

AWAKEN (Wolves of Timber Falls)

CHAPTER ONE

Layla

Blood drenched the grass. Dark red blotches, seeping into the earth around my feet. Everywhere I stepped, another layer coated the soles of my boots. Enemy blood. Shifter blood.

The sickly stench of death layered the cool winter air until I could no longer smell the pine needles. Bile rose in my throat as I recalled the lives lost tonight. Not only from our pack. All lives.

Hunters had attacked. Ambushed us. And they left a bloody trail of destruction.

I paused by a fallen tree branch, dragging the toe of my boot through a pile of blood-coated leaves. A dull ache constricted my chest as though invisible hands squeezed my ribs. The pressure so great I didn't know whether to scream or collapse.

We'd grown complacent over the past few months. Too relaxed. And not just Timber Falls. Neighboring packs had resumed gatherings, travel, allowing their pups to venture out alone.

Now, we'd all paid a hefty price for those mistakes.

Exhaustion settled deep in my bones as I surveyed the carnage. Fallen branches, gashes in tree trunks from wolf claws or blades, drag marks in the earth from someone removing an injured shifter. Or a dead one. God, the blood. So much painted the ground that at any moment I imagined the trees sucking it up and changing their leaves to crimson.

I turned away even though I knew I couldn't escape it.

I should head back to town with the others. After the attack, it would be stupid to stay in the woods, especially alone. Safety in numbers had been our motto for years. A hunter wouldn't attack a group of shifters.

How horribly wrong we'd been.

Despite knowing better, I couldn't go into town. I couldn't stomach their looks.

It wasn't your fault.

You tried your best.

There's honor in dying to protect the pack.

No. That was utter crap. Those shifters died because hunters attacked our pack. They died protecting their families.

They died because I couldn't save them.

Besides, Trey had accounted for all the hunters. There weren't any left alive.

I was safe.

Numbness seeped into my limbs as I stared at the dark stains smeared over my palms. So much death. All because of a war started long before I was born, when an ancient coven of witches tried to eradicate shifters by turning themselves into beasts. Bloodthirsty hunters.

Now, descendants suffered the consequences of their ancestors' craving for power, and instead craved something more sinister: shifter blood.

Death. So much senseless death.

Father would never allow this to happen again. This battle was a turning point. He'd declare war against hunters, possibly witches. He wouldn't stand back and accept defeat, not now. Not after a group of hunters planned and orchestrated an ambush on our pack.

There'd never be peace.

Everything I'd worked for died on the blood-soaked ground.

Wiping my palms on the thighs of my jeans, I inhaled a ragged breath. Despite every

instinct telling me to return to town with the pack, my feet wouldn't move.

“Layla,” a familiar voice rumbled from behind me making me jump.

I turned, facing my father, Alpha of Timber Falls. The one who'd led his pack into battle tonight.

His voice softened as he placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, bending so we were eye level. “I know you don't feel it, but you did everything you could tonight. You saved countless pack lives.”

Not enough though.

I nodded, not trusting my voice, or the tears that threatened to never end if I let them fall. Weakness wasn't in my veins, but tonight it floored me.

I peered down at my hands again. Defeat. This was what it felt like.

He wrapped one arm around my shoulder, pulling me against his chest. He smelled familiar, like rugged pine mixed with the comfort of home, but the underlying metallic scent of blood coated my throat. I drew back. I couldn't stand it any longer. If I stayed in this forest, with blood-stained hands for another minute, I'd snap. And if that happened, I feared I'd never recover.

My father kissed the top of my head. “I need to debrief the pack. Let's go clean up.”

I stepped to follow but stopped.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't face the pack. Not tonight. Not when all I wanted was to scrub my hands until the skin returned to ivory. Though, I feared it would never be the same. Centuries of war, of bloodthirsty killing, of senseless death would stain my hands forever.

I twisted out of Father's embrace. “Actually, I'd rather...stay at home tonight.”

He tilted his head, studying me. One thing I knew about my father, he chose his words carefully, he always had. I figured the trait made him a better alpha. He never took a wrong step. But now, I could tell he took the time to choose words that would empower me rather

than make me cry.

His expression softened, his midnight blue eyes deepening even further. “Don’t blame yourself for the decisions of others, Layla. Hunters attacked our pack. They killed our shifters. Not you. You saved them.”

I shook my head as the anger bubbling in my belly thundered over the grief. The last thing I wanted was to argue with Father, especially tonight, but I had only so much strength left. “No death is warranted. Yes, hunters attacked our pack, but our pack slaughtered them. They didn’t just kill them, end them quickly, they *slaughtered* them. Ripped apart their flesh. Those hunters were once witches. Once...”

My throat closed preventing the rest of my sentence. Just as well. I remembered hunters were once basically humans with magic, but that didn’t mean my father agreed. Bloodlust was bloodlust in his eyes. No matter who it came from.

I exhaled a slow breath, hoping to soften my father’s protective instincts. “I’m exhausted. I just want to decompress.” I looked up at him so he could see the truth reflected in my eyes. “I need to be alone. I’ll check in with you in the morning.”

After a moment of tense silence, where I thought he’d disagree or pull his alpha card and drag my tired ass into town, he nodded. “Keep the door locked. I’ll send Trey to check on you.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes because that wouldn’t help my cause. But seriously? I didn’t need protection, especially from Trey. No hunters had escaped tonight’s bloodbath.

Instead of debating my independence for the umpteenth time, I simply lifted to my toes and gave Father a peck on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Make sure you call if you need anything and text me when you get home.”

“Yes, Father.”

Before he changed his mind, or heaven forbid, sent someone to escort me, I turned

and followed the path through the forest to my cabin.

Lost in my head, I numbly weaved through the trees, diverting my gaze from every dark stain, focusing only on my destination. The air gradually freshened. Rather than a choking stench, the blood became a faint scent lingering in the background. Probably because it still covered my clothes and hands.

About five years ago, I convinced Father to build me my own place on the wolf reservation. I loved him more than anything, but being his only daughter, his only offspring, meant the urge to protect the pack's future alpha was strong. Overbearingly strong. Not helped by the fact my mother passed while giving birth to me.

My father had years, centuries even before he'd handover leadership, his talk of retirement was a tease. It had better be. I wasn't ready to lead the Timber Falls pack, especially not now.

"Lay, wait up."

I peered over my shoulder and waited for Baker, wearing only a pair of jeans, to catch up. With all the ink down his arms and those ripped abs, I could understand why half the females in the pack swooned over him. Except me, because...eww.

"Please tell me Father didn't send you to escort me home."

He scoffed. "As if I need a reason to make sure my favorite cousin arrives home safely."

This time I did roll my eyes. I was his only cousin.

Baker bumped my shoulder with his, and we fell into step. To be honest, the company was...nice. Baker and his brothers had always treated me like their sister, more than their cousin. But with Baker it was different. He wasn't only closest to me in age, he was also my best friend. And, well, he probably knew me better than I knew myself.

"How's your mom?" I asked, swallowing the sick feeling creeping up my throat.

“She’s fine. Cussing at my old man for fussing over her.” He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans before kicking a random stick. “The wound on her leg is healing already, thanks to your quick thinking.”

His mom was one of the lucky ones, but I didn’t say it aloud. Even shifter blood had its limitations as we’d all seen tonight. As Father had seen with my mother.

“What’s the deal with heading to your place? I figured you’d join the other healers at the infirmary.”

I shrugged. “I’ve done all I can tonight. I just need some time to...process this.”

“I get it.”

My shoulders sagged with a deep exhale when I spotted my cabin as the tree line thinned. A simple wooden cabin with a front porch and loft. I didn’t need much. In the beginning, I came out here on the weekends, but lately, I’d spent more time in town. I hadn’t realized how much I missed it. How much I needed it.

Out here, no one depended on me. For a short period of time, I could forget I was a pack healer, Rhett St. Claire’s daughter, and next in line for alpha. Out here, I was simply Layla. A twenty-seven-year-old wolf shifter, lover of ancient history, books, and spicy merlot.

At the bottom of the porch steps, I turned to Baker.

“I’m going to head back to town and check on Mom. I’ll text you later.”

I nodded, so thankful he knew me well enough to give me space. Even though it likely irked every protective bone in his body.

He turned to leave.

“Baker?” When he glanced back at me, I said, “Thanks.”

He gave me a curt nod before jogging in the direction of town.

On the porch, I lifted the rustic flowerpot and grabbed the front door key.

Someone coughed.

I froze, fingers curled around the key, crouched beside the flowerpot. Cocking my ear toward the forest, I listened...and listened, until I swore I'd imagined it. Events of tonight played havoc with my imagination and had clearly shot my nerves, making me jump at the slightest rustle.

Straightening, I slid the key into the lock.

The cough came again, this time more of a gurgle as though the person struggled to breathe. Not an animal. A person. And not my imagination.

After battle, shifters usually returned to human form, especially if injured. As though their animal knew the best way to heal was to shift. But my father accounted for all our pack, those alive and...dead.

My heartrate kicked up as the gurgling sounded again.

I couldn't ignore it. Someone was out there, close by, and on the verge of death. I needed to help them. What if it were an injured shifter from a neighboring pack? What if it were a human caught in the bloodshed?

I couldn't just stand here and do nothing. Not ever, and especially not after tonight.

Leaving the key in the lock, I crept down the stairs, scanning the small clearing in front of the cabin. No one. The person coughed again from behind me, this time ending in a sickening wheeze.

I raced around the rear of the cabin, scanning the yard. Still no one.

Where the heck were they?

Something made me spin back to the cabin and crouch to peek under the rear porch. Bingo. A guy, mostly concealed in darkness, lay face down in the dirt.

On my hands and knees, I crawled under the timber porch to assess his condition. Dark short hair, broad shoulders and so many tears in his shirt it clung to his torso by only a

few threads. His long, thick legs clothed in torn jeans stretched father under the house. One boot missing.

With only the filtering moonlight, I didn't recognize him, but a few shifters from neighboring packs had helped us tonight. He probably belonged to one of them.

I scanned his body once more, looking for obvious wounds and found deep claw marks in his side, oozing blood.

Why would a wolf attack another shifter?

The guy wheezed again. Blood splattered from his mouth onto the dirt.

It didn't matter whether I knew him, or which pack he belonged to, I needed to save him. This war had spilled too much blood already. He'd clearly sought safety under the porch while the rest of the pack had finished off the hunters. Once I helped him and he was out of immediate danger, I'd call Father to take him to the infirmary.

Shuffling closer, I tentatively swept thick, dark hair off his forehead to better see his face. "I'm here to help you. You're going to be okay."

His eyes shot open. Bright amber vertical slits narrowed in my direction.

I sucked in a breath, scrambling backward.

This guy wasn't from my pack or any other. He wasn't even a shifter.

He was a hunter.

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