

Chapter 1 - Reunion and Lies

A flash of movement lunged from the side of the road, pulling my focus from my mind. Slamming on my brakes, a deer barely made it across my lane of traffic before my front end careened right where it had been. Jerked back into awareness, I overcorrected. My backend fishtailed. *Shit!*

Using both feet on the brake, I held the steering wheel firm. The sides of the road swapped entirely too quickly. The trees blurred, and I slammed my eyes shut. My knuckles ached at my grip. The vehicle spun beneath me before skidding to a halt halfway on the shoulder and facing the wrong way.

Slowly, I cracked open an eye. The radio filled the cabin, and the ditch blazed alive with my headlights. My body erupted in a quivering mess. Screaming at the adrenaline, I pounded my steering wheel. The eerily quiet night offered no comfort. Throwing it into park, I checked for any damage. *Nothing. Good.*

Forcing calming breaths into my core, I shakily checked my phone. Kian and Ryan were safely at Wolfisle. *Maybe they're in it together.* Paranoia prickled down my spine. *Acnos said we could trust him.* It anchored in my bones and poisoned my veins despite our divine confirmation. *Get a move on unless you want them to catch you.* The critic added toxicity.

I guided the car back onto the lonely road. *Lonely is better than company.* The branches from the trees reached out at me like desperate hostages. Blasting the AC, the heat rushing through my body subsided. The shadows danced along the road, beckoning me all while the music droned on as incoherent background noise.

My erratic thoughts bounced absurdly out of control. Everything that I knew was gone. My entire life had been a lie. Everything she had said to me was a twisted version of the truth. The only reason I wasn't killed was that I was going to have her savior baby. I shuddered at the thought. *Was everyone in on it?* The council never indicated any such motives. Growing up never seemed strange or out of place until recently.

Headlights popped into my rearview mirror. My heart sped up. My fingers firmly repositioned and gripped the steering wheel. Slamming on the gas, the trees again lost their detail while I raced through the mountains. They quickly disappeared behind the curves and hills. *They're catching up. You better hurry.* The slime slid down my limbs, adding weight and making them difficult to maneuver.

My phone lit up in the passenger seat. Ignoring it, I whipped off the road towards Wolfisle. *Another hour at the most.* My tears had long dried up, leaving behind a cold exterior. Staring lifelessly ahead, another set of headlights illuminated my rearview. *It's her.* Within seconds, they were close to my bumper.

A straight-a-way opened up, and the car sped around me. Slowing down, I waited for their brake lights to engage, but they continued on their journey, not paying any more attention to me. A quick scan of the car showed the critic wrong. *It's not. Now shut up and let me drive.* Mentally, I shoved them aside and sent them tumbling to the back of the mind.

The road to his place glimmered like a sidequest in a video game. *This is it.* The car slowed, but the adrenaline pumped itself heavily through my veins. Eyes watched me from the safety of the tree line. *This was a mistake.* Apprehension leaked from my heavy muscles.

Pulling the car around back, I grabbed the duffle bag out of the backseat and killed the engine. My trembling hands gripped the keys and the bag handle. The light beep from the lock disrupted the silence. Turning towards the small cabin, Kian stood at the doorway. My focus shifted closer. Victor stood a few feet from the trunk of my car.

“Cassidy.”

His voice was different than I remembered, deeper. His hair was darker, like mine. His eyes were a piercing green, like Ryan’s, instead of the blue like I had been led to believe. He was strong instead of puny. Mom hadn’t seen him, so her projection was only a guess. *Why hadn’t I seen the difference?* Shame and guilt welled up inside.

I stared at the man that I had been convinced was a monster. My twin brother. The weight of my actions crashed down on me. *Hold it together.* I stood under its massive assault until I could no longer hold myself. My knees buckled, and I crumbled to the ground. He hurried to me, kneeling in front.

“Cassidy, listen to me. None of this is your fault. We were children.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Could the other Victor touch you without pain?”

I looked at him with a shocked look on my face. How could he forgive me for everything I had done? I was the monster. Surprisingly, his arms enveloped me in an embrace. Panic flooded my mind, but I refused to allow it to stay. *He’s not a danger. He never has been.* He helped me from the grass even though my impulses begged me to kill him.

His skin rested on mine with no pain. *Look! There’s proof.* Tears cascaded down my face. The flashes of all my mistakes flooded my mind. *The people I’ve killed.* My shield weakened. *The hurt I’ve caused.* The illusion around reality cracked and splintered. *Oh, gods.* My stability wavered, and I stumbled into the corner of my car.

“No.” My voice croaked out, and my vision wavered.

“Let’s get you inside.”

He smiled and put his arm around me. My muscles naturally tensed. His voice was soft. The statement made more tears spring from my eyes. He wrapped me in a comforting embrace as the consequences of my misguided path wrecked my mind. My vision swayed, and the oxygen struggled in my lungs.

Kian disappeared from the doorway, and by the time I crossed the threshold, he held out my son to me. He kissed the top of my head and handed Ryan over. My eyebrow furled, and I diverted my gaze downwards. I couldn’t smile. It hurt trying to expand my chest. More tears poured onto his blanket. His tiny hands reached for my face as a wave of comfort and love washed over me.

His little legs kicked under the soft fabric. He pulled my finger into his mouth, cooing and staring into my eyes. No one bothered me. No one rushed me to do anything. Time

stood still. I forgot the company in the room. Everyone disappeared but my tiny family. *We are safe.* The beast purred against me. *Are you sure?* Doubt kicked in.

My brother sat across the room, unthreatening and peaceful. The videos played in my mind of the abhorrent events that I was told he was responsible for. *It's not true.* The man in the room bore no personality traits of the monster of my nightmare. He allowed me to stare. He allowed entry into his mind. *He's not shielding.*

"Cassidy?"

A voice came from my right. Through my tears, another stranger stood in front of me. Her familiar aura confused me. *Have I met her?* Her auburn hair was twisted up and held by a clipper. Her eyes were an earthy brown that radiated something around the tears that welled there. She was a few inches taller than me, and a strange impulse urged me to interact with her. She knelt down onto the floor next to me.

"Yes?" I finally replied.

"I know everything is crazy right now, and you don't know what to believe. That's okay. We are here to help you through it. I'm your Aunt Lydia."

"Hi."

The information refused to process. *I have an aunt?* The stories I heard never mentioned siblings. *She lied about everything.* My heart sunk in my chest. My stomach churned, and I feared I would lose the contents of my dinner. Her calming smile offered comfort, but I didn't know how to accept it.

You're such a fool. The critic knocked me while I was down. *Shut it before I make you.* Growled the beast. I lowered my head to Ryan's blanket. His quick grip grabbed strands of my hair, but I didn't care. My heart shattered in a different way than losing my son. Everything I had known was wrong. *I know nothing.*

Holding my baby close, I gently rocked back and forth. His noises quieted, and his eyes fluttered shut. His tight grip on my finger never left, but waves of serenity engulfed me from his relaxed body. Static filled my mind. *She's on her way, and we're just sitting here!* My newfound aunt cocked her head to the side and knelt down next to me.

"Fret ye not. We are going to keep you three safe. She won't be able to find you here." She said calmly.

"She already knows that we're here. We don't have much time. We need a plan."

"She's not coming here."

The seriousness of the situation unfolded a weight of bricks on me. I wanted to run. Runaway and just keep running. Kian, Ryan, and I could be wandering nomads. A new town every few months. It wasn't an option, but it settled on my mind like a peaceful existence. *Killing her is the only way.*

"There are no innocents here. No one is in danger. She is not on her way. She didn't follow you." Questions flew into my aura. "Telepathy runs in our family."

She heard us! The critic slinked away. *I told you to keep it shut.* The beast purred and snapped. Lydia smiled and winked. Kian's warm hand on my back kept me in the present.

There's no rush. Catch your breath. Leaning back against the chair, my muscles refused to relax. My mind shuttered and sputtered keeping the storm at bay.

Chapter 2 - Friend or Enemy?

“When you’re ready, we will all head to the lodge where it’s safest.”

My exhausted body pleaded for a bed. *When was the last time I slept?* Yawns overtook my body. Lydia returned with a steaming cup of tea. As she handed it to me, flashes from the docks sprung into my mind. *The alley conversation.*

Goosebumps raced down my back. *She’s the lady.* Studying her for the first time, I was sure. Her unshielded mind confused me. Her openness was a foreign concept. She whistled a comforting tune, but only in her mind. The notes sparkled throughout her aura. I nodded, and she replied with a smile.

Kian grabbed the duffle bag that I brought, and we loaded up in his car. Lydia, Victor, and two others walked around mine, chanting and raising wards. *Bait. She’ll hunt for your vehicle first.* Overstimulation and lack of sleep snapped my processing center in two.

Pausing at the passenger door, I studied the road below us for headlights. *She will come.* Ryan squirmed in my arms before settling. *I have what she wants.* A hand descended on my arm, and my body jerked back and away. Kian put his hands up in surrender.

“It’s ok, baby. It’s just me.”

He opened the back door and helped me strap our sleeping child into an unfamiliar car seat. Our car was in the middle of the caravan making its way up the mountain. *So many lies.* The headlights in the side mirror triggered more paranoia. *What if this is a trap? A cold chill wrapped my body. What if they’re in on it?*

No one answered in my head. The storm bore down, darkening the already black night. It separated me from my mental companion, leaving me alone to battle reality. The lodge rose into view. It blended in with the surroundings without a single light shining through or reflecting from any of the windows.

My breathing became shallow, and panic set in. Desperately, I intentionally calmed the air rushing from my body before I hyperventilated, but it wasn’t working. Air raced too quickly in and out. Kian’s voice registered to my ears, but I couldn’t comprehend the words. Sweat beaded up on my forehead, and all I could do was stare ahead.

He pulled around into the shadows of the back of the looming building. He turned to me, but the whirling chaos separated me from his comfort. His words refused to register in my brain. *What is happening?* Tears rushed down my face, and my limbs trembled in terror. I lacked the energy to fight through the confusion. Movement stopped, but the whirlwind inside intensified.

He disappeared from the driver’s seat. The center lights illuminated the cab when he opened the back door. Danger crept too close for comfort. In the mirror, he lifted our sleeping son from his seat. Unable to move, the panic anchored in my bones. The frozen fear made it difficult to fully occupy my body.

She’s waiting for me. My door opened next, and I flew as far as the seat belt would allow. *She’s here.* Kian gently leaned across me and unbuckled my seatbelt. *I can feel her.* His

hands enclosed around mine. His aura reached out in comfort, but the chaos denied him entry.

A burst of terror broke the spell on my body. My head moved too quickly for the blurry surroundings to process. *Where is he?* Several feet away, Lydia cradled a small form. My heart sank into my stomach. I lunged from the seat into my husband's arms.

"No! You can't have him. Please don't take my son from me." I cried desperately to Lydia.

"Cassidy, I'm not taking Ryan from you. We are going to go inside and get you settled in, okay?"

She rushed over and spoke calmly, but my brain couldn't process the meaning. It was consumed with overwhelming panic. My eyes darted around. *Safety in the trees.* People filed out of the darkened structure. Eyes watched my movements. Hands kept me from running. *Trapped.*

"I can't stay here."

"It's okay. You are safe. We are not going to let your mother hurt you anymore."

Her soft words contradicted my perception. Daggers flew into my body as I jumped from face to face. *Oh no.* The realization settled in my stomach. Their kindness and comfort morphed into torture and agony. I jumped away from Kian's grip and backed up the length of the car. It steadied my shaky legs.

"No. You're all working together."

"Cassidy." Surprise blossomed in Kian's face.

"You've been in on it, too. You all have. I'm just a pawn in all of your games."

My words stammered to come out. My hand curved around the back of the trunk. Kian took a step towards me with his hands out in a non-threatening manner. The paranoia suffocated me into survival mode. My magic gathered within me, readying for defense.

"You know that's not true."

"Don't come one step closer," I warned him.

"We need to go inside and take Ryan to our room, Cassidy." He said sternly. "So we can put up some of our things."

"No. That was the plan all along. You tricked me. Everyone has tricked me."

My poisoned mind showed me their secret intentions. Her face glimmered in and out of existence. *She's watching.* Her laugh echoed in my mind. Their faces shifted into menacing monsters and their hands into claws. My eyes grew wide as reality and illusion battled for supremacy. *Run.* I bolted down the road.

"Damn it." Kian uttered behind me.

"Cassidy, stop!" Victor yelled.

Dozens of footsteps pounded the gravel behind me. My feet slipped and slid on the small rocks, but I powered on. Giant wings disrupted the air above me diverting my path to the right into the woods.

My feet never slowed. My aching ankle screamed for me to stop. The protection of the trees gave way to a clearing. The steps behind me shrank in number, but the ones left were closing in. A hidden hole gobbled my foot, and I stumbled for several feet. Just as I righted myself, someone slammed into my lower back, dragging me to the ground.

Rolling over, my fists made contact with whoever was crawling up my body. Backpedaling, a grunt came from them as my foot came in contact with his flesh. A hand enclosed around my ankle and yanked me back. The weight of another body interrupted my leg defense, and my wrists were quickly contained. My eyes focused, and Kian's face came into view in the moonlight.

I fought to no avail. My chest heaved, craving oxygen. He did the same. The sweat dripping down my skin made breaking free easier. Busting free from his hold, I vigorously wiggled from underneath him, but I didn't get far. My fingers clawed at his strong hands pushing my shoulders into the grass.

"Cassidy," he said out of breath. "Remember what the gods said. We are in this together. I know you are terrified right now, but we have to let Victor help us. I would never have brought you here if I wasn't sure."

He spoke calmly through ragged breath. His aura lay open and unabated. He spoke the truth. *Or what he believes is true.* His words twisted in my head. *He can protect you from anything.* Acnos' voice whispered through the static. Nothing responded to the comfort. Clamping my mouth down onto his forearm, he bellowed in pain, but his hands remained.

"Cassidy, it's ok," Victor spoke from above my head.

Terror leaked from me like body odor. Locking eyes with my twin, I doubled down on my fight. Reality ceased to exist. A past inspired illusion held me in its grip. Fine sand-like material sprinkled over my face. My vision grew dark. *Fight it.* My struggle amplified as black crept forward in my eyes. It was stronger, and I fell into darkness.

Chapter 3 - Overwhelmed by Impulse

My mind floated barely under consciousness. My body lifted into the air. Chatter surrounded me, but it had no meaning. My steel eyelids refused to open. My muscles filled with concrete, unable to move. *Put me down. Put me down!* Screaming out to the empty void, I waited for death. *It was a trap.*

I floated down into the darkness, into nothingness. Perception disappeared in the belly of unconsciousness. Awareness drifted in and out. *You walked into your death sentence.* The critic's slimy voice slid across my mind. *You're there! I thought you disappeared.* She snorted and snapped her fingers.

The room lit up. *Where are we?* A light glow surrounded everything. Sterile white tile and steel tables kept us company. *Deep in your mind.* Instruments and gadgets were displayed on the counter. She lounged against the wall. My movements were dreamlike. *This doesn't make sense.*

My hand was enclosed around the doorknob, but it lacked temperature. Forcing the door open, I stared down an impossibly long hallway. *Run fast.* Her cackle followed me down the corridor. My legs carried me past random doors and other wings in a blur. Pausing out of breath, the remainder of my journey disappeared into a pinprick.

What is time? Turning and glancing behind me, the critic sauntered to me. *How did you do that?* Pointing back from where I started, she let a cold fingernail trail down my skin. A chill sent through me. *Leave me alone!* I ran again. The never ending hallway brought me to tears. A frustrated scream bellowed from my mouth.

Weren't you just happy to see me? I skidded to a halt. *Why are you doing this?* She shook her head. *I'm not doing anything. All you have to do is think your way out. It's your mind.* She pointed above her to a shining Exit sign. *That wasn't there...* My thoughts trailed off as her words made sense. The door under the neon glow opened with ease.

I jumped awake. My eyes darted around the unfamiliar room. My racing heart deposited adrenaline and disorientation throughout my body. Memory of my inner mind quickly faded and was replaced with recent events. My skin prickled with goosebumps. The door on my right slowly opened. I raced to the other side of the bed, gathering magic in my palm.

Kian quickly entered and shut the door. The tray he carried wobbled but never spilled. I slipped out of bed and backed myself into the opposite corner while he deposited it on the dresser. He calmly turned to me, hands in surrender.

"Good morning, love."

"Don't 'good morning' me. Why are you keeping me in here?"

"You're not being kept in here. You are not a prisoner. It will take some time to recover from yesterday."

My logical, rational thought urged me to believe him. It urged me to run to him and allow his comfort to permeate the cold paranoia. My body craved his embrace, yet I stayed curled up in the corner, ready to strike.

He stood before me, approaching with an unshielded aura. He permitted my scan of his motives. *He's not lying.* Alternating realities warred in my head. *Trust no one.* He cautiously sat facing me on the end of the bed.

"If I'm not being held here, then let me leave. Let me take Ryan and leave."

"We can't leave. We need their help. They have manpower and protection."

Hot liquid welled up and dripped from my eyes. The bed creaked back into position as he rose. His blurry form advanced towards me. Before he could reach out, I threw my hands up in front of me.

"Please don't touch me."

The words were simple, but they cut through my broken heart. Loneliness and abandon sealed me away from anyone else. I craved his touch, but the risk of trusting was too great. His energy encompassed me anyway. Initially, I squirmed and whined at the mixing of our auras. He took his seat back on the bed, still encompassing me.

"I do understand. I'm not going to abandon you, and I'm not going to hurt you. Now that you're awake, I'll get Ryan."

Welcoming a moment of me time, disappointment bloomed on my skin when he only poked his head out the door. Moving against the wall by the window, I stared out at the endless expanse of trees. Whispers from the hallway grinded against my soul. *They're plotting.* He quietly shut the door and returned to his place on the bed. Nothing was real. Nothing was true. *I'm the next plot twist*

"Just stop. Stop trying to convince me that you're not on her side. It only hurts worse. At least she was honest with me. Why don't you be honest with me? What was your role in all of this?"

"You want honesty?" He asked harshly.

My stomach dropped. I pleaded with him to get it over with. I nodded yes, not trusting my voice. I could never be ready for a betrayal, but anything was better than the panicked paranoia that squeezed life from my body.

"The honest truth is that I am your husband. I love you dearly. I fathered our child, and I did my best to keep you safe. This betrayal was in motion long before we could do anything about it."

"I'm so."

My statement remained unfinished. My overwhelmed and shattered heart wasn't strong enough to trust again. *Everyone is an enemy.* It was the only way to stay safe. It was the only way to protect myself. My jumbled thoughts got lost in the confusing mental fog. Kian sighed and nodded.

"I know. You don't have to do anything right now. Your aunt is bringing Ryan."

I jumped at a light knock on the door. Lydia entered with a bundle of blankets. Without hesitation, I scooped him from her arms. Holding him close, I resumed my position at the window. Tears gathered in the bottom of my eyes, but I blinked them away.

“Thank you,” I responded after a few moments.

“You’re very welcome.”

The door remained closed. Furniture lightly moved around. *What are they doing?* Ryan cooed and grunted, squirming in his cocoon. Taking a glance, they had made themselves comfortable. No one blocked the exit, and they weren’t paying particular attention to me. She sat back with a newly started book. Kian sat comfortable with his laptop.

“Why are you still here?”

Despite my son in my arms, adrenaline pumped through my body. *I need to escape.* Running wouldn’t be an option. They would stop me before I breached the door. Neither rushed to answer my question. He stopped tapping on the keys for a moment.

“Well, in my defense, I know better than to leave you alone in this state. The last time I did I fished your body out of the bathtub. Our son needs you. I need you. For once since we met, I’m going to fulfill my duty of protecting you.”

He never looked up from the screen. His nonchalance almost made the panic subside. Almost. Their presence sucked the oxygen from the room. *I need to be by myself.* My breathing grew shallow as I glanced at Lydia, still waiting for a response.

“I’m just bored. I’ve already cleaned all I can. I’m here for whatever you need.”

Ryan’s glowing calm wasn’t strong enough to permeate the storm. Slowly rocking back and forth, I judged the distance from our window. *You’ll die.* The critic’s words were soft but serious. She smiled at me, but I dismissed the growing desire to allow her in. *I can’t fall into their trap.*

“Am I stuck in here, or am I allowed to leave the room?”

The cynicism in my voice made me cringe. She closed her book, revealing a separate concentration. Her eyes locked with mine, and I cowered. Diverting my eyes back out the window, I assumed the four walls were my prison.

“Whenever you’re ready, we can show you around,” she responded.

“What if I don’t want to be shown around? What if I just want to leave?”

“We can’t protect you if you’re not here.”

Her expression confused me. The concern dove deeper than I understood. A love radiated from her that disoriented my view of reality. *She wants you to let her in.* The walls creaked forward an inch. The ceiling followed suit with dropping.

“How do I know you’re not her?”

My heart cracked at the question. I *wanted* her to be my newfound family. The logical part of my brain couldn’t understand the dichotomy in my heart. Her unshielded aura sparkled and comforted. Her mind requested I enter, to prove her innocence. Shying away, I broke eye contact. Anxious ants raced under my skin.

“You’ve been traumatized. You’ve been betrayed. You’ve been abused. It’s a hard thing to accept. I can’t convince you that I’m not her. There’s nothing that I can say that will undo the damage she has caused.”

Her emotions were displayed for all to read. She was polar opposite to mom who always remained guarded. Her actions were genuine and forthcoming. A moment of clear sunshine burst through the storm clouds in my mind. Clarity and a moment of breath anchored me to the truth.

“If I do trust you, if I do believe what you say.” Paranoia exploded in my mind. The winds returned, and I shook my head no. “It’s too much of a risk.”

Sniveling little pussy. The words rang out in my head in mom’s voice. *You are nothing.* The tears beat against their dam. The faster my thoughts flew around in my mind, the more disorientation gripped my body. Kian rose and approached me. My eyes pleaded for him to back up, but he removed the tiny body from my arms.

The exhausting battle over my brain consumed me. Reaching out for my son, I stumbled forward. The window sill steadied me, but the panic disrupted my balance. The room shifted and twisted into a dimmer, less comfortable cell. Their faces blurred between reality and illusion. *Which is the truth?* My mind spun faster.

My fingers webbed through my hair. My palms pushed against my pounding skull. Their words didn’t register. *Please stop. Please stop.* I whimpered in my mind. The pressure building on the inside refused to subside. Desperation flooded through me. My forehead sped forward, colliding with the glass pane.

My ears erupted in a high pitch ring. Every thought and ache stopped for a moment. Every emotion ceased to exist while glitter filled my field of view. Their mouths moved, but no sound made it through the echo. A chair appeared at my side, and I gladly sat.

I tenderly touched my forehead above my right eye. It was wet. Stars dotted my sight. My stomach turned as I saw the red on the tips of my fingers. My hands started shaking. I couldn’t respond to their requests. The familiar prickle of fur sprouted under my skin. *Shhhh. It’s ok. I’m here with you.*

Victor flew into the room. I couldn’t process danger or threat. The ring faded to a static in my mind. His furrowed brow and quick moving lips made no sense. *Is Lydia crying?* Her vibrant aura dimmed with her shift in mood. She put her hand up, and he immediately stopped. Her mouth moved, and they turned to me.

I pushed up from the chair, but my legs weren’t ready to hold me. I stumbled to the soft landing of the mattress. I clawed at the comforter, pulling myself further away. Shadows descended on me, but my vision was blurry. Nausea bubbled up, and I groaned. A warm glow appeared over my forehead, and I drifted into darkness.