more money?" That didn't sound right. "With strings attached I imagine..."

"It's not just money, Angel. It's businesses. Specifically, the main company. The shipping business. He wants to add it to my trust fund."

"Why would he do that?" Wasn't the guy an asshole?

Miles shrugged. "Whenever he's offered me something, it always comes with a price. One I'm never willing to pay."

I ran my fingers over his scalp. "What do you want to do?"

He sighed. "I want to ignore him. I don't want the business and I don't want to talk to him."

"Is there any reason you have to?" I asked as I watched the trees dance in the breeze through the mesh ceiling of the tent.

"No, not that I know of."

My fingers brushed his forehead. "Does it bother you to talk to him?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He reached up, took my hand and rested it on his chest. "I don't like getting angry, Angel. I don't like how it makes me feel."

"And he makes you angry," I said softly.

He nodded as he squeezed my fingers.

"If there is nothing you need to say, then you don't have to talk to him." I stroked my fingers over his chest.

"Why does that feel wrong?" he asked, his voice soft.

"Because we're constantly told to respect our parents even if they don't deserve it," I answered.

He moved off me and lay beside me. "That was a quick answer."

I sighed as I shifted and turned to lie on my side facing him. "I've had a lot of time to think about it."

His fingers found mine. "I'm not used to sharing anything with anyone."

"You're always taking care of everyone else." I reached over and touched his chin. "So, sometimes, maybe you can let me take care of you?"

He struggled with the idea but eventually, he sighed. "I can try."

"Do or do not. There is no try." I used my best Yoda impression.

He burst out laughing. I smiled as I watched him laugh.

When he calmed down, his eyes were warm as they met mine. He reached over and brushed a curl out of my face. "Alright. I'll let you take care of me. But it'll be an adjustment."

I grinned. "I'll be sure to remind you, often."

He leaned in and kissed me softly. My heart raced as I relaxed into his kiss. Something moved the flap. Miles pulled back just as Hades' tongue got my cheek.

"Oh, Hades!" I turned my head in time to be licked on the other cheek.

"Hades." Miles chuckled as Hades shook his wet fur. Water flew off him and over everything in my tent.

"You little shit!" Hades ran back outside and started to roll in the dirt. "You are so sleeping outside."

* * *

Asher

Most of the day went by in a blur. The guys spent most of the day keeping me busy and my mind off tonight. It even worked for a while.

Energy slid over my skin and down my spine. I lifted my head as Astrid and Ranulf stepped into the light of the fire ring. Her eyes glowed in the light, shining with several different colors just like an animal.

Something inside me moved.

Astrid didn't say anything, she pointed her chin at the trail off to the west and started that way.

My heart pounded as silence fell around the fire. I had to go. Was this really fucking happening? My eyes met Ally's, her eyes already filling. She blinked them back and tried to give me a hopeful smile.

I looked at each of my best friends. Zeke and his worried face. Miles and his calm eyes. Isaac and Ethan... well, those two seemed to be pissed. I needed to go.

I got to my feet. So did they. I snorted. "You guys can't come." But they wanted to, every one of them.

Isaac came toward me and hugged me.

My throat tightened as I patted his back.

When he pulled back, he smirked up at me. "We'll go shopping for your collar tomorrow."

I snorted just like he hoped.

Ethan came forward and hugged me too. "I think you became a wolf just so you can run around naked in the woods."

I chuckled again, my throat loosening.

Miles came over and looked up at me. "Do you want to talk before you go?"

I smiled and shook my head. There was nothing to talk about.

Zeke met my eyes. "A new set of rules."

I nodded. "A new set of rules."

Ally walked around the others and headed for the trail head. I left the guys and went to stop her. But she stopped as soon as she was out of normal hearing distance and looked up at me.

I stopped, making sure to block the guys' view of her.

"It's just change," I reminded her.

She blinked quickly, pushing the tears back and nodded. Then she smiled for me. "I wish I could go with you."

I stepped closer and took a deep breath of rosemary. "You're always with me, Ally."

She pulled Zeke's hoodie around her and rubbed the fabric between her fingers. "You're too sweet for your own good."

My eyes ran over the hoodie. Something about it bugged me... It should be me wrapped around her, giving her comfort. Making her feel better. Not Zeke. Not caring that the guys were there, I pulled her into a hug. She buried her nose in my neck and took a deep breath as her hands balled in my shirt. I held her small figure tightly as I buried my nose in her hair. When I was ready, I pressed my cheek to her hair near her ear. "There's a pair of Daffy Duck flannels in my bag."

Her chuckle was a bit shaky. "You know you'll never get them back."

I lifted my head and met her eyes. "I don't want them back."

Her eyes finally overfilled, tears ran down her cheeks. "Don't worry about me. Tonight, I need you to take care of you. Do what's best for you."

I went to tell her I was fine but when more tears fell down her face, I couldn't. It wasn't much that she was asking. And she was right. I nodded.

She gave me a real smile.

"Does that mean you're not taking Daffy?" I asked, poking at her.

She scowled at me. "Are you kidding? As soon as your foot hits that trail, I'm going for your bag."

I chuckled. Her tears stopped falling. I leaned down and kissed her temple. "I'll see you in the morning." I stepped around her and started down the trail to where Astrid was waiting. Ally didn't move until I turned the corner.

Heart pounding, and that weird feeling was back in my stomach. Hot chills ran up my spine and over my skin. "So, what happens now?"

"Now, we get away from the humans," Astrid explained as she began to jog. I matched her pace, which was most people's sprint.

We ran over two miles before she slowed to a walk. She stopped in a clearing that let the moonlight stream down to the forest floor. My skin began to itch.

"This is a good spot." She turned and eyed me. "It shouldn't be too long. You might want to strip down."

I scowled at her. "What? Why?" Was she serious?

"When you shift into a werewolf, every bone in your body will break and reknit. And if they don't do it right the first time, they'll break again," she explained. "Clothes mess up the process."

Shit. Dread was a rock in my gut. "It's going to hurt. Isn't it?"

She nodded. "The first time does because it takes the longest. Your body is trying to find its way into this form. So, yes. It hurts."

"You didn't say anything before." I scratched the back of my neck.

Her eyes followed my hand to my neck. "You would have dwelled on it all day. Just trust me, the shorter the notice the better." She met my eyes. "If I were you, I'd strip down now."

I looked down at my hand to find I'd drawn blood. Son of a... That thing inside me moved again, knocking the air from my lungs. Hunching over as if hit in the gut, I took several deep breaths as nausea rolled through me. My skin was too tight... I pulled off my shirt and dropped it to the ground.

"Listen to me, this can take hours if you fight it." Astrid moved to the side as I struggled to shove my mesh shorts down my hips.

Something cracked, pain had me on my hands and knees in the grass. My skin broke out into a sweat as I tried to breathe. That thing inside me

was moving, getting bigger and bigger. My insides ached, burned. I'd never felt anything like it...

"If you let the pain roll over you, accept that it's there, then it'll be a lot shorter." She knelt down at my side. Muscles knotted and unknotted.

My muscles spasmed, making me cry out. "Shit!" My mouth burned, my face ached. Heat built inside me, growing hotter and hotter with every heartbeat.

Muscles tore with a meaty sound, bones in my legs snapped. I screamed as agony rolled over me. Sweat poured off me in streams. I gasped for breath. Wave after wave of pain and heat ran up my legs. My fingers dug into the grass as blood ran down my arms. The inferno built higher and higher. Until I was sure I was on fire.

"You're fighting," Astrid snapped. "Let go, Asher. You'll still be you."

But would I really? Every muscle I had tightened, bones snapped like twigs. A tsunami of soul crushing agony slammed down on me. I barely lifted my head enough to throw up everything inside me. Over and over. My tendons stretched and finally tore. The bones in my forearm bent and bowed in front of my eyes before snapping. I screamed as the broken white pieces of bone showed through the red meat of my skin. I clenched my eyes shut as I jerked. Something was pushing against my skin, every inch of it.

Pressure built in my spine until I wanted to scream, only I could barely breathe through the crushing weight around my chest.

"Think of something peaceful. Think of home or your favorite place, and relax your body." Astrid tried again.

That grinding sensation of bone on bone ran down my spine, sending me screaming against the ground. Something peaceful? I could barely think of my name! Something in my ribcage finally broke, giving me some relief in my chest. Peaceful... Miles' house... the family room... everyone playing a board game. Isaac and Ethan trying to cheat... Zeke catching them and lecturing... Miles watching with an odd small smile on his face... Jess.... I was fading, something was shoving me out of the way. I tried to hold on.

"Go with it, Asher," Astrid repeated. "You will still be you."

Ally came into the room and sat down beside me. Her big green eyes looking up at me. Ally... a convulsion had black spots dancing across my vision. Blood soaked the grass under me. Ally... the guys... Jess... Mom... I couldn't take it anymore... I let go a bit more.

My pulse pounded in my ears, making the world dark then light again. My wolf took shape in front of me, like a ghost running toward me in the dark. Enormous. Most of his fur was white, turning grayer as it rose over his ribs. Blazing blue and silver streaked eyes met mine. My eyes watered, the bones in my face fractured. My jaw elongated as my blood filled my mouth. Still he ran toward me. Guys... Ally... Jess...

"Accept him, Asher or you'll never have control." Astrid ordered. The torture went on and on. More bones snapped, more tendons tore. My vision grew darker. My wolf kept coming closer.

"Accept him!"

Ally... I let go. Anything to make it stop... I fell through the agony as the wolf hit the surface. Everything I was exploded.

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CHAPTER 23

LEXIE

howl echoed across the lake. Another responded. I let out the breath I'd been holding. The night fell silent again as I watched the light of the full moon bounce off the water.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and held them to my chest. It had been hours since they walked down the trail.

After his back disappeared, I had gone straight to the guys' tent and pulled on Asher's blue Daffy duck pajama bottoms. When I came back out, no one said anything. I had sat down in the sand without a word. The others had come over and joined me. No one had said a word.

"He must have finished shifting," Miles said in a quiet voice.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Guilt hit me like a semi truck. "We never should have gone to New Orleans."

"We can't change the past," Zeke muttered under his breath.

"I know." I took another deep breath as we fell back into silence. Eventually, Miles brought me a blanket from their tent. I wrapped it around me and refused to move from the shore.

It was a long, endless night. Sitting. Waiting. Worrying.

After an eternity, the sky lightened and the sun began to rise, everyone could breathe easier. It was another hour before Astrid and Ranulf walked up the trail.

I bolted to my feet and ran to them. "Where is he?"

Astrid's eyes were tired when she looked over my head as the others reached us. "Actually, he's going to be pretty out of it and on the defensive. I think Lexie will be fine but only her. I'll come back and bring one of you out with me when he's going to wake up."

I held my blanket closed and followed Astrid down the trail.

When we were out of earshot I had to ask. "How'd it go?"

"He did pretty well, it only took him forty minutes to shift." She looked down at me. "Which is good. The first time is hell."

"How'd he'd do on the run?" My stomach was in knots as we moved through the woods.

"Not bad, he had some control issues which is expected. But he wasn't easy to guide away from the camp."

"What does that mean?" Was it good? Bad?

"It means his wolf kept trying to get to your camp." She stopped walking and met my eyes. "All night, we got maybe three miles away from camp. He wouldn't go any further than that."

"Is that normal?" Shouldn't he be running into the woods? "That's where we were, we're his family."

"His human family. His wolf hasn't met you guys yet." She eyed me. "Under some circumstances, it's normal. But I'll need to talk with him and see what he remembers to know for sure." She started walking again. "We'll need to leave this afternoon."

"Today was our last day anyway," I muttered, my heart aching.

She led me off the trail and deeper into the trees. Eventually, Asher came into sight. He was lying face down next to a log in the long grass. Naked. Those hard muscular lines of his body were covered in dried blood and dirt. Scrapes were everywhere, and packed with grime. Long stings of... I don't know what, were pasted to his skin in the muck. I pulled off my blanket and covered him to his shoulders. Worried, I moved to his head and sat down. His face was pale, the bags under his eyes were dark.

Carefully, I ran my fingers through his hair. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, he's just exhausted from shifting."

"Why's he covered in blood?" I looked up at her, my heart clenching.

"It's part of shifting. Your body basically breaks and heals repeatedly." She met my eyes. "Don't worry, it's all his."

"Yeah, 'cause that's not worrying," I muttered.

I leaned back against the log and continued to run my fingers through his hair. He made a quiet barely there groan. Still out cold, he reached over and touched my thigh with the back of his fingers.

"He'll be in pain when he wakes up. He'll feel like he got the shit kicked out of him, but he'll be okay." Astrid tilted her head to the side and

eyed us. "I'll bring one of the others out around the time he'll wake up."

"Thanks, Astrid." I couldn't take my eyes off him.

"You're welcome." She walked back into the trees.

The sun rose slowly, showing the scrapes on his face. Birds started chirping. A breeze ran through the grass. It was probably pretty, but I refused to take my eyes off Asher.

His hand shifted in the grass. He whimpered in pain, the sound like a dagger to my heart. "Ally..." he croaked.

I ran my fingers through his hair again. "I'm here."

His fingers moved, searching for mine.

I took his hand in mine and held on tight. "It's morning. Astrid says you're going to be okay." My throat tightened as my eyes burned. Not now. You can freak later, right now it's about him.

"Hurts." His voice was a dry, barely audible rasp.

"She said you'd be hurting." I kept my voice soft and soothing. My chest grew tight.

He groaned, his fingers tightening on mine. "Ally..."

"Yeah?"

"Stay with me..."

"I'm not going anywhere." I moved my fingers through his hair again.

Time moved slowly. Asher groaned once in a while. He whimpered if he moved.

"How bad was it?" I couldn't stop myself. I had to know.

"Bad," he groaned. "I pissed myself..."

I squeezed his hand again. "That'll be our little secret." He squeezed my fingers back.

When at last he opened his eyes, I could finally breathe normally. "Shit..."

"What do you need?"

"It feels like I was dropped off a mountain," he groaned.

"I should have brought painkillers or something." Why didn't I think of that? Would it even work on him?

That feeling of being watched washed over me. I lifted my eyes and searched the area. Nothing. There was nothing...

Astrid and Zeke came through the trees.

His gaze focused solely on Asher. Astrid disappeared back into the trees as he came toward us.

Asher growled deep in his chest as his hand tightened on mine. Zeke stopped where he was and simply waited.

Eventually, Asher relaxed. "Sorry..."

"You good?" Zeke asked as if Asher hadn't just threatened him.

"Yeah. Just... move slow."

Zeke moved toward us slowly. "We have to get you back and cleaned up before someone sees you."

Asher barely nodded. "You might have to carry me."

Zeke shrugged. "Why do you think I came?"

My heart warmed as Zeke knelt down beside him. Asher groaned, let go of my hand and tried to push himself up. Asher cursed. Without a word, Zeke knelt down, put Asher's arm around his shoulders and helped him to stand up. Asher cried out as his face grew pale. Keeping my eyes on his upper body, I reached out and closed his blanket to cover him.

Asher reached down and held it closed so I could let go.

"You just flashed her, didn't you?" Zeke growled.

"Next time, we'll bring him shorts." I stepped back.

We started back through the trees and toward the trail. Zeke practically carried Asher, but let him keeping moving his feet through the grass.

"Next time you'll stay home." Zeke turned us onto the trail.

"Don't start." I shot him a look over Asher's head.

He sent me one back. "We'll talk about it later."

We were halfway back when Asher spoke up. "Whose blood?"

"Astrid said it was yours." I hated to tell him that but he had to know he didn't hurt anyone.

Asher nodded and seemed to become more alert.

"We'll get you cleaned up," Zeke promised.

The guys were waiting at the trail head when we turned the bend.

Isaac jogged toward us and took Asher's other side. "What happened?"

I moved out of the way. "He's okay, we just need to get him cleaned up before someone sees him covered in blood."

Miles and Ethan shared a look.

"It's his blood." I kept my voice light and matter of fact. As if one of our best friends didn't look like he'd been slaughtering innocents all night.

The others relaxed as we made our way to camp.

"Get him to the shower, I'll get him some clothes." Miles ran up the trail.

"He still can't stand," Zeke grunted.

"Then he'll need help," Isaac said as they picked up the pace.

"I'll take care of it," Ethan said as he fell back with me as the guys hustled Asher across our campsite.

"I'll make him breakfast, I guess?" I looked up at Ethan at a loss.

Ethan wrapped his arm around me. "He'll be okay."

"I'll make him something mushy." My voice was quiet.

Ethan kissed the top of my hair. "I've got him, Beautiful." Ethan headed off toward the shower. I went and made myself busy. Oatmeal. Oatmeal is good and easy on the stomach.

* * *

Asher

EVERYTHING FUCKING HURT. It was like I'd been hit by a semi and rolled over a hundred times. Ethan went into the shower as Zeke and Isaac helped me into the tarped off section of the shower. Ethan turned on the water and tested it.

"You're going to have to sit on the ground." Zeke moved me inside. "Or we can get a cooler?"

I shook my head. "Blood. The ground works."

Zeke and Isaac carefully set me down on the tarp covered ground. Ethan took the shower head off the mount and came over.

"We need to take off the blanket to get you clean, man." Isaac's hand squeezed my shoulder.

I nodded and let go.

Ethan moved the water over me, warming my chilled skin. "Have Miles grab his soap."

"Already did." Miles' voice came from behind me. "Do you need anything else?"

"Clothes?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah, sweats, a shirt and shoes." Miles shifted.

"Okay, I've got him from here." Ethan reached over, grabbed my bottle of soap and a wash cloth. "Asher? Can you hold the soap bottle?"

I blinked several times before I nodded.

He slipped the bottle into my hand. The plastic helped ground me in reality, helped bring me back to the present.

While Ethan wet my hair, I tried to remember what happened last night. Pain, lots of pain. And then... nothing. "I can't remember."

"That's alright, you don't have to." Ethan squatted down and started soaping up my hair. "Astrid told us you didn't hurt anyone."

I nodded. Good. That was good. I looked down at my hands. Blood and dirt were caked into my nails.

"Head back, man."

I tilted my head back. The morning light was shining through the trees. Birds twittered here and there. The world was fuzzy and out of focus. Ethan rinsed me off then began to soap up a wash cloth.

Ethan soaped up my hands and arms, rinsing every once in a while, to make sure the muck was coming off. I hissed as the end of my fingertips burned. What the hell? The sting brought everything back into sharper focus. Ethan finished washing my back.

He rinsed me off, cleaning scrapes I didn't know I had. "I'm... I'm better."

Ethan stopped. "You're sure?"

I nodded. "I... I think I was in shock."

"I can't imagine why." Ethan rinsed more soap off my back. "You just turned into a wolf, ran through the woods all night, then shifted back. You know, just a normal summer night."

I chuckled. Pain shot through me, making me groan. "Oh, don't make me laugh."

"Sorry." He handed me the wash cloth and kept the water running down my back. "Wash your chest and your junk 'cause I love you, man, but even I won't clean your front."

I cracked a smile as I took the stained pink soaped cloth from him. "What was your original plan?"

"I was going to spray a lot of water, squirt the soap bottle at ya, cover your junk with it and spray more water." He moved the water over my shoulder and chest then back to run down my back. I picked up my soap bottle and added more soap to the cloth.

"I'm glad you had a plan." I started washing, needing to get the nastiness off me. When I reached my legs, I pulled a long string of... tissue off my leg. Please, let it be tissue... I took several deep breaths and

continued washing. When I was done, Ethan handed me the shower head. I rinsed the rest of the gunk off me. When I finally felt clean I got to my feet. I stumbled. Ethan grabbed my arm to hold me up. I hung up the shower head and shut off the water.

Ethan put a towel over my shoulder. "I'll be outside. Call if you need help."

"Thanks, Ethan."

"That's what family is for." He left me alone.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to move. Ally had been the first thing I remembered... She had been worried. I needed to see her, make sure she was okay. My wolf woke up a little inside. I could see him in my head. Lying down, lifting his head to sniff the air... He half growled... Somehow, I knew he was all for seeing Ally. He lowered his head sleepily.

What the hell? I'd have to ask Astrid about it... I dried off, careful of all the sore muscles. It took a while but I managed to get my jeans and shirt on. When I went to pick up my shoes my body protested loudly. Fuck that. I left my shoes in the shower and started hobbling out.

"Lexie's got breakfast for you." Ethan went back into the shower. I made my way slowly to the campsite. The others were standing around the hammock, everyone but Ally...

They turned to me as I painfully stepped around the tree.

"How're you feeling?" Miles pushed up his glasses. My legs turned to rubber. I sat down on the hammock before I fell down.

"I think I just ran out of energy." I groaned as my body protested.

"Well, don't pass out yet." Zeke looked over the heads of the others.

Ally slipped between Miles and Isaac with a mug in her hand. My heart gave a hard thump. My wolf woke up enough to lift his head and pay attention. She smiled as she handed me the mug. "I don't think you'll be able to stay awake long so I only made a bit of oatmeal and added your protein powder to it." Those sweet eyes met mine.

I took the mug and smiled. She'd made it with chopped walnuts, raisins, vanilla and cinnamon. My favorite. "Thanks, Ally."

"We're going to let you get some sleep while we pack up camp." Miles put his hands in his pockets.

"I can help." I tried to get up but Ally simply pushed me a little and I fell back into the hammock groaning in pain.

"Nope, nap time for you." Ally decided, she turned to the others. "Leave my tent for last. I still have to put my stuff away."

The guys agreed and started back to camp.

Ally looked down at me. "Please eat?"

It took everything I had to finish half the mug before exhaustion set in.

She saw, took the mug from me and set it down on the ground. "Lie down."

I grabbed her hand and tugged her closer. "Only if you go with me."

She smiled. "Get in." I did as she said and leaned to provide counter balance. She got in next to me and sent us swinging. She rested her head on my shoulder and pressed against me just like the other night. A satisfied rumble vibrated my chest.

She looked up at me. "What was that?"

I thought about it. I hadn't meant to do that... Oh... my wolf had rolled over on his back and practically vibrated with happiness. "Just my wolf. He's happy."

She raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

I nodded.

She snuggled against me. "That'll take some getting used to."

"Yeah, it will." Rosemary filled my lungs as peace settled through me. "Stay."

"Until you fall asleep," she promised.

Darkness washed over me, and pulled me under.

* * *

Lexie

Asher went LIMP beside me. His breathing was deep and even. He was so exhausted. I stayed for a while, needing to feel that he was there and okay.

When I was sure he was asleep, I carefully climbed out of the hammock and headed toward camp to start getting my stuff packed. Louis was waiting for me at the fire ring. My chest grew tight as I met his gaze. There was nothing but peace in his eyes.

"Are you sure about this?" Please change your mind...

"Yeah. It's time," he said. "Uma has everything she needs to teach Juan, and when the time comes..."

"I'll fly out to help him learn how to raise and control the dead." I finished for him.

He gave me a grateful smile. "Thank you."

"Ready?" There was no point in drawing it out.

He looked around the group and at the trees.

"It was a pleasure, Louis," Miles said.

"It was fun." Isaac shrugged.

"We'll make sure to keep Juan out of trouble." Ethan thought about it. "Mostly."

"Thanks." Zeke met Louis' gaze. "For being there."

Louis gave all of them a smile. "I'm ready."

I summoned my will, wrapped that gold ribbon around his wrist and dropped.

We hit the grass of the Veil. I let him go as I straightened. The circle of scorched earth still made me clench my fists. Months of crossing souls and that fucker... Pushing it from my mind, I turned back to Louis.

His eyes were wide as he looked around. "So, this is the Veil."

"Yep. The walls are supposed to be clear but as you can see..." At least the fog had gotten lighter. That's progress at least.

"And what's that?" He looked up at the sky.

"That's the Way." I turned back to him. "It's how you move on."

He nodded.

"Louis." It was my last chance to say it. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come down to New Orleans. You'd still be alive; the Witch's Council wouldn't have attacked-"

"Lexie, stop." Louis shook his head. "None of this is your fault. The Witch's Council made their own choices. That's on them. You're not so powerful that it's all on you. People make their own choices."

I nodded. "I know but... your kids, and Uma, Savannah..."

A gentle smile spread across his face. "They're going to be okay. They'll heal and move on. The way it should be."

I nodded.

A ball of purple light came down out of the Way.

I hugged him as my eyes burned. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

He hugged me back. "It's up to you now."

Tears rolled down my face as I stepped back and let him go. "I'll be there for Juan."

He shook his head. "You need to catch this guy. And make sure he can't do anything like this again."

I nodded. "How could I stop anyone from doing it again?"

His lips pressed together. "Talk to Uma. Tell her what you need. She'll teach you."

A purple door appeared. It opened, showing Louis' kitchen at his house in New Orleans. A silver haired woman got to her feet and smiled. An elderly man folded a newspaper and turned toward the doorway. A smile blossomed over his face. A woman in her thirties with long dark hair and big brown eyes stepped away from the stove. She tore off her apron and rushed to the door. Tears fell down her cheeks as she smiled a huge smile.

"Rosalinda..." Louis' voice cracked. He ran through the door and lifted her into his arms. She held his face between her hands as she kissed him over and over. The door closed and turned back into a ball of purple light before shooting back up into the Way.

"Goodbye."

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CHAPTER 24

AUGUST 24TH

put my bag in the back of Miles' truck. Everything was packed up but the chairs. Asher was awake and moving around better than before. He was still in pain but he was moving better. I fiddled with the zipper on my bag.

"Lexie." Miles' voice jarred me back to reality.

I turned to him.

"The guys are waiting."

My stomach knotted. This was it... Dropping my voice until it was barely a whisper. "Are we doing the right thing?"

He moved closer. "We can't leave it like this."

I nodded. This was it. I followed Miles out from the back of the truck and to the almost empty campsite. The guys were sitting in their chairs, waiting. Chewing on the corner of my lower lip, I walked past them and took my chair.

Miles didn't sit down. "We all know why we're sitting here. It's time to make a decision."

The tension rose. Everyone made a point of not looking at each other. My chest grew tighter.

"Does Lexie date no one? Or does she date all of us?" Miles looked around the group. "We've talked about it the entire trip. Fought about it. Yelled at each other. But before we leave this site, we will make a decision."

Hades yawned loudly in the silence.

"I think the first question is, what does she want?" Zeke leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees.

Everyone turned to me. Oh, shit... I swallowed hard as my heart pounded. "I want to keep your friendships intact. I'll go with whatever choice will make that happen. But I am not going to choose."

"Then that's it." Zeke turned to the others, his eyes burning. "Because we're not going to fucking pass her around like she's-"

"Why the fuck do you think we would treat her that way?" Ethan barked, his eyes flashing. "You've known us since we were four. Have we ever done anything to make you think we'd treat a girl that way?"

Zeke thought about it. "No-"

"Then why the fuck would we start?" Ethan began to spin his rings. "Your faith in us is overwhelming, Zeke."

"Ethan." Miles tried to calm him down.

"How about you let us answer for ourselves instead of deciding for us?" Isaac surged to his feet, drawing everyone's attention. "There are four other guys here and everyone has their own relationship with her. Everyone has their own boundaries. Their own limits. You can't speak for all of us!"

"Calm down." Miles stepped forward getting everyone's attention again. "Zeke was simply saying, in his way, that us making her feel that way would be unacceptable." Miles turned and met Zeke's gaze. "Right?"

Zeke clenched and unclenched his jaw before he nodded. The knots in my stomach grew bigger.

"I could not date anyone," I rasped as I looked down at my fingers in my lap.

"Is that what you really want?" Asher's rough voice had me lifting my head to meet his eyes.

I couldn't lie about this. I shook my head.

"Then you need to tell us." Miles shifted on his feet.

I met Miles' gaze. He was right, I was tiptoeing over what I really wanted. It was selfish and asking of them way more than anyone ever should. But it's what I wanted... "I'd be happy with the group dating option." I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my thighs. "How do you guys feel about it?"

Thundering silence was my answer. My face burned but I refused to look away from them. This is what I wanted, I'll own it.

Miles sighed. "I'll go first." He turned to each of the guys as he spoke, making eye contact as he went. "Lexie pointed it out to me after the first meeting here, that I really hadn't thought about it myself. I was too busy

worrying about all of us. And when I started thinking about it, I thought I couldn't agree to all of us being with her. There was no way." He turned to Ethan. "Then I realized that Ethan shares something with Lexie that I don't." He turned to the group. "I don't understand art. But they do. Ethan understands that part of her that I don't. That I can't."

"You always did hate anything to do with art." Ethan shifted in his chair. Miles smiled. "Then I thought about the rest of you." He turned to each one. "Asher always sees the good in people. Isaac likes to push his boundaries and try new things. Zeke, she understands your rage better than any of us can."

My eyes stung.

"The fact is, that all of us share something unique with Lexie." He started tapping his thigh again. "And once I thought of it that way, then I realized I could work with the group dating option."

Heads snapped as they turned to Miles. Miles' ears tinted pink as he sat down. Zeke looked as if someone had hit him in the back of the head with a board. Silence fell.

Eventually, Ethan leaned forward, getting everyone's attention. "Look, I didn't have some epiphany. I just suck at relationships." He gestured to the others. "You guys have seen it."

They all agreed.

"And to be honest, I'd rather have part of her than none." Ethan met my gaze. A warm smile spread across my face.

"So, that's my vote." Ethan shrugged.

Asher shifted in his seat. "A couple of days ago, my life was normal. At least, I thought so." His eyes were unfocused on the ground. "At the beginning of the trip, I never would have even thought about this."

"What about today?" Miles watched him carefully.

"Today, I'm a werewolf who will be leaving town for a month." His eyes met mine. "I'm not normal. And that's going to be an adjustment. So, why should I have a normal relationship? I vote for group dating."

My pulse raced in my throat. Was this really happening? He changed his mind...

Isaac leaned forward and sighed. "This is crazy." He met my eyes. "I have huge issues and that's not surprising to any of you. I'm pretty sure I'm going to try to fuck everything up several times before I get the hang of

this. But... I'm willing to work on my shit." His eyes met mine. "If this is what it takes to make Lexie happy.... I'm in."

Zeke looked at all of them as if they had lost their minds. He got to his feet and met my eyes. "I need a word with you. Now."

Leaving Hades with the guys, I followed him down the trail all the way to the picnic bench.

He turned on me, his eyes glowing. "Tell me you're not going to fucking do this?"

I sighed. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because! You..." He ran his hand through his hair. His wild eyes met mine. "More than anything, I never want you to feel used. To feel like you're an object. I'd kill to keep that from happening. To be passed around..."

My heart ached. "Zeke." I stepped closer and pressed my hands against his chest. "Would they ever do that? They're our best friends. Would they *ever* do that?"

A muscled ticked in his jaw. "No. But that doesn't mean you won't feel that way."

"Now, the biggest question." I shook my head. "Would I *ever* let someone treat me that way? Put up with someone who made me feel that way?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No."

"So, what kind of situation are we really looking at?" I asked carefully.

"All of us dating you isn't going to happen." Zeke look me straight in the eyes.

"You really didn't even think about it. Did you?" My heart sunk as my stomach bottomed out.

He shook his head.

"You said you would." I stepped back from him. "The first night here, all of us talked about it and you agreed to think about it. Then yesterday."

"I didn't think you were crazy enough to try it." He ran his hand through his hair.

I couldn't believe him. A heavy weight filled my chest as I looked up at him. "Zeke, I care about all of you. How did you expect me to choose one of you?"

"Because that's how it's supposed to work." He gestured at nothing.

"Who says that's the way it's supposed to go?"

"Everyone!" His voice echoed off the trees.

I suddenly realized how tired I was. Tired of trying to be something I wasn't. Tired of pretending for everyone else. "Zeke. I'm not normal. I'm never going to be normal." My voice was quiet and steady. "And I'm trying to be okay with that. It sucks once in a while but not everything is puppies and rainbows all the time."

"I know," he said. "But if we did this, what do you think people are going to think?"

"What?" Who gave a fuck about other people and what they thought?

"Jessica has already trashed your reputation at school. If you start dating five guys at once, they're going to think she's right." He shook his head. "Last year was bad enough with the harassment toward you. Do you really want to go through another year of that and worse?"

"That's why you wanted me to choose?" My voice grew louder and sharper. "Because you're worried about what other people will think of me?"

"Lexie." He stepped closer. "I don't give a fuck what people think. But I do give a fuck about how they treat you. This is something you need to think about. If you did this, there will be repercussions and you might not pay for them alone."

"What do you mean?"

He cursed. "You will get more shit at school, all of us might and that'll put pressure on everybody, which will make having that kind of relationship that much harder."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're right. There are social repercussions that all of us would have to deal with. And they might make things harder." I swallowed hard as I tried to explain how I felt. "But I'd rather face it together than live my life regretting that we didn't try because it was out of the ordinary. Because it was scary, and crazy."

"Lexie..."

"I can't choose." I looked up at him. "I just can't." My heat beat pounded in my ears, filling the silence.

Shadows moved through his eyes. "I don't think I can do what you're asking."

My heart shattered. Tears filled my eyes as I struggled to breathe. "You can't?"

He shook his head.

Tears fell down my face as I looked down at the ground. I took deep breaths. I knew it was useless to hope... "Okay." I wiped my face as I looked at his chest. "I just... Before this is over, I just... I need you to know..." I lifted my eyes to his with my world crashing around me. "I love you. And I... never meant for any of this to happen."

His face was blank and hard as stone as I stepped back. "I'll go tell the others." Wiping my face again, I turned and hurried down the path. The weight on my chest was crushing. Making my breathing ragged. It was over. I'd be with none of them. Why did I get my hopes up? Why did I even think this would work? It never would have worked anyway... What was I thinking? There's no happily ever after in real life. When did I forget that?

When I made it back, the guys were standing in a circle. They examined my face. Miles' eyes grew cold. They didn't even have to ask. Zeke's answer was clear on my face.

"He's out," I rasped.

The guys nodded.

"So, that means..." Isaac turned to Miles.

"She'll date nobody." Miles confirmed.

Everyone struggled with their emotions. The silence was heart wrenching. What were we going to do now? With everything between all of us, how do we go back?

Miles cleared his throat. "Then we should start to head home..."

Zeke walked off the trail and up to the circle. "I need to talk to you guys alone." His voice was so sharp it made me jump. He looked down at me. "Take Hades and go back down the trail."

I didn't argue. I was too busy wiping tears from my face as I left the group. Zeke was probably going to yell, lecture... call them idiots for even thinking of trying this. It didn't matter.

I sat on the picnic table in misery. What the hell was I going to do now? I could try to avoid them for a while, at least until school started. Make sure I'm not alone with anyone... A fresh wave of tears ran down my face. God, I was so stupid. I should have said something. I should never have kissed any of them. Why did I ruin everything? Misery took up a home in my heart and I wondered if she'd become a permanent tenant.

I don't know how long I sat there. At least an hour for sure, but I didn't even want to bother to check my phone. I was scratching Hades' ears when he barked. The guys walked around the bend in the trail. Every face was

somber, every set of eyes shadowed. And this is where they'll tell me that I need to give them space. I braced myself for it.

"Lexie, we've been talking." Miles stepped forward, tapping his fingers on his thigh.

"You guys need space, right?" I tried to keep my voice from cracking. It didn't work.

Miles took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Lexie, w-will you be our girlfriend?"

My heart leapt in my chest. Did he... did he just say? "Girlfriend?"

Miles' cheeks tinted pink as he grinned. "Will you go out with us?" He gestured at the others who were standing just as awkwardly as he was.

A big happy, stupid smile spread across my face. "Hell, yeah."

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EPILOGUE

looked up at Asher and fought back tears. "I'm going to miss you."

His fingers squeezed mine. "I'm going to miss you too. But I have to go."

"I know, it just sucks."

"You have four other boyfriends to keep you company," he muttered.

"Not until you get back," I reminded him. "We agreed, no individual dates until you come home."

He frowned. "That's not really fair to you guys."

"But it's fair to you and we agreed." I stepped closer and looked up at those beautiful eyes. "Now, you better hug me. Because you're about to leave for a month."

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his arms. I took a deep breath of cinnamon and vanilla.

"Promise me that you'll stay safe." His lips brushed my ear.

I closed my eyes and tried to memorize his touch. "Only if you promise me the same."

He kissed the top of my hair. "I promise."

"Then I promise too." I lifted my chin and met his eyes. "I'll talk to you tonight?"

He nodded, his eyes rough. "And every night until I get home."

My eyes burned as I went up on my toes and brushed my lips against his.

Astrid cleared her throat.

Asher pulled back, regret filling his eyes. "I can't..."

My heart ached. "Then you better go. The sooner you go, the sooner you come back."

He leaned down and kissed my temple. "I love you."

I smiled. "I love you too."

He stepped back from me, picked up his duffle and got into the car with Ranulf and Astrid.

A month. I could do a month. Right?

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