

ARDELEAN
BLOODLINE



PREQUEL

Spark

SARAH JAEGER

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An Introduction to The Ardelean Bloodline

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Sarah Jaeger

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Cade Alden

Flopping down on the back deck with Deacon and Lena after our pack run, I'm ready for a day of lounging. It's been four long weeks of traveling, with my employer's company, for what felt like an endless mission. I've needed to get out and stretch my wolf, The Leviathan.

My brother and sister, the only members of my family and our defacto pack, are the only wolves I spend time with regularly. On holidays we see our cousins, but the three of us keep life under the radar. I've missed them a lot. I hate being away sometimes, but I need to have something to do, something I can do to make a difference. I wish it gave me more time with them.

It was a great run. Lena is quick and always makes Deacon and I run longer than we intended. As a result, by the time the three of us made it to the deck, Deacon and I barely make it up the stairs. He rolls onto his side at the top of the stairs while I make it more toward the center, but I'm equally content to just lie here for the rest of the night. *Maybe a nap?*

Between pants, I hear my phone buzzing loudly as messages hit one after another. It sounds strange, not like it's on the counter? Rattling louder?

Lena whines through a yawn — her black-tipped nose going up in the air — using her baby of the family privilege to avoid doing anything she doesn't want to. She's always been special, and by making up for being gone so much, I let her get away with too much. It'll probably bite me in the ass at some point, but guilt is a strong feeling.

Deacon rolls over, pretending not to hear the buzzing.

Slowly and begrudgingly, I push myself back to two legs from my wolf form. The Leviathan tucks himself away. It's a regimented process, stretching and fitting myself back into one piece. One he chooses to not make any easier.

My phone has been vibrating for so long it's vibrated itself to the very end of the counter. The charging cord is the only thing keeping it from a short drop to the floor. As I pick up the phone and remove the charger, there's a spark. *What the hell?* Palming it, I flick the screen on. There are over one hundred messages from no less than forty people across various platforms.

Dread drops like a rock in my gut. *What the fuck?*

"Lena! Deacon!" I shout to get them in the house.

I'm starting to open the messages by priority when my phone starts ringing again. Judah Alloway flashes on the screen. As my older cousin and Alpha of a large pack, his call is as good of a place as any to start in decoding the sudden implosion of my phone.

"Now you fucking answer," Judah snaps at me.

I let out a low growl matching his tone. "I went on a fucking pack run. What the fuck happened in the last two hours?"

We've never been the kind for informal small talk. He's busy. I'm busy. But we're usually friendly. His short tone is uncharacteristic.

"Wolf shifters have been outed to the public." Judah punctuates every word.

Chills run down my spine. I've never been so afraid that I'm at a loss for thoughts and words. The implication of humans knowing is . . . *It's a death sentence, for all of us. We'll be experiments at best.* Between panting from the run and now this, it's like there's no air in the room. I could suffocate on fear alone. Forcing air into my lungs with a deep breath, I hold it before exhaling slowly and repeating the process.

Judah's voice is muffled like he has his hand over the mic. He's giving instructions, and I hear wolves howling and a child crying in the background. It's a heartbreaking sound. Everyone sounds just as afraid as I am. All our lives, we've been taught to be careful and never let humans find out what we are.

"Your pack?" is all I can think to ask.

"No. Thank fuck." Judah cusses. He keeps filling me in. "Los Angeles. Gared Gardner, two wolves crashed through the middle of some sort of flea market in Los Feliz."

"Anyone hurt?" It feels like a good question to ask.

There's nothing more to do but start digesting information. Turning the volume up on the call, rather than putting it on speaker, lets me delve into the messages. Every Pack Alpha who still has my phone number has texted me. But it seems my number has been circulated because there are messages from so many unknown numbers. I don't know where to start.

"No," Judah snaps.

All the noise from his phone stops. I check to see if we've been disconnected. His name is still there so I've just been muted.

One of the various unknown numbers sent me a video from a news outlet website. One small female wolf is fleeing from a larger male. His teeth snapping at her flanks are telling of the aggression in the situation. She's running for her life. You can see the fear in her eyes as she runs from him. I can only assume she didn't think she had a choice but to get away from him.

I don't blame her in this. But what the fuck was happening? In the end, they'll both likely pay for this with their lives. If they're not dead already. That thought adds to the sinking feeling in my stomach.

I turn it off when the video starts again in order to continue looking at other messages.

“What’s wrong?” Lena asks as they come in the door.

I shake my head at her but shout at my muted phone, “Judah!”

“Yes, sorry.” Judah breathes deeply. “We’re collecting ourselves here. We’ve voted that we’re going to try to be business as usual. Our pack hasn’t been outed, the best way to stay off the radar is to keep the status quo.”

“That’s a good plan.” I agree.

Judah’s always been the levelheaded one. After his parents retired five years ago, Judah stepped into the role of Alpha Male in a well-established pack, with all the members supporting him wholeheartedly. Between his level head and his pack’s seniority, it’s not surprising they’ve come to a solution for themselves so quickly.

The feeling of The Leviathan stirring inside me is uncomfortable. I shake my head, denying his push to shift back into the wolf form.

I scrub my hand down my face before turning to Lena and Deacon. They stand there watching me, expecting answers. They narrow their eyes, raking across my face. Their assumptions of what’s going on are conveyed in downturned lips and the stench of fear. I don’t have answers for what I’m sure are a hundred questions.

All I can do is tell them what I know. “Wolves have been made known to the public. It’s not something we’re going to be able to brush under the rug.”

Lena falters backward, shaking her head. Deacon snakes his arm around her, holding her close to him. I know he’ll do anything it takes to protect her at all cost.

“Let’s get dressed.” I shake my head. *What do I do?* There are so many options, but this doesn’t have to change my life. Just like Judah’s pack, we could fly under the radar too. I stick with that thought and offer it to them. “I’m going to offer support to Robert, but I’m not taking control of anything unless I have to. If we can stay out of it all, maybe we can keep our lives as they are.”

“I. . .” Lena starts but ultimately stops speaking.

She shakes her head and leaves Deacon’s side, heading toward her suite to get dressed.

“Is this the end?” Deacon asks. He swallows hard.

I shake my head. Now more than ever, I’ve got to be the strong one. I push back my fear and do exactly as Judah is doing. *Be strong. Hold it together.*

I draw a deep breath and collect myself. “No. It’ll work out. It might be rough for a while. But this isn’t the end. I don’t think so.”

“The Ancestors are scared,” Deacon says, looking around the room. “I need a fucking drink.”

I nod and leave him alone in favor of getting cleaned up, dialing my phone along the way. Before I start taking anyone else's calls and messages, there's someone else I want to talk to.

"Cade. Good to hear from you," Ansel answers. My oldest cousin's voice is chipper on the line.

Clearly he doesn't know. It's not surprising. Ansel lives in the middle of nowhere without any reliable access to television or internet.

"You alone?" I don't give him our usual greeting, hoping the flatness of my tone will give him an indication that there's a problem.

"No, Ben's with me." Ansel drops his tone. He hesitates. "Cade, what's going on?"

I'm not very familiar with Ben as a person. Ultimately, if Ansel trusts him to be in on this conversation, then it's important to have it as soon as possible.

"You might get a call to respond to a couple of wolves in California. Under no circumstances go to California. I don't care how badly someone says they need you. Stay in Utah." I am borderline begging him to listen.

I run my hand back through my hair before turning on the light to my bathroom. I'm not Sovereign Alpha anymore; therefore, I don't have the actual authority to order him to do anything. I wish I could.

"Why shouldn't I go if I get a call?" Ansel challenges, pushing the lack of information.

"We've been outed to the public. The wolves in California are the ones who did it." I say it quickly to get it over with.

"Shit."

I hear a low whistle on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah." Ansel stops speaking. He clears his throat, and his voice wavers a bit as he continues, "I'll stay home. Suddenly, I feel very busy, too busy. Like, I'm not sure I can answer my phone busy."

"I wouldn't answer if it's not family." Reaching into the shower to turn it on, I continue, "I'll call you back when I know more. I'm not sure what Robert's going to do next."

"Robert?" Ansel asks. He scoffs. "This happens and you're not taking back the throne? What is it going to take for you to..." Ansel's voice trails off. "That's out of line. It's your life."

"I don't know what to do, Ansel." I answer honestly. "If it'll make a difference, then maybe. But right now, it doesn't seem like there's a reason to put us at risk."

"Your call." Ansel blows a raspberry. "Thanks for the heads up. I've got to figure out how to tell the guys."