


ROXIE RAY



CLAIMING
THE WOLF
DADDY

Claiming The Wolf Daddy

A Single Dad Shifter Romance

Breaking Pack Rules

Book 2

Roxie Ray

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Chapter 1

Marley

The smell of Wyatt's aftershave burned my nostrils. I'd been running for so long that my lungs were on fire, the muscles in my legs trembling.

I was trying to get out of the forest and get back to civilization, but with only the full moon lighting my way through the thick canopy overhead, every tree looked the same. If I could stop and catch my bearings, I might be able to discern which way was east and west. Use one of those tricks my dad had once taught me on a camping trip.

But what was I supposed to look for? Moss on a stone? A stick that could get exposed to sunlight? I didn't remember.

As I tucked myself into the hollow of one of the trees, all I could do was hope that Wyatt wouldn't hear my exhausted breaths sawing in and out of my mouth. That I could block the sound with my dirty, scratched hands.

I clapped those hands over my mouth as I heard the soft thuds of his feet on the forest's loamy ground. Closing my eyes, I forced myself to hold my breath, forced my heart to slow. I stayed like that for a long time, listening for Wyatt's footsteps, hoping he would stalk past me so I could run in the opposite direction.

The loud snap of a twig had my eyes flying open, and I looked straight into Wyatt's dull, glassy stare. He'd shifted back into his human form. I couldn't tell which form of his was more terrifying.

“I’m going to wring your *fucking neck*,” he said in a voice that sounded like a recording. Like a voicemail saved from years ago.

He grabbed me and wrestled me to the ground, sitting on my stomach and choking me, choking me, choking me.

Not again, I thought. I don’t want to die again.

His thumbs pressed harder and harder against my windpipe until I heard a sickening snap.

I shot up in bed with a loud gasp, clawing at my throat, trying to tear Wyatt’s hands away from me. I scrambled in a panic, and then reality started to leak through the holes in my sleep-addled state.

Wyatt wasn’t here. Wyatt was dead.

I wasn’t in a forest; I was in the condo, and in bed with Cole. Cole, who was sitting up next to me, smoothing a hand over my back.

“Easy, baby. You’re all right,” he murmured. “You’re all right. You’re safe. You’re safe.”

Those words had become my mantra over the last three weeks. The nightmares seemed to be endless. It was a good night when I didn’t have at least three instances of lurching out of bed like this.

I gulped in greedy breaths and nodded as the rest of my body woke up. I rested my hand just below my collarbone, reminding my body that it wasn’t being choked. That I could breathe just fine.

After a few minutes, I managed to still myself and calm my erratic breathing. I shut my eyes and let out a long, low exhale through pursed, dry lips.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“No need to be sorry, babe. You want me to get you anything? Cold rag? Warm milk?”

“I think I’ll just get myself some tea,” I said. “You should go back to sleep. We have a flight to catch in a few hours.”

“You’re part of that ‘we,’ you know.”

“Yeah, but I can sleep on planes. You can’t,” I said with a little wink.

He stared at me, his lips pressed together like he didn’t believe me.

“Cole,” I said, “I promise I’m fine, okay? It was just a bad dream—not like those early ones where I woke up in a full-blown panic attack. Go to sleep. I’ll be fine making my own tea.”

He let out a soft sigh and nodded. “All right. Just call me if you need me. I’m not far.”

Nodding, I slipped out of bed and pulled on my robe, tying it in front. I quietly made my way from the bedroom through the dining room and into the kitchen, reaching above the stove to click on the overhead light. I blinked against the brightness—the dimmers at Cole’s old house had spoiled me. He’d said he’d install some in the condo when he had a chance, but I didn’t want to make too much of a fuss when he was so busy rebuilding the house.

After my eyes adjusted, I filled the electric kettle with some water and turned it on. While I waited for the water to boil, I took out some herbal tea, honey, and half and half.

I had never been a huge tea drinker before Cole, but a cup of tea was one of the best ways for me to get back to sleep after a nightmare. He’d introduced me to tea after the nightmares I’d had back at his house and then here at the condo after we got out of the hospital.

As I was pouring hot water over the chamomile tea bag, I heard the padding of small feet to my left.

Noah stood in the doorway in his dinosaur pajamas, holding his new comfort item: a plush toy that looked a lot like his father’s wolf form.

“What are you doing out of bed, little man?” I asked.

He approached me and wrapped his arms around my legs, nuzzling into me. “I heard noises. I was worried it was a bad

guy.”

“Yeah? And you came to investigate like a brave boy?”

“Mm. I want to protect Mommy and Daddy.”

My heart cracked. Noah was such a sweet boy and so earnest in his care for us. I hated that I couldn’t protect him more from the terrors of Wyatt’s attack. He was still so scared most nights. He hadn’t slept without a night light since I told him to hide in the bungalow when Wyatt had broken in.

“We want to protect you, too,” I said, kneeling to get to eye level with him. “But you know what? So far, everything is super safe. Nothing to protect me from. I’m just making myself some tea. I thought something warm might be nice to drink.”

I looked back at the steeping tea before returning my gaze to him. “You want some warm milk, kiddo?”

Noah nodded, bringing his stuffed wolf a little closer and giving it a tight squeeze. “And can you tuck me in again?”

“Of course,” I said. “You gotta get plenty of sleep before you go stay at Nanny and Gramps’s house, right? Can’t have you all sleepy when you go to the funnest house ever!”

Noah cracked a smile then, his tongue pushing at his loose front tooth. I hefted him up into my arms and sat him up on the counter, then set about heating him some milk on the stovetop.

“What are you going to do with Nanny and Gramps while your dad and I are out in Georgia?” I asked him.

“Gramps got a metal doctor,” he said, kicking his little feet. “We’re going to go to the beach and look for buried treasure.”

“Do you mean a metal *detector*?” I offered.

“M-metal decockter,” he said.

“Close,” I said with a laugh. “De-tec-tor.”

“De–detector,” he corrected.

“Good job, Noah,” I said cheerfully. “You got it!”

As the milk warmed, I took the tea bag out of my cup and added the honey and a splash of half and half. Blowing on the liquid, I took a small, careful sip.

“You’re getting so good at your words. I’m so proud of you.”

“Yeah, I’ve been learning lots of new words and things,” Noah said. “And you always help me. That’s really nice.”

I chuckled as I tested the milk’s temperature on the inside of my wrist. It was warm enough, so I poured it into a cup with a straw and handed it to him. I settled in against the opposite counter and drank my tea as Noah sipped at his warm milk.

Already, I was starting to feel a little better. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the warm beverage or Noah’s presence—maybe both.

“How is it?” I asked.

“Tastes like normal milk, just warm,” he said. “It always looks super-tasty in the cartoons, but it’s kind of boring.”

I laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. It is kind of boring. It’s just supposed to make you sleepy.”

“How come you’re not having warm milk?”

“I have milk in my tea,” I countered with a smile. “Do you want to try my drink? See if you like it better?”

Noah nodded, and I helped him take a sip from my cup. After swallowing, he smacked his lips and scrunched up his nose. “It tastes like grass.”

I laughed, setting the tea down on the counter. “Yeah, it kind of is like drinking grass, I guess.”

“I like the warm milk better,” he said, picking up his cup to take another sip.

“Yeah, you have way better taste than I do.”

As we finished our drinks, we chatted about his grandfather’s new metal detector, school, and presents from

Georgia. When we were done, Noah reached out his arms for me to pick him up.

“You might be too big for me to carry you by the time we get back from Georgia,” I teased as I carried him to his room. “First your teeth go loose, and now it seems like every time I see you, you’re a little taller and stronger.”

“Do you think the tooth fairy takes shifter teeth?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m certain she does,” I promised. “I’ve known shifters who got a visit from the tooth fairy.”

“Really?!” Noah asked brightly. “How much money did they get?”

“Well...” I said as I passed our bedroom, then pushed the door to Noah’s room open with my foot. “That depends on how well you take care of your teeth, but I think most shifters get around five dollars.”

“Whoa! I’m going to be rich!”

“That’s right,” I said with a laugh. “What are you going to buy with all of your fabulous wealth, Noah?”

“Hmm,” Noah said as he emulated his father’s habit of rubbing his chin. “Maybe another *Adventure Hour* toy. Or a dinosaur toy.”

“Those are both great ideas,” I said.

I settled him in his bed and covered him with his blanket, tucking it under his feet and legs so he was nice and snug. He squeezed his wolf plushie closer and snuggled into the covers.

“Do you think a bad guy will ever break into this house?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so,” I said, genuinely meaning it. “Your super-strong dad scares bad guys, and this building has a lot of special locks and safety measures to stop people from getting in.”

I brushed my fingers through his hair, pushing his wild curls away from his face. It was starting to get a little too long.

We'd have to get him a trim soon so his hair didn't get in his eyes during class.

"How about a story to help you go to sleep?" I suggested.

Noah nodded and moved to face me more. "Can you make up a new one? I've already read all of my books, and you're really good at it like Daddy is."

I smiled down at him. "Sure. I love coming up with stories."

I spent the next half hour telling him a sweeping story about a pirate ship on the high seas, with swashbuckling scallywags and mermaids and sea serpents before winding down and murmuring about the ship bobbing lazily on the seas.

Noah was asleep by the time I finished. I rose very carefully from the edge of his bed so as not to shift him. When I was sure he was fully asleep, I walked to the door and exited the room, quietly closing the door behind me.

When I walked back into our bedroom, Cole was sitting on the edge of the bed, giving me a look that was equal parts guilty and affectionate.

"What are you doing up?" I asked. "I thought you were getting some sleep."

"I was," he said. "But I heard that darling story of yours, and the questions my son asked about bad men getting into the house..." His gaze dropped to the floor and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I feel like that new fear is my fault. If I hadn't left you guys alone..."

I shook my head and sat next to him. "Don't think like that," I said. "It's not your fault, nor is it mine. Wyatt was the one who frightened Noah. All we have to do is make sure we give him the chance to air out his feelings in a safe, loving environment and keep reassuring him that we're safe."

"Is that your expert opinion?" he teased.

"I mean, maybe 'expert' is a little strong, but generally speaking, kids just need a safe space to feel like they can

communicate their worries and fears, process them, and hear from a trusted and reliable adult that their fear is understood but not necessary.”

Cole nodded and sighed before looking sidelong at me. “You know, I love hearing you talk to him like he’s your son.”

A flush crept up from my chest to my ears. “Y-you do?”

Cole nodded and looked down at his hands. “It makes it feel like you...you plan to stay. It makes me feel a little safer.”

“I do plan to stay,” I reassured him, sliding a hand down his arm and cradling his hand in mine. “You’ll have a hard time getting rid of me at this point.”

“Yeah? I hope that’s still the case after the Georgia visit.”

“You’re that nervous about it?”

He nodded and heaved in a breath. “Yeah. Worried my family will make asses of themselves and make you feel bad about yourself.”

“Well, it’s not like I’ll lump you in with them. You’ve never made me feel bad about myself just for being a human,” I told him. “It would suck if your family didn’t accept me, of course, but I wouldn’t hold it against you. It’s not like you have any control over them. And to leave you over something so trivial would make me quite the hypocrite, given how my dad first treated you when you guys met.”

Cole nodded and gave my hand a few squeezes. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “Honestly, I know better than to think you’d ever be anything but tolerant and sweet. You’ve never done anything to the contrary. I guess I’m just not used to all of these variables and uncertainties. I’m used to controlling the board state, you know?”

I nodded. “Risk management.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Well, don’t worry about me. I can handle the heat; otherwise, I wouldn’t be coming with you tomorrow.”

I glanced at the clock, seeing the small hour of the morning glowing green there. The sun would be rising soon, and Cole needed more rest.

“Let’s try to get a little more sleep,” I suggested. “We have a long day tomorrow.”

“I don’t know if I’m going to be able to sleep,” he said.

I nibbled on my lip and looked back at the door to make sure it was closed. When I met Cole’s eyes again, his eyebrows quirked in question.

“Lie down,” I said quietly.

Cole’s hand squeezed mine a little tighter, an instinctual tensing going through his body. “And exactly what do you have planned for me, Miss Cage?”

Despite the fact that we knew each other’s bodies intimately at that point, I still found myself blushing. “Just a little bedtime activity,” I said sheepishly.

“Oh, yeah?” His smile took on a sharpened, almost lupine quality. “And just what *bedtime activity* did you have in mind, sweetheart?”

“It’s a surprise,” I said, still feeling a bit shy.

Cole huffed a little laugh, then pressed a kiss to the back of my hand. Grinning, he slid back on the bed, lying down and propping his head on his folded arm to keep an eye on me.

The straining slope of his erection pressed against his boxer briefs. I scooped a little closer and palmed him over his underwear, drawing my hand in a heavy path up and down the underside of his cock, feeling it grow a little more with each long, slow stroke.

He heaved a sigh of comfort and surrender before adjusting his back and shoulders slightly. “God, I love it when you touch me,” he said in a low rumble.

“I love making you feel good,” I murmured, dragging my teeth across my lower lip. It still didn’t feel natural for me to talk to him during these experiences, but I adored his little affirmations when we made love. I wanted to give him the

same feeling. I wanted him to know how much I treasured our little dives into physical intimacy.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he said, holding out his hand.

“But I’m taking care of you right now,” I said.

“No, no. I’m not having that. Come here,” he said, his tone a little sterner. “Unless you don’t want me touching you.”

“N-no, I want you to, but...” I flushed, nibbling on the inside of my lip.

“Tell me what you want,” he said gently, his eyes hooded. “Don’t be shy, baby. I want you to feel free to tell me when, why, and how you want me. It makes me feel so good to know you want me.”

Relenting, I crawled up onto the bed. When I was close enough, he positioned me comfortably on his lap. He slid his hands into the thin fabric of my robe and rested them on the spot where my thighs met my pelvis. His thumbs rested close to my vulva, brushing tantalizingly over my pajamas.

“So, what is my lady love’s delight tonight?” he asked, pressing a kiss to each of my knuckles in a slow, savoring calm.

“Is there anything you haven’t shown me yet?” I asked, brushing my free hand down his bare chest, across the ridges of muscle around his ribcage, his abdomen. He smiled against my hand.

“You want to try something new, sweetheart?” he asked, “Feeling a little curious? A little playful?”

I dropped my gaze to hide my embarrassment, but Cole used his free hand to lift my chin until I was looking at him again. “Eyes up, baby. I want you to look at me when you’re talking to me,” he instructed.

I cleared my throat. “I am feeling a little curious, yes. I’m not...not bored or anything. I’ve learned so much from you in the course of our relationship. I’m just curious what other things you like and whether or not I’ll like them, too.”

“Sure,” Cole said with a smile. “Well, there are some things we could try that require supplies, but there’s something we haven’t tried that I think you might like.”

“What is it?” I asked softly, my breath hitching.

“Can I move you?”

“Absolutely,” I breathed. “You know I love it when you put me where you need me.”

He chuckled and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I do, but still good to check.”

He grasped me by my hips, lifting me with ease and turning me so I faced away from him. Then he adjusted himself beneath me, sitting up a little so his head was a bit more elevated.

“On your hands and knees, sweetheart,” he instructed warmly.

I obliged, taking care not to accidentally kick him in the face as I adjusted myself. We chuckled as I arranged myself awkwardly, and then Cole was sliding my robe and nightgown up to the small of my back, revealing my underwear and backside, his breath hot on my skin.

I craned my neck to look back at him, and he met my eyes as he kneaded my ass, pushing the soft flesh aside. I could feel my center part for him, warm and already wet, and a soft sigh escaped me as the sweet tightness of arousal and anticipation moved through me.

He drew one hand back just a few inches before slapping my ass firmly, the sound echoing in the room. I gasped.

“These panties are so pretty,” he said as he kneaded and parted me again. I could feel the lace of my panties nestling slightly between my outer lips, the roughness of the fabric stimulating enough to make me crazy.

“You like them?” I asked through a gasp.

“Mm-hmm,” he rumbled as he stroked his thumb across the lacy fabric that pressed against my most sensitive parts. My back arched involuntarily, the angle of my hips shifting to

grant him easier access. “My sweet, impatient, beautiful mate. What do you think is coming?”

“Me, hopefully,” I replied.

He sputtered a laugh before pressing his thumb into me, my panties now a frustrating barrier between my center and the penetration I so desperately wanted. “A little reward for such a delightfully terrible joke,” he remarked.

In one swift move, Cole hooked that same thumb into my panties and pulled them aside. “God, that’s pretty,” he said, and I didn’t think he was talking about my panties.

I was about to give a sassy reply when he pulled me back toward him and slipped his tongue against my clit, dragging it slowly and torturously to my opening, where he made a few delicious circles.

I gasped and moaned, elbows buckling with the shockwaves of pleasure. “*Fuck,*” I whispered.

He hummed into me by way of answering.

He savored me like that for several moments, enjoying the taste of me, the sounds of me enjoying him. All the while, I watched as his cock went from the slight stiffness I’d coaxed with my hand to a full erection, standing proudly and pushing at the opening of his boxer briefs.

I swallowed the saliva pooling in my mouth. My mind went back to that night on the roof, to his hands knotted in my hair as he fucked my mouth. I wanted to feel him inside me again, wanted to taste this proof of his desire for me.

I fumbled clumsily with his waistband until I finally managed to free his member. It sprang out with the coiled tension I could feel coursing through the rest of his body—the same tension that kept my muscles taut.

“Good girl,” he said, his voice warm with praise. “You’re picking up on the flow of things now.”

I lowered my mouth onto him just as he flattened his tongue against my slit again. I suckled tightly on the head of his cock, circling my tongue around it just as he slipped his

finger into me and slowly stroked against that magic little spot he'd been able to find so astutely. While he did that, he caught my little bud of nerves between his teeth and suckled slowly and rhythmically.

“*Mmm,*” I groaned around him, taking him deeper into my mouth.

A second finger joined the first, making the fit a bit tighter and increasing the friction. My whole body was a live wire, my stomach clenched, my thighs tight. I pressed him into the back of my throat. God, it felt so good to have him both in my mouth and between my legs.

I quickened the pace, undulating my head to increase the pressure on his cock, finding new pleasure in it with every suck and lick.

“Fuck,” he said against me. He slid his fingers out of me, and I made a distressed noise.

“Easy, baby,” he said. “I’m not done with you yet.”

With no warning, he wrapped his arms around me, cupping his hands around my breasts and lifting me up. Gently, he moved me closer to the foot of the bed, still on my hands and knees.

Cole positioned himself behind me, using his knees to bring mine together as he massaged my breasts, bringing that tension to my peaked nipples as he pinched them between his thumbs and forefingers.

I whimpered, elbows buckling again. He didn’t let me collapse, though; one hand caught me, damp fingers wrapping around the bend in my arm. He tweaked my other nipple just a little longer before grabbing my other arm the same way, pulling both my arms slightly behind me.

His cock pressed against my entrance. There was a pause, a slight adjustment, and then the slow push in, and in, and in. He used his grip on my arms as leverage to bury himself deep inside me.

His breath hissed out between his teeth. “Fuck, Marley,” he breathed. “You always feel so perfect around my cock. You

feeling okay? Does this hurt?"

I whimpered before shaking my head.

"Use your words, baby. I need to know I'm not hurting you."

"I-it doesn't hurt," I gasped needily.

"Good girl," he said. "I'm going to adjust my grip a little, and I need you to tell me if it hurts."

He pulled my arms farther behind me, my shoulders shifting to accommodate the pull. He did it slowly, carefully, until I was almost upright. "All right?" he asked again.

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he grunted before driving himself into me, pressing into the very depths of me.

I cried out softly before biting down on my lip to stop any sound from escaping me. We hadn't soundproofed the room yet, and the last thing we needed was Noah bursting into the room to check on us.

"Very good, baby," Cole said, a smile in his voice as he thrust in and out of me again and again.

With my legs squeezed together, it was like I could feel every inch of him against those sensitive nerves inside me. That tight fit, the angle, enabled him to thrust deeper, perfectly straddling the line between pleasure and pain. I kept biting down on my lip, choking down my moans as he drove up into me again and again.

"F-f-fuck, *Cole*," I whispered. "I'm going to—"

"Go right ahead, sweetheart. Come for me," he growled next to my ear. "But be nice and quiet for me, like a good girl."

I nodded as I felt my climax edging closer and closer until it finally crashed into me. Choking down my moan, I let out quiet, whining breaths as he continued to pump into me.

I'd had mine, but he hadn't had his yet. He kept going, his speed increasing as my muscles clenched around him.

“Fuck, Marley. Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he growled with each thrust.

He pulled out of me and came, his warm seed hitting my inner thigh and trickling down my shaking leg.

He bent his head, resting it on my shoulder as he caught his breath. As his breathing slowed, he pressed tender kisses against my shoulder before loosening his grip around my arms, careful not to let me collapse forward.

Cole wrapped his arms around me in a gentle embrace before sitting us back against the headboard. He held me close, peppering my face, neck, and shoulders with chaste kisses. I laughed softly, turning my head to kiss him deeply.

He smiled into the kiss and brushed my hair away from my face. “How was that?” he asked me.

I gave a joking, noncommittal shrug. “All right, I guess.”

Laughing, he flicked my nose lightly. “Smart ass,” he said. “Let me get something to clean you up so we can finally get some sleep.”

“That sounds perfect,” I said.

He slid out from under me, grabbing a wet towel from the bathroom to help me clean my thighs while he tidied himself up, too. He checked my arms for marks and made sure I could still move them properly. We lay back down, and he pulled me against his chest.

“You are a fucking marvel, you know that?” he said, kissing my forehead. “Every time I make love to you, it gets better and better.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” I said with a sigh, kissing the spot over his heart.

My eyelids started to droop, my body gently humming in a sort of pleasure hangover. Cole smoothed his hands up and down my back.

“Go to sleep, baby,” he said. “Big day tomorrow.”

Lashes fluttering, I said, “I love you.”

He smiled against my forehead and brushed another kiss over my temple. "I love you, too. Nothing will ever change that."

As I drifted off to sleep, I realized that for the first time in my life, I could believe someone when they told me those words.

I could believe him.

Chapter 2

Cole

Despite how tired I was after a *very* enjoyable time fucking my mate, I had a hard time getting any rest after we were done. Marley, thankfully, fell asleep almost immediately. That was my primary concern, anyway—having her get some sleep before we were dealing with airports, taxis, and babysitters.

The truth was, I'd been having quite a bit of trouble sleeping after that harrowing day at the parking structure. Some nights, I just stayed up and watched Marley sleep. Some nights, her rhythmic inhaling and exhaling helped lull me to sleep. Other nights, I was too obsessed with the fact that I'd almost lost her forever that I couldn't find any rest at all.

Travis had called it out pretty quickly after we left the hospital, noticing the lapse in my attention to detail, my clarity, and my decision-making. I'd even called my sister about it when I was out running errands for work.

“The first time I had to use lethal force on the job was when we found a man who had nearly beaten his wife to death twice, and he came at us with a screwdriver,” she'd told me. “Killing a man—even a horrible one like that—gave me insomnia for weeks.”

I couldn't tell if I was haunted by Wyatt dying because of my defending myself from him, or if I was haunted by the idea that I'd almost failed in protecting Marley. I flipped between the two again and again. Sometimes, I spiraled on the guilt I felt over Noah experiencing so much trauma because I hadn't been there when he'd needed me.

Marley was seeing her therapist twice a week now. I wondered if I would benefit from seeing one, too. Then again, it would probably be hard to find someone who specialized in treating shifters. Our issues and traumas were tied to a completely different set of biological drives that even general practitioners didn't fully understand yet.

So, I watched Marley sleep, watched the minutes tick by, watched the blue morning light come in through the shitty blinds I had yet to replace. I'd have to do that when we got back from Georgia.

Another thing to pile on my many spinning plates.

Marley's alarm started chiming a little after sunrise, and I watched her do her adorable deep inhale through her nose as she stretched her body languidly like a cat. Her body went slack, and she grumbled.

"Too early," she murmured.

"Mmm," I said, doing my best to sound sleepy, too. "Sleep well? Any more nightmares?"

"No. I slept soundly thanks to a *certain someone's* hard work," she said coyly. "Speaking of which, I better hop in the shower real quick before we take Noah to your mom's. That is a humiliation I have no interest in."

"You and me both," I said, kissing her temple. "Allow me to join you."

Eyes still closed, she smiled as I kissed my way down the line of her jaw, her neck, and then her collarbone.

"God, it is so nice to wake up to someone who *actually* likes you," she said softly. "I feel more spoiled every day."

"As you should," I said primly before rolling on top of her. Careful to support most of my weight on my arms, I rested my chin on her chest just below her collarbone. She smiled down at me and brushed her fingers through my hair. I closed my eyes, relishing the feel of it. "Careful. You're going to put me right to sleep."

"Like a puppy getting a scratch behind the ears?"

“Tsk, tsk, Marley. Making dog jokes about a shifter?” I teased. “You should know better.”

She gave a warm chuckle, but didn’t stop playing with my hair. I knew we didn’t have much time for this, but I couldn’t deny myself the comfort of her gentleness in this moment. Not after a night of cycling between guilt about my son and guilt about her.

“How are you feeling about the trip?” she asked.

“Good,” I said. “Got a chance to talk a bit to my grandfather, Victor. Seems like a decent enough guy to me. Can’t imagine he’s going to be much like my mom and dad have always claimed. How about you?”

I slid my arms around Marley, nuzzling into her a bit more as her nails scratched my scalp gently. She was quiet for a long moment before she let out a breath.

“Well, I’m much less nervous than I was feeling a couple of weeks ago,” she admitted. “But I’m still a little nervous. I really don’t want a redo of the meeting at the gym, you know?”

“I don’t think that will happen. Those were strangers; this is my family.”

“Your family, but they’re strangers to me—and you,” she said. “I just don’t want them to be wary of me. I want them to like me.”

“They will like you,” I promised. “Just show them all what a wonderful person you are. Show them the real you, and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

She worried her lower lip between her teeth in such a way that told me she wasn’t entirely convinced.

I brushed my hand up her side and kissed the spot over her heart. “I won’t let them hurt you, Marley.”

She smiled at me again and gave a tight nod. “Well, if we made it through that day on the parking structure, we can make it through this, too, right?”

“That’s my girl,” I said, coming onto all fours to kiss her lips. “I’ll get the shower started. You just rest for now.”

“How did I wind up with such a sweet man?”

“Must have something to do with how sweet you are.”

After our shower, we got Noah packed up and headed to my parents’ house. It was still quite early in the morning when we arrived; my mother and father were still in their pajamas and having breakfast. Noah wouldn’t have to be at school for another couple of hours.

When we entered, my mom gave each of us a good squeeze before picking up Noah and hefting him over to the breakfast table.

“How’s that tooth of yours doing, kiddo?” my mom asked.

Noah beamed widely and pushed at it with his tongue. “It’s wiggly!”

“Maybe we ought to tie a string to it. Do the old doorknob trick?” my dad suggested.

“That would be one way to handle it,” I said. “I can’t believe we’re already at the point where Noah is starting to lose teeth.” I shook my head and sighed.

“Time goes by fast, doesn’t it?” My dad smiled and clapped me on the shoulder. “Well, kids, you wanna stay for breakfast, or do you guys need to get on over to the airport?”

“We’d better get a move on,” I said. “Going to pick up some breakfast near the gate. We’re already running a bit late. Last thing I need is for Travis to complain about my punctuality and driving.”

“I’ll walk you out to the car,” my dad offered. “See you off.”

I said a quick goodbye to my son, kneeling to give him a big hug and a kiss on top of his head before leaving him with the promise of goodnight phone calls.

Marley and I both hugged my mom, then made our way back to Marley’s little car—a safer bet than leaving the Jeep at

the airport for the next three days. I could sense my dad was following us out to the car for a private conversation, so as we neared the vehicle, I turned to face him.

“All good?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “Just wanted to give you a little advice before you head out there and see my parents.”

Marley stilled next to me, her focus homing in on my dad.

“Sure,” I said, reaching for Marley’s hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “What’s up?”

“My parents—your grandparents—can be pretty hard-headed. As a result, a lot of their pack is the same,” he said. “I know that my parents are doing better about interspecies couples, and I know they’re getting a lot more progressive, but just be careful while you’re there. If a pack is a body, the alpha is the brain. It can take a while for the rest of the body to catch up after a big change, you know?”

He looked to Marley, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. “Stay near Cole, all right? I’m not saying anyone will go out of their way to hurt you, but sometimes in a closed-off situation like our family’s pack, the wild and animalistic nature of our lupine sides can go unchecked. People start acting more like wolves than people. Just be mindful and aware.”

I shifted a little uncomfortably on my feet. “Uh...Dad?”

“Hmm?” he asked, training his intense gaze on me.

“You’re not saying that some asshole is going to try and claim Marley, are you?” I asked. “This isn’t some thinly veiled request for me to win the pissing contest before it can start?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Listen, I’m just saying this stuff out of an abundance of caution. If I thought someone was going to attempt some old-fashioned throwdown to try and claim your mate, I wouldn’t even advise going there with Marley by your side. I just want you to be careful, that’s all.”

I looked at Marley. While she was squeezing my hand hard enough for it to hurt even me with my shifter strength, she

seemed strangely determined.

“We’ll be careful,” she promised. “I’ll stay near Cole. And if I need to get out of there, we’ll plan for that contingency.”

“You could always head out with Travis and Jack if needed,” I suggested.

Marley nodded and released my hand so she could hug my father. “Thank you, Kenneth,” she said.

I nodded at my dad, conveying the same gratitude in a way I knew he’d understand. My father gave Marley a lingering hug and patted her back twice before giving her a little peck on the top of her head and letting her go.

“You kids give us a call when you land and when you arrive,” he said. “We’ve got Noah and everything else covered for now.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll touch base in a few hours,” I said.

Marley and I got in the car and made our way to the airport. After the usual inconveniences of dealing with check-in and TSA, we made it to the gate to find Jack and Travis already there. As predicted, Travis was on my ass immediately for showing up so close to boarding time. I let him have his fun, especially since I could tell from the way his knees bounced that he was feeling nervous about the trip.

Despite the lecture, we still had about half an hour to wait before we boarded the plane. As we sat munching on fast food and coffee, Jack was the first to start a conversation.

“So, Lana didn’t want to come with us?” Jack asked Travis, his arm hooked over the back of his vinyl seat. “I was hoping we could get her perspective on this whole thing.”

“Honestly?” Travis said. “She can’t leave work right now. The superintendent of the district has made a nice, cozy home up her asshole, so she can’t risk leaving and having anything even slightly off at POSHA. Besides that,” he continued, “I think it’s important for me to take away my own conclusions from this trip. I’m going to do my best to give Marley and Cole their space while I do my own research separately. I want

to make sure that this decision is one I make entirely for myself.”

“A good call,” Marley said between bites of her French toast sticks. “You never know what you’re doing for others when everything’s so close, you know?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Travis said. “I was doing some reading online—there are entire online communities based around late-in-life shifting—and I’ve been getting a lot of insight into some of the pitfalls that other people have fallen into.”

“Like what?” Jack asked.

“Some people took on the change to please controlling partners, some did it when they were still quite young and weren’t thinking of the long-term consequences, and some just had no idea what they were signing up for when they left one community for a new one,” Travis said. “Like, there’s one guy who said if he’d known how competitive shifters could be and if he’d realized his human friends would be afraid of him, he wouldn’t have done it.”

“Do you think you’re going to feel that way?” I asked.

“Honestly? No,” Travis said. “You’ve been my best friend for years—I’m used to competition. Even competition I always seem to lose.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Well, that may change when the biological playing field is leveled,” I pointed out. “For all we know, you might end up kicking my ass on the regular. We might have to change the power structure in the pack.”

“Oh, well, wouldn’t that be something? Alpha Travis,” he said with a far-too-excited beam. “Lana would hate that. She loves bossing me around too much.”

“You guys are made for each other,” I said. “You’re entirely too bossy, too.”

“Pfft. You say bossy, I say organized,” Travis said. “Speaking of which, you guys have your tickets ready?”

“I got ’em,” Marley said, waving the little envelope that held our boarding passes.

“See?” Travis said to me. “You gotta have your mate carry them. Cole, you’re a great and mature man in most ways, but in others, you’re still just an unaccompanied minor.”

“I guess that makes me your chaperone for the day,” Marley said with a sweet little titter.

“Or my *mommy*,” I countered.

“Oh, gag,” Jack said with a dramatic dry heave.

“Yeah, could we not do that?” Travis added.

“Play stupid games, win stupid prizes,” I said. “You don’t want to think about Mommy Marley, then don’t present the idea.”

“I would argue that it’s *you* who doesn’t want to think about Mommy Marley,” Travis asserted.

“You’re both wrong—it’s actually Lana,” Marley said.

“Oh, fuck. Shit. You’re right.” Travis stiffened in his seat. “Better change the subject.”

I wound up being glad that Travis and Jack were with us as we boarded the plane in our respective seats. They were back in economy somewhere, but I’d sprung for first-class seats for me and Marley because limited legroom made me want to die. Also, something about flying always made me hungry, and first class had unlimited snacks.

Marley seemed in good spirits as we settled into our seats. In fact, she looked adorably excited.

“What are you all chipper about?” I asked, smiling as I stowed our carry-on bags in the overhead bin.

“I’ve never flown first class before,” she said. “These seats are so comfortable. And look!” She pulled out a plastic bag from the pouch in front of her that held a blanket, an eye mask, and a set of earbuds. “They gave us free stuff.”

I chuckled as I shut the overhead compartment good and tight, checking to ensure it wouldn’t bust open. “I mean, technically,” I said as I sat next to her, “we did pay for those courtesy items.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have to pay *more* on the flight, you know? It’s more like you paid for the bigger seats, and they threw in extra stuff.”

“Ah, I see. It’s an incentive.”

“That’s right,” she said, cracking open the plastic bag and unfurling a small fleece blanket. I turned on the air conditioning to get a bit of airflow, then popped a stick of gum into my mouth. I offered the pack to Marley. “For the ear-popping,” I explained when she frowned at me.

“Oh.” She giggled. “I was worried you were trying to tell me my breath stinks.”

“Considering the events of last night—or this morning—I think it’s safe to say I’m willing to tolerate any number of things about your breath without putting up a fuss.” I winked.

“God, you’re so dirty sometimes, you know that?” she said as she popped the gum into her mouth.

Not long after, the flight took off, and we settled into the pleasant boredom of the two-hour flight to Savannah, Georgia. Marley, despite her excitement over the free sleeping gear, spent most of the flight staring out the window at the sea of fluffy clouds. I mostly spent my time watching her and engaging with her each time she pointed out a particularly pretty one still splashed in pinkish light from the early morning.

We began our descent just as I started to get antsy about being confined in a tin can with wings. Landing didn’t feel much better; at that point, it was all about getting our bags from the carousel, managing the logistics of our rental cars, and finally, getting to the pack lands. I always hated these parts of traveling—the hurry and bustle and stress of everything working out at exactly the right time, dealing with crowds of other grumpy travelers, the inevitability of something going wrong.

Still, as we got off our flight and waited for Jack and Travis, I couldn’t feel too stressed. Not with Marley in such a decent mood beside me.

“I thought you’d be more nervous,” I said to her as I smoothed my disheveled hair. “You seem perfectly at ease, though.”

“I am nervous,” she admitted. “But I trust you to protect me. I also don’t think your grandfather would invite us all to come if he thought I could get hurt. And at the end of the day, it’s not Curt or Wyatt we have to worry about, you know?”

I nodded and heaved a sigh. “Very true. That was an entirely different ball game.”

When Travis and Jack joined us, things became a blur of pulling up reservation emails, looking for our luggage, and debating on whether we should eat lunch now or wait until we got to the pack lands. We decided to wait, too nervous to conceive of eating a heavy meal, especially when we had an hour’s drive ahead of us. When we finally got into the rental cars—Travis and Jack in one, and Marley and me in the other—my skin was humming with nerves.

Marley seemed to sense my unease as we pulled onto the interstate. “You okay?” she asked.

“Uh...I don’t know. I’ve got something going on,” I said. “Chest feels tight, and stomach is twisting.”

“You’re anxious.” She reached over to pat my thigh reassuringly. “It’s understandable. This is kind of an important trip, and your dad psyched us out right before we left.”

“Yeah, he sure fucking did,” I said. “I was worried he’d freak you out.”

“I mean, I am really nervous. I don’t want to be ostracized or second-guessed, but I’ve also spent the last three months being ostracized and second-guessed, so it’s something I’m starting to get used to. Especially with the help of my therapist.”

I nodded, eyes on the road as I forced myself to take a long, slow breath. “I’m less worried about people being shitty to you and more worried about some hotshot getting the wrong idea and trying to claim you.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned that,” she said. “The claiming thing. What exactly is that?”

My face heated, and I pressed my lips together. “Uh,” I said, trying to bide time.

“Cole, are you blushing?” Marley sounded amused.

“It’s just...listen, it’s a wolf thing, and it’s kind of embarrassing. Essentially, claiming is a very feral, kind of unhinged sex act that would...claim you as mine.”

She was quiet for a long time, and we passed three exits as she processed that information. I could sense the gears turning in her head. By the time she spoke again, my left knee was bouncing. I’d wanted to avoid the embarrassment of having this conversation with my human mate.

“So, your father basically suggested that you rail me as soon as we arrive?”

Marley’s words were so direct, so vulgar compared to her normal way of talking, that I barked a laugh. She’d never referred to sex as *railing*, not even when she was at her most turned-on and minx-like.

Once my laughter subsided, I shook my head. “I mean, I don’t think he would use those exact words.”

“What exactly is involved in this ‘unhinged’ sex act?”

“You really want to talk about this?”

The car’s air conditioning wafted her scent toward me. I glanced at her to confirm what I’d sniffed. Sure enough, she was nibbling on her lower lip and pressing her thighs together.

“Marley,” I chastised gently.

“Eyes on the road!” she shouted as she grabbed my chin and turned my gaze back ahead.

But there were almost no cars on this secluded stretch of highway, so I had a feeling the gesture had nothing to do with driving safely and everything to do with how embarrassed she was by her own curiosity.

God, she was so fucking cute. I couldn't fathom how she had the capacity to be so sensual and so preciously adorable at the same time. I kept my eyes on the road as she'd commanded, but I couldn't help but grin like an idiot.

"What's that dumb smile for?" she muttered.

"You're curious," I teased.

"Well, I mean, you have been a corrupting influence on me! Like, I was happy to get a quick little missionary session and go on my merry way. You're the one who introduced me to...to..."

She trailed off, and I felt a predatory, hungry curl of temptation I couldn't resist.

"To...face-fucking?"

"Cole..." she warned.

"And hair pulling?"

The smell of her arousal—honey and Georgia peaches—filled the car even more.

"Why do you love messing with me so much?" she asked. "It's like you're *trying* to embarrass me!"

"How can I not when you make it so fun?" I teased.

"Are you going to tell me about this heinous sex act, or are you going to leave it to my imagination?"

"You know, I think I will leave it to your imagination."

I could feel her gaze on me, the burn of her frustration scraping against my own emotional landscape. It only made me smile wider.

"You're a real dick sometimes," she grumbled.

"And yet, you still love me," I said.

"Against my will," she insisted, but then she laughed and sank a little deeper into her seat. "If I wind up pouncing you as soon as we're settled in, let the record show that it was entirely your fault."

“Duly noted,” I promised. “I could think of worse fates than my sexy mate wanting me to fuck her like an animal.”

I felt Marley’s gaze on me again and looked over to meet it. She wore an adorably flushed expression, complete with a scrunched-up nose.

This was the best road trip I’d had in a long time.

Chapter 3

Marley

Stupid Cole with his stupid perfect body and his stupid sexy smile and his penchant for sweet torture. I couldn't tell what was worse—that he wouldn't tell me about the claiming, or that he'd left me to my own devices to imagine what it could be.

The drive was a long, torturous twenty miles after that. Cole seemed happy to engage in any conversation except the one consuming my thoughts, made all the more infuriating every time he cheekily asked me if I was feeling “a little distracted.”

When we pulled up to a set of gates, I fixed my face to not look too much like a petulant child. The kid working in the security kiosk was young, maybe seventeen, with bronze skin and dark brown hair. He wore a polo with a logo of a crescent moon. The moon had a wolf print inside it.

“Fancier than I was expecting,” Cole said under his breath as he rolled down his window.

The young man beamed at us. “You must be the old man's grandson, and she, your mate,” he said to Cole. “Welcome to the headquarters for the Savannah Silver Moon pack. We're happy to have you here.”

The young man handed a pamphlet to Cole. It had a map with a highlighted route through a collection of streets inside the compound. “If you just follow the route mapped out here, you'll get to guest housing. The house number and door code are written on the corner there, so no pesky key to worry about

holding onto or losing,” he said. “I’m Eugenio. I also put my number down there in case you need anything and the old man is away.”

“Thanks, Eugenio,” Cole said. “For the info and the warm welcome.”

Jack and Travis pulled in behind us. Cole looked back at their SUV in the rearview mirror. “That’s my second and my mate’s brother. You were expecting them, too, correct?”

“Jack and Travis? Yes, sir, we were expecting them. They’ll be staying in the housing directly next door to yours.”

“Thanks. Need anything else from me?” Cole asked.

“Not at all. Enjoy your stay.”

Eugenio reached for a remote and clicked the single button on it. The heavy gate opened slowly, as if it was made of solid steel. Perhaps it was. Cole took the route specified with me playing navigator. Jack and Travis followed behind us.

Driving through the compound sort of felt like we were entering an exclusive gated community or a military base. There were cafés, restaurants, parks, libraries. We even saw a small handful of shifters doing deep stretches in their lupine forms.

“This is…” I started.

“It’s weird,” Cole assessed.

“I was going to say it’s kind of beautiful.”

He looked down at me, his brows raised. “Beautiful?”

I nodded. “Sure. I mean, you always have to be so careful about where you shift when we’re back in New Middle Bluff. It’s kind of amazing to see shifters just doing their thing both in and out of their wolf forms, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. It’s kind of reading *Stepford Wolves* to me.”

I snorted and broke into a ridiculous fit of giggles. It started with a little trilling laugh before devolving into tear-

jerking cackling. “That one tops all the others,” I said through my tears. “God, that is the dad joke of all dad jokes.”

“Well, now you’ve just given me a challenge,” Cole said, reaching over to squeeze the soft flesh of my waist. I gave a startled yelp before breaking into another giggle fit. “Hey, come on, focus,” he teased me. “You’re our navigator.”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry. Um, turn right up ahead, then left at the next street.”

Soon, we found ourselves deep in the center of the compound, surrounded by a little stretch of picture-perfect townhouses all painted in pastels like the famous ones in San Francisco. I could only imagine what Jack was saying in the car behind us.

Oh my god, Marley, you have to help me figure out how to find a shifter boy so I can live here.

I shook my head at the thought as Cole pulled into the parking spot with the same label as the building we’d be staying in. “Wait here a minute. Don’t get out of the car without me right next to you,” he said.

“Sure,” I said, nerves creeping back into my good mood. It wasn’t so much that I was scared of what would happen here. Honestly, I wasn’t sure what daunted me. Part of me just didn’t love the idea of having to go everywhere with an alpha escort.

All the same, I waited until Cole came back and opened my door for me, offering me a hand to help me out of the sedan.

I took it and got out of the car, stretching my arms above my head and rolling my shoulders. “Ugh, it wasn’t even that long of a drive, and I already feel stiff.”

“Maybe we could think of a way to loosen you up,” Cole murmured, his lips right by my ear.

I rolled my eyes and swatted his chest. He laughed, catching my hand before I could withdraw it completely. “Does this mean you’re ready to tell me what claiming is?” I teased.

“Careful, sweetheart. We’re surrounded by a strange pack, and wolves have *excellent* hearing.”

That was a no.

Jerk.

My brother and Travis approached us, and sure enough, Jack practically squealed in delight. “Marley, remind me to swipe right on more shifters. These houses are fucking cute.”

“You know we don’t all come with furnished houses, right?” Cole asked dryly.

“Well, I’ll just have to swipe right on the correct ones, then,” Jack said with a shrug before making his way to the house he’d be staying in with Travis.

I looked up at Cole. “Should we bring the bags in now?”

“Let’s check the place out first,” he replied.

The house was adorable. It had an open, airy floor plan with pretty, pale blue paneling and white molding. The décor was mostly beach-themed, giving it a comforting ambiance that reminded me of home. There were wood floors, an ample kitchen with new fixtures, and more than enough places to sit and work if needed.

A narrow set of stairs led to the sleeping quarters—a loft-style room with the largest bed I’d ever seen and no shortage of lounging furniture. Chaises, sofas, cushioned seats, and ottomans were arranged around the space.

The en suite bathroom was nearly half the size of the huge sleeping quarters. The most notable features were the separate shower and bath, each almost twice the size of the sizable ones Cole had in the beach house.

“Holy hell,” I said, peeking around the door. “Do they think we’re going to be entertaining in the bathroom?”

Cole came up behind me to scan the bathroom. “They’re sized so you can shower or bathe while shifted. I have a few clients who prefer to bathe in their lycan form.”

“Do you like to do that?”

“I haven’t really tried it, except for out in the wild.” He shrugged. “Lakes, rivers, that sort of thing.”

I tapped my lips with a finger, wondering what it would be like to bathe with Cole while he was in his lycan form. It sounded almost cozy and comfortable. I wondered if he’d want to try it while we were here or if it would be offensive of me to ask it of him. I opted to keep that idea to myself for now. If it came up naturally, I’d bring it up.

I turned my attention back to Cole, who was now settling into one of the larger pieces of lounging furniture. I plopped down next to him, and he pulled me in tight, wrapping me in his arms and peppering the top of my head with sweet, adoring kisses. When I looked up at him, he was giving me a lazy smile.

“What is that smile for?” I asked.

His grin took on a bit of an edge before he pulled me onto his lap and kissed me deeply. “Awful big bed over there,” he said softly.

“It sure is.”

“Big enough for a heinous sex act,” he said, then laughed at the angry pout that formed on my face.

“You’re exceptionally cruel,” I said. “If you keep it up, I’m not going to tell you my theories on claiming.”

“Theories? You have more than one?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that I spent the rest of the drive over here pondering what it could be.”

“Well, you have to tell me now.”

“I think that really depends on if you’re a good boy or not.”

“Oh, is Ms. Cage putting her foot down?” Cole teased. “Enforcing the rules?”

Heat crept into my face and I narrowed my eyes. “Someone’s acting like they don’t want to hear my theories.”

Cole gave a bright, boisterous laugh before squeezing me closer to him. He stood up so abruptly with me still in his arms that I yelped and tightened my arms around his neck. He bent down to put me back on the loveseat.

“I’ll have to be on my best behavior then, won’t I?” he asked, brushing his lips over my temple. “I’ll go grab the bags.”

“Wait, I’ll come help,” I said, holding onto his shoulders as he started to withdraw.

“Rest. It’s been a long day of traveling,” he said, smiling. “Try out the bed, okay?”

He winked and gently took my hands off his shoulders. “Be right back.” Then he breezed out of the room and down the stairs.

Sighing, I wandered over to the bed. I pressed my hands on it, feeling the gentle give of soft memory foam and the downy bed covers. I turned down the fluffy comforter, toed off my shoes, then crawled in. It was big when I looked at it, but even more so when I was actually lying in it. Cole had a slightly oversized king mattress, but this one was like a king and a queen combined. And it was so comfortable. The soft mattress and heavy comforter enveloped me in a comforting cocoon. The untouched linens were cool to the touch, and the pillows cradled my head like clouds.

“Oh my god,” I moaned.

“That good?” Cole asked.

I started, lifting my head to see him in the doorway, holding our bags. He had an easy, content smile on his face.

“That was quick,” I remarked.

“Well, I’ve got to be a good boy.” He waggled his eyebrows. “I’m just going to hang up our clothes, then I’ll come join you.”

“Let me help.”

“It won’t take me more than a few moments. You just stay over there and be comfy.”

“If I stay here, I’m going to fall asleep.”

“Good. We need a nap before our outing tonight.”

“Outing?”

“Eugenio stopped by while I was unloading the car,” Cole explained. “Apparently, there’s some big feast thing to celebrate our arrival. I tried to insist we didn’t need it, but the kid was adamant that it’s tradition when another alpha is visiting and...well—”

“Better to not undermine yourself if they’re trying hard to give you recognition as an alpha,” I finished.

His jaw worked a little as he opened our bags and started unpacking.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t know how I feel about going to a huge event like that with you,” he said. “I don’t want something to happen when I’m the only one there to protect you.”

“I don’t think anything bad will happen,” I said. “I don’t think your grandfather would allow something bad to happen.”

“You’re probably right,” he said as he hung our clothes in the closet across the room. “I think that warning my dad gave me is just kind of freaking me out.”

“Yeah.” I smiled at him. “But if your dad was truly worried about something happening to me, he would have told us not to come, right? Or he would have come with us. He just wanted us to be on our toes, not hide out.”

Cole nodded as he hung one of my dresses. “All the same, you stick close tonight, okay?”

“Like glue,” I promised.

He smiled at me for a moment before returning to his task. “Warm up that bed for me, and we’ll take a nice afternoon nap before we have to look like functional, competent pack leaders.”

“We?” I repeated. “I’m just the set dressing.”

He shook his head. “You are not the set dressing.”

Yet, as Cole said it, he seemed a little distracted. I could tell he was turning something over in his mind. While I wanted to pick a little play fight, I could just tell he needed space to think and ponder.

I snuggled back in the bed, letting my body get heavy and sink into it. Planning on just resting a little until Cole joined me, I closed my eyes and listened to the birds twittering away outside and the quiet, metallic clinks of the velvet-lined hangers as Cole put our clothes away.

Then, after what felt like only seconds, Cole was climbing into bed and wrapping his arms around me, pulling me tight against him, my back pressed to his chest. He nuzzled the back of my neck, kissing the skin there and inhaling deeply. I couldn’t tell if he was smelling me or just settling in.

“That was fast,” I murmured as I relaxed against him.

“No, it took a while. You just fell asleep, sweetheart,” he said, kissing that sensitive spot behind my ear. “You’re right, though. This bed is ridiculous.”

“I know.” A soft chuckle drifted from my lips. “How long have I been out?”

“Twenty minutes or so. We don’t have to get up for another few hours.”

“Good. ’Cause I’m obsessed with this bed right now.”

“Mmm. So, have I been a good enough boy to hear one of those claiming theories before you fall back asleep?”

A giggle went through me. “I’ll give you the least creative one. How about that?”

“I’ll allow it.”

“How kind of you,” I teased. “Does it have to do with finishing inside me? Is that the heinous sex act?”

“That’s not a heinous sex act, Marley,” he said, the soft huff of his laughter tickling my ear. “That’s normal behavior. In fact, I’m pretty sure I have finished inside you.”

“I thought it could be a ritual version or something. A particular way you do it. And you usually opt not to, like last night.”

“There’s no freaky cum magic I’m avoiding. If anything, that’s because I like making a mess of you, silly girl. And out of an abundance of caution because it’s a little early for a pregnancy scare, my being lost in the throes of passion notwithstanding.”

“Well, that’s the first theory,” I said. “I’ll have to see how the night pans out to decide if you get to hear any more.”

“Such a slave driver,” Cole said as he kissed me on the back of my neck, right where my hairline was. I shivered as his warm breath sent goosebumps down my skin. “Go back to sleep, baby.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. The combination of the impossibly comfortable bed and his arms tangled around me was enough to knock me out within minutes.

We woke to the sun slanting into the room at a lazy angle, splashing the entire room in the orange haze of dusk. I woke up first, feeling Cole’s arms wrapped around my waist, one hand cupping my breast. Every now and then, the hand on my breast tightened, his fingers drifting lazily over my nipple. Cole’s body was curled around mine in an almost protective position. I was almost fully engulfed in him and the blankets.

My mind was hazy as it came back into the present. I was floating in a fog of dreamy comfort, ready to surrender to it again and sleep. Just as I was about to drift off again, the alarm on Cole’s phone went off.

He was so deeply asleep that he jerked, his heart thumping against my back. “Fuck,” he gasped. “Scared the shit out of me.”

“You were passed out,” I said. “Do you want to get a bit more sleep?”

“Probably shouldn’t, as much as I’d like to. If we get too much sleep, we’ll just spend the whole night paranoid and awake.”

“Good point. When do we head out to the...whatever?”

“Eugenio is gonna come get us at seven. It’s five-thirty now. We’ll probably be there late, so better to dress in layers in case it gets cold. I also don’t know if we’ll be inside or outside.”

I nodded and stretched my whole body, Cole moving to accommodate me.

“I love your little kitty-cat stretches,” he said in a voice still heavy with sleep as he kissed my shoulder. “You’re adorable.”

His easy praise, the way he always found something to say he loved about me, made my heart flutter and warm. Cole had a wonderful way of making even the smallest details about me seem special.

The haunting urge to compare Cole to Wyatt hovered at the edge of my subconscious, but I forced myself not to give in to it. It used to be a comfort, a way I could normalize how things were and internalize the belief that I deserved better than what I used to have. What I was so convinced was the only thing I could expect in life.

Now, as much as I was relieved to never have to think about Wyatt darkening my doorstep ever again, it felt almost...uncouth to think about a dead man that way.

Cole and I rolled out of bed together and hopped into the oversized shower to freshen up and look somewhat presentable at the dinner his grandfather, Victor, had arranged for us. I dressed in layers like Cole suggested—jeans, a nice blouse, and a flannel shirt tied around my hips for cooler weather later. I also opted for a cute, slouchy beanie over some loose waves and minimal makeup.

Cole dressed in a similarly casual manner, and then it was time to get going. We were lounging around in the kitchen area when a knock sounded at the door. I followed Cole to find Eugenio smiling warmly at us.

“You guys ready to walk over? It’s not far,” Eugenio said.

“Yeah,” Cole said, subtly positioning himself between me and the teenager. “Lead the way.”

“Great. We’ll just drop by to pick up your friends real quick before we go.”

Cole nodded, and Eugenio headed over to the townhouse next to ours. Once he was gone, Cole tugged me closer, putting his arm around my shoulders and tucking me firmly against his side like a bird taking me under its wing to protect me.

I smiled up at him, and he winked at me. “Moment of truth,” he said.

“Moment of truth,” I agreed.

Before long, the five of us—me, Cole, Jack, Travis, and Eugenio—were all walking down the very same streets we’d driven on earlier, getting an even better chance to see how things were done in the Silver Moon pack. People seemed generally happy, which was a nice change from what I was used to. It was good to see shifters living in relative comfort, especially after the recent tension back in New Middle Bluff with Lanyon Clover and Wyatt. It felt, strangely enough, like I could breathe a little easier, knowing there was less chance of Cole being harassed while we were together.

Though a few passersby ogled us as we walked, no one stopped us or said anything rude or hateful.

After a few blocks, we reached a large building called The Annex. It was like a high school gymnasium on the outside: warm tan bricks with red shingles and wide glass doors like the ones at Shift into Fitness back home. The inside, however, didn’t look much like a gymnasium at all. It was wide open with plenty of room to mingle, its fixtures modern and classy. Not quite as fancy as some of the parties I used to attend with Wyatt when I was with him, but nice enough to make it feel like a proper event. There were lounging areas, a PA system, and a bunch of tables set up like the building was a restaurant.

Jack and Travis parted from us as we came to a stop inside, citing the desire to rub elbows with some of the other people

in the building. There was already quite a large crowd gathered, everyone chatting and smiling. For the most part, everyone looked normal, like any parent I'd see at Polar Shift Academy or anyone at the coffee shop.

As I looked around, I felt a little silly for being surprised by this. I'd heard so many things about Cole's grandfather, especially how controlling he could be, that I'd just assumed it would be miserable to spend time with any of the shifters in his pack. Then again, we were just blending into the crowd for now. There was no telling what would happen later as the night went on.

"What do you think?" I asked Cole.

"Seems nice," Cole said. "Wonder where Gramps is, though."

"Is that any way to refer to your grandfather?" a deep baritone said behind us.

We turned to a man roughly the same height as Cole with white cropped hair. His stubbly, salt-and-pepper beard matched his heavy eyebrows. Most striking was the quirk of his smile, almost an exact duplicate of Cole's.

He looked younger than I'd expected. I'd heard somewhere that shifters had higher life expectancies than humans. Did they also age slower because of that?

Either way, Cole's grandpa?

He was kind of hot.

I felt a little jostle from Cole and looked up at him to find him quirked a single eyebrow at me. Did he—no way had he smelled that thought on me. I wasn't aroused, just observing! Oh, God, if Cole knew, then Victor probably did, too. Mortified, I looked at the older man and made to apologize, but he wasn't even looking at me.

"It's nice to see you, son," Victor said, holding his arms open for him. "C'mere and give this old man a hug."

Cole stepped forward while I stayed frozen in mortification, still not entirely convinced I was off the hook

quite yet. Cole hugged his grandfather, and the men clapped each other's backs in the same way. When they parted, Victor held Cole out at arm's length and smiled. "God, look at you. You're a full-grown man, aren't you?"

Cole chuckled. "I try to be. It's good to finally meet you."

"Good to meet you, too," he said. "And who is your little friend here?"

He glanced over at me, and Cole gazed at me. "This is Marley Cage, my mate."

"N-nice to meet you, Mr. Lucas," I said, stammering more than I would have liked.

"Just call me Vic. Everyone does," Victor said, nodding once at me before looking back at Cole. "You didn't bring my great-grandson?"

"He has school," Cole said with a shrug. "Bad idea to take a kid out during such a formative time, you know?"

"Sure, sure. Next time, then," Victor said. "We've got some time before dinner starts. Why don't you come along with me, and I'll introduce you to some folks?"

Cole nodded and took my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. I sensed the slightest moment of hesitation in Victor before he turned to lead us away. I looked up at Cole, and he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

Victor led us back out of the main room and down the hall until we reached what looked like a study of some kind. He opened the door and ushered us inside. The room was nice, with plenty of lounging furniture and a table brimming with nicely displayed refreshments. I suddenly felt a little embarrassed by the refreshments I'd prepared for our meeting as I took in what the Silver Moon pack had to offer: crystal decanters with wine, scotch whiskey, and heated trays with finger foods. It made my chips, pastries, and cured meats look like the orange slices kids took home from soccer games.

Cole squeezed my hand again. "Nervous?" he whispered.

"A little," I admitted.

“I’ve got you. I promise I won’t let anyone disrespect you.”

I smiled up at him and nodded before looking around the room. All eyes were glued on us. Some looked quietly surprised, others looked guarded and suspicious. Cole rubbed his thumb over my palm, and I realized he hadn’t just promised to protect me for no reason.

He’d done it because he’d noticed the suspicion immediately. He’d said those things for the people in the room to hear more than for me.

“Everyone, this is my grandson Cole and his mate Marley,” Victor said. He crossed his arms, looking so much like Cole that it was uncanny. “Listen up. All of you have been extremely lucky that you haven’t had to face the reality of the new policies enacted a few years ago. We’re pretty remote out here; we’re also a long-standing pack and don’t encounter a lot of outsiders. The few humans we’ve had to deal with have been by happenstance and bad luck when it comes to mating.”

I was a little shocked by what I was hearing. Victor was talking about me like I wasn’t right there in the room with him. Like I was a dog with her owner instead of a person.

“I’m not going to tolerate anyone being rude or exclusionary to *my kin*,” Victor snapped. “Is that clear to all of you?”

The silence in the room was deafening.

“Victor, we would never deny your kin,” one of the people in the room said. It was another older man, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “But this girl isn’t blood. We all know humans and shifters can’t be *true* mates. We’re happy to give her a warm welcome, but expecting us to treat her like our kind—to bring her into private matters—isn’t appropriate.”

“She is my mate—by all definitions of the term,” Cole said sternly. “I love her, we’re physically united, and I can sense her emotions.”

There was a quiet rumble of voices in the room.

“That’s impossible,” the same man said, the anger in his tone more pronounced.

“So, you, on your own, are the authority on all things that are possible when it comes to shifters?” Cole challenged. “She was bitten once by one of our kind, and medical intervention kept her from going into the shift. But we know now that all people have the recessive shifter gene. Who’s to say that the aborted bite didn’t change things on an epigenetic level?”

I frowned. Was that even possible? Could I be partially shifted? Could I lack the ability to shift, but carry other innate abilities or traits?

And earlier, when Cole gave me that look...that was because he’d sensed my emotions? My little passing attraction to Victor? Had I been feeling Cole’s emotions, too? I thought about the previous couple of weeks, anxiety roiling in my stomach. Why hadn’t Cole mentioned anything about this to me?

I felt another tight squeeze of my hand, almost painful this time. Cole met my eyes. Just as he did, calm washed over me—the very same calm that often eased me after my terrible nightmares. He gave me a near-imperceptible nod. Swallowing, I lifted my chin in response.

“If you’re so sure about her, then why haven’t you claimed her?” another pack member asked.

Victor stiffened. “Who the fuck just asked that?”

The room was tense and silent as Victor glared at everyone in turn. He had his jaw clenched so tight, I thought his teeth might break. Cole’s eyebrows rose in surprise as he watched his grandfather.

“No one brave enough to take responsibility for their fat mouth?” Victor asked. “Fine, I’ll address the room to make it clear to all of you.” He walked over to the table with the decanters and poured himself a glass of whiskey before tossing it back. “I don’t care what you think about my grandson’s choice of mate. I don’t care if you dislike her, and I don’t care if you don’t trust her. The private lives of two mates is no one

else's business." He turned back toward the room. "And if Cole says this human woman is his mate, then I expect you to treat her with the same respect you would my mate. You understand me? This boy is my family. Any disrespect towards him will be treated the same way that insubordination is treated when it's expressed toward me. Is that clear?"

"And claimed or not, if anyone so much as glances sideways at *my mate*, we're going to have a fucking problem," Cole threatened. "I've come here to learn from this pack, but I'm not beyond protecting my people. That means I expect everyone to respect my mate, her older brother, and my second, who is considering becoming a shifter. I expect to be treated like any other alpha visiting your pack."

Victor looked over at Cole, a glimmer of pride in the older man's eyes. "We're going to have a pleasant feast tonight," Victor said. "And tomorrow, you are all being made available to my grandson and his pack for whatever they need. I don't care if Miss Cage asks you to teach her how to make a fucking omelet—you will treat my family right."

I was starting to wish I hadn't come into this room. The tension was so thick, you could cut it with a knife, and it seemed like the source of it was me. Despite that, I found myself staying calm. This issue used to cause me so much panic, so I figured it was Cole's influence that was bringing out this uncharacteristic calm.

The silence lasted too long for it to be comfortable. But then, shockingly, one of the younger people in the room stood up. Not just younger—young. He looked around twenty years old, his long hair tied in a bun on the top of his head. He was tall, lanky, tan, and had kind eyes. He approached us, and Cole again subtly moved in front of me before the guy could reach me.

"May I speak to your mate?" he asked in a soft timbre, as if he was breathing through his words. "I'm happy to speak through you, but it does feel a little disrespectful."

Cole gave me a sidelong glance so I could advocate for myself. I nodded, and he stood to the side, his grip still firm on

my hand.

“My name is River,” the young man began. “I came to this pack as an outsider. My mother was a human and died before I reached adulthood. The foster system put me here. I didn’t know much about being a shifter before coming here because my dad split when I was a kid.”

“Oh,” I said, not sure what to say to that.

“I’m sure it’s terrifying to be in a room full of shifters who distrust you, especially after you’ve already survived a bite,” he said. “I run a self-defense class for all the humans born to two shifter parents. We go over how you can protect yourself from anyone—man, woman, or wolf. Would you like to join us?”

“Absolutely!” I said. “I didn’t even know there was such a thing.”

“There wasn’t for a long time,” Victor said. “That’s why River’s in this room. He spearheaded it after we learned about the epidemic of bullying these human children were experiencing because they were different.”

“It’s been positive for everyone involved,” River said calmly. “Lots of interpersonal conflicts have eased up in the younger generations. Lots of kids grow up being able to choose whether or not they want to be a shifter in their own time.”

“River counsels for that, too. He might also be a valuable resource for your second, Cole,” Victor added.

“I’ll introduce them,” Cole said, nodding. “Actually, we could do that now if you have the time.”

“Sounds great,” River said, smiling at Cole. “Yeah, let’s get out of this stuffy room.”

“You coming?” Cole asked his grandfather.

“No, I still have some things to settle here. You go on ahead. We’ll be right behind you.”

I couldn’t decide if that was ominous or not.

I didn't have to think about it too long, though, because Cole and River were quick to usher me out of the room.

Cole heaved a sigh as we stepped out of the study. He looked over my head to River, who walked on my other side like he was flanking me along with Cole. "Thank you for doing that. I'm sure you had to put your neck on the line for it."

River shrugged. "I wanted to be sure you guys were good people before I said anything; otherwise, I would have spoken up sooner. But I could tell from how you kept checking with your mate nonverbally and the way you unabashedly stood up for her without taking too much ownership of her that you were the real deal."

River looked down at me. "Not to mention, a woman who's been bitten by a shifter and still allows herself to love one? That's a beautiful thing."

I flushed, feeling awkwardly transparent.

"I'm sorry for sharing that without your permission, Marley," Cole said, his remorse clear in his tone. "I shouldn't have done that. I got complacent when everyone was so kind and polite. I should have discussed it with you prior and come up with a plan."

"Cole, it's fine," I said. I glanced around to make sure there were no prying ears nearby. "Did you tell the truth, though? About our emotions and being able to sense them?"

Cole nodded. "Yes. I started noticing it a while ago, and the longer we're together, the more obvious it becomes."

"The thing in the big room..."

"Oh, you mean the flutter of attraction you felt for my grandfather?" Cole asked archly. "Yeah, that was a surprise."

"I mean, Vic's a good-looking dude," River said blandly. "Can't blame a girl for looking."

God, I was going to die of embarrassment. "Could we maybe not? It was purely biological and mostly because he looks so much like you."

“He does?” Cole asked.

“Yep, the resemblance is creepy,” River said. “I would have thought you were father and son if it weren’t for the fact that he kept calling you his grandson.”

“Yeah, he does look shockingly young,” I agreed. “Although, I suppose now that I think about it, your parents also look young for their age.”

“Yeah, it’s different for everyone,” River said. “Some people age really slowly, while others age like normal, but when they hit their middle age, they don’t age much for decades. Me, I’m thirty-five, but I still look like a snot-nosed kid.”

“Thirty-five?” Cole and I repeated, shocked.

River laughed, shrugging one shoulder. “I know, right? I can’t even say it’s from just the shifter genes, either. My mom used to get mistaken for my sister all the time.”

“I suddenly feel like I don’t know anything about shifters,” I said.

“No kidding,” Cole said.

“It’s one of the advantages of having a pack and living together like we do,” River said. “You can’t learn a lot about your kind when you’re all scattered around a huge territory.”

Cole grunted in agreement, but I could tell he was feeling a little disconcerted. I hoped he wasn’t internalizing his lack of knowledge as some kind of failure on his part, but that wasn’t something to bring up in front of a stranger.

“So, what should we expect tonight?” Cole asked. “I know dinner, but there’s an awful lot of people here if it’s just that.”

“You’ll be introduced as Vic’s kin. That’s almost a guarantee,” River said. “We’ll eat a really good meal. Probably have a little social hour, and then we’ll hit the yard for some wild time.”

“Wild time?” Cole echoed. “What’s that mean? An after-party or something?”

“Pfft, no,” River said. “No, it’s when we get some time to just...go do wolf things, I guess. Like reindeer games for shifters.”

“Maybe I should start calling you Rudolph,” I suggested to Cole.

“Not if you want me to answer,” he said dryly.

The three of us shared a laugh as we stepped back into the main area. The people mingling there seemed to have multiplied. Travis, chin in his hand, was talking to a young guy, focused intently on the conversation while my brother took video footage with his phone. Children played in the center of the room, wrestling and shifting seamlessly in and out of their wolf forms.

River led us to a table, and we made small talk while we waited for Victor to come back. All the while, we learned more about River’s history and found out he’d studied to be a therapist.

For what it was worth, once dinner started, those who had been in the study with us had the good nature to seem supportive and excited that we were here. And because of that, it seemed everyone else was happy to accept us, too. So many people came by our table to introduce themselves. It was like we were celebrities.

The food was obscenely delicious. Braised meats, hearty soups—all comfort foods to soothe frayed nerves. I had to wonder if that had been by design, to serve good food to smooth out all the edges of this whole situation.

Soon enough, though, we got a little downtime and privacy as the crowd started to thin with people either going home with their young children or filtering outside to prepare for a wild time. Eventually, Cole and I were alone at the table, with a few good Samaritans cleaning up the inevitable mess from a huge crowd of people sharing a space for a few hours.

Cole put his hands over mine and rubbed his thumb across my knuckles. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I feel like I got slammed in the face with a bunch of new information today, but I’d say I’m holding up okay, given how stressful it was at the start. I’m excited about River’s class tomorrow, too.”

“Yeah. It will be good for you to get some insight into things. Get some tools to use when I can’t be there to protect you.”

I nodded, and our conversation hit a natural lull for a few moments before Cole yawned and stretched his arms over his head. “All right,” he said. “I think I’ve been a good boy. How about you give me another one of those theories of yours?”

“Here?!” I squeaked. “Cole, there are still shifters in the room.”

“Well, then, I guess you’d better be quiet, no?” he teased. “Come on, you know I can hear you. You don’t have to say it too loud.”

A breath hissed out through my teeth. “It’s embarrassing.”

“I’ll cut you a deal,” he said. “You tell me your theory, and if you’re wrong, I’ll give you a hint. What do you say?”

A hint? I could work with that. And if I wasn’t wrong, then I would finally know what to expect.

I looked around the room to see who was in close proximity and was fairly confident I could share without anyone hearing. Regardless of the privacy, my face flushed and I swallowed. Sharing this theory wasn’t only embarrassing to do in public, but it was also kind of telling of myself.

“Well...um.” I cleared my throat and wanted to hide under the table. “D-does it have to do with some kind of pursuit?”

“Pursuit?” Cole asked. “What do you mean? Like a courtship ritual?”

I shook my head. “L-like a chase.”

I looked up at him and watched his expression go from confused to calculating to surprised. “Wait a minute,” he said. “Is this your roundabout way of telling me that you have a primal fetish?”

Shit, shit, shit.

“N-no!” I stuttered entirely too loudly before standing abruptly from my chair.

“Where are you going?” Cole asked me as I left the table and started heading for the door.

“We have to go...do the reindeer games,” I stammered.

This conversation would have to wait. Preferably until the end of time.

Chapter 4

Cole

I was still grinning to myself as I followed Marley outside to where my grandfather's pack was gathered. A massive bonfire was roaring, the flames crackling and sending sparks into the air. Bottles of beer were cracked open and tapped together before being thrown back. Unlike inside, there wasn't much provided for seating. It seemed like the culture of this whole thing was for people to either bring their own picnic blankets or just shift and lie on the ground. As such, lots of people had shifted into their lycan forms and were lounging near the fire, play-fighting, or vanishing into the woods.

I could see Marley's wonder and curiosity. Her wide eyes scanned the area. I was always so enamored with her bright, effusive curiosity about lycans. The longer we were together, the more I could feel her enchantment with my kind. It was such a boon to know the woman I loved celebrated me, even after everything she'd gone through. River was right—for Marley to still find it in her heart to love me, my son, and my parents said so much about her capacity to love.

Marley, my sweet mate with the biggest heart. My adorably sinful minx. My everything.

I was so grateful she was here with me.

She turned to me, and that bright smile I loved so much lit up her eyes. "Are you going to go and play?"

I looked around again and found a group of shifters stretching. They seemed to be preparing for a run. "I don't want to leave you here on your own."

“I can stay with River or Vic,” she suggested. “You should let loose a bit. You haven’t really been able to engage in wolfy activities in New Middle Bluff.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t know. Dad said to keep you really close.”

“I’ll be fine,” she promised. “Go have some fun, Cole. Your grandfather’s right over there. I’ll just sit down and get to know him.”

As the group shifted, I felt the tug of wanting to join in, and then I felt a little drift of amusement through my bond with Marley.

She elbowed me. “Come on, I can tell you want to go,” she said. “Just be back before midnight.”

“Wouldn’t want to turn into a pumpkin,” I said.

“Or, god forbid, look like a party girl,” she joked.

Grinning, I kissed the top of her head. “Go on over to my grandfather. Once I’m sure you’ve made it, I’ll get going.”

She nodded and navigated her way through the crowd to the old fallen tree where Gramps was sitting. I watched from afar as he smiled at her and patted the wood next to him. Marley waved at me, her figure somewhat distorted by the heat radiating off the bonfire.

I was still reluctant to go, but I could feel she was at ease and relatively safe. The feeling was only bolstered when River joined the group of shifters a few seconds later.

I could indulge in this. No, I *needed* to indulge in this if I wanted to be a good alpha. I couldn’t always be at Marley’s side, so I needed to trust her to know what was best for her and who she was safe with. Better to do that in a controlled environment like this than with a bunch of complete strangers once we started our pack back home.

I walked over to another group of shifters who looked like they were getting ready to go for a run. The group was mixed, both men and women, most of them around my age if not a little younger. I realized Eugenio was among them. I almost

didn't recognize him with his shirt off. The guy was built like a brick house under that unassuming polo.

"Hey, Cole," he said as I approached. "What do you think so far?"

"Of what? The bonfire?"

"Of everything!" He gave a cheerful laugh. "The place, the food, the community. It's nice, right? Feels good to be around your kind and exercise a bit of freedom."

"Yeah, it does," I admitted. "I guess I never realized how much we're still restricted over in New Middle Bluff."

"Oh, I've heard of that place," a sharp-eyed woman beside Eugenio said. "They're one of the most shifter-friendly cities in the US, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, pretty progressive. Well-integrated, too."

"Even so, it's hard to share a city with a bunch of humans," Eugenio said. "So many of them are still so nervous about what we can do, you know? I grew up in a pretty small but progressive town, but I didn't really feel like myself until I came here. It's nice to just *be* sometimes, you know? Shift when I want to, take human form when I want to, without worrying about city ordinances and junk like that."

I'd never really thought about that, but it would be nice to just exist as a shifter.

"You guys about to head out for a run?" I asked.

"Yeah. Want to join us?" Eugenio asked. "We were gonna take a swim by the waterfall. Perfect night for it."

"Sounds nice," I said. "Lead the way."

A few moments later, the group shifted into their wolf forms—a myriad of different sizes, shapes, and colors. I followed suit, running after them as they tore into the tree line.

They were faster than most of the wolves I'd encountered back home. Most notably, though, they had an almost feral quality to them as they ran. I felt like a domesticated husky among wild wolves.

I was reminded of the conversation I'd had with Wyatt back at the shifter club, when he'd talked about how we'd forgotten our roots, our connection to our wild sides. Seeing these shifters dash through the woods, kicking up clay and moss as they streaked past the majestic pines and oaks, made me wonder if Curt and Wyatt had even realized how far removed *they* were from the true ferocity they claimed to be so obsessed with.

I stayed in the rear of the group for a while, maybe a mile or two. When I started to get the hang of the terrain, the group naturally parted, allowing me to pull ahead next to Eugenio. A show of respect, no doubt, for my position as alpha of my pack.

We broke through the other side of the forest, finding the rushing water of a narrow river that widened as we followed its course. I leaped into the air, letting out a triumphant howl. The cool, damp air caressing my fur made me want to run even faster. If I knew where we were going, I'd have taken the lead.

The longer we ran, the more connected I felt to the earth beneath my feet. To *me*. I'd always been content to go for a run in my local reserve, but I'd not realized how all the concrete and landscaping lacked the true energy of the wild ground.

I'd never felt this alive before.

Up ahead, the waterfall came into view. I put all my power into my legs, pushing myself harder to get near the water. Eugenio kept pace—they all did. They'd slowed down for me, and now I was playing the game on their level.

They all slid to a stop just at the edge of the cliff. I overshot the stop, almost falling off and into the water. They started to shift back into their human forms, laughing warmly.

“Get ahead of yourself?” the sharp-eyed girl asked me, giggling.

I shifted back into my human form as well, a little baffled as to why we weren't remaining in our lycan forms. “I thought

we were swimming,” I said, panting heavily.

“We are, but wet clothes are the worst,” Eugenio said.

“Wet clothes?” I asked, catching a movement in my peripheral view.

The sharp-eyed girl had stripped off her shirt and was already unhooking her bra. I looked away immediately. “What the fuck?” I snapped.

“What, you’ve never been skinny-dipping before?” she asked, clearly unbothered by her nudity.

“Not with someone who isn’t my *fucking mate*,” I growled.

“Oh, ease up,” she said as her pants fell to a puddle on the floor. “You haven’t even claimed her yet.” She walked past me, trailing her fingers down my arm. “We’re animals, after all. We can still play, even if you’re tied to someone else.”

I grabbed her wrist, looking pointedly into her eyes and nowhere else.

“Let me make it exceedingly clear,” I hissed. “Claimed or not, I’m absolutely devoted to my mate. And the next time you touch me with this hand, I’m going to rip it off. Understood?”

The girl’s eyes got even sharper as her smile curled. “Understood, *Alpha*,” she said mockingly as she wrenched her hand away. She walked off, ample hips swaying before she dived into the water.

I looked at Eugenio, and he gave me an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that,” he said. “She’s a bit hedonistic and definitely not sorry about it.”

I looked at the water and watched as she came up from the water in her wolf form.

Eugenio shrugged again, then stripped down with the others and leaped into the water.

I hemmed and hawed for a moment, not sure if it was wise for me to swim with a woman who’d just come onto me so brazenly. Maybe it was some kind of test of authority. But I

supposed I'd made my boundaries clear—I was more than happy to follow through on my promise to tear off her hand if she tried touching me again. And we weren't swimming in our human forms.

I'd have to talk with Marley about this later. But for now, I needed to be smart about this whole thing. If I looked weak, it wouldn't just be me who would be in danger of people stomping all over me. I had to think of my three human companions, too.

To keep their best interests in mind, I'd need to potentially cross a line. But I needed to trust that Marley would talk things out with me. She wasn't Olivia, and I wasn't human. It was possible that we'd be dealing with these little pushes and prods, these subtle challenges, for the rest of our lives.

More and more, it was seeming like a good idea to claim Marley properly. Was I ready to offer that to her, though?

I was still ruminating on it as I shifted and jumped into the water. It was surprisingly warm despite the autumn chill in the air.

I swam slowly, my mind on Olivia. I'd been such a territorial guy, so young and full of fire back when we first started dating. Practically chomping at the bit to claim her. She'd seemed interested in the idea until I told her what it involved, and then she'd laughed in my face and called me a deviant.

I hadn't thought much of it at the time, but now that Marley was engaging curiously with claiming and throwing her theories around about what it might involve, I was getting a little nervous to tell her what it entailed. With Olivia, it had stung to have her laugh in my face and refuse me. With Marley...honestly, it scared me. I was doing a good job of playing claiming off as a bit of cheeky humor, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized I was worried about scaring her away.

But would protecting myself and her from the stranger parts of shifter life help in the long run? Not having claimed her was proving to be more and more of a problem. And so

far, that was only on my side of the equation. It made me sick to think about what would happen if I let the wrong person protect her, the wrong person get close to her, only for him to take what I'd been too frightened to offer to her.

I swam over to the lapping shore, finding a place to think yet soak in the warm, crystalline waters. The sky was darkening, and the stars were starting to twinkle around the crescent moon.

Yeah, I would have to have this talk with her—and soon.

Then again, as I watched the other shifters play and chase each other in the water, my mind drifted back to Marley and her second theory about claiming. Her sheepish suggestion that it involved a chase, a hunt. Maybe she wouldn't be so put off by the truth of it. My heart warmed as I thought about her little descent into degeneracy with me. What was it she'd said? That she would have been happy to get off with a quick missionary session and go on her way?

I loved how sweet she was. How sensual she wanted to be. I wanted to give her free rein to explore every aspect of that sexuality. Try anything, see what she liked, what she didn't care for.

If she was interested in being hunted, maybe I *would* hunt her.

It wasn't long before the water started to get too cold, and with the way my thoughts had drifted, I was feeling more and more inclined to be near my mate. I wanted to feel her body in my hands, to hear her whisper my name on a moan. I wanted Old Sharp Eyes to hear Marley's pleased screaming so she'd know how happy I was to fuck *my mate* and how little I needed a side dish. I was *fully fucking fed*.

After drying off and getting dressed, I ran so quickly and eagerly that I left the rest of the group behind me. There was nothing like the woman you loved to inspire you to hurry the fuck back to her.

Though the run out to the waterfall had taken nearly half an hour, the run back seemed to take only minutes. I just

sprinted toward the smell of that burning bonfire. As soon as I broke through the tree line, I shifted back into my human form and looked around for my lady love. The one who inspired all of my joy, and at least half of my protective rage.

I found her sitting near the fire, sharing a beer with Jack.

“Oh, your hair is still wet,” she said, beaming at me as she stood and took off her flannel, reaching up to dry my hair with it.

The cloth obscured my gaze for a few moments. When Marley was done, her smile was filled with care and affection. “Don’t want you to catch a cold,” she said.

I smiled back before taking her face in my hands. She gave me a startled look before I closed the distance between us and claimed her mouth in a deep, hungry kiss.

She stiffened with surprise, clearly not expecting the sudden and very public display of affection. I shifted the angle of the kiss, crossing the threshold of her lips with my tongue, tasting the pleasant tang of beer. After a minute, I parted from her and rested my forehead against hers.

She was poised up on her tippy toes, her eyes glazed with comforted arousal. “What was that for?” she asked dreamily.

“Just because I love you, baby,” I said. “And because I want to get you back home as soon as possible.”

She smiled. Behind her, I heard her brother say, “Ew.”

“Okay,” she said. “Want to go home now?”

“Absolutely.”

She turned back to Jack. “You coming with us?”

“I think the fuck not,” he said, making a disgusted face. “I’ll let you guys get it out of your system before I share a wall with you.”

Marley giggled, and I hefted her into my arms in a bridal carry. She gave a tiny shriek and grabbed onto me.

“What has gotten into you?” she asked, smoothing a hand down my cheek.

“Running in the forest is amazing,” I said, sparing her brother any details he didn’t want to know. “And when I looked at the night sky, I thought of you and how much I appreciate you.”

She gave me the sweetest smile and craned her neck to peck my cheek. “I appreciate you, too.”

“See you guys tomorrow,” I said to Jack, who lifted a lazy hand in farewell. Travis was nowhere in sight, but I figured if Jack was at ease, there was no need to panic. I turned and started carrying Marley, first through the double doors into the building and then back out to the main street.

When we got some distance from the noise and chaos of the bonfire, Marley tilted her head and studied me. I nuzzled her nose with mine. “What’s that look for?” I asked.

“Just wondering where this sudden flood of affection has come from, that’s all,” she said. “Something happen on the run?”

“A couple of things,” I said. “For starters, and in the interest of full transparency, we went for a swim. It, uh, was a skinny dip. I wasn’t anticipating that at all, but I’m not interested in having something get to you through the grapevine.”

I felt the pang of her jealousy, sharp and sickening—a twist in the gut and a sudden race of the heart.

“Marley,” I said. “Nothing happened.”

“But...but someone tried to do something,” she said, panic lacing her every word. “What else would you mean by something getting to me through the grapevine?”

“Marley, it doesn’t matter what someone does. Nothing is ever going to take me away from you.”

“It does matter!” Marley insisted. “It matters to me. It’s disrespectful *to me* if they do that.”

“You’re right,” I said. “That’s why I put her in her place as soon as it happened.”

“You did?”

I nodded, keeping my eyes trained on hers. “Didn’t even give her the courtesy of learning her name. She touched me—just my arm, nothing inappropriate—and made a pass. I told her the next time she touched me, she’d be losing her hand.”

I felt some of Marley’s discomfort ebb and noticed the quiet relief in her easy exhale. “Who was it?” she asked.

“I don’t think that’s important,” I said. “It won’t be a problem, and if it becomes a problem, I’ll handle it.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one to handle it?”

The question took me by surprise. Marley had never been a particularly aggressive or protective person when it came to me. Then again, we hadn’t dealt with this sort of situation yet.

I bought some time, considering if it was a good idea to give Marley the sharp-eyed woman’s identity when I wasn’t sure she could hold her own against the woman. I turned down the street the townhouse was on and cleared my throat. “What do you plan on doing?”

“I don’t know...tell her to back off?” Marley suggested. “Vic was telling me how pack dynamics work when it comes to family and loved ones. He said that with shifter biology, respect is earned through strength and consistency.”

“Marley, you know that means...usually, that means a showdown. A fight.”

Marley’s mouth worked and her cheeks pinked. She turned her head away. “I don’t want to be a spineless little human. I don’t want to just let people stomp all over me, especially when it comes to you and Noah. Vic told me that without being a shifter and being able to hold my own without you, I could be a liability in the pack.”

I took in a deep breath, feeling the need to flex my hands. What the *fuck* was my grandfather putting in her head? “Marley, our pack dynamic will work however I say it does.”

“But that’s the thing, Cole! With no real tie to you and Noah, with no real formal place in the pack, I have no way to hold my own.”

“That’s not true, Marley,” I argued. “You’ll have what I’ll give you, and I’ll give you everything. You know that.”

She shook her head, refusing to meet my eyes. “It’s not going to be enough.”

We neared the door to the townhouse, and I carefully set her back down on her feet.

“What would be enough?” My question wasn’t harsh or cruel, nor was it accusatory. “Marley, baby, I don’t want you to ever feel like you don’t matter. You don’t need to change yourself to fit into my life—you don’t need to change for anyone. But I also don’t want you to feel like you don’t have a secure place in my life because of the pack. This whole effort was primarily inspired by my desire to protect you, for fuck’s sake. So, tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.” I paused. “Want me to quit the pack thing altogether? I will. Want me to keep our pack to only people we know we can trust? I’ll do that. Want me to make you my second—”

“No, I don’t want any of those things,” Marley cut me off. “And I know you don’t want them, either. Earlier, I think I could feel your euphoria a little bit. It got hard to sense it for some of the time you were gone, but when you shifted and ran into the forest, I could tell you were enjoying yourself. I don’t want to take the potential of that away from you. But I also don’t want to be some kind of unofficial groupie in the eyes of the pack.”

“Marley, you would never, *ever* be that,” I promised. “I’d never allow it.”

“You may not have that choice,” she said, her tone assertive. She breathed in deeply. “*We* may not have that choice.”

I stilled, feeling her tangled emotions in my chest—worry, fear, insecurity, confusion, and suspicion. I cupped her cheek and coaxed her to look up at me. “Marley,” I said quietly. “Just tell me what you want to do.”

Reluctantly, she looked up at me. Her stern expression crumpled into one of worry and uncertainty.

“Just tell me,” I said. “I won’t be mad.”

I felt her emotions build before they played out on her face. Her lower lip quivered, and she bit down on it. She inhaled shakily and squared her shoulders, gearing up to say what she was thinking.

Panic sliced through me, a flash of a thought that she might tell me this wasn’t working out with me. That she’d realized after seeing how things were done that she was in over her head.

Feeling like I might implode, I almost wanted to flee from her. Then she finally opened her mouth and spoke.

“I...” she said. “I want you to let me become a shifter.”

Chapter 5

Marley

“Absolutely not,” Cole said through gritted teeth. “No, Marley. I’m not going to let you make a choice like that based on insecurity. I’m not going to let you change everything about your life over some stupid woman who can’t keep her hands to herself.”

“That’s not why,” I insisted. “Cole, I’ve been thinking about this for a long time.”

“You can’t have been thinking about it for a long time. We’ve only been together for a few months.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Be honest—if it weren’t for me, would you even be considering it?”

“Why shouldn’t you be the reason I consider it?” I asked. “Cole, I love you, and I want to spend my entire life with you. Is it really so strange for me to want to change for someone I’m in love with?”

“It is when there’s nothing wrong with you just the way you are.” He sighed. “I shouldn’t have left you alone with my grandfather and River. I knew it was risky, but I didn’t think they’d fill your head with this bullshit.”

“Cole, I’m more than capable of drawing my own conclusions based on the information I have.” My anger and desperation mixed and twined together, threatening to bubble over. “And frankly, if I decide to do this, there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

Cole took a step back from me. “So, that’s it?” he asked. “You’re going to do whatever you want, and fuck what I think

about it?”

“That’s not what I—”

“Marley, why are you suddenly so obsessed with changing? Why can’t you just stay the way you are? Why can’t you accept that you’re perfect and beautiful and strong?”

“I’m not strong,” I protested.

“You are—”

“Not in the way that matters!” The hold I’d had on my temper snapped. “Not in the way that would have mattered when Wyatt showed up at my house with a gun. Not in the way that could have protected Noah, that could have kept me from getting choked so hard, the doctors weren’t sure if I’d ever talk properly again.”

I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth. Not because they weren’t true, but because Cole’s expression shifted to abject misery and guilt.

We had talked about the day on top of the parking structure a few times. Not at length—things were still too raw, too hard to dig into. I couldn’t find it in myself to tell him how close I’d been to surrendering to death. I wasn’t ready to hear what he thought as he watched Wyatt plummet to the ground below. But I knew he felt guilty for not being there. I knew he felt he’d failed me—failed us—by not being there when we were in danger.

“Marley.” Cole’s voice broke. “Marley, I promise I can do better. I promise I can protect you—I *will* protect you. I’ll never let something like that happen to you ever again.”

My heart broke at the sadness in his voice. I stepped forward and reached up to place my palms on his cheeks. “Cole, it’s not realistic for you to think you can protect me from anything that would ever try to harm me.”

“You keep saying that,” he said, his expression cracking as he put his hands over mine. “Do you not think I can do it? Do you think I’m too weak? Too incapable?”

“No! Cole, no. I know you would make every effort. And I know you’d put your life on the line for me if it came down to it. But it *shouldn’t* come down to it.”

“But I want to protect you,” he said. “It’s my *job* to protect you. To protect everyone in the pack.”

“You’re only one person, Cole. And you don’t deserve to take on all that stress alone.”

“Marley, don’t you realize that if you go through with it, it could kill you?” he asked. “I’ve been reading up on it. The rate of failure is low, but it’s not zero. And the risk factors increase if you’ve been bitten before. And you have been.”

He rubbed his hands down my shoulders and arms to my waist and pulled me close. “Marley, I wouldn’t survive if you died trying to become a shifter. The guilt would fucking kill me. I’d lose you. And I *can’t* lose you.”

I wanted to argue, make more points, show him how foolish it was to keep up with this urge to prevent me from getting stronger. Couldn’t he see I was in just as much danger as a human as I would be going in to do the shift? But I could tell he was breaking. I could feel the hurt leaking out of the cracks that were barely holding him together.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

“We’ll find another way.” He sounded so needy, so small. “We’ll figure out how to keep you safe. We’ll figure out how to keep you strong.”

I nodded, not entirely convinced. The look on his face told me he knew that. But I could feel his relief that we were putting a pin in this conversation.

“Perhaps I’ll feel better after the self-defense class tomorrow,” I said.

“Yeah,” Cole said. “I’m sure that the lessons have merit if there are a bunch of humans born from shifters here. If the lessons didn’t work, they’d probably make the change, too, you know?”

I nodded, smiling tightly. “Yeah, you’re right. We’ll make do for now. I’ll stop trying to put the cart before the horse. For all I know, it’s not as serious as Vic made it out to be.”

Cole huffed out a breath, and I felt the anxiety leave his body. His body *and* my body, actually.

“You know,” I said. “I thought it might be nice to enjoy that bathtub with you. Maybe in your lycan form? If it’s not rude to ask, I mean.”

“What?” A smile cracked through his tense expression. “It’s not rude. I guess I just always thought shifting without expressly needing to would creep you out or something.”

“Why would you think that?”

His mouth twisted. “It happened accidentally a few times when I was with Olivia. I’d shift in my sleep. I was still a bit of a young buck back then and didn’t always have my shifting under control. She’d always freak out when she woke up next to me and I was in my wolf form.”

“I’ve been wondering what it would feel like to sleep next to you while you were shifted.” My face warmed, and I swallowed hard. “Our family dog always slept in my bed with me when I was a kid.”

Cole gave a mischievous grin and bent down closer to me. “Marley Cage, are you equating me to a common dog?”

I gasped. “No! Of course not!”

The laugh that burst out of him sent relief coursing through my veins. “I’m kidding,” he said. “Do you want to try it tonight? It might get a little too warm for you, though.”

“I can always kick you off me if that’s the case,” I teased.

He laughed again and kissed my forehead. “See? You’ll handle yourself fine.” He winked, then entered the code on the keypad to unlock the door.

We went upstairs, and Cole started running the bath. As he came out of the bathroom, he pulled his shirt off. “It’ll probably take nearly half an hour to fill that massive tub.

While we wait, want to tell me more about that primal kink of yours?”

My jaw dropped open and my heart stuttered. “I was hoping you’d forget about that whole thing.”

“Oh, I know *you* did.” His grin was rather too eager for my liking. “Unfortunately for you, I’m a degenerate.”

“It’s kind of embarrassing to discuss it,” I mumbled.

“Marley, baby.” He beckoned me over to the bed. “Come here.”

I flattened my lips into a thin line, hesitating. But when he sat down, I shuffled over to him. Cole pulled me onto his lap and placed my hand on his chest right over his heart.

“Whatever you want to experience, anything at all, I want you to tell me,” he said. “I know I’ve said that to you before, but apparently, it bears repeating.”

I chewed on my lip. “What if you don’t want to do something I want to do? I don’t want you to think I’m some kind of freak.”

“Would it make you feel better if I shared one of my kinks that I think is a little too intense? Maybe once you hear just how much of a freak I can be, you might feel a little better about sharing yours.”

“Haven’t you already told me everything?”

“No. Mostly because I don’t want you to think I’m a weirdo, and I definitely don’t want you to feel pressured to do something you don’t want to do.”

That piqued my curiosity, and I quirked an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“I have a few.” He pursed his lips as he seemed to decide what to start with, then he grinned. “I’m a bit of an exhibitionist.”

“Exhibitionist?” I repeated. “You want people to *watch*?”

“Not quite that far,” he said. “But it’s been more than once in public that I’ve wanted to heft you over my shoulder and

find a little hiding spot to fuck you ragged.”

The muscles in my thighs clenched slightly, and Cole’s eyes lit up with interest. “That was a little spike of arousal from you, wasn’t it?” he asked.

I blushed. “Well, I...I think it’s more that you want me enough to feel the urge to do that.”

“Which would feed into that primal kink, right?”

I was seized by so much embarrassment that all I could do was hide my face in my hands.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he said as he gently pulled one of my hands away from my face. “Baby, it’s all right. I’m serious. You have nothing to feel ashamed of. Marley, for God’s sake, you’re dating a wolf shifter. It’s not that far of a leap that you’d be into some primal sex.”

I snorted. “Isn’t it kind of wrong of me? Isn’t that kind of like fetishizing you?”

“No,” he said emphatically. “Olivia fetishized me. She loved everything about fucking me, but scorned and mocked everything about what I was. She rejected Noah, hated that he was a shifter. You wanting to feel the excitement of being chased down or wrestled into submission or thrown over my shoulder like a prize is not a problem for me.”

I was still having trouble meeting his gaze, my ears burning with embarrassment. “But, how do...I mean, logistically, how does that work? Where do we even start with working out how we’ll explore those things?”

Cole gave me an adoringly patient smile, then dropped my hand to brush some hair away from my face and tuck it behind my ear. “You know what I’m going to say, don’t you?”

I pursed my lips slightly. “Negotiation?”

He cradled my face, coaxing me to look at him again. “Negotiation. We just have to talk about your expectations, about the ways you want to experience this, about the things that excite you about it so I can deliver. I’m here to make you

feel good. Making you feel good is what makes *me* feel good, remember?”

I nodded and inhaled deeply. “Right.”

“Why don’t you tell me some aspects of this whole thing that you find interesting and exciting?” he suggested. You mentioned being pursued. Is that something you would like?”

I chewed nervously on my thumbnail. “It feels like it’s complicated. Like, some of it feels...” I trailed off, realizing exactly what it was that felt like such a blockage in my mind. I *had* been pursued before. I’d been pursued in a very real way more than once—by Wyatt. Once when he bit me, and again only a few weeks earlier when he came after me and tried to take me back to Leighton Valley with him...or wherever the hell he’d planned on going.

Suddenly, I was overcome with so much shame that my throat ached. My mind flashed with memories of Wyatt telling me he knew I liked everything I claimed to hate. And all the times I’d feared for my life and survival because of his aggression and anger and possessiveness.

Had he been right this whole time?

“Walk me through it, baby,” Cole said softly, rubbing my thigh to comfort me. “I can read your feelings but not your thoughts, so explain the shame and disgust you’re feeling.”

Disgust? Was that what I was feeling toward myself?

I shook my head and swallowed painfully. “It is something that excites me, but I just realized that I actually have been chased and pursued. For real. I’ve almost died *twice* from being pursued.”

“What does that have to do with things you want to experience sexually?”

“If I don’t fear it in a...in a sexual context, does that mean this whole time I’ve been trying to heal myself from the abuse I suffered? That I was faking being a victim?” My voice had started to shake, and my eyes burned.

“Marley, no. Absolutely not,” Cole said firmly, but not with any hint of unkindness. “Marley, baby, I think I’ve told you this before, but you know that kinks can be used to reclaim negative experiences you’ve had, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You desiring to have an experience similar to the trauma you suffered does not in any way indicate that you’ve been faking anything. It’s likely just that your brain wants to rewrite those experiences and memories in a light that puts you in power.”

“I don’t want to have the power,” I said, the words rushing out of me. “I think that’s what scares me. I don’t want to be the powerful one. I want to feel desired and pursued. I want to be hunted down and...and...”

Cole waited patiently while I tried to organize my thoughts. I closed my eyes and thought about that deep, primal desire—the wish to be chased while fleeing. There had been times in the beginning with Wyatt when we first moved in together that he’d chased me through the house until catching up with me. He’d picked me up in his arms and spun me around.

It had been fun...until it wasn’t. It had been fun until the chase meant I’d done something wrong. That I’d angered him, and he was going to punish me for it.

“I want someone to pursue me because they desire me,” I finally said. “I want you to want me so badly that when I run away, you can’t do anything but chase after me.”

His eyes were calm and thoughtful as he listened to me. His hand smoothed my thigh in an up-and-down motion that was almost covetous.

“I do want you that badly, Marley,” he said softly. “I want you that badly all the time.”

“You do?” My words were a whisper.

He nodded, his expression still so blissfully calm. “It’s hard to be a shifter at times. There are so many biological drives unique to us that humans often don’t understand. We

keep them at bay, learn to adapt, but those primal urges and instincts never really go away. And people like Wyatt don't care if it harms anyone when they fulfill those desires."

I nodded. Even though I knew that, I still appreciated the reminder. Especially when I was in such a vulnerable place.

"I don't really know what primal sex involves. And I don't really know what a primal kink is," I admitted. "But when I was considering the possibilities of what being claimed could mean, what it could involve, I can't deny that I liked the idea of you hunting me down and claiming me as your own."

I felt a sudden pang of arousal, one that was followed by a sharp nasal inhale from Cole. He raked a hand through his hair as his other hand tightened on my thigh.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I am," he said. "Sorry. I'm trying to keep my cock in my pants while you're being so vulnerable with me, but..." He looked a little embarrassed as he rubbed his hand down his face. "I find the idea very appealing."

"Really?"

"Ha, Marley," he said before reaching to cup my face in both of his hands. "Yes, you perfect, gorgeous, incredible, sexy woman. Like I said, I keep most of my instincts at bay, but that doesn't mean they aren't there. It would be the thrill of a lifetime to have to chase you. To know that when I catch you, I've won."

"Not a very hard match to win," I said a little sheepishly.

"We don't know that for sure. We could use it as practice after you've learned some techniques from River tomorrow."

I shrugged. "I don't think those things usually work."

"I think we'll be surprised by a lot of what we learn here," he said, brushing his thumb along the curve of my cheekbone. "That's part of the thrill of the chase, too, isn't it? The fight?"

"Do people usually enjoy that?"

“Sure. Primal kinks aren’t just about the chase. They can involve wrestling, biting, scratching—though I’d probably leave those last two to you for obvious reasons.” He winked. “I’m here to do whatever feels right for you, baby. We can try things and stop them, or we can just keep it to a playful chase. I’ll follow your lead.”

I ran my tongue along my teeth. “I think I would like to try it.”

Excitement spiked through that new bond of ours, and Cole was sweet enough to look a little embarrassed. “I’m gonna go check on the bath and get myself back in sorts before we talk more about this. I don’t want to inadvertently pressure you to do something because I’m acting like a schoolboy who just saw a picture of a naked woman for the first time.”

He gently shifted me off his lap and onto the edge of the bed, then rose and stretched his arms over his head as he walked into the bathroom.

I ogled him as he walked. He was so large and solid, I couldn’t imagine being able to fight him off me. Strangely enough, the idea didn’t bother me as much as I thought it would. I imagined his rough manhandling as if trying on a coat to see if it fit right.

There was something fundamentally different about the idea of being pursued by Cole—a man who had only ever supported and cared for me—and Wyatt, who represented pure terror for me. I wondered if that’s what Cole had meant when he said it could be a way to reclaim power over my trauma. That I could, in essence, “redo” the frightening things that had happened to me and rewrite them, all with the safe knowledge of being hunted by a man I knew would never try to hurt me.

I stood and wandered to the bathroom, leaning against the doorframe as I looked at Cole. He was kneeling over the tub, testing the temperature of the water. He heard me, of course, and looked over his shoulder.

“Almost done, baby,” he said.

I blew out a shaky breath.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I was wondering if we could try it?”

“Try?” he asked, his brows knitting in confusion. “Try what?”

“Could we do a trial run? Do a little of that wrestling or whatever tonight?” My face was getting so hot, I was certain my cheeks were bright red. “You know what? It’s a stupid idea. Just forget it.”

“Hey, no, not at all. It’s not a stupid idea,” he soothed. “I think it’s actually really smart. Better to try a little nibble of it rather than go full throttle from the start, you know?”

My face was still burning hot, but I managed a nod.

He came over to me and touched my cheek gently. “You want to try tonight?”

I bit my lower lip. “Where would we start?”

“A little tumble in that bed, maybe?” He nodded toward it. “We can keep it tame. My goal could be to get you subdued, undressed, and in the bath.”

I glanced at the bed before meeting his gaze again. I could feel how much he was holding himself together for my benefit, could practically see the taut quality of his breathing as he waited for my answer.

“You’ll keep it playful?” I asked. “I don’t want it to be too menacing or scary.”

The corner of his mouth lifted into a smirk. “It’ll be like a really sexy game of tag.”

I snorted. “Yeah. Okay. Let’s give it a shot.”

“All right, sweetheart.” He lowered his head to kiss me.

The kiss felt like a precursor to what was about to occur. It was sweet but claiming. His tongue snaked into my mouth and tangled with mine. Just as I expected the kiss to end, Cole shifted the angle and bent further into my space, taking ownership of it.

Each moment I didn't move, he became more and more demanding. He crowded in on me until it was all I could do to back against the wall. It was enough to overwhelm me, and before I realized it, I was pushing at his chest.

He parted just enough to smile down at me. "Did you finally remember what we're doing here? Did you remember that you're supposed to be fighting me off, sweetheart?"

Cole took another step back, one eyebrow raised. His expression had an almost teasing quality to it, like he was daring me to make a move. I glanced at the massive bed, then back at him. His expression and stance were both at ease, but I was as tense as a cat ready to bolt.

A few long seconds passed, then I took off running.

Cole tracked me with his eyes, giving me a head start. I went around the bed, putting it between us in the hope he'd lose some time by having to navigate around or across it.

"You sure you want to be in a corner like that?" he asked coyly.

Shit. I'd moved myself into a trap. There were only a couple of feet to move in, and I was hemmed in by a wall. When I looked back at Cole, he was stalking toward me.

I let out a yelp, scrambling onto the bed and rolling across it. I'd intended to catch myself in time to leap from the bed and run down the stairs. Unfortunately, I'd miscalculated my force and trajectory and wound up falling to the floor with a graceless thud. It didn't hurt, but it was embarrassing.

Cole gasped. "Marley, you okay?"

I peeked over at him from behind the edge of the mattress. His eyes were wide with genuine concern. It was endearing—a little crack in the game that showed his true care and regard for me. I almost wanted to hurry over to him and kiss him, promise him I wasn't hurt, and tell him how adorable he was.

But we were playing a game. One I wanted to win.

I jumped up and ran, knocking over one of the chairs as I hurried to the narrow staircase.

“Hey!” I heard him shout behind me as I rushed down the stairs.

My body sang with the thrill of getting one over on him. I was certain I’d be able to get downstairs and find a hiding place before he even got out of the room.

But just as I was about to drop onto the first floor, I was suddenly plucked off my feet. The abrupt movement surprised me so much that my feet hadn’t even registered that they could no longer move me.

Two arms, thick and corded with muscle, wrapped around me, crushing me to my captor’s chest.

“Gotcha,” Cole growled in my ear as he started hauling me back up the stairs.

I reached for the stair railing, clasping my hands to the wooden banister. Cole laughed, freeing up one arm to pry my hands away from it. What followed was a game of chicken where every time he took one of my hands off the railing, my other hand replaced it.

“You a scrappy little thing, you know that?” he muttered.

When he pried one of my hands off the banister again, he took it with his other hand, forcing me to wrap my arm around myself. With the one hand out of commission, it was easy for him to lay claim to the other one. He wrapped his arms around me again, making sure my arms were wrapped around me. “Little bit of self-love, hey, sweetheart?”

To my surprise, I *growled*. Not just a grunt or a whine of frustration; no, the sound that came out of me was angry and feral. I kicked my legs fruitlessly, but all Cole did was laugh as he carried me back into the room and back over to the bed.

“No biting,” he instructed as he tossed me onto the mattress.

I scrambled onto my hands and knees, trying to scurry away again. My skin was hot, and my heartbeat echoed in my ears. Before I could make it to the edge of the bed, Cole grabbed my ankle, flipping me back over and dragging me across the mattress over to him.

“I don’t think so,” he said, a sharp quality to his smile that made me want to melt and fight in equal measure. He climbed on top of me, resting on my pelvis with enough of his weight that it pinned me in place. I tried to scramble from under him, feet kicking, hands grasping for purchase.

His hands went to the buttons of my blouse.

Right—this was the fight. The goal was to get me undressed for the bath.

I swatted one hand away. He reached with his other, and I smacked it. This continued while he gave me a shit-eating grin. After a few minutes of this little game, he gathered both my wrists in his large hand and pinned them above my head. I wriggled beneath him, trying to get out from under his hips.

“Attagirl, keep fighting,” he said. “It’s not over till it’s over, sweetheart.” His other hand worked at my buttons with infuriating ease.

Kicking and thrashing, I railed against him until I finally got a hand free. I grasped his shirt, pulling and struggling. His smile fell, and his brow set with determination as he made to subdue me again. He got close to grabbing my free wrist, but I swiped it away, scratching him in the process.

I gasped, and we froze for a few seconds. I watched the blood spill over his skin. It wasn’t a deep cut, and it wasn’t like he was bleeding profusely. It was more like the kind of scrape someone might get from brushing too close to a rose bush.

“Naughty,” Cole murmured.

When I looked back up at him, his grin was almost hungry. His eyes narrowed, his pupils pinpricks despite the dim lighting of the bedroom. I could almost swear that his canines had become slightly elongated in his excitement.

This was a hunt, and I’d just drawn first blood.

Realizing the gauntlet I’d just thrown down between us, I started to struggle again, finally managing to wrench my legs free.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” he growled.

I thought he’d go for my hands again. Instead, he ripped my shirt open, the small pearl buttons flying onto the bed and floor. I couldn’t tell if I was frightened or aroused by the show of power. Maybe a bit of both. Wasn’t that the whole point of this?

I scrambled more, getting myself free of him. He grabbed the back of my shirt, and the only way I could get free was to slide my arms out of it. I ran to the other side of the room, pressing my back against the wall, panting wildly, my bra straining as my chest expanded with every breath.

He slid off the bed, tossing my ruined shirt to the floor and flexing his hands at his sides.

“One down, three more to go,” he said in a menacing singsong. “I can hear your heart racing over there, Marley. What’s your plan now? Going to run again?”

“M-maybe,” I said, eyes darting around the room for the best possible escape route.

The stairs were my best bet. I could find a hiding spot downstairs, or run outside.

I must have made my thoughts too obvious, though, because just as I tore away for the stairs, Cole was going for them, too. He intercepted me, and I slammed into his body, knocking the wind right out of me.

He didn’t wait for me to catch my breath, though. Instead, he hefted me over his shoulder, tugging at my jeans. He was able to get them off in three rough tugs. His movements were so rough and jostling that I had to choose between letting myself fall to the floor or grasping onto his shirt for dear life.

His palm connected with the curve of my ass with a hard *slap*. He cupped his hands where my thighs met my hips, the warmth of his fingers brushing dangerously close to my center as he clasped me hard against his chest.

I pounded against his back in a futile attempt to get him to let me go. When he seemed unbothered, I resorted to scratching again, fighting with the hem of his shirt until I

found the smooth skin of his back. This time, I intentionally dug my nails in and dragged them up his skin.

“Gah! *Fuck*,” he hissed as he tossed me onto the bed again. “You little minx. That hurt.”

Despite the guilt and the urge to flee, I giggled.

“Oh, you think it’s funny?” he demanded, hooking his hands around the back of my knees and pulling me to the edge of the bed. I tried to bat his hands off, but it was ridiculous how easy it was for him to tear right through my panties and toss the scraps of fabric away. “You’re lucky I love this bra so much,” he muttered as he flipped me over roughly. “Otherwise, I would have ruined it along with the rest of your clothes.”

I clawed at the bed, trying to get away one last time before he won. He gripped my hair, winding the length of it around his hand and pulling. I whimpered as he got on top of me.

“Don’t worry, baby.” His breath was hot and rough on my ear. “I can take this off with one hand.”

Cole took his time with the bra. He gave my ass a hard squeeze, curving his thumb to brush against my entrance. He brushed that same hand in a slow path up my spine until it slid under the band of my bra.

He drew the hand away, pinching the clasp of my bra with practiced ease. It gave way, releasing the heavy weight of my breasts against the bed. One rough grapple later, I was turned onto my back.

Cole leaned over me, brushing his nose against mine. “*I win*,” he said before claiming my mouth in a victorious kiss.

My mind still told me to fight him off, and I shrank into the plush mattress as if trying to avoid his contact. I wasn’t ready to concede.

But he kept up with that sweet pressure against my lips, and I eventually relaxed into it. I answered his slick movements with my own, closing my mouth over his lower lip, tasting the tip of his tongue as it traced my lip. I sighed

softly through my nose as he cupped my breast with tender care, his fingers brushing over my nipple.

I started to feel the pang of absence between my legs as my fight-or-flight instinct gave way to desire. I wanted him inside me. His fingers, his cock, something.

I let my legs open to him, moaning at the rough texture of denim as I slid my thigh against his hips by way of invitation. He parted from the kiss just enough to meet my gaze.

“Need me to touch you, baby?” he asked.

I thought touching was only the natural conclusion to this little experiment in wrestling, but we’d never discussed anything after the removal of my clothes. My heart warmed at how careful and attentive Cole always was with me, even after chasing me around the house and literally tearing my clothes off.

“Please,” I murmured.

He nodded, his eyes burning into me as he reached down between my legs with the same hand that had been cupping my breast. He watched my face as he slid one finger into me, then a second one along with it.

I melted into the touch, exhaling shakily and letting out a quiet whimper. He answered that reaction with a slow, delicious rhythm of his fingers sliding in and out of me. Every touch was deliberate, every stroke lingering. This was not a hard and fast finger-bang; this was strategic. He started with a come-hither motion against the curve of my G-spot before spreading his fingers out and doing a slow retreat. Just before his fingers slipped out of me, he thrust them inside me again.

Within minutes, I was a quivering, whimpering mess. Each slow stroke made me cry out louder and louder for him.

“Cole,” I moaned. “God, Cole!”

“That’s it, baby,” he said, unnervingly calm. “Come for me, sweetheart.”

After a few more strokes, I did. My thighs squeezed around his wrist, my hips bucking as he coaxed the last bit of

release out of me. I went slack, and he bent down to kiss me again.

This time, the kiss was gentle and loving—a kind transition from the high-intensity experience we'd just had. When he broke the kiss, we sighed dreamily in unison.

“I wouldn't be surprised if that tub was overflowing by now,” he said with a chuckle. “You put up more of a challenge than I thought you would.”

“Really?” I asked a little breathlessly. “Did you think I'd just lie there like a dead fish?”

“To be entirely honest with you, I wasn't sure how well you'd take to the whole thing. Especially with...well, you know.”

I did know. He was referencing the number of times I'd been pursued in a very real way. All the same, Cole hadn't seemed all that concerned about it before we started. No more concerned than usual, anyway.

“I thought we might have to stop and I'd need to calm you down,” he admitted. “I wouldn't have been at all upset if that happened, but I wasn't entirely sure what to expect.”

“But you didn't say anything against it before we started,” I said. “Why didn't you?”

“Because you brought this up all on your own, and I didn't want to scare you away from it when I knew I was likely projecting.” He lay down next to me and placed his hand on my stomach. “And I'm glad I didn't, because I was clearly wrong about what I thought you could handle.”

I nodded, pursing my lips and looking up at the ceiling. I wondered if he realized the irony of trusting my agency in this matter, but not in me wanting to become a shifter. I thought about pointing that out to him, but decided not to. I'd just had a pretty intimate experience with him, and I didn't want to ruin it by bringing up that subject when we'd already argued about it.

“That was fun,” I said instead.

“Yeah?” he asked. “You liked it?”

I nodded. “It kind of felt like being chased on the playground. Like, it felt dangerous, but also exciting because I knew you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Wish I could say the same,” he teased. “You did a number on my back, little thing.”

I winced. “I’m so sorry. Does it hurt?”

“A little,” he said with a wink. “But don’t worry about it. I love being scratched like that.”

“Really?” I asked in surprise.

“Fuck, yeah,” he said. “Marley, do you know how often I want to put a mark somewhere on you and show people that you belong to me? I don’t, because I know how to behave like a proper man, but it’s gratifying as hell to have you do the same thing to me. It...” He trailed off, looking a little ashamed.

“What?”

“I shouldn’t say it.”

“No, tell me. It won’t bother me, I promise.”

“I didn’t think it would. It’s just that it’s a train of thought I’m not particularly proud of, you know?”

“We all have those, don’t we?” I asked. “I mean, I wanted to rip that other shifter’s hair out when you told me she was coming onto you.”

“*Really?*” he said, sounding intrigued. “My, Marley, you don’t seem like the jealous type. I’m honestly surprised to hear that from you.”

“Why wouldn’t I be jealous when you’re so far out of my league?”

He snorted a laugh, and I raised an eyebrow. His amusement faded, and his mouth dropped open. “Wait, you meant that? Seriously? Marley, I am *not* out of your league. If anything, you’re entirely too good for me.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I said, shaking my head.

“I’m a single father, a shifter, and a bit of a brute. Most human dudes would think you were an idiot for being with me, and probably a good share of women, too.”

“And I come with a truckload of ex-boyfriend baggage. Besides, I look super average,” I said. “Clearly, the one who lucked out here was me.”

“Well, let me assure you, then,” he said. “You have exactly nothing to worry about when it comes to other women. As far as I’m concerned, you’re my mate until you tell me otherwise.”

He pressed a few kisses to my shoulder, neck, and face while I giggled and half-heartedly batted him off. “Okay, okay, you win.”

“That’s right.” He brushed his lips softly over mine. “And on that note, let’s go wash up, yeah?”

“Let me treat those scrapes, too,” I offered.

“Nurse Marley here to take care of little old me? I’m so lucky.”

“Not that lucky,” I said. “My legs feel like jelly, so you’re going to have to carry me to the bathroom.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I suppose that could be arranged.”

Cole got up and scooped me into his arms with ease, carrying me into the bathroom. The tub hadn’t overflowed, but it was close. The water steamed enticingly, and I sighed.

“Want me to put you right in?” he asked.

“God, yes,” I said.

“Won’t be too hot?”

“No. It’s pretty hard to deter me, you know?”

He carefully set me in the tub. The water was *insanely* comfortable, just below the temperature I would have had to dance around until my body acclimated.

And I could have danced around. The bathtub was deeper than it looked. Luckily, there was an area for me to sit so I didn't have to float or stand. While I went to the tiled seating, Cole got undressed, and I enjoyed the show at this interesting vantage point. I admired the little hollow that formed at his flank, the pleasant swell of his half-erect penis, the masculine curves of his thighs and calves.

God, he was a beautiful man.

He walked over to the tub and looked at me, his hand resting on his hip. "Uh, you mentioned wanting to bathe with me while I was in my lycan form. Is that still the case?"

I beamed and nodded emphatically. "Of course! No point taking a bath in here and wasting the opportunity to be close like that," I said. "Why would I have changed my mind?"

"Things got a little heated just now. I just wanted to make sure you weren't feeling gun-shy about it, I guess."

I shook my head and patted the seat next to me. "Let me just fix up your back, and then you can shift whenever you feel comfortable enough to do it, okay?"

He nodded and smiled, coming around to step into the tub. I was fully prepared to start acting like his nurse, but before I could, he pulled me into a tight hug. He buried his head in my hair, taking a deep breath and sighing.

"I appreciate you so much, Marley," he said softly. "It's so wild that you don't think of yourself as a catch for me. You're beautiful, and you have an even more beautiful heart. And that's saying something."

My heart threatened to burst out of my chest, and I wrapped my arms around him. "It's easy to be sweet to you and Noah. You both make it easy, honestly. I'm so lucky to have you."

He drew back and pressed his lips to my forehead. "All right. With that out of my system..." He turned his back to me, revealing two sets of angry scratches on his back.

I cringed. "Jeez, it's really bad. I really didn't think I scratched that hard."

“It’s going to look worse with the water,” Cole said. “It’ll look like it’s bleeding a lot more than it is.”

I cupped water in my hands and poured it over the wounds, only to find that the scratches beneath had already healed. The only thing to contend with was a bit of leftover blood.

“Oh,” I said. “You’re already healed.”

“I thought I might be, but I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to let you play nursemaid. You could still clean me up if you like, though.”

I chuckled. “I suppose that’s only fair. Eye for an eye and all that.”

“Speaking of which, I owe you some new clothes,” he said with a laugh.

“Wow, such remorse,” I teased. “You sound real broken up about ruining my panties and shirt.”

“Allow a man his sinful pleasures,” he quipped.

“Did that do it for you, then?” I asked.

“Did that do it for me?” he said, peeking over his shoulder at me. “Jesus Christ, Marley, what do you think?”

I pressed my lips together, feeling a little embarrassed. “Yes?”

“A fucking resounding yes. Frankly, the entire experience was a damned dream come true,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong; I was still holding back. But even that part of things felt exciting in its own way. A little bit of denial, a bit of self-control, while feeling like I was getting away with something...”

He trailed off as I finished getting the last bit of blood off his back. He turned, his brow tensing a little. “Hold on. That didn’t sound right—the way I said that.”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it. I understood what you meant.”

“I wanna clarify, anyway. Marley, when I say getting away with something, I don’t mean that I fantasize about having my

way with you or taking advantage of you. But when it comes to being in a relationship with a human woman, it's often expected that you don't indulge in those parts of things, you know? You keep it together to avoid catastrophic disasters or scaring off your partner."

I nodded, not needing him to explain but appreciating that he felt the need to do so. "I know, Cole," I said, reaching up to cup his face. "Lucky for us, we're so attuned to each other that we don't have to be fearful of something like that happening. Hell, we've been feeling each other's *emotions*. I'm sure it feels like a relief."

The breath he exhaled sounded like he was releasing everything that had been coiled inside him. "Right," he said. "It does. It feels good to be myself with you, whatever that looks like at the time. Whether that's hunting you down like they did in the old days or bathing with you in my shifter form, it just feels good not to have to hide anything from you."

I nodded and gave him a quick kiss. "I'm glad, because I don't want you to have to keep anything from me. Especially regarding who you are, both as a man and as a shifter. So whatever happens, give me a chance to accept all of you before you assume I can't handle it, okay?"

"I will," he said, rubbing his nose against mine. "I promise."

We bathed each other with the luxurious soaps offered in the house. I'd brought my own toiletries, but found I didn't need to use any of them—the Silver Moon pack had provided everything. All their products smelled so good and felt wonderful. By the time we were scrubbed and clean, both of us had soft, nice-smelling skin.

I sat back against the wall of the tub, and a moment later, Cole shifted into his wolf form, almost taking up the entirety of the tub.

I sighed. "That will never not be amazing to me—watching you turn into a beautiful, huge wolf. It's like something out of a fairytale."

He waded through the water toward me. When he reached me, he set his snout on my shoulder and exhaled heavily. I smiled and reached up, scratching behind his ears and beneath his chin. He raised his head to allow better access, and I raked my fingers through the fur on his chest.

Cole let out a comforted grumble, his mouth opening as he gave a happy pant toward the ceiling.

I giggled and shook my head. “Say what you want about being problematic,” I teased. “But you’re definitely acting like a giant dog.”

He closed his mouth and nudged my hands away before giving me an unimpressed glower followed by an indignant snort. I laughed so hard, my stomach hurt, and he turned away from me in defiance. I could only imagine what he would have said if he’d been in his human form.

His charade of offended attitude didn’t last long, though. A few moments later, he returned to my side.

We soaked together in relative quiet for a while. When I started drifting off against him in the tub, Cole shifted back into his human form and gathered me up in his arms.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” he murmured. “It’s been a really long day. Let’s get to bed.”

My reply was an incoherent mumble. Just as he’d carried me from the bed to the bath, he carried me from the bath to the bed. He wrapped me up in one of the huge towels meant for shifters, then groomed himself—shaving, brushing his teeth.

Curled up in that soft, plush towel, I was on the brink of sleep when I heard him laugh quietly. “Come on, sweetheart,” he said, waking me. “Let me comb your hair and get it braided so it doesn’t get too tangled while you sleep.”

A half-hearted sound came out of my mouth, but I sat up and let him do what he wanted. Cole was so gentle as he combed through my tangles, parted my hair, and started plaiting it into two loose braids at the sides of my head. He handed me elastics, which I clumsily twisted around each end. After that, he offered to get me into some pajamas, but I shook

my head. His body was so warm, his hands so strong and gentle, I didn't want to deprive myself of any of it. I didn't want to have anything between us, especially when there was no risk of being interrupted by a five-year-old.

He chuckled and gathered me into his arms again, squeezing me close as we settled into the comfortable bed. I made myself small, not because I felt any sense of danger, but because I loved being enveloped in his powerful arms.

I half-thought of pawing at him to initiate some sleepy sex. But before I could do much more than brush my fingers across his skin, I was already asleep.

* * *

As the soft tendrils of sunlight crept through the curtains, I slowly opened my eyes, feeling the warmth of a new day and the ridiculously comfortable bed enveloping me. It took me a few moments to fully become aware of my surroundings. But when I started to rouse fully, I was keenly aware of an absence from the bed. Cole was gone.

The shower wasn't running, and I didn't feel his presence in the room. Just as I was about to roll out of bed and go looking for him, he appeared in the doorway, dressed in a loose white tee and his boxers. He was holding a tray in his hands. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee filled the air, reminding me of our first meeting. My whole being filled with warmth as those fateful moments replayed in my mind.

"Why are you being so cute?" I asked sleepily.

"Good morning, love," Cole greeted me with a tender smile. "I like to think I'm always cute, but in this specific moment, I thought I would make you some breakfast to get you energized for your self-defense training today. You looked so peaceful sleeping, I couldn't bear the thought of waking you up."

My heart swelled with gratitude as I propped myself against the multiple pillows around me. Cole settled beside me, placing the tray on my lap, revealing an array of

nourishing delights—a vibrant fruit salad with cut strawberries, red grapes, kiwi, and blueberries next to a bowl of oatmeal with a pat of butter melting in the center and a bit of brown sugar in a ramekin along with some walnuts. The coffee was just like how I liked it: a splash of cream and too much sugar. There was even some orange juice. Finally, on a separate plate were some scrambled eggs.

I couldn't help but admire the thoughtfulness behind Cole's breakfast. "This looks absolutely amazing," I said, my voice filled with appreciation. "You've truly outdone yourself, Cole. I can't possibly eat all of this."

He chuckled, his eyes filled with warmth. "Just make sure you at least have a little bit of everything. The carbs from the fruit and oatmeal will give you something to burn while you work out, and the protein will help you stay fueled and energized." He reached over and popped a blueberry into his mouth. "I know how important it is to nourish your body, especially when I know how important this is to you."

I scooped up a bite of eggs, knowing full well that I was too excited for the oatmeal and fruit. After finishing about half the eggs, I started in on the fruit.

"Where did you even get all of this? Did you leave the house?" I asked.

"I was about to, but I checked the fridge on a whim to see if they had it stocked with any basics and found it was full of fresh produce." Cole shrugged.

"They're really treating us like royalty," I said. "It makes you wonder if they're trying to keep us here."

"It'd be a lie to say the idea hasn't crossed my mind," he said. "Yesterday, I was thinking how nice it'd be to bring Noah here and set the whole alpha idea aside."

I nodded, chewing thoughtfully on a strawberry. "Should we do that? I wouldn't blame you for making that choice. And I mean, I can come here with you."

"You'd drop everything back in New Middle Bluff for that?"

“I’d do just about anything for you and Noah,” I said plainly. “I mean, it’d be an adjustment, but it’s not like I have many things keeping me tied there. I have no job, after all, and I’ve been living in Lana’s place for the most part.”

Cole nodded. “Well, that’s incredibly sweet of you. But I think the conclusion I reached last night was that it would be swapping one set of circumstances for another. Things are okay for non-shifters here now, but I don’t want to be at the mercy of that sentiment changing. I don’t want to give Noah a community and have him get attached to it, just to have to flee like my parents did.”

“That’s fair,” I said, digging into the oatmeal. “A smart choice, I think. And we can always adopt what we like from here and take it back with us for your pack.”

“*Our* pack,” he corrected with a grin. “It’s your pack, too, sweetheart.”

“Is it?” I asked. “I mean, I’ll still be human. I don’t think many shifters will consider me part of the pack.”

“Of course you’re part of it,” he said, his brows knitting as he smoothed his hand over my back. “I’ll be alpha, and you’ll be my mate. There are no technicalities or fine print that say you are required to be a shifter to be a part of my pack. It’s *my* pack. You’re part of it if I say you are.”

I gave him a half-hearted smile as I pushed my oatmeal around in my bowl. Sure, maybe that was true in some ways. But my mind went back to the night before, to Cole telling me about the woman who came onto him.

“Do you think that girl would have made a pass at you if I wasn’t a human?” I asked finally.

Cole stilled, and I forced myself to meet his gaze. “Marley, I thought we were in agreement about you not becoming a shifter.”

“Like I said last night, we may not have a choice in how people see me. I mean, I was announced and introduced as your mate last night to most of those people, and that woman

still felt like it was okay to come onto you.” I shrugged. “That’s all.”

Cole’s mouth worked a little, and he sighed. “That isn’t because you’re a human.”

“Then what is it?”

Cole withdrew his hand from my back and sat up next to me, rubbing his chin in that way he always did when he was thinking or stressed about something.

“She came onto me because I haven’t claimed you,” he said finally.

“Then just *do it* already!” I urged. “It’s not worth holding off if it opens us up to stuff like that. Cole, I don’t want to feel like I have to worry about women clamoring all over you when we’re apart.”

“Marley, it’s not that simple,” he said. “The process of claiming is a little intense.”

In that moment, it occurred to me that claiming might be the equivalent of marriage in shifter-speak. This whole time, I’d been flippantly asking Cole to marry me. “Is it a marriage thing or something?”

“What?” Cole asked, seemingly surprised by the leap in logic. “No, we have mating ceremonies for things like that.”

“Then what? You don’t want to be tied down or something?”

“Marley, you silly girl,” he said, taking my hand. “It has *nothing* to do with a fear of committing to you. Trust me, if it were that easy, I’d do it in a heartbeat. Hell, even if it weren’t easy, I’d do it.”

“So what is it?”

Cole shifted a bit uncomfortably, but I didn’t take my eyes off him. I’d been dying to learn what claiming was about. He’d made jokes about an unhinged sex act, but I’d thought he was just pulling my chain to get a rise out of me. Now that he was looking so desperate to get out of this conversation, I was starting to worry that claiming was something gross or painful.

He inhaled and breathed out. “All claiming is intense because it’s having sex while one or both partners are partially shifted.”

The words landed, but my mind failed to disentangle their meaning. “Is a partial shift even possible?”

“Yes,” Cole said, looking down at the bed as he fidgeted with the sheets. “It’s more like the kind of shit you’d see in a pre-clawset movie or something.”

I was quiet for a moment, trying to remember those old movies and what the shifters looked like in them. Somewhere in my distant memory, I thought I could recall mangy-looking creatures with patchy fur, clawed hands, and awkward-looking snouts.

“So, like that naked mole rat vibe?” I asked, trying to school my face.

“Naked...what? No. Just...” He sighed. “Here. Look at my hand, okay?”

He put his hand in front of me. His fingers elongated, his skin darkened to a shade similar to his dark brown hair, and his nails grew to tapered, vicious points.

I reached out to touch his hand, noticing that the areas of skin that looked darker were actually covered in soft, velvety fur, almost like a squirrel’s.

“Soft,” I remarked, quietly enamored.

Cole was looking at me as if I’d grown a second head.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I thought you’d freak out,” he said. “I mean, there’s more than one reason most of us don’t walk around like this, even when we have to fight in humanoid forms. Most people, even some shifters, think a partially shifted person is monstrous and ugly. Claiming—people out of the clawset in areas like New Middle Bluff, we usually just forget about it as a thing. Honestly, I hadn’t even thought about it until my dad mentioned it.”

“I could never think you’re ugly,” I said. “I mean, I’ve seen real ugliness, you know. I’ve seen it in Wyatt and Curt. Not in how they look. In the hatred they spew.”

I tangled my fingers with his, brushing my thumb over the soft fur. His hand curled around mine, dwarfing it nearly twice the usual size.

“So, for you to claim me, you’d have to have sex with me like this?” I asked.

“That’s a pretty large part of it, yeah,” he said. “There are some other aspects to it.”

“Like what?”

His hand shifted back to its normal size and appearance. “Marley, I don’t want you to think I’m a freak. I really don’t want that.”

“I’m not going to think you’re a freak.”

“You might,” he said skeptically.

“Cole, please give me a chance to show you I’m a good partner. I don’t want you to have to hide *anything* from me. Least of all anything having to do with you being a shifter. Please tell me.”

He sighed and looked away from me again, leaning his head against the wall. Squeezing my hand, he gnawed on his lip for a moment. Finally, he spoke.

“There are some theories that the act used to be related to...uh...breeding. Something about the finale is slightly different from the human form.”

“That’s nothing new,” I said. “You’ve finished in me before.”

He shook his head. “Not like this.”

“What’s the difference? Cum is cum, right?”

Cole snorted a laugh and gave me an incredulous look. “It is so odd to hear you talk like that.”

I chuckled. “Should I be more clinical?”

“No, please don’t. I think that’d be worse.” He heaved a slow breath. He closed his eyes and took in a long inhale. “Marley, what do you know about the anatomy of lupine creatures?”

I frowned. “Not much.”

His brow twitched faintly. “So, let me put it this way. My, uh, situation down there is part of what is partially shifted in the claiming process.”

“Oh,” I said, drawing out the syllable. “Does that mean it’s bigger or something?”

“Yes.” Cole pressed his lips together. “It has another feature in that form.”

“What is it?”

“In that state, there is usually a knot.”

“A knot? Like a sore spot or something?”

“Oh, Marley,” he said wistfully. “Not that kind of knot. It’s a part of my cock that swells up, okay? It will happen when we’re fucking, and eventually, when I’m close to coming, I’ll be in such a rut-wild state that I’ll press it into you before I come, and... basically, we’ll literally be joined at the hip until we both wind down.”

His face was scarlet. I’d never seen him so flustered before. Sure, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t kind of shocked by this information. Maybe not so much the information as the fact that I’d never heard about it before. But Cole had said himself that most shifters didn’t even acknowledge that wilder side of themselves unless they were in remote areas or in packs.

I was still running through the logistics when Cole took his free hand and covered his eyes, cringing with shame.

“Wait,” I said, moving before thinking and almost upending the entire tray of food on my lap. There was a chaotic yelp and a downright impressive display of acrobatics as I saved it from falling over the edge of the bed. When I had a good grip on it, I carefully moved it away from my legs. As

soon as I was sure it wouldn't make a mess, I crawled onto Cole's lap and pulled his hand away from his face.

"You think I'm disgusting," he said.

"Is that what I feel?" I asked, tilting my head to catch his downcast eyes. "You know most of my strong feelings these days. Is that what happened?"

"No..."

I smiled and put my hands on his cheeks. Cole begrudgingly let out a breath and dropped his hands to the tops of my thighs as he looked at me. "I can't believe how much you look like Noah when you're pouting. I can't believe I get to see you *pouting*," I teased.

"It isn't pouting, Marley. It's—I mean, there was a time you were so nervous about dating me because I was a shifter. I'm terrified this will be some kind of deal-breaker."

"Well, it's not," I promised. "I mean, I was just surprised I'd never heard anything about this before, you know? It seems like something Wyatt would have eaten up."

"I have a theory that he didn't because it would have meant revealing the monstrous side of himself," Cole said. "Like, Wyatt always seemed to know that his behavior was bullshit, you know? He would never act abusive around people who would care; he'd keep it under wraps, or try to convince you that you had the wrong idea. If he tried to claim you and you'd gotten footage or something of it, there was no way he could argue or gaslight you."

It made sense. Of course, there would be no way to ever confirm the truth of it, but it tracked with Wyatt's behavior while we were together and the media mess that followed when he found me again.

"Anyway," I said, shaking my head to stop thinking about Wyatt. "I...do have some reservations, but it doesn't sound like anything much more intense than the stuff we've been experimenting with in the bedroom."

Cole's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

“Can you blame me?” I said, also blushing now. “I’m a little bit obsessed with you, after all.”

Cole let out a little sigh and pressed his forehead against mine. “Fuck, Marley. I don’t think you even understand how obsessed I am with you. I keep thinking I’ve hit the limit of how much I can think about a woman, and then you say or do something like that.”

“I’ll, uh, do some reading,” I said. “I’m sure there are women who have experienced knotting online somewhere. They probably have tips for doing it safely and—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You actually want me to do it?”

“You said they...weren’t taking us seriously because you hadn’t claimed me,” I mumbled, feeling my ears get hot. “Do...do you not want to?”

“I do. But, Marley, this is not—it wouldn’t be like how it is when I make love to you, baby.” He drew back from me and stroked a hand down my hair. “It won’t be slow, it won’t be careful. I won’t be in a headspace where I can check for your consent at regular intervals. I’ll be more animal than man. God, Marley, I don’t want to hurt you or scare you.”

“Wild like last night? With the chase?”

“That times ten,” he said. “Please take me seriously when I tell you this, Marley. In that mindset, until I’m done with you and sated, it’ll be the roughest sex you’ve ever had. I won’t be in danger of causing any real harm to you—I wouldn’t bite or kill you or something like that. But I can’t rule out scratches, bruises, or even some tearing.”

My heart thrummed, and I had to swallow the saliva that had pooled in my mouth. I looked away from him as a litany of emotions rushed through me.

Cole pressed his hand to my chest and tutted softly. “Marley, it’s fluttering like a hummingbird in there,” he said. “We don’t have to do it. Not until you feel ready for it. Hell, we don’t ever have to do it if you don’t want to. It doesn’t hurt my feelings. It doesn’t feel like rejection or anything. I’m just happy you’re not rushing out the door, you know?”

I swallowed dryly again and shook my head. “That’s not why my heart is racing,” I said. “I’m not scared.”

“What, then?” he asked patiently.

“R-remember when I freaked out and walked away when you asked me about the primal kink thing?”

“Yeah, it was fucking adorable,” he said with a grin.

“Same thing,” I said. “I’m forcing myself not to flee, but I just feel weird because, to be honest, all of that sounds really appealing to me. And I know that it makes me seem like someone who can’t make up her mind. Like, I fought tooth and nail to get away from an abuser, so why would I find something like that even remotely appealing? Maybe it really was my fault that Wyatt—”

Cole pressed his fingers to my lips. “Don’t even finish that sentence,” he said, his voice quiet and heavy. “Don’t conflate your fantasies with implicit consent to being abused. That’s not what I’m doing to you—that’s not something I would *ever* do to you. Do you understand me?”

“But...” My throat was tight. “Other people...”

“Who gives a fuck what other people say, Marley?” Cole demanded, grasping my chin, not hard enough to hurt me, but enough to jostle me out of my spiral of self-blame. “The only person who knows what you want is *you*. People may speculate or try to tell you that this or that behavior means this or that about you, but they’re all full of shit. You are the expert of your own mind and body, all right?”

“All right,” I said.

“Say it back to me,” he commanded.

“I...am the expert of my own mind and body,” I repeated.

“One more time. Sound like you believe it this time.”

“I’m the expert of my mind and body.”

“That’s right. No one else. Only you.”

My face was still burning, but I nodded. I took a deep breath and chewed on the inside of my lip as I worked up the

courage to say what was on my mind.

“It sounds exciting,” I finally said. “I want to see what you’re like when your want for me goes unchecked. I want to know what it’s like when you don’t hold back at all. Even if it hurts, I want to experience that with you.”

Cole dragged in a deep breath, one tighter than the one before. One I was learning telegraphed his arousal. His lips flattened, and he huffed. “All right.”

“All right? What does that mean?”

“That means I need a day to do some thinking and figure out some logistics. Hell, I’m trying real hard not to pounce on you right now.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “All right,” I said. “I guess I should probably start getting ready for this class I’m going to.”

“Yeah, probably a good call,” he said. “Munch on some fruit while you get ready.”

I nodded and climbed off his lap. I reached over the massive bed to grab the bowl of fruit, feeling his eyes following me the entire way. His eyes didn’t stray from me as I rounded the bed and walked into the bathroom, munching on kiwi as I went.

I brushed my teeth, trying to focus on the task at hand and push aside any lingering nerves. Next, I gathered my hair and tied it back into a ponytail. I wanted my hair out of my face so it wouldn’t impede my movements during the training. When I left the bathroom to get dressed, I saw that Cole had snuck away. Perhaps to get some space from the urge to pounce.

I put on some athletic leggings and a spandex tank top. At first, I wanted to wear something that covered the scars from the aborted bite, but I had nothing to hide. The scars on my arms served as reminders of the battles I’d fought and survived. They were a testament to my journey, proof that I had overcome adversity and emerged stronger than ever. There was a time when I would have stressed out about keeping them hidden, especially around strangers.

Once, the scars had felt like a symbol of failure. Now, they felt like a badge of honor. Proof that I'd been through hell and come out the other side.

I slipped into a pair of running shoes, double-checking the laces to make sure they were secure. The familiar sensation of the cushioned soles against my feet brought a sense of comfort. These shoes had carried me through countless challenges before. My daily runs were the first thing that helped me feel like I had some control over my life. I was able to run out the anxiety and tension and fear that had plagued me when I first moved to New Middle Bluff.

I'd never anticipated that those runs would lead me here.

With one last glance in the mirror, I turned away, leaving behind my doubts and insecurities. Today was about embracing the present and the opportunity to grow and learn. The training session would push me to my limits, both physically and mentally, but I was ready. At least, I thought I was.

Excitement built within me as I went downstairs. I found Cole waiting by the door, a proud smile on his face as he took in my appearance. His eyes lingered on my scars, but he didn't say a word. Instead, he simply reached out and took my hand, offering me a silent gesture of support and understanding. His own scars, both from Wyatt's attack and the multiple surgeries he'd had to endure afterward, were a physical trait that linked us, proving we knew exactly what the other was dealing with.

"Feeling a bit better?" I asked as I laced my fingers through his.

"Better' is an interesting word for it," he said with a sly grin. "I am feeling a little less keyed up, though."

"Good. Can't have you trying to disrobe me in front of everyone," I teased.

"No, we can't have that. I don't particularly feel like sharing that version of you, either."

I laughed as we walked out the door. "What do you think I should expect at this training? I mean, have you ever seen a

shifter-led self-defense course for humans before?”

Cole’s brow furrowed slightly. “Honestly, Marley, I have no idea,” he admitted with a sheepish smile. “I’ve never witnessed a shifter-led self-defense course for humans. It’s uncharted territory for both of us.”

A tinge of nervousness crept into my voice as I replied, “Oh, I thought you’d been to something like this before.”

Sensing my apprehension, Cole squeezed my hand. His eyes, filled with unwavering support and reassurance, met mine. “Marley, you are incredibly strong and resilient,” he said earnestly. “I have no doubt that you’ll do great today. If anyone can fight off a shifter, it’s you. Especially with the experiences you’ve already had.”

“I’ve never actually fought off a shifter successfully.”

“You’ve never *subdued* a shifter. But you have fought them off or evaded them,” he said. “Sometimes running is the best way to fight a pursuer. There’s no shame in it.”

I took a deep breath, allowing his belief in me to wash away any doubts. “You’re right,” I replied, a newfound confidence in my voice. “I guess I still get first-day jitters even after being out of school for so long.”

Cole squeezed my hand again, a proud smile on his lips. “I know you do, Marley. But you’re a lot stronger than you think you are. Easily the strongest woman I know.”

We got in the rental car and made our way to the location River had texted Cole that morning. It was a training ground the shifters usually used, but when they weren’t training, it was used for these self-defense courses. When we arrived, we discovered that the space was a massive warehouse, complete with corrugated metal walls and a flat roof. The hangar-like doors let in the cool autumn air and bathed the space in sunlight.

Inside, the space reminded me of Shift into Fitness, but it was twice as large. Every corner of the training facility seemed to hold a different apparatus, each more intriguing than the last. Enormous tires were scattered across the landscape, ready

to be lifted and flipped as part of some intense exercise routine. Rock-climbing walls loomed overhead, their textured surfaces riddled with candy-colored stones. Rope ladders dangled from above. Obstacle courses stood tall, adorned with a myriad of structures designed to push people's limits.

"Well, look what the dog dragged in," a familiar voice called from across the room.

I turned to see River walking over to us in a muscle shirt, his hair braided neatly down his back. I smiled and waved at him. He broke into a jog to get to us quicker.

"Glad you came ready to break a sweat," he said to me as he approached. He clapped Cole's hand and shook it. "Good to see you, too, Alpha."

Cole nodded and looked around the room again. "Nice place," he commented.

River nodded, eyes shining with excitement. "Yeah, it's a real boon for us. Plenty of room to train and play without having to leave the compound." River's voice carried a blend of enthusiasm and pride.

"So, when does everyone else get here?" I asked.

"In a couple hours. I hope that's all right—I wanted to give you a tour and get an idea of your fitness level so I can pair you up with the right people. And I wanted to make sure you get everything you can out of the time you have here. All told, you'll probably be with me for about four hours. If that's cool with you."

"Fine with me. Can Cole stay and watch?" I asked.

River grimaced. "As much as we welcome everyone, we have a pretty stringent policy against mates staying with their partners in these scenarios. We've had a couple of fights that could have been avoided. Certain parties got in a tizzy because of the scenarios we were running with other pack shifters."

Cole stiffened beside me. "What kind of scenarios?"

"Well, we're not trying to do security theater here, Cole," River said. "We need to make sure that these men and women

can actually protect themselves against shifters. So, we pair them up against real shifters.”

Cole’s protective nature was one of the many things I loved about him, but it could also be a source of tension between us. As we stood there in the spacious training facility, Cole frowned. Concern flashed in his eyes, showing just how unwilling he was to leave my side.

“I think I can take care of myself and manage my emotions,” he said sharply. “How can you keep an eye on every person training today? What if someone gets a little too intense with Marley? I should be here to step in.”

“And are you planning on waiting until she flags you for help, or will you leap in at the first sign of her discomfort?” River asked. “Be honest.”

Cole’s lips twisted into a bitter scowl.

I gently placed my hand on his arm. “It’s okay, Cole,” I said soothingly, trying to calm his worries. “River is a skilled trainer, and I trust him. Besides, I need to learn to handle myself in these situations. I can’t do that if you’re always looking out for me.”

“I just worry about you,” Cole admitted, his voice softening. “I know you’ve been nervous around shifters before. I don’t want you to bite your tongue when I’m not here to advocate for you.”

“I know,” I replied, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. “But I’ll be fine. I promise.”

River nodded. “We have a lot of failsafes in place—we don’t play around. If it makes you feel more comfortable, I’ll be her partner the entire time. That way, you’ll know exactly what she’s up against. That work for you?”

My stomach flipped. I didn’t know why the idea of going against River was making me so nervous. Maybe it was just because he was so clearly suited to this kind of thing. He didn’t have the same build as Cole, whose strength was his athletic ability and well-developed muscles. River was built more like a dancer or a surfer—lithe and slender with well-

defined bands of muscle hugging his arms like cables of reinforced steel. I was fit, but I had no doubt he'd be able to overpower me in seconds.

Cole looked at me, then back at River, sizing him up.

River put his hands up in a surrendering gesture. "Listen, man, the last thing I'm interested in is hurting your mate or earning your ire. Your grandfather has been a huge help to me. I have a personal investment in not fucking this up."

Cole looked at me again. "Would you be okay with that? Or would you prefer someone else?"

"I feel safe with River," I said. "After all, he took good care of me last night, right?"

After a moment of hesitation, Cole sighed. "All right," he said. "Stay partnered with River. Make sure you ask for breaks or help if you need it. I'll be back in about four hours to pick you up."

A warm smile spread across my face. "Thank you, Cole. I'll be waiting for you. This training will be good, and it will make it easier for me to be with you and not feel so bad about not becoming a shifter."

Cole nodded again, leaning down to kiss my temple. "Do your best, baby."

With that heartfelt goodbye, Cole left the training facility, leaving me in River's capable hands. Turning back to face him, I saw he'd been watching our exchange with a knowing smile.

"He cares about you a lot," River observed.

"He does," I replied, my voice filled with affection. "Sometimes a bit too much, I fear, but I know it comes from a place of love and concern. I'm sorry he got kind of intense with you there for a few moments."

River chuckled softly. "Believe me, that was nothing. I've seen way worse—got the scars to prove it, even." He hesitated for a moment. "I don't mean to pry, but what was that bit about feeling bad about not being a shifter?"

I chewed on my lip and glanced over my shoulder. Cole was already in the car and pulling out of the parking lot.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s more than okay,” River said.

“Actually, it would be good to get the opinion of a neutral third party...if you don’t mind keeping the information to yourself.”

River nodded. “Come on, we’ll walk while we talk,” he said, gesturing back to the sprawling warehouse behind him.

I nodded, joining him at his side as he started the tour. As we walked across the turf’s plush padding, he pointed out the first of two obstacle courses.

“We use these mostly for the non-shifters, helps with agility and decisive action. You afraid of heights?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Cool, how about we talk while we go through the stages of the course?”

“Sure.”

The obstacle course looked like something in a game show where people had to climb and jump before scaling a ladder and hitting a giant button. Truth be told, it looked kind of fun with all the rope ladders, netting, and climbing frames. From what I could tell, the towering structure stood about twenty feet above us and extended another ten feet at the top, where it ended at a zipline down to another wooden platform closer to the ground.

I watched as River started climbing the latticework of rope. I followed him, grabbing the crisscrossing bands of rope.

As we reached about halfway up, River called back to me, “So, can you talk and climb at the same time?”

River didn’t even sound the slightest bit winded. Meanwhile, I was already panting just from the demand on my core muscles.

“Yeah,” I said through a rough breath. “So, uh, after all the hullabaloo from last night, I told Cole I was thinking about becoming a shifter.”

“Yeah?” River asked, looking back at me. I had my foot stuck in one of the squares of the rope. “Slow down, see what your foot is doing—yeah, like that. Okay, get your footing... nice! Here.” He offered me a hand after coaching me through the delay, especially since I’d wasted a lot of breath on a little panicked wiggle in the ropes.

“You don’t have to, I can handle it.” I panted.

River shook his head. “It’s no trouble. Accept help when it’s offered freely,” he advised. “No need to run yourself ragged when someone’s willing to help you.”

I paused for a moment, mulling over what he’d said. When he wiggled his fingers a little more insistently, I finally grabbed his hand. He proceeded to lift me almost completely to his level with no sign of struggle whatsoever. The only hint that he was exerting any energy was the faint press of his lips.

Once I was firmly in the rope lattice, River continued talking as if it took nothing out of him. “So, what did Cole say when you told him?”

“He said no,” I said.

River nodded, gesturing for me to continue ahead of him. I started making my ascent again.

“That’s your choice, isn’t it? Or at least, shouldn’t it be?” he asked.

“I guess so,” I said as I continued climbing. “But it’s not like he’s saying not to because he’s trying to control me or something. He just doesn’t think I should do anything out of insecurity. Especially something so dangerous.”

“Understandable, sure,” River said. “I mean, why *do* you want to become a shifter? Is it just because of him?”

I was quiet as I continued to climb, thinking about the answer to that question. Even with my little head start, River overtook me pretty quickly. He pulled himself onto the

wooden platform above me before leaning over the edge and offering me his hand again. “Almost there, just another push,” he encouraged.

I took his hand. Once again, he pulled me up with no effort. I sighed as I crawled onto the sturdy wooden platform. “Man, that was a lot harder than it looked,” I said.

River grinned, still looking pristine. “Yeah, it takes some practice to get used to, but it’s a great workout,” he said, then grinned again. “You’re avoiding the question.”

“Oh, no, I’m not,” I said quickly. “Just wanted to really think about it, I guess.” I leaned back on my elbows and looked at him sidelong. “It’s created so many issues for me—for us. Me, Cole, and his son Noah. Not being a shifter has not only caused problems with local folks, but with people here, too.”

“Here?” River asked. “Like who?”

“Some girl made a pass last night while Cole was out running with them,” I said. “He told her to back off, but I can’t help feeling that wouldn’t have happened if I was a shifter.”

“Well...” River said before wincing. “Actually, never mind.”

“The claiming thing, right?” I said. “It’s all right. I know that’s the other option.”

“You know what it entails?”

“As of last night, yeah.”

“So, you can understand why I recalibrated for a moment,” he said wryly. “But I digress. That’s not what we’re talking about. We’re talking about your reasons for wanting to be a shifter.”

I nodded. “There’ve also been a lot of close calls.”

River’s gaze sobered a bit. “The scars. Cole mentioned the bite last night.”

“Yeah,” I said. “An abusive ex did it. He wanted me to become a shifter, probably so he could control me better.

Honestly, after learning about the claiming thing, I feel like I understand him even less than I already did.”

River nodded. “So, you want to become a shifter so you can protect yourself?”

“Yeah,” I said again. “I work—worked—at a school for shifters back home in New Middle Bluff. Most of my friends and relations these days are shifters, too. Whenever I see them shift, it’s just so beautiful and powerful. I want to have that for myself. And for the people I care about, too. I don’t want to just hug the wall while Cole does all his shifter things without me. I don’t want to constantly be surrounded by a halo of people meant to protect me, either.”

River bent his knees and rested his elbows on them, crossing his arms and leaning his chin against his forearms. “So, you want to become a shifter for the people you love and have the ability to protect yourself?”

I squirmed a bit. “I guess those aren’t very good reasons—wanting to do it for a boyfriend and for power.”

“I’m not judging your reasons,” he said with a shrug. “Frankly, I’m not the arbiter of what reasons are and aren’t good enough for you to become a shifter. But neither is your mate. At the end of the day, it should be a decision you make for yourself, right?”

His words struck a chord within me, resonating deeply. I knew he was right. I had to embrace my own power and learn to navigate the shifter world on my own terms. All the same, I didn’t want to hurt Cole by causing him to worry. Not after everything he’d done for me.

“He said that I’d be more likely to have complications since I’ve been bitten already,” I said.

“That may be so, but if that’s a risk you’re willing to take, then it’s fine,” River replied.

“He seemed upset that I would consider doing anything that could take me away from him. He wants me to not do anything I’ll regret, especially when he thinks I’m perfect as I am.”

“And you are,” River pointed out. “Perfect the way that you are, that is. Everyone is. But that doesn’t stop people from wanting to improve, right? Sometimes we like ourselves and still want to modify our bodies, get more muscular, be more flexible—whatever. Becoming a shifter is just another way of choosing a modification for yourself, even if it’s permanent.”

I pursed my lips. In some ways, it was nice to hear these things, but it was also difficult to decide what was the best option. Even if I wanted to become a shifter, I didn’t want to hurt Cole by pursuing it. And what if I really did wind up in horrible shape because of the shift? I was so confused, so on the fence about what I should do.

“You have time to figure it out,” River said softly. “It’s not like you have to make the decision today. I know it must be hard to discern what you want to do for yourself when you’ve spent so much time having to play by someone else’s rules.”

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s difficult to figure out if I’m making choices for other people or making them for myself.”

“Well, when you figure it out, I think you should do what’s right for you.”

“What if Cole leaves me? If I tell him I want to become a shifter, what if he decides he can’t abide it?”

“Do you want to be with someone who holds his love hostage in that way?”

My mind immediately went to Wyatt when River asked me that, not Cole. “Cole isn’t like that,” I said. I wasn’t being defensive, just stating a fact.

“If that’s the case, then it’s a hypothetical you don’t have to worry about, right?”

“That’s true.” I huffed out a breath. “So, the only hurdle is whether or not I’m willing to make him upset and put him through the stress of changing into a shifter.”

“Well, your buddy who’s with you—what was his name? Travis? He’s becoming a shifter soon, right? Maybe you can figure things out by seeing how it goes for him.”

“And there’s always the possibility that I could change my mind after I get some good training under my belt,” I said with a smile.

River laughed and winked. “In that case, let’s get back to this obstacle course, yeah?”

He stood to his full, lanky height and offered me his hand. I accepted it, and he pulled me to my feet.

We worked our way through the rest of the course. I did much better now that the course was mostly a straight shot instead of vertical ascension. It started with a few leaps across some platforms, then climbing across one of the big nets on a frame of bars. Finally, a simple wooden ladder brought me to the zipline.

River had treated this exercise like an unofficial race, and I’d certainly lost, officially or not. Now that I was higher, the zipline looked much more daunting than I’d originally thought. It hadn’t looked so high from the floor, but standing at the platform and realizing it would just be a harness and a steel cord keeping me from falling...

“You gonna chicken out?” River teased.

I gulped. “No.”

“Good, ’cause this is the best part.” He turned to take a harness off the wall and put it on the floor in front of me. “Legs through the loops.”

I stepped into them, and River put on the harness with focused efficiency. His hands didn’t linger as he pulled, tugged, and tested the straps to see if they were properly secured. When he was done, he clicked me in with a set of carabiners and handed me the handrail.

“You just hang onto this and slide right down. I’ll be just a few minutes behind you.”

“Right,” I said. I hovered a bit at the edge of the platform, then closed my eyes and stepped off it.

My stomach lurched as I fell the few feet between the line and the harness, but the sickening sensation turned into

exhilaration as I *whooshed* through the air at a fun, exciting speed. I finally opened my eyes, giggling and whooping as I soared through the air. Once I landed and fumbled to get myself out of the harness, River pulled the handlebar back up to the platform, clipped himself in, and zoomed down right after me.

“Good job, Marley,” he said when he’d landed. “You kicked ass up there. We still got about an hour before the others show up, so let’s get some water and a snack, and I’ll show you the rest of the facility.”

River gave me a tour of everything else, explaining that the tires along with some other obscenely large fixtures were for lifting. I could see Cole being able to lift them, but it would probably take my strength combined with Lana’s and Paulette’s to get them moving. The rock walls were rarely used, according to River, but we indulged in a bit of rock climbing after snacking on protein bars.

I turned out to be better at rock climbing than River, which gave me a jolt of pride. River had moved too quickly and gotten himself into some tough situations.

Finally, other humans started to trickle into the warehouse. The first was a small, bright-eyed girl who looked to be about four foot eleven. If she had been a shifter, her tail would have been wagging as she greeted River.

“Hey!” she said to me after River introduced me. “I’m Odette. So cool to meet you up close. I saw you at the feast last night.”

“So nice to meet you, too,” I said, smiling.

“Isn’t River the nicest? He told me he was gonna pair up with you, but he usually pairs up with me,” she chirped. “Don’t worry, I like to share. Makes me appreciate him more when I get to wrestle with him again.”

“Odie, are you talking someone’s ear off again?” someone said, approaching from behind her.

“Meiko!” she said brightly. “This is Marley. She’s that other alpha’s mate-slash-girlfriend-slash-partner or whatever.”

Isn't she so pretty? River's pairing up with her today."

"Hey," the girl said to me as she approached. She had gorgeous angular eyes and hair as glossy as polished obsidian. "I'm Meiko, one of the trainers. Glad to have you."

"Meiko, let's pair up!" Odette suggested eagerly.

"Last time we paired up, I made you cry," Meiko said flatly.

"You did not!" Odette protested.

The two of them walked toward the water dispensers as they bickered.

About a dozen more people showed up after that, and the atmosphere became pleasantly social as we all sat on the turf. Mostly, I just watched people chatter, trying to pick up some threads of their conversations. There were ten humans and five shifters for the day's session. I assumed we'd be taking turns pairing up with shifters.

As the training session began, River introduced me and explained my connection to Cole and Victor. I tried not to feel uncomfortable as people eyed me with curious reverence. I didn't want anyone to handle me with kid gloves just because I knew the alpha.

Once we were instructed to run a huge lap around the warehouse, I quickly found out that wouldn't be the case. Even with my running routine, I was having a hard time keeping up with just the other humans. As we ran, the shifters ran along with us, shouting words of encouragement and sometimes words of subtle challenge or doubt for those who responded better to negative reinforcement.

River stayed near me, just as he'd promised Cole. I wondered how much he was slowing himself down for me, though.

I pushed myself, wholeheartedly embracing the challenges they set before us. Odette, despite her tiny size, appeared to be the most capable of the group, running right in front of all of us with Meiko stone-faced beside her, barely breaking a sweat.

Of course, all the shifters were also barely breaking a sweat while the humans were all red-faced and panting.

When the run was over, we were given five minutes to get some water and rest. I flopped back onto the turf and groaned, already exhausted. River chuckled as he came to sit next to me, taking a sip out of a reusable water bottle.

“Already giving up?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m just worn out, that’s all. It’s a lot of work running around the entire warehouse.”

“We haven’t even started sparring yet.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“You know, if you’re going to be here for a while, we should probably train you every day if you’re up for it,” River suggested.

“You think so?” I asked, propping myself up on my elbows. “Here?”

“Not while the other shifters are training, of course, but we can move things to the forest. There’s plenty of room over there.”

“That sounds good,” I said. “And it will give Cole some time to handle pack stuff without me present.”

“Why should that matter?” River asked.

“I’m not saying it would,” I said. “But sometimes I worry that he has to watch what he says with me around, especially since I’m not a shifter. I don’t want him to have to edit himself to guard me or my feelings.”

River nodded. “That’s kind of you. I’m sure that as his mate, you are more than within your rights to know the ins and outs of the pack.”

“I’m still not entirely sure what role I’m supposed to fill in the pack,” I admitted.

“It’s still a new thing, right? Just play it by ear. You don’t have to make any choices or decisions yet. Just see what feels right.”

See what feels right. It made sense, but it felt strange to think of the whole situation that way. After all, could I really be a true pack member without being a shifter? Sure, there were pack members with me in the warehouse, but they had been born and raised in the culture. I was coming in as an outsider. Even if Cole did wind up claiming me, there was no way to know if that would be enough for the other pack members.

Once again, I couldn't help but think that so many problems would be solved if I became a shifter.

"Come on. Time to get started," River prodded.

Once again, he offered me his hand. I let him do a little more work to get me back on my feet. He walked to the center of the lazy circle we'd made on the turf and clapped his hands together.

"All right, folks," River said. "I know you all know the drill when it comes to sparring, but we've got some new blood here, so we're going to go back to fundamentals. I'd like us all to help Marley as much as we can so she can feel safe within her own pack and when dealing with other shifters. Keep an eye on her, make sure her form looks good, and make sure we're breaking all those bad habits."

"Woohoo!" Odette cheered with a little punch in the air. "Today is gonna be so fun. I love helping newbies."

Meiko smiled at her and shook her head.

"Marley, I'm gonna pair up with Odette," River said. "She's the smallest of us, so you can see just how effective this stuff is." He gestured toward the small woman, and she bounded up eagerly. "When you're the weaker party in the equation, you need to use the strength and momentum of your opponent against them. This is what we train smaller shifters to do against larger shifters."

I watched closely and quietly as Odette bent her knees and prepared herself. With her tiny frame, she looked about half River's size. The lazy circle we'd formed constricted as River also slipped into a readied stance.

They circled each other on soft, quiet feet, just like a real pair of wolves might do as they fought over a meal or a mate.

Odette crouched low, her tiny form ready to pounce. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders, and her eyes gleamed with taunting challenge. With a focused breath, she sprang forward, launching herself with breathtaking grace. Her movements were fluid, like a dance, as she closed the distance between herself and River.

River, standing tall and composed, awaited her approach. He understood the advantage of his larger stature, but he knew better than to underestimate Odette. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips, his excitement clear in his gaze.

As Odette neared, she seemed to blur, the ground beneath her feet barely making a sound. She deftly sidestepped River's outstretched arm, her nimbleness a testament to her training. Despite how small and weak she looked, she was taunting him. Coaxing him to go after her.

River's eyes narrowed, his focus sharpening. With a sudden burst of energy, he lunged forward, his arms aiming to grab Odette in a controlled hold. But she was one step ahead. With a twist of her body and a leap in the air, she slipped out of his grasp, hurtling to the ground.

Odette gave a bright laugh, hopping on each of her tiny feet. "Too slow!" she said gleefully.

"Exactly," River said as he got back to his feet. "I may have strength and size on Odette, but if she can keep evading me, she'll wear me down until I can't go after her anymore. You see that, Marley?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm not nearly as fast as her, though. I don't think I could do the same kind of thing."

"Not in the beginning, but if you keep training and doing the same methods with your mate and your own pack, you'll get there," he said. "Why don't you come have a turn with me?"

"I—ah...well," I stammered.

“Come on, you can do it!” Odette exclaimed. “No time like the present!”

I gritted my teeth and wandered into the center of the circle. Odette beamed at me and patted my shoulder as she moved back.

“Ready?” River asked, his eyes gleaming with challenge.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. “Ready,” I replied, my voice steady despite the butterflies in my stomach.

With that, the pursuit began. I darted to the left, but I didn’t have the same agility and grace as Odette. Instead of landing easily, I went sprawling on the ground between two of the people watching us. The pack members watched with bated breath, their eyes fixed on the action unfolding before them.

I panted and looked back at River, figuring we’d be preparing to reset and try again. But River wasn’t stopping. He was back on his feet in seconds, coming right at me.

I yelped in shock and leaped to my feet, sprinting away from him.

River was quick, agile, and persistent. He matched my every step, never giving me a moment to catch my breath. The circle of pack members unfurled and watched as I ran.

Odette called above the noise in my head. “If you’re running a footrace, you’re always going to lose!”

I didn’t know if that was a sound bite from other training sessions or what, but I was too panicked to draw any real conclusions from it. I just kept staying the course.

I used every trick in the book, leaping over obstacles, twisting and turning, trying to stay just out of River’s reach. But he was relentless in his pursuit, closing in on me with every stride.

My heart pounded as I felt River’s fingers brush against my shoulder. He had caught up to me, and there was no escaping his grasp. The pack gasped as River tackled me to the turf and we slid across it. He straddled my hips as I fought

him. He grasped my wrists and pinned them to the ground, gently restraining me and signaling the end of the chase.

I was panting beneath him, my heart hammering, my stomach flipping. He was grinning down at me, but as I lost myself in a moment of panic, the smile faded.

His brow tightened. “Hey, hey, Marley, look at me. You’re all right, you’re safe,”

I fought against his grip, but he didn’t let go.

“Easy, easy. I’m going to let you go, but I need you to calm down before I do. I can’t have you clawing my eyes out,” he said. “Breathe, Marley. You’re safe.”

I blinked, forcing myself to take a deep breath.

“There you go, good,” he said, lifting his hips off of me. “Do that three more times, okay? You’re safe, you’re among friends. No one is going to hurt you. You understand?”

I nodded and took two more deep breaths. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“No apology needed,” he said. “You back with us?”

I gave a terse little nod and exhaled slowly. “Yeah.”

He let go of one of my hands, and once he was sure I wouldn’t lash out, he let go of the other. “I’m sorry for freaking you out. The first time is overwhelming for a lot of people.”

I sat up and put my hand on my chest. “Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. Odette bit the shit out of me the first time,” River said with a chuckle.

Odette giggled and wiggled her fingers at us innocently. “I started training after fighting off my shitty dad when he tried to get handsy with my mom,” she called. “We got lucky when some other shifters outside our house heard the hubbub, but he still did a number on me. After that, I decided I was tired of being vulnerable.”

I rested my elbows on my knees and dropped my head. The group wandered over and sat down around us.

“My ex tried to abduct me a few weeks ago and almost choked me to death,” I said, then I looked at River. “Not that I thought you were going to do that.”

“I know you didn’t,” he said. “That was a trauma response, and truth be told, if I’d known that happened only a few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have started with so much intensity.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to overshare,” I said.

“Your experiences aren’t a burden,” Meiko said calmly. “If your pack and your friends are going to be able to help you, you’ll have to be vulnerable with them.”

Odette nodded emphatically. “We can’t support you if we don’t know what’s going on in your head. And, I mean, I just dumped my whole thing on you, so it’s only fair.”

“Only if you want to share, though,” one of the other participants added, someone whose name I didn’t know. “What’s important with this whole thing is that you own your experience. You’ll never feel safe and confident if you’re keeping someone else’s pace, you know?”

I nodded, finally able to exhale fully, the tension seeping out of my body. “Yeah, you’re right. Thank you.” After a moment, I added, “I think I would like to tell you guys what happened. If you don’t mind taking time out of class for it.”

“We’d all love to get to know you better,” River said with his signature kind smile.

We shared our experiences and what had brought us to wanting to protect ourselves, even if it felt impossible at times. When we were feeling more comfortable with each other, we resumed the lesson, but River and the other shifters took things a lot slower, staying mindful of the fear and trauma I hadn’t yet processed.

When the training session finally ended, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie with my fellow humans. I was almost sad that I wouldn’t be able to stay and train more with them, but I was excited to bring the idea of this training up with Cole. If I was really going to be a part

of the leadership structure in the pack, I wanted something like this training in the pack.

Soon enough, though, Cole appeared at the warehouse entrance and the group started to say goodbye and disperse. I said my goodbyes to River and jogged over to Cole's open arms.

"How'd it go?" he asked eagerly, pulling me into a warm embrace.

"It was great! I feel like I'm making progress. You should see the way the other humans go up against the shifters. It's incredible."

"Yeah? They hold their own?"

I nodded. "Yeah, even better than I would have thought. Did you see the really short girl leaving?"

"Oh, yeah. The talkative one?"

"Yeah," I said. "She was leaping around like a little ninja. The only person who seemed to be able to get a hold of her was another girl named Meiko. It was amazing to watch. And River said he'd meet up with me during our remaining time here so I can learn a little more and bring it into our pack when we get things started up in earnest."

"That sounds like a great idea," he said. "What time do you think you'll be meeting up with him?"

"He recommended the morning," I said. "But I wanted to talk to you about your plans first."

"That should work," Cole said, leaning down to kiss me. His eyes sparkled with pride as he pulled back, and I felt a surge of care and appreciation toward him. "I knew you could do it," he said, planting another kiss in the center of my forehead. "I'm so proud of you."

I smiled, my heart squeezing. "I missed you, even though it was only a few hours."

"I missed you, too, sweetheart," he said. "And the good news is, since I had a few hours to myself, I was able to finish

what I wanted to get done today. So, if you'd like, we can spend the rest of the day together. What do you think?"

"I think..." I said, stepping onto my toes and giving him a deep, lingering kiss. "I think that sounds perfect."

He laughed and brushed his hands down my back to the curve of my ass before finally picking me up and hitching my legs around him. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said. "Let's massage all those sore muscles."

"I have a feeling you have only one sore muscle in mind, judging by where you're putting your hands," I teased.

"I can neither confirm nor deny my intention of giving you a nice little booty rub when I get you back home," he said. "But more than that, I want to talk to you about something."

"Oh?" I asked. "Something serious? Something bad happen today?"

"No, sweetheart," he said as we neared the car, him supporting my weight with one arm while he used his other hand to open the passenger door. He slid me into the seat and buckled me in.

"Can I have a little preview? So I'm not anxious about it?" I asked nervously.

He huffed and shook his head. "So impatient," he teased. "But yes, since you asked nicely."

"Okay..." I said, anticipation mounting.

"I've been thinking about what we talked about last night and this morning. The stuff about the claiming."

"And?" I probed.

His mouth spread into a dark, devilish grin as his eyes narrowed with hunger.

"I've decided that I want to hunt you. In the forest. And, if you agree, I want to claim you when I catch you."

Oh.

Oh, god.

Chapter 6

Cole

Seconds after I dropped that bomb on Marley, my phone rang.

“Excellent timing, as always,” I said wryly as I fished the phone out of my pocket and looked at the screen. Travis, naturally.

I sighed and looked at Marley, now flushed scarlet. I hated losing the opportunity to tease my beautiful mate, but I hated Travis’s sulking and guilt-tripping even more.

I stood up straight and answered. “Hey, Trav, what’s up?”

“Aren’t we supposed to be, like, doing this whole trip together or something?” he asked. “I haven’t seen you since we arrived yesterday.”

“Marley had a self-defense class, and I met with my grandfather,” I said. “No offense, but you’re being a little clingy.” I smiled into the phone, knowing he would love the bromance joke.

“Listen, I was here way before your hot girlfriend was. You can spare a couple hours to have some dinner with me.”

“Tell him!” I heard Jack say in the background.

I cringed. Sure enough, my plans for the night would be completely derailed. I would miss out on the chance to hunt my mate down and fuck her in the woods, claim her as mine once and for all.

I closed the car door and walked around to the driver’s side, sliding into the car and starting it before placing the

phone in a holder and putting it on speaker. “What are we going to do for dinner?” I asked.

“Shit if I know,” Travis said. “Do they have restaurants in this place? Can we get pizza delivered, or would that be uncouth?”

“Why don’t we just cook at home? Our kitchens are fully stocked. Might as well make use of all the food we got.”

“Oh my fucking god, don’t you dare ‘we have food at home’ me,” Travis griped. “Come on, we’re on vacation.”

“We are decidedly not on vacation,” I said.

“For fuck’s sake, you’re being difficult,” Travis said. “You kill time, I’ll find a restaurant or something and text you the address.”

“I don’t know why you didn’t just do that from the get-go,” I said.

“You know what? Me either,” Travis said just before he ended the call.

Marley snorted a little laugh and sighed. “Somehow, he and Lana are perfect for each other.”

“You’re right,” I said as I put the car into reverse and backed out of the parking spot. “So, we have time to kill. What should we do?”

“Honestly? I stink. Why don’t we just go back to the house so I can shower and get ready for dinner?”

“You don’t stink.”

“I definitely do. You just like how I smell.”

I shrugged. “Same difference. But yeah, let’s get you washed up.”

I turned on the radio and rolled down the windows, letting the fresh air into the car to enjoy the sun and the comfortably cool day. We listened and bobbed our heads along to two songs, and then Marley turned down the volume.

“Okay, so are we going to talk about the fact that you just told me you want to hunt me down in a forest and claim me when you catch me?” she asked. “Or are we going to keep pretending you didn’t just drop that bomb on me like it was nothing?”

“Consider it retribution for, ‘I want you to let me become a shifter, Cole!’” I smirked at her.

“Rude,” she said. “But really, was that a joke?”

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t. But I don’t want to rush through the conversation about it, if that’s okay with you. We can talk about it tonight after dinner.”

“Does this mean you figured out the logistics?”

“I did some research, yeah,” I said. “Got an idea of how other mixed couples have done this whole thing and determined that, with proper preparation, we can reduce a lot of the risks and have an enjoyable time. Hopefully, it will help you feel a little more secure in your position in the pack and in your position as my mate.”

“It would be nice to know that there’s some kind of distinction making us official in the eyes of the other pack members and shifters,” she said. “People can tell right away if you’ve claimed me, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s sort of a step between just being together and going through a mating ceremony.”

She blew out a small breath. “Yeah, I’d like to have that recognition. I don’t want to seem like some throwaway girl to other people.”

I glanced at her. Her knees were bouncing lightly with nerves, and I felt the echo of them in my chest. I wished I could make her feel more secure in our relationship without having to subject her to the feral nature of some of these things. She was always such a trooper, but I frequently wondered if she would even consider things like this with me if it weren’t for her insecurities and the combative, competitive nature of pack life.

Marley deserved ease and comfort. She deserved a straightforward relationship that culminated in someone dropping to one knee and offering her a ring.

Instead, she was stuck with a half-beast who could think of nothing more exciting than hunting her down in the forest, ripping her clothes off, and fucking her like an animal.

Disgusted with myself, I rubbed at my chin. When I'd been with Olivia, I'd never thought of anything like this. Mostly because she never would have entertained anything like it. She was interested in shifters because we were stronger, more virile, and better suited toward athleticism and power. But she was terrified of my lycan form and hated Noah once she learned he was a shifter, too.

Now that I was with a woman who was so accepting and eager to celebrate my nature, I couldn't help but feel like a monster. Like some kind of degenerate corrupting a perfect girl to be my little plaything.

"What's wrong?" Marley asked.

I jerked slightly and looked over at her. "Huh? Who said anything's wrong?"

"You're rubbing your chin," she said. "You only do that when you're stressed about something. Well, at least that particular version of the chin rub."

"Huh, no kidding?"

She nodded as I came to a red light. "Yep. I pick up on these things, you know."

I smiled over at her and nodded. "I know you do. You're very perceptive."

"So, what's wrong?"

I sighed. As a rule, I didn't like lying about something when Marley asked me about it directly. But I had a feeling I knew how she would answer a question like, "Do you think I'm a freaky monster man?" So, I decided to just disclose how I was feeling.

“I just worry that you’re getting swept up in my rip tide, you know?” I admitted. “That you’re making an effort to make me happy by agreeing to all of these things and that you’ll regret them. That one day, you’ll push yourself too far and start to fear me.”

“Because you think something is inherently wrong with the way shifters do things?” she asked.

I hadn’t thought of it like that, but now that she put it that way...

“I feel like it’s a pretty objective truth that the way my biology works is far stranger than yours,” I said. “I don’t see any human couples trying to fuck in the middle of the forest.”

“I promise you, some do,” she said with a laugh. “And they don’t even have the excuse of instincts—not that they need it. There’s nothing wrong with two consenting adults doing something they want to do. I mean, that’s what you always tell me whenever I feel shameful about the things I want to do with you.”

“Uno reverse,” I groaned. “Fair enough, using my own arguments against me.”

“Well, I can’t help it that you’re so reasonable,” she said.

She reached over for my right hand and took it in hers. I kept my left hand on the steering wheel as the light turned green and I continued driving.

“Point is,” she said, “even though I’m nervous, and even though this whole thing has some elements of danger and strangeness associated with it, it’s still something I want to do. It’s something I want to do with you, and only you.”

“Would you want this if you were dating a human?” I asked.

“I’m not dating a human,” she pointed out.

“But—”

“Cole, hypotheticals like that are silly,” she said. “I don’t know what I would or wouldn’t want if I was with a human

partner. And I hope I never do because I love you, and I don't ever want to think of a life I'm not spending with you."

I squeezed her hand. She had no business being so utterly perfect. Kind, sweet, beautiful, sexy, sensual Marley. With a heart the size of Texas. "I can't imagine being with anyone other than you, either," I said.

And maybe that was the answer to this strange, misplaced guilt. Maybe it was time to really think about settling down with her. Maybe I would feel better about everything if I gave her the legitimacy of a proper marriage along with an official bond within my own community.

Suddenly, her hand in mine felt sorely naked. I wanted to see a ring on her finger, a ring I got for her. I wanted to feel the cool metal and hard stone against the callouses on my hand.

I resisted the urge to rub my finger against the empty space on her ring finger. The last thing I needed to layer on top of all of this was the hint of a marriage proposal.

"I love you, Cole," she said as we pulled up in front of the townhouse. "So don't worry about me. You've always been so understanding of my choices and the pace I set. If I tell you I want to do something, you can trust that I really do want to do it. And you can trust that I'd tell you if I didn't."

I nodded, my shoulders sagging in relief. I brought her hand up to my mouth and kissed the back of it. "I'll do my best not to freak out about it."

We went inside to shower. I hopped in with her, but we kept it pretty chaste, especially since Travis had told us which restaurant to meet at. Early dinner was what he'd called for, which gave us only about an hour to get ready and head out of the compound to visit some brewery that was famous in the region and, therefore, something Travis was absolutely obsessed with. We'd also have to account for traffic going into the city, not to mention a thirty-mile drive since Travis never did anything by half measures.

When we got out of the shower, I gave Marley a rub-down to ease the tension in some of her aching muscles. I tamped

down the urge to seduce her. Ever since coming here, it felt like I couldn't keep my dick in my goddamned pants. Every time I saw her bare skin, I wanted nothing more than to bury myself in her. But I wasn't a beast. I could control myself.

I could give my mate a damn massage without having to worship her pretty little flower.

When I was done and Marley was sufficiently loosened up from her hard day of training, we got dressed. She picked out a nice, slouchy sweater along with a pair of gray jeans. She finished everything off with a cute scarf and a pair of sneakers.

I wore my typical uniform—a pair of dark jeans and a black T-shirt. I also trimmed up my beard and threw on a gray leather bomber jacket in case Marley got chilly.

We hit a surprising amount of traffic after leaving the compound, but it didn't aggravate me the way it usually did since Marley was with me. Conversation with Marley was always so effortless. We talked about everything and nothing at all, made jokes about the people we saw in other cars killing time in curious ways, like one woman who was so prepared for traffic, she was crocheting what looked like a baby blanket.

"I strive to be that good at multi-tasking," Marley said.

"You could start a side hustle with all of the hats you make on your commute home from work," I said.

"Side hustle becomes the main hustle," she said. "Marley's Mittens."

"Baby's Blankets," I said.

"Oh, come on, that's terrible. Even for you."

"Excuse me, that is excellent material."

The hypothetical debate kept us entertained all the way to the restaurant.

When we arrived, Travis texted that he and Jack were already seated, which was a relief because there was a huge line of people waiting outside. I didn't understand why Travis always loved coming to places like this. I doubted we'd even be able to hear each other talk while we ate.

I opened Marley's door for her, pulling her against my side and kissing the top of her head. "Hungry?"

"Starving," she said. "I should have eaten something after we left the warehouse. I hope I don't get grouchy."

"Definitely don't want to deal with a hangry little woman," I said. "We'll get you some kind of appetizer. Sound good?"

"Yes. I demand mozzarella sticks."

"A woman of good taste."

"Only the best."

We walked into the restaurant and wandered around until we saw where Jack and Travis were sitting, nursing pints of foamy beer. They grinned at us as we slid into the booth.

"Look who finally showed!" Travis cheered over the loud music.

"We hit major traffic on the way here," I said. "I'm honestly not sure how you guys made it so much earlier than us."

"We were already out this way," Jack said. "Filming at a couple places nearby. Getting some B-roll."

"Ah," I said. "You said you had some news. Are you sure this is where you want to give it to us? It's loud as fuck in here."

"Yeah," Travis said. "It's pretty simple news, to be honest. Just that I've done all the talking I wanted to do, and I've finally made the decision. When we get back to New Middle Bluff, I'm going to start the process of becoming a shifter. I already called the clinics and got the wheels moving."

"Really?" Marley asked. "What's involved in the process?"

I looked at her and found her leaning into the conversation, clearly interested in learning more about the whole thing. I tried my best not to feel on edge. Part of me wished she wasn't here to have this conversation with Travis. I didn't want her humoring the idea of becoming a shifter. I didn't want Travis

to make the transition sound easy or painless. I didn't want her to change.

I didn't want to face the possibility of losing her.

At the same time, I knew these protective impulses and discomfort were my problems to deal with. I had no business telling her what she could or couldn't do. Besides, even if she didn't hear about it from Travis, she would hear about it from someone eventually. Or she'd just ask Travis when I wasn't around.

So, I just bit my tongue as Travis started explaining it all.

“When I get back to New Middle Bluff, I have to complete four sessions with a therapist to discuss the transition and get documentation that I've discussed all of the consequences and changes that will take place when I start the treatment. Once I get the all-clear from the therapist, I'll go to the shifter clinic and get a screening to make sure I don't have any contraindications—”

“Any what?” Marley asked.

“Basically, they're gonna do the world's most thorough physical to make sure I don't have any dormant genetic illnesses or any unknown health problems that can be complicated by the genetic therapy,” he said. “Once I have the all-clear for that, I'll get to start the injections.”

“Wow,” Marley said. “That almost sounds like it's easy.”

“All things considered, it is pretty easy. Especially compared to other life-changing medical procedures,” Travis said with a shrug.

“And you're going to film the whole process?” I asked.

Travis nodded. “That's the plan. Get a real, raw account of exactly what does and doesn't happen when someone elects to become a shifter.”

I leaned back in the booth, putting my arm up on the back of it behind Marley. “How does the therapy work? How many injections?”

“Four of them, with two weeks between each for acclimation,” Travis said. “After the third one, I should be able to partially shift. After the fourth one, I should be able to shift completely.”

“Wild,” I said. “It’s almost surreal to think about being able to go on a run with you in lupine form.”

“Yeah, fucking tell me about it, bro.”

“Have you told Lana?” I asked.

Travis nodded. “Yeah, we had a long talk about it last night. Honestly, she was a big part of what convinced me. I talked to her, and she gave me the names of some people to chat with in the pack. After those conversations, I was pretty much certain that this was the right choice for me.”

“Lana was supportive?” Marley asked. “She wasn’t worried you’d get hurt or something?”

“She’s daunted, yeah. But she knows it’s something that I feel I need to do, so she’s promised to be there for me every step of the way.”

I shot Travis an exasperated look, a subtle one I knew only he would catch. He met my gaze and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I mean, she definitely has her reservations,” he added quickly. “It’s a pretty big decision, and the process can be dangerous.”

Marley’s lips quirked to the side. “Yeah, that’s true,” she said. “But you guys will be able to enjoy a lot more time together after going through it. You’ll be able to connect in a really unique and special way.”

At that, Travis gave a tender, lovesick smile. “Yeah,” he said with a rare, quiet sobriety. “It’ll be nice to share that with her, and with Cole and Noah, too. It will finally feel like my chosen family is my real family.”

Marley smiled at him and nodded. “Yeah, that’s so wonderful,” she said.

I hated that I could feel the somber ache of pining envy coming from her. I hated knowing that my fears and insecurity over her safety were making her feel that way. Truth be told, I pined for a lot of those things as well: running through the forest with my mate, the wind gusting through our fur, the cool earth beneath our feet. I imagined how her howl would sound.

I wanted those things, but I didn't want them so badly that I was willing to put Marley's life at risk. It wasn't that I didn't want her to be a shifter. I just didn't want her to get hurt trying to assimilate.

But it pained me that it was hurting her to hear Travis talking about this. To know that he was starting the process she so badly wanted to start herself, but that she could only watch while I did everything to keep her from endangering her life.

I was caught between a rock and a hard place.

"So, how did your talks go today, Cole?" Travis asked.

"Good. I met up with Gramps and asked him about some of the logistical minutiae when it comes to pack life. Obviously, he's pretty staunchly in support of buying a huge chunk of land and treating it more like a commune, but he did give me some insight into how we can run it more like something that slots into people's lives rather than something people have to pack up and move into."

"Yeah? Like what?" Jack asked.

"Well, I think we should probably look into building a community center, kind of like the one we were hanging out in last night," I replied. "Something close to the forest so we have an outlet for folks who want to engage in some of the wilder aspects of being a shifter. It might also be nice to have some sort of dormitory for people who come into the pack after leaving abusive situations."

"Nice," Travis said. "How we gonna foot the bill for all of that, though?"

"Gramps told me I can apply for a federal grant," I replied. "Some bill got passed a few years ago that gives grants to

packs in areas where there are no formalized groupings of shifters. The initiative started when a few lone wolves were having a rough time in their communities. So, we've got some homework to do when we get back home, but from the research I've been doing, we have all the qualifications."

"Probably should tap in Houston on that one," Travis suggested.

"Yeah," I agreed. "If not for the paperwork, then to get us in touch with someone who knows what they're talking about regarding the paperwork."

"This is so exciting," Marley said next to me. "Could we open the dorms to human women escaping abusive shifters, too?"

"Absolutely," I said. "And I'd love to work with you on figuring out what we should have for those women—and hell, the men, too. Even if it's not as common, I'm sure there are plenty of human men who have experienced the same kind of controlling abuse."

Jack nodded as if he knew firsthand that there were. I wondered how many shifters he'd talked to while working on his docuseries.

As we chatted about the possibilities for our pack, a waiter approached the table and took our orders. Marley ordered her requisite mozzarella sticks as a starter along with a chicken pasta dish. I got a steak. Jack ordered a wedge salad, and Travis went for some sliders. Standard American fare. I still wasn't sure what was so special about this place, but I wasn't about to ask.

As the night wore on, the restaurant only got busier, making it harder and harder for us to talk. Finally, we gave up talking when music started playing and a DJ encouraged people to get on the dance floor. Marley, already two beers in, took my hand and led me out of the booth to dance in the aisle.

I laughed and lifted her off the floor, carrying her bridal-style. "Let's find the actual dance floor," I said. "I'd hate for our dancing to end with a plate of pasta down your shirt."

She giggled, clearly a little tipsy. “Yeah, that’s maybe not the sexiest food to eat off your girlfriend.” She pointed ahead like she was instructing an army to charge. “To the dance floor!”

“Aye, aye, captain!” I said eagerly.

It took a while, but we finally found a small dance floor near the bar. The music was mostly country music with some old dance tracks sprinkled in. This place was nothing like Night Shift, the bar where we’d met and shared our first dance. Instead of neon lights and glitter, it was more cowboy boots and scuffed wood floors.

The music was lively, giving us the opportunity to engage in a bit of silly, flirtatious dancing. I spun Marley around and pulled her back in, swaying on the dance floor instead of bumping and grinding like teenagers.

Again, I thought of what it might be like to share a first wedding dance with her. To see her all dressed up in white. To take the garter off her thigh with my teeth.

I wanted everything with her. I wanted to *give* her everything. That feeling only deepened as the music changed to a heartfelt ballad that probably came out twenty years ago—something my parents may have even danced to. I held her close, one hand on the small of her back, the other cradling hers.

She looked up at me dreamily as we danced, her face faintly flushed from the alcohol and the exertion of dancing in a hot room.

“I love you,” she murmured.

The words were so simple, and I’d heard them a hundred times before, but they never failed to knock the wind right out of me.

“I love you,” I said back fervently. “I’m so fucking happy I found you, Marley. And I’m glad you keep me around, even with all my mistakes and baggage.”

“It’s easy when you’re so wonderful,” she said. “You’re impossibly easy to love.”

I smiled and huffed a little laugh before brushing my nose against hers. “Right back at you, baby.”

“May I have a kiss?” she asked sweetly.

“Of course.”

As I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers in this moment of levity amid a sea of uncertainty, I knew one thing for certain.

I was going to marry this girl.

Chapter 7

Marley

We kept having to delay Cole claiming me. Between my lessons with River, Cole's meetings with his grandfather and other pack leaders, and the lunches and dinners both Travis and Jack insisted we have together, we were struggling to find the time for a chase through the forest.

I was trying not to be impatient, but every time I saw Cole interacting with another woman, I found myself wondering if she didn't think I counted as his mate because he hadn't claimed me. Some little secret part of me wondered if he would find someone he was more interested in while we were here. What if he met the perfect shifter woman?

I tried not to let the idea get to me too much. I knew my insecurities were coloring my perception of things. But I was starting to worry that Cole had changed his mind about claiming me. I was beginning to lose hope that we'd do it at all before the trip was over. We'd be going home in a few days, and I doubted that we could swing doing it there.

After the night at the brewery, Lana told us that Lanyon Clover hadn't left yet despite Wyatt and Curt being past problems. She sent me some social media pages run by so-called "exterminators" who claimed to run down criminal shifters and get them detained by police. It looked like they ran a bunch of crummy self-defense courses, too, so I wondered if they were trying to radicalize other humans in the area and pull more people to their cause.

Whatever the case, there was no way we could do the claiming back home. There were too many people, and too

many chances for something to go wrong and for the authorities to be called.

I tried my best to shrug it off. I only really needed to be claimed for the visit to the Georgia pack, anyway. And we were about to leave now. Maybe it was for the best that we didn't push it.

At least, that was what I tried to tell myself as I finished cleaning up after making some dinner. Cole was at another meeting of the minds, this time with Travis, Jack, and Vic. He'd offered to let me join him, but they were going to be talking numbers for the dormitories and the community center, and I didn't want to be in the way. Not to mention, Travis and Cole would be pretty focused, and Jack would be filming them.

I was still nursing some soreness from River's lessons, anyway, so I decided to make something to eat and take a bath.

I was still soaking in the bath when Cole got home.

"Baby?" he called through the small house, a nervous edge to his voice.

"In the bath!" I called out.

I heard his feet on the stairs and then in the bedroom before he appeared in the bathroom doorway.

"Well, don't you look cozy," he said warmly.

"Mmm," I said sleepily. "Trying to soak off some of the soreness. How was the meeting with Vic?"

"Good. We've got a solid business plan lined up," he said. "Got some more information about the grant stuff, too. He gave me some contacts in DC to get in touch with. The man is remarkably well-connected."

"Great," I said. "We can hit the ground running when we get home."

"Yes. Which reminds me, I have a present for you," he said.

“Oh?” I asked as I waded over to the edge of the tub. He sat down on the floor, kicking his legs to the side. He reached into his pocket and fished out a small parcel before handing it to me. It was about four inches long and rectangular, wrapped in black wrapping paper with a silver ribbon tied around it.

I frowned. “Lipstick?” I asked.

“About that size, but no,” he said with a grin.

“Perfume?”

He laughed. “Baby, why don’t you just open it and find out what it is?”

I gave him a skeptical look for a few more seconds before carefully plucking at the silver ribbon. It unfurled with ease, and the paper followed shortly after. When I was done, I was left with a little cardboard box. I opened the box and removed the object.

It was a whistle.

I tilted my head, my frown deepening. “It’s a whistle.”

He nodded. “It is.”

I turned it over, trying to see if there was some kind of cheesy engraving on it or a joke I was missing. When I looked up at Cole again, his smile had grown to something hungry, something with an edge. Was I missing something?

“Uh...why?” I asked.

“As you know, tomorrow is our last full day here in Georgia,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, still waiting for him to land the plane when it came to this conversation.

“Tomorrow, I have a couple of meetings with some of the pack’s chain of command,” he said. “And I’ll be back at three o’clock sharp.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, still not following.

“And your job, sweet Marley, is to be out of the house by two. I’ll give you one hour to get a head start.”

Gooseflesh broke out on my arms. I swallowed dryly, knowing instinctively what he was priming me for, but almost too eager to allow myself to believe it.

“Why?” I asked. “And why the whistle?”

“The whistle is for you to blow at any point you feel unsafe, scared, or want to stop,” he said. “It’s engineered kind of like a dog whistle. It’s high-pitched enough that you won’t be able to hear it, but it will be piercing enough for my hearing that even if I’m rut-wild, I’ll be able to stop and check in on you.”

I looked down at the whistle in my hand, suddenly struck by how provocative the innocuous object was. Even in the bath, my skin blazed with cold fire, and my heart raced as my thighs clenched.

We were going to do it. Cole was going to claim me. He was going to hunt me down, pursue me, and have his way with me. I was intrigued, I was nervous, I was...God, I wanted it so *badly*. I wanted it right that second.

He cupped my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You okay?” he asked. “Your heart is hammering away over there.”

I nodded a little stiffly. “I’m just nervous and excited. Are you sure you want me to take a whole hour? I can probably get pretty far in that much time.”

“I’m sure,” he said. “I’m fast, baby. It won’t take me long to scent you in the air, especially once you break a sweat. If you get lost or scared, just use the whistle, and it will help me find you.”

I nodded. “So we’re going to do this, then.”

“If you’re still on board, yes.”

“I am, definitely,” I said. “I’m looking forward to having something between us that will formalize what we are to each other.”

He smiled, his eyes twinkling with affection. “Yeah, me too,” he said. “It will be a good holdover until I can give you

the things you really deserve when all the dust and bullshit settles and we can finally breathe easy.”

“I hope that happens soon,” I said. “The more complicated things get, the more I just want to be able to live an easy, happy life with you and Noah.”

“So do I, baby,” he said, releasing my chin. “Any chance you made dinner? I thought they would have food at the meeting, but no such luck.”

“I made a casserole; it’s in the fridge. It’s an enchilada bake I found on the internet,” I said.

“Sounds amazing,” he said, leaning down to kiss the top of my head. “See you when you get out.”

I smiled up at him and nodded.

Cole walked out of the bathroom, and as I heard him go downstairs, I waded back to where I was sitting when he first came in. I examined the whistle again, turning it this way and that. The object was fairly simple but finely made, looking like he’d spent a lot of money on it.

I wondered if this whistle was used exactly for jostling someone out of a fit of rage or horniness. Had he gotten it at a sex shop? Were there sex shops for shifters? I’d never even thought of it.

Wondering if the whistle would make any sound I could hear, I lifted the instrument to my mouth and put it between my lips. I gave it a gentle little blow, but only heard my breath flowing through it.

Downstairs, I heard a plate clatter to the floor. “*Fuck!*” Cole shouted.

I was so startled that I tossed the whistle out of my hand. It skittered across the tile floor before landing on the bathroom rug in front of the sinks.

After a few more minutes, I heard Cole’s feet on the stairs again, and I dipped myself deeper into the bath water, covering my mouth and leaving my nose exposed so I could still breathe.

When he stuck his head in the bathroom, I was staring at him from behind the lip of the tub as if I'd been caught throwing the ball in the house.

He gave me an affectionately chastising look. "Didn't believe me when I said it would be piercing?" he asked.

I came up out of the water enough to speak. "I wanted to see if I could hear anything that came out of it."

"Well, now you know. So, emergencies only, please. Now I have a mess of enchilada bake to clean off the floor."

"I'm sorry! I'll clean it," I said frantically.

"Easy, sweetheart, I'm just poking fun. No harm done, just wanted to give you a hard time," he said, his playful admonishing giving way to genuine amusement. "I'm not actually upset. You're just..." He trailed off and shook his head. "Actually, never mind."

"I'm what?"

He huffed. "I'm getting to know you well enough now that I can sometimes predict what you're going to do. I had a feeling you'd give the whistle a try when I handed it to you. When you didn't, I figured I got it wrong. But you did it when I was out of the room, I'm guessing to protect my ears. And that choice is very adorably, sweetly, perfectly you. It just makes me happy when I get it right, even only half-right."

I flushed. "Thank you," I said. "F-for everything, not just the compliment."

He smiled and winked. "Sure thing, sweetheart," he said before leaving the room.

It was a relatively normal night after that, despite the anticipation of the next day. I got out of the bath and dressed in some lounging clothes: sweats and one of Cole's T-shirts. For some reason, those clothes were the epitome of cozy comfort for me.

I went downstairs and settled on the couch next to Cole. He was talking on the phone when I curled up next to him. He pulled me in close and kissed my forehead as he spoke.

“Yeah. No, it’s been going well.” A pause. “Yeah. Wait, why isn’t he in bed yet? Ma, I told you to keep his routine as close to normal as possible. Yes, I know it’s a weekend—gah, all right, all right. Yeah, put him on.”

I grinned, amused by the bickering between him and his mom. As much as a growing boy needed his rest, I was glad Cole got to talk to Noah tonight before he went to bed. I could tell Cole was missing him from subtle comments here and there. His desire to share certain experiences we were having with his son was clear.

“Hey, buddy,” Cole said after a moment, his smile growing. “So, you convinced Nanny to let you stay up late, huh? Little Mister Charming—no, you’re not in trouble.” He paused and looked over at me. “She’s right here, you wanna say hi?”

My heart warmed, and I put out my hand for the phone. Cole handed it over to me, and I put it up to my ear.

“Hey, Noah! How have you been liking staying over at Nanny’s?”

“I love it! But I miss you and Daddy,” he said. “Gramps keeps trying to show me his coin collection, but they all look the same.”

“Ah, yeah, that can be tricky,” I said. “Noah, do you want a souvenir from Georgia?”

“What’s a soun-ee-veer?”

I laughed. “It’s a special present from a different place. Something you get to remember a trip you took. Or something you get for a friend since they couldn’t come on a trip with you.”

“I like presents,” Noah said.

“Me too,” I said, slightly conspiratorially. “So, what kind of souvenir would you like? Something you can eat? Something you can wear? Something you can play with?”

“I want something...something I can eat *and* play with.”

“Well, that’s a tall order,” I teased. “But I’ll see what I can do.”

“Okay! Marley, when do you and Daddy come home?”

“Two more sleeps! Do you know what that means?”

“Yeah. I got to sleep tonight, and then I go to sleep tomorrow, and after I wake from that sleep, you and Daddy are back.”

“Precisely right. And we can’t wait to be home with you.”

Noah fell quiet, and I could almost picture his sheepish sweetness on the other side of the line. His little tucked-in chin and cheeky smile after something that excited him had happened.

“Could I talk to Daddy again?” he asked.

“Of course you can,” I said. “I’ll talk to you in a couple of days, okay? Two more sleeps.”

“Okay.” He paused, and his next words stuttered out of him. “Love you, M-mama.”

My heart stopped, and I gasped. For a moment, my brain completely ceased functioning. Noah had asked me before about calling me Mama, but he hadn’t done it yet. I’d assumed he no longer wanted to after what had happened with Wyatt. I’d told myself that I would earn his trust again.

But maybe he’d just been shy this whole time.

“I love you, too, baby,” I said softly, my throat tightening as I looked at Cole. “Here’s your dad.”

I handed the phone back to him, and Cole brushed a hand over my leg before hooking it under my knees and pulling my legs to drape sideways over his lap. He didn’t really pull me onto his lap, just increased our points of contact. I leaned into him, letting him cuddle me close while he finished talking to Noah and wished him a good night.

He tossed the phone off to the side. “You heard it?” I asked.

He beamed, cupping my face and kissing me before brushing his nose against mine. “He called you Mama,” he said.

“I know,” I said, my heart almost aching.

He backed up from me just a few inches, brushing his thumb over my cheek. “You’re okay with that? Being his mama?”

“Yeah, if you are,” I said. “I mean, I know things are still kind of new, but—”

“I’ve never been more okay with something. And I’ve never been so certain that I want to be with someone for the long haul as I’ve felt with you, Marley. I’m downright ecstatic.”

“That’s good news,” I said, giving a loving giggle and wrapping my arms around his neck, “because I’m afraid you’re going to have a very hard time getting rid of me now.”

“I’m sure I’ll figure out how to acclimate,” he said.

“Yes, you can be remarkably flexible,” I said.

“Speaking of flexible...” he said, putting his hand on the small of my back and leaning over me. “I’ve got an idea for how to stretch some of those sore muscles of yours.”

“Oh? Hmm, lemme see...yoga?”

“There is a pose having to do with a dog that we could do,” he said coyly. “A little more cardio than your typical yoga practice, though.”

“Is that right? I don’t think I’ve heard of this exercise. I guess you’ll have to show me.”

“Oh, I’m a very good instructor,” he said as he stood up, still holding onto me. “Let’s get started right away.”

I laughed as he carried me up the stairs, taking two steps at a time.

In bed, we swapped one form of soreness for another.

The following day, I woke before the sun rose. It'd been a while since I'd done that, so it was a little unnerving and disorienting to find the room dark. I was still cuddled up with Cole from the slow, tender sex we'd had right before collapsing into sleep. I could feel the subtle press of his half-erect penis bunting up against my backside.

While I roused more, I thought about the coming day, taking quiet inventory of the tasks on the docket. I looked over to the nightstand, thinking groggily about how dry my mouth was and how I could go for a drink. The glow from the digital clock reflected on the whistle, and the gravity of what it represented crashed into me.

Cole was going to claim me today.

Remembering that was more energizing than coffee or an energy drink. My stomach was so tight with anticipation, it felt like I couldn't quite get a full breath in.

I lay there, trying to calm myself down for a little while. I gave up when dawn started to leak into the room. Six in the morning was an appropriate time to wake up and start making breakfast, right? Maybe if the meal was more involved. Like muffins or something.

Yeah, I'd make muffins for Cole's meeting.

I slid out of bed, doing my best not to wake Cole. When I was sure he wasn't going to roll out of bed with me, I walked over to the closet and pulled on a silky robe, tying it quickly before tip-toeing down the stairs. Once I started the surprise breakfast, he might hear the commotion and join me, but he seemed pretty knocked out as far as I could tell. He hadn't budged an inch when I got up. With hearing like his, he'd long gotten used to sleeping through benign sounds like coffee makers, sink faucets, and the clanging of pots and pans.

I looked up a recipe for zucchini muffins and started cross-checking it against the ingredients in the house. Luckily, we had just about everything, and making the muffins would keep me busy for the next hour or two.

I got to work, using a box grater to shred the zucchini. I had enough zucchini for a double batch. From there, it was fairly straightforward to mix the ingredients and get them baking.

But once I got the first batch in the oven, I found myself devoid of tasks to occupy my mind. As I washed my hands, I was reminded of Cole's lethal-looking claws when he showed me the partial shift on his arm, the velvety feeling of the short fur covering his skin, the sensations in my body when I imagined how it would feel to have those pointed fingertips pressing into the soft parts of my skin.

I exhaled sharply and shut off the water, patting my cold hands against my hot face. I didn't need to be messing with myself this way. I didn't need to leave myself open to these flustering, overwhelming thoughts. Not when there was still half a day before I'd be able to make good on them.

So instead, after cleaning up and pulling out the first batch of muffins to cool, I started preparing some food from the fridge for dinner.

And when I ran out of tasks to do there, I made Cole lunch.

And when I still had more time to kill, I made a fresh breakfast.

I was just getting ready to watch a video on making whipped cream with a bowl and whisk when Cole appeared in the kitchen doorway dressed in a suit and tie, leaning rakishly against the threshold like some kind of businessman-turned-delinquent. I was so surprised to see him there that I yelped.

"You're up," I said, my voice embarrassingly breathless. "Good morning. You were so quiet."

"Was I? Did I sneak up on you?" he asked, a predatory edge to his smile.

I swallowed, my core tensing. "A little bit."

He chuckled, pushed himself off the wall, and approached me. The metal mixing bowl I held shook. Thankfully, I hadn't put anything in it yet or it would have splattered all over the floor.

“What have you been up to this morning? I was lonely when I woke up,” he said, sliding a lock of my hair through his fingers.

“Oh, well...I was feeling restless, so I thought it would be good to get a start on breakfast,” I said.

He looked at the counters around us, almost every surface covered with food either meant for breakfast or a later meal. Chicken marinated in soy sauce and chili oil. A bowl of chopped broccoli, cauliflower, and carrots was ready to be stir-fried for dinner. Two plates held a mountain of zucchini muffins. Finally, there was a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast that I’d meant to take up to him in bed.

“Were you planning on making enough food to hold us over until next month? Or...”

My body blazed with embarrassment. “I m-made muffins for you to take to the meeting.”

His smile grew wider, and he kissed the top of my head. “This is a lovely little preview of what it might be like to have you as a wife,” he said. “Not that I’d ever expect you to stay home unless you wanted to, but it’s very sweet, baby. You didn’t have to do all this, but I love that you did.”

I didn’t think I could be more flustered than I already was, but I was proven wrong. “Your wife?” I sputtered.

“Sure,” he said, grabbing one of the muffins. He took a bite of it, moaning in delight. “Fuck, Marley, that’s good. What is it? Carrot cake?”

“Zucchini. S-similar flavor,” I stammered.

“Thank you for using that restless energy to make me something for my meeting, baby. I appreciate you so much.”

“Can we not pretend that you didn’t just mention super-casually that you were thinking about me as your wife?” I asked, shaking my head to keep my nerves at bay. “I mean, I know you’re teasing me and everything, but—”

“I’m not teasing—” he started, then shook his head. “Okay, I *am* teasing, but not about that. You don’t think I think

about what you might be like as my wife?”

“Honestly, I just assumed that after how things went with your ex, you wouldn’t ever want to be married,” I said. “I know she was kind of flighty, and then there was everything with Noah and how hard you worked to gain sole custody of him and all that. I just figured your view of marriage would be soured.”

“Eh, maybe in the beginning.” He shrugged. “But things ended between me and Olivia almost six years ago now. Call me old-fashioned, but I’ve always wanted that dream life. Wife, kids, nice house—the whole package.” His expression grew serious. “Then again, I’ve been assuming marriage would be something you want. If not, then that’s okay. We could always—”

“I do! I do want marriage,” I said hurriedly. He looked a little surprised by the sudden intensity of my admission. I shrank into myself a little bit and bit my lower lip. “If—if you want to.”

“I just said I did, silly,” he teased, taking the metal bowl from me and setting it on the counter. He gathered me up in his arms and hugged me tightly, peppering kisses over my face. “Ease up a little. You’re wound up like a spring right now.”

I curled into him, letting my body loosen and release. “Sorry,” I said.

“Nothing to apologize for,” he said as he swayed me back and forth. “Is this about later today? We can always postpone it or cancel, baby.”

“It’s not fear,” I said with absolute certainty. “I’m excited, but I’m nervous since I don’t know what to expect.”

“We’ll be safe and careful, just like we always are.” He kissed the top of my head again. “And just like with everything else, I’m going to take really good care of you when we’re all done.”

“I know you will,” I said, and I really did know that. Cole would never do anything to me without being sure I would be

okay. And never without a plan to patch me up if anything went wrong.

“I have to get going, but you remember the plan, right?” he asked.

“You’ll be coming back around three, and I should already be gone by then, right? Getting my head start?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He shot me a devilish grin. “And then we’ll have some fun.”

“Sounds great,” I said a little airily. “Let me get these muffins packed up for you.”

I placed the muffins carefully into a large bowl, snapping the lid on so they wouldn’t tumble out on the drive. I placed a brown sack lunch on top of the bowl, made Cole a haphazard breakfast sandwich, and wrapped it up in a paper towel.

“I guess I won’t have any problem fueling for my *exercise* today,” Cole said. “You’ve given me enough food for marathon training.”

I blushed and stood on my toes to kiss his cheek. “See you this afternoon,” I said. “Good luck catching me.”

He caught my face with one of his hands, using enough force to keep me on my toes, but not enough to hurt me. His lips crushed mine, and he held me hostage as he claimed my mouth, giving me a taste of what was to come. His tongue crossed the threshold of my lips, conquering mine with brutal efficiency. Just when I thought I was too overwhelmed to think, he changed the angle of his head and deepened the kiss even more.

I heard his lunch drop to the floor, followed by the clang of the mixing bowl and then the sandwich. His other arm pulled me closer, his hand dropping to my backside and grabbing a handful of flesh there. His other hand left my face, only to slide into my robe and grope my breast.

I moaned, melting against him, wanting to climb him like a tree.

Then, as abruptly as he'd started the delicious assault on my mouth and body, he stopped kissing me. He let go of me, straightened his jacket and shirt, then picked up the food he'd dropped.

"See you later," he said. He smiled, winked, and left the house with the food, abandoning me as I stood there half-naked, entirely lost to a spell of desire so strong that I had to sit down.

As I heard the car start and pull away, I opted for a cold shower.

Cruel tease of a man. That's what Cole was.

The afternoon rolled around much faster than I'd anticipated. I got dressed in comfortable clothes that weren't precious to me in case Cole tore them off: an old T-shirt, a pair of spandex leggings, and my old running shoes. I braided my hair in twin braids, just as Cole had done a few days ago. Finally, I put my whistle on a chain around my neck so it would be close if I needed it. On the way out the door, I grabbed a water bottle.

The compound was tucked in the middle of a forested area, but it took me some time to figure out where to enter the forest that wouldn't require me to scale a gate or something. In the end, I decided I would just go into the forest near the community center—the same entrance that Cole had used when he'd gone on a run with the others. I knew it was well-traveled and I could go a while before potentially getting into a bad spot.

There were no real trails, which was just as well. It wasn't a good idea to hide from Cole by taking a pre-determined hiking trail.

I looked down at my phone, making sure I still had service as I went deeper into the forest. I was nearly half an hour into my head start, and I hadn't gotten very far. I weighed if I should start jogging or save my energy for later when Cole was actively pursuing me.

I opted to continue at my normal pace but was more decisive about the direction I took. I walked in a mostly straight line as quickly as I could without exhausting myself. By the time I reached the end of my head start, I had put about three miles between me and Cole. The sun was starting to arc toward the horizon and paint the sky a brilliant reddish orange.

Anxiety roiled through me. I hadn't thought to bring a flashlight, so I'd be running through the forest in the dark. Though I had my smartphone with me, which had a decent flashlight, I wasn't relishing the thought of being in the dark forest.

What if Cole couldn't find me and I got lost? If I used the flashlight on my phone too much, the battery would die. Nerves churned in my stomach as the sun crept closer to the ground and the air started to cool.

I reached a river and started following its curve in the hope of finding a shallow area to cross it. The sun finally dipped below the horizon, and the sky started to turn lilac above me, the first stars blinking to life near the milky half-moon.

Finally, I found an area where the water was only a few inches deep and had enough stones for me to walk across it. I was wobbling my way across the river when I heard it for the first time.

A howl.

I didn't know how I knew it, but I knew it was Cole. The howl was long and trilling, and I wondered if it was a signal that he'd found my scent or just meant to unnerve me. If it was the latter, then it worked. Even though the howl sounded rather far off, I was so startled by it that I rushed across the river. The grip on my running shoes wasn't enough to keep me from sliding on the smooth stones and falling to the ground in a heap.

Cold water seeped through my clothes, knocking the wind out of me. I tried to scramble to my feet, slipping twice more before struggling through the stones and water to the river bank.

By the time I rushed up the incline of packed earth and pine needles, I was almost completely drenched and already shivering. I couldn't be sure if it was from the biting chill in the air or the adrenaline shooting through my veins.

Okay, okay, relax, Marley. Keep your head, stay aware of your surroundings. You have to stay calm if you're going to fend him off.

River had mentioned that when faced with a formidable challenge—a real one—I might freeze and panic. He'd reminded me to breathe, to remember what I'd learned. Despite my best efforts to keep calm, I ran as fast as I could with little mind for pace or energy conservation. The hill kept getting steeper, my heart kept hammering harder. The whistle bounced against my chest as the lingering bits of sunlight abandoned me, leaving me at the mercy of the night stretching above me.

I had no idea how long I ran like that. It felt like miles. I didn't feel like I could stop because Cole kept howling, each howl louder than the last. It got to the point where I couldn't discern where the sound was coming from. It bounced off trees and distant mountains, sending my head spinning.

As my surroundings grew darker, I became disoriented.

Eventually, the howling stopped. Had he lost track of me?

I slowed, my breath sawing in and out of me in ragged gusts. And yet, despite the primal sense of being hunted, I wasn't frightened. At least, not in the same visceral way as when I'd been pursued by Wyatt. A small part of me knew this was a game and I wasn't in real danger, but the loudest part of me still felt the need to hide from the predator.

Maybe this was what Cole meant when he talked about surrendering to instincts. It was a thrill, even if it was intimidating.

I heard the trickle of running water and walked toward it. I wasn't sure if it was a different river or the same one I'd fallen in before, but I hadn't seen water for a while. Turning on my

phone's flashlight, I tried to catch my bearings and avoid falling into the water again.

As I walked, I came to the edge of a small cliffside. When I looked over it, I found I was a little farther ahead of where I'd crossed the river before. Water rushed below me, the inky wet stones bathed in silver moonlight. Maybe Cole had lost my scent there, and that was why I wasn't hearing him anymore.

My flashlight shut off, and I checked my phone.

Dead. Shit.

Perhaps it would be wiser to head back, especially if Cole was nowhere nearby.

I turned to trudge down the hill, but something caught my eye. It was a glint, like moonlight shining off a mirror. I turned this way and that, looking for the source of it.

Terror rushed through me. Two eyes stared at me through the dark, catching the light like a cat's. Only, these eyes were much larger.

I froze, every inch of me turning to stone as I heard the rough, heavy step against the cushion of pine needles. He grew closer and closer, taller and taller, until he stood before me.

He was Cole, without a shadow of a doubt. But he was...

Beautiful? Terrifying? It was hard to choose just one word to encapsulate what he looked like. His impressive height seemed to have doubled, though I was sure it was a trick of perception. Cole usually stood at least one head taller than me, but now he seemed to tower so far over me that I only reached the top of his abdomen.

His eyes were narrow, dark, and angular. His mouth was open, seemingly out of necessity given his sharper and larger teeth. Yet, his face had retained most of its humanity.

An inhuman growl rumbled in his chest as he stalked closer and closer to me. He was shirtless, and those brutal claws I'd become so enamored with had made their return. His hair was longer, the dark length of it tumbling to his shoulders,

which were half-covered in beautiful fur that covered his chest and arms, making him look like some wild Viking warrior clad in hides and furs. The fur tapered to a point that disappeared behind the waistband of his black jeans. His proportions had become so elongated and narrow that the faded denim hung loose on his hips, so loose that I could almost see where the base of his cock started.

The only thing keeping the pants on his body was the monstrous erection straining against the fabric, trying to break free.

His eyes were low and focused on mine. They were the most striking golden color I'd ever seen, each with only the faintest pinprick of a pupil in the center. He lifted an enormous, clawed hand and reached for me, grabbing one of my messy braids and running it through his velvety fingers. He was so gentle, so covetous, as he fondled the golden strands.

He dropped the braid, then raised that same hand toward his face. I thought he meant to inhale my scent from his fingers, but I was wrong. He lifted his hand to his mouth, placing the sharp, black nails of his two middle fingers between his vicious teeth. He bit clean through the nails, dulling their sharpness to two flat ends. He turned his head to the side, spitting the brutal points out of his mouth before giving me a wide, hungry grin.

I ran.

Running was a strong word. It was more like I tumbled down the hill, then across the shallow part of the river. He followed unhurriedly, like he was playing with his food. His feet sloshed in the water as he pursued me, bare and as brutal as his hand, stretched and elongated like a dog's.

A sound of distress croaked out of my throat. I was already so winded, my muscles screaming at me. But I forced myself to move, to power through the chase.

Behind me, Cole's growl sounded like a sadistic laugh. It could have been a delusion from my half-exhausted haze, but I didn't think about it too much. He let me keep running and put distance between us. Eventually, I lost sight of him.

Even though a small voice in my brain told me it was useless to keep running because Cole had a good track on my scent, I still felt the urge to flee, the need to get as far away as possible, the drive to escape my pursuer. Eventually, I found a hollow opening near a tree, a sort of ditch near the root network of a massive old pine. I hid there, curling up in it like it was the embrace of a loving parent. I hugged my legs close to me and tried to make myself as small and quiet as I could. I shivered but willed myself to still, to control my shaking, panting breaths. I was so tired, I thought I might fall asleep right there.

While sitting there, I felt a cold weight against my chest and leaned back to see what it was. The whistle. I had the strange sense that I was remembering something I hadn't actually forgotten. What had Cole told me? That he may have the power, but I was the one in control? Or was it the other way around? Whatever it had been, I still had the comforting knowledge that I could stop this whenever I wanted.

But the strangest thing of all? Despite the fact that I could stop it, despite the fact that I was cold and exhausted and scared, I didn't want to stop it. Cole had been right. This was like going through the horrors I'd been through before, but with all of the horror removed. I could do this. I knew that I was safe, that Cole would never hurt me in any way I didn't allow. This game of pursuit was not only erotic, but it might help me avoid a real attack from a real predator in the future.

Cole didn't take me down, not because he wanted to play games with me but because he wanted an honest win. He wanted a struggle, not just because he liked when I fought or was kinky as all get out, but because he wanted to see me *try*.

So, I would fucking try. I'd been training and had picked up a thing or two. Even if I didn't win, I could put up a damn good fight.

I got back on my aching feet and inched around the tree, peeking out from behind it.

Ten feet away, Cole was kneeling just past another tree.

I looked him right in the eye, and his grin showed every pointed, dangerous tooth in his mouth. I clenched the whistle tight and pressed it against my chest.

I had the control. I was in control. "I'm in control," I said to myself.

He heard me, though, because his grin grew even wider.

I looked around, judging the best spot for me to go. I weighed my choices, considered the possibilities and contingencies. Then I gathered what little energy and will I had left.

Gritting my teeth, I sprinted straight at him.

He clearly hadn't expected that move, which I was counting on because it was the only way I could get out of this. He skidded back onto his haunches, trying to redirect energy he'd already accounted for using in his hind legs. Cole tried to correct, but his large size made his movements slow and clumsy.

He lunged at me, trying to grab me right out of the air, but I leaped past his arms and crashed into the ground behind him before sliding down a steep hillside carpeted with silky, slippery pine needles.

I picked up speed, wailing as I careened down what felt like a slip-and-slide in complete darkness. With my forward momentum, I narrowly avoided several trees that would have killed me at this velocity. Ahead, maybe only thirty feet away, I saw the approaching drop off a massive cliffside. The pine trees below looked like something from a Hollywood miniature.

"Cole!" I screamed. "Cole, Cole, Cole!!"

I heard a vicious snarl just behind me and craned my head back just long enough to see him bounding on his hands and legs, building speed and force, catching up with me. The slippery pine needles seemed to be giving him trouble, and I was worried he wouldn't be able to get to me before I careened to my death. I threw out my hands and dug in my heels, trying my best to slow my descent.

The next thing I knew, Cole was at my side. He snarled and growled before pulling slightly ahead. I lost sight of him for a moment, then heard the deafening crack of wood breaking off to my right. I turned my head to the sound just in time to see him bounding off the trunk of a massive pine tree, putting all of his force into his legs before pushing off the trunk and slamming into me. He clutched me to his chest, and the two of us went rolling off the hazardous bed of pine needles and onto solid ground.

We panted, tangled up in each other, our gazes focused on the pine tree. The cracking sound had been the snapping of the trunk, and now we watched as it slowly creaked away from us, smashing into the ground with a thunderous thud before it tumbled off the side of the cliff.

More noise followed, and I flinched and twitched until it fully settled. In the silence that followed, I dragged in a shaky breath. My heart was threatening to break free of my ribcage, and my muscles burned with the readied tension that had coiled inside me as my body tried to leap into action during the fall.

I looked up and saw Cole still staring at the destruction he'd wrought. I remembered what we were doing, that I was still his prey. The game wasn't finished yet. I could still win this.

Our legs were somewhat tangled, but my arms were mostly free. He was poised over me, his clawed hands on either side of my head, bracketing me in. I watched him briefly before looking down between us and getting a clearer idea of what I'd need to do to extricate myself. When I was fairly certain I could do it, I started sliding out from underneath him.

I'd almost gotten entirely away from him when my leg brushed his arm. He looked down at me and snarled, his teeth bared.

I yelped and rolled over, scurrying away from him on all fours. The heel of my shoe clipped him on the chin. His teeth clattered audibly, and he made a sound between a growl and

whimper as I fled toward safer ground and as far away from him as possible.

I dipped between a few trees and over a hill. When I finally got a visual of my route out of the forest, my leg was pulled from under me.

I screamed as I was dragged back by that velvety, clawed hand. My shirt caught on the ground, riding up my back and exposing my skin to the damp earth. Twigs and pine needles caught in my braids as Cole pulled me underneath him again, his other hand grasping my jaw.

His grasp on my face was gentle, though I was sure he had the strength to crush my skull if he was so inclined. Instead, his clawed, lithe finger slid into my hair, brushing carefully against my scalp—a movement that was equal parts caress and threat.

Be good, that touch seemed to say, and I'll have no reason to use these.

I shivered as the dragging stopped. Once again, I couldn't tell if it was because I was cold, scared, or excited. Likely all three.

Cole released my leg and caught the fabric of my wet shirt with one of his nails, tearing into it as if it was made of tissue paper. I reached for his hand, gripping it tightly and trying to pry it off me. He leaned closer to me, his face only inches from mine, and let out a vicious snarl, not taking kindly to being interrupted. I struggled against him, anyway, and my reward for this behavior was a far rougher experience. Instead of the gentle approach he'd been taking thus far, Cole dug into the fabric, jostling and fighting with it until it was torn to shreds and I lay before him in only my bra. With another quick rip, Cole tore that off my body as well.

The cold air bit at the skin of my breasts, making my nipples feel raw and sore as they peaked and hardened. His hand drew a line down my body as his grip on my face tightened, keeping me in place.

My chest rose and fell with frantic, desperate need. Even though I'd lost, I couldn't find the room in my mind to be disappointed. Every thought in my head followed the path of that velvety hand—a sharp contrast to the stinging drags of the three sharp nails that remained after he'd bitten off the other two.

I hadn't given much thought to the action earlier. There had been something unnerving about it, but I'd so quickly gone into fight-or-flight mode that I hadn't really analyzed it. It was only when that hand smoothed over the mound of my pelvis and between my thighs that I realized why he had done it.

He punctured the spandex of my leggings right over my opening, just enough to barely brush against the hot, wet skin there. Then, just as he'd done with my shirt, he dragged that nail upward toward my belly button, the tight fabric popping open, my lace underwear giving in even quicker than the spandex.

He didn't even bother to rip the rest of my pants off before he slid the two blunt fingers deep into me, his golden eyes focused entirely on the object of his appetite. I let out a startled cry as he stroked so deeply that his fingertips brushed against my cervix.

Cole's golden eyes flicked from his fingers to meet my eyes. His slack mouth pulled into a smirk as his eyelids drooped, his expression darkening with desire. His fingers brushed every surface and nerve ending inside me as he watched me fall apart.

He brushed his thumb over my cheek in a gentle caress. I tilted my head into the soft warmth of his hand, craving tenderness to go along with the unstoppable drive within him to have exactly what he wanted, exactly when he wanted it.

“Good,” he said, though it sounded more like a rumble in his chest than spoken language. I smiled up at him as he caressed my face, my hair, between my thighs.

He leaned down and so, *so* carefully nipped at one of my breasts, enough to smart but not actually hurt me. I jolted, the

sensation shooting through my body from head to toe. He let out a frustrated grunt and moved the hand on my face to my chest, placing weight there so I couldn't wriggle. The weight was oddly comforting, even a little enticing.

Cole returned his attention to my breasts. He caught my nipple between those sharp teeth of his, using his tongue as counterpressure. The mixture of pleasure and pain was so overwhelming that my hips bucked.

He snarled, annoyed with my disobedience. He pressed his large palm down on my pelvis and changed his gentle, coaxing strokes to sharp thrusts of his fingers—the only real motion he could do with his hand at this new angle.

He was pressing against the very end of me, each thrust bringing me closer to climax. All I could do was lie there, completely at his mercy. I couldn't writhe, couldn't arch. Could only wait for the tidal wave to crash into me with full force.

He pulled his fingers out of me and parted them in front of him, watching my juices spread like spiderwebs between his claws while he lapped his tongue over my neglected nipple.

I was on the brink of falling apart. My body was so sensitive, and I was still coming down from my orgasm as he continued to play with me. Cole kept his hand on my chest, pinning me down. Abruptly, he grabbed me by the hips and lifted me.

He jerked me, spinning me slightly so that he was between my legs again, my bare back and hair catching in the dirt. With no effort at all, he picked me right up off the ground, hooking my legs over his broad shoulders before sliding a hand up to support my back.

“Cole, you're going to drop me,” I said, balling my hands into his long, soft hair.

He didn't respond, only used his sharp teeth to tear at what remained of my leggings. The air was cold against me, brushing against the wetness and heat. I shivered in his precarious grip, my toes curling.

“C-Cole?” I said.

He let out a snarl, but begrudgingly put his other hand on my back before standing to his full height and striding until my back was pressed against the trunk of a nearby tree. When he was satisfied that I was well-supported, he placed both hands where my hips met my outer thighs and spread me open.

I parted for him and watched as he looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. He idly licked his lips, and I gasped. His tongue was slightly longer than usual.

I didn't have time to wonder what it would feel like before he helped himself to me.

I felt the slick stroke of his tongue from the base of me to the very tip of my clit once, twice, then the insistent push of his tongue past the threshold of my opening. My toes curled and my legs stiffened as I melted against him. He exhaled roughly through his nose as his tongue worked on me.

So soon after the first orgasm, it was an exquisite torture. My clit was so swollen, it was throbbing painfully. I tugged at his hair, trying to get away from his tongue. But no matter how much I tried to pry him off, he only pulled me closer against him, burying his nose in my slick folds.

“Cole,” I begged. “I'm going to—”

I couldn't finish my sentence before every muscle I possessed contracted. My thighs squeezed tightly around his head, and I bowed toward him and came all over his mind-ruining tongue. He lapped up every bit of it, like I was a delicious meal. My legs twitched with each long stroke of his tongue, more overstimulated than I was after the first orgasm, but I knew well enough not to complain. He wasn't done with me.

As he finished savoring me, he tore the scraps of spandex off my legs. All that was left on my body was the whistle and my running shoes. I'd ditched the socks shortly after I fell in the water.

He lowered me from his shoulders and placed me down in front of him, supporting my wobbly knees with a single hand

at my waist. I thought I'd seen his full erection before, but it was even larger now, pressing so hard to escape his pants that it was peeking past the waistline of his jeans.

I looked up at him, and he stared down at me in expectant silence.

My throat was dry as I unbuttoned his jeans. They fell off his legs in a puddle. I unleashed his cock from his boxers, and the soft fabric slid down to pool on top of his jeans. I licked my lips as I stared at what I'd have to contend with.

It was similar to what I was used to, but also markedly different. It was still the same color and texture, though it was framed by a thicker coat of hair—the same I'd observed earlier—that gave way to barer skin underneath. It was also larger. Large enough that I wasn't certain it would fit inside me.

Then there was the knot—a bulbous addition I'd not seen on him before. I now understood what he meant when he said we would be joined at the hip until he came down from his high.

He put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me down onto my knees before pressing his member against my lips. I winced and flinched away from it. Cole took hold of one of my braids and twisted it around two of his fingers before roughly forcing himself into my mouth.

Grunting, I put my hands on his thighs, pushing against them slightly as he pressed deeper and deeper into my mouth. The tip of his cock brushed the back of my throat when the knot touched my lips.

It was too big. Cole ground into my mouth, snarling with frustration. He used my braids for leverage, then abandoned them to grip the back of my head and drive in as deep as he could. I lost myself to the blissful sensation of his cock fucking the slick parts of my throat.

I gagged as he pressed deeper, breaching past my uvula. I tapped his thigh when the knot blocked my nostrils—the signal we'd agreed on when he first fucked my mouth—and pushed myself off him, gasping for air.

He knelt beside me, his large hands smoothing my hair. He held my face, catching my gaze to make sure I was still with him. I smiled blissfully and cupped his own face.

“You’re still in there,” I said softly, not in surprise but in encouragement. “I love you so much, Cole. I love you like this. I love you in your fully human form. I love you shifted. I just love you.”

He leaned forward and pressed his forehead to mine, like he’d done so many times when feeling moved by his own love for me. His nose brushed mine as he breathed quietly.

“Okay?” he grunted in that deep growl.

“I’m okay,” I said. “I’m ready. I want you to claim me.”

He nodded and dropped his hands to my waist. He panted heavily before turning me to face away from him. He supported my upper body with one hand, the other splaying over my hip to bend me forward slightly. He positioned his legs on either side of mine, then guided me back, pulling me onto him and driving into me with a swift thrust.

A hard breath huffed out of him as I moaned and slackened like putty in his hands. I felt the knot press against my opening. God, it was so fucking big.

He started to work on me, thrusting into me at the same time that he pulled me forward and back over and over again. Each thrust allowed him deeper access, stretched me more and more so I could accommodate every inch of his enhanced cock.

When I’d grown completely supple and malleable in his hands, he let me go, pressing my head into the tattered remains of my clothes as he repositioned himself behind me, his legs moving up, giving his cock nowhere to go but deeper.

He stopped being gentle, slamming into me with hard, unforgiving thrusts, my face scraping against the compact earth.

The widened base started to press past my opening, stretching me to my absolute limit. It hurt, but God, it hurt so good. I moaned and gasped as his tempo increased, the force

not letting up. Cole's breathing became erratic, as did his pace. All I could do was grunt and whimper as he used me.

He let out a vicious snarl as the knot finally breached my entrance fully. I felt the strange sensation of it locking inside of me before he forced it out again.

Two more wild thrusts later, he pulled me tightly against him, his hips and back arching as he craned back and gave a wild, victorious howl as he released himself inside me. There was so much of it that it burst past the knot that locked us together and seeped out of me.

I was so exhausted, so spent, that my legs were on the verge of collapse. Cole seemed to feel the same because a moment later, he bowed forward, wrapping his arms around me and taking me down with him. He settled us onto our sides while his cock twitched inside me.

Cole curled himself around me, and we took gasping breaths as we came down from the high of this wild, beautiful, chaotic experience. He gently combed his fingers through my hair, nuzzling the back of my head and breathing in my scent.

I knew he had started to shift back when I felt his lips press a tender kiss to the nape of my neck.

"Cole?" I murmured.

"Hey, baby," he said. "Doing okay?"

"Mmm," I said. "Sore, but...so good."

"Went pretty rough on you. You sure you're all right?" His hand—his human hand—stroked my hair.

"I'm fine," I said, but then a chill sent a tremor through my body. "A little cold," I added.

He pulled me tighter against him in answer to the complaint, his slightly higher body temperature fending off a bit of the chilly night and damp forest floor. As my senses returned to me, I realized my clothes had been torn to shreds.

I reached behind me to touch Cole's hip. "Uh...Cole, how do we get back home?"

“I parked the car next to the forest,” he said. “And I’ll carry you back to the entrance—”

“No,” I said. “I mean, I’m totally fucking naked.”

“Oh.” He chuckled. “I have a bag stashed about a mile away from the tree line. It has a first aid kit, water bottles, some chocolate, and a fresh set of super comfy pajamas.”

“You brought all of that?” I said, turning my head to look back at him.

“Of course,” he said. “Marley, you know I don’t fuck around with safety. Not ever. And regardless of whether or not this was a biological drive of mine, I knew it would be incredibly intense and challenging for both of us. Aftercare is a crucial part of all of this. Especially when I just hunted you down like an animal.”

I worried my lower lip between my teeth. “Yeah.”

“So, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, are you okay?” he asked again.

I gave him the courtesy of at least thinking it over more this time, replaying the experience from start to finish, checking in on myself at each stage with the clear view of hindsight.

“The knot hurt like hell,” I muttered.

He sobered and brushed my hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said gently. “We don’t have to ever do it again if you don’t want to.”

“I think I would like to try it again, but could we have more time next time? Maybe some more foreplay to help get me ready for it?”

“That’s more than a reasonable request,” he said. “Do you feel distressed over how much it hurt? Do you feel like you need to get support from anyone else or get some space from me? Do you feel frightened of me or anything?”

I was surprised by the honesty of his questions. Never in a thousand years would Wyatt have ever asked me if I needed distance or outside help if he hurt me, accidentally or

otherwise. “No. I wasn’t afraid—not in the way I’d be of someone like Curt or Wyatt. I mean, I was intimidated and experiencing the adrenaline rush of being hunted down, but I never once feared that you would hurt me beyond repair. Except, I’m worried you may have, uh...”

“Made you bleed?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “From a medical standpoint, that could be dangerous if we overdo it.”

“I did tear you a little bit. I smelled the tinge of your blood right after I came. It probably happened when I pulled the knot out, and that might be why we’re still stuck together. Inflammation and all that.”

“Ugh, I’m sorry for bleeding on you,” I said.

“Firstly, don’t ever apologize for something silly like that. Secondly, I didn’t smell a lot of blood. I just happen to be very primed toward your scent in particular. And, uh, I got a whole lot of exposure to the smell of your blood a little while ago.” Sadness tinged his words.

“Cole, I...ugh, I wish I could look at you while I talk to you,” I grumbled.

He laughed softly, his breath gusting faintly against my cheek. “Should we try to separate?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Please.”

It took a little negotiating, but he managed to slide himself out of me without hurting me. Once I was free, I turned around to face him. He bent his arm to act as a pillow for me, staying on his side as I snuggled back into his body heat. I looked up at him, and he brushed his hand through my hair again, his eyes full of love and back to the color I was used to.

“You can’t blame yourself for Wyatt hurting me,” I said. “I know you feel responsible for it, but you’re not. And it breaks my heart that you think it’s your fault.”

“Biological drive, sweetheart. I’m hard-wired to want to protect you,” he said. “And the truth of it all is that I failed to

do that when I let you go to your old place without me. You could have...if you hadn't fought..."

"But I did fight," I said. "And I'll continue to fight. Just like I fought you."

He chuckled again, the sound full of love. "You really threw me for a loop when you came straight at me. If I'd known you were going to do that, I would have waited somewhere else."

"I'm afraid the one who really paid for that decision was that pine tree."

"Absolutely fucking crazy," he said. "I still can't believe I managed to fell a tree with just my body."

"How did you do that, anyway?" I asked. "Where did you find the strength?"

"I had to get to you," he said. "Luckily, I managed it before you got hurt."

I smiled up at him. "You saved me from the world's most prickly Slip and Slide."

"I'm surprised you didn't wind up skewered by more of those pine needles."

"Critical mass—too many needles to be pokey," I teased. "It's basically ball bearings at that point."

"And then you still tried to get away," he said. "I had you underneath me, and you scrambled up and got away!"

I gasped, remembering that my heel had clipped his chin. "Oh, shit, Cole, is your chin okay?"

"A little bruised, nothing my beard can't hide. It'll heal tonight."

I covered my mouth with my hands. "God, Cole. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "I knew the risks. Frankly, I came out of this much less battered than I expected. Can't say the same for you, which I feel pretty bad about, but..."

“I knew the risks,” I said, mirroring him. “Can we go home? I’m tired and hurting. I just want to go back to being your mate and snuggle with you all night.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Let me get dressed, and I’ll carry you back, okay?”

I nodded, sitting up so that he could do just that. He put on his tattered boxers and jeans while I hugged my legs close to me, trying to retain as much body heat as I possibly could.

Cole picked me up bridal-style as he usually did. I was especially grateful for it this time because it helped me stay warm. After trudging through the forest for a while, we reached the river, where Cole’s shirt hung from a tree. He put me on my feet, then slipped the shirt onto me.

I thanked the wardrobe gods that Cole had opted to wear a flannel shirt after his day in the suit. It warmed up quickly and was large enough to practically be a dress on me. I was still chilly, especially my legs and feet, but my teeth weren’t chattering anymore.

The warmth of Cole’s arms under me and his chest next to my cheek nearly lulled me to sleep as he traversed the woods. Just as my eyes threatened to close, we reached the bag Cole had stashed near a dilapidated picnic table.

Cole then started taking care of the little cuts and scrapes I’d gotten during this whole experience. There were several small puncture wounds from his claws, some scrapes from my falls and tumbles, a few blisters on the ball of my foot, and a couple of bruises from when he’d been a little too rough. He cleaned and bandaged what he could, then used arnica cream on the bruises.

“I’ll help you care for the micro-tears when we get home,” he said. “Make sure they’re clean, and maybe put an ice pack on them.”

“I can clean myself, thank you,” I said. “Also, did you just suggest putting an ice pack on my cooter?”

“Did you just call it a cooter?” he quipped back.

“I am at liberty to call my vagina anything I want.”

“Exactly. So why the fuck would you pick cooter?”

“What would you call it?”

“Oh, are we naming your genitals now?” His lips quirked as he tried to hide his smile. “How about...Hannah?”

“No! We’re not naming it!” I rolled my eyes. “There aren’t many charming words to describe a woman’s bits.”

“Sure, there are,” he said. “Pussy is a decent one.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I hate that one.”

“Fair enough. You are a bit of a dog lover,” he said with a wink.

“You’re terrible,” I said, swatting him.

“I’d say you have no idea, but now you do,” he said as he pulled out a pair of pajama pants for me. “Here. Now, as for charming words, I have one I like, but you might think it’s too corny.”

“It better not be something like *love cave* or *secret garden*,” I said. “I’ve read enough romance novels to think those are terrible, too.”

“No to both of those,” he said. “But I’ve always loved the term *flower*.”

“Flower?” I repeated. “That’s adorable.”

“Well, it makes sense, right?” he said. “When you make love to someone for the first time, you deflower them. It’s pretty and fragrant like a flower. It opens up like one, too. So, I guess it’s tangentially related to the secret garden thing, but only the flower part of it.”

I laughed as I stood up and shimmied into the pajama pants, relishing the warmth they provided. “I can’t believe we just had this conversation.”

“Marley, I just hunted you through the forest and then fucked you like an animal, and you’re shocked by a bit of silly banter about pet names for your...cooter?”

“See? It’s a good word.”

“It’s growing on me,” he said with a shrug. “Okay, come on, let’s get you home already. You want me to carry you?”

“I can manage the rest of the way,” I said. “Want me to carry any of the stuff?”

“Nah, I got it,” he said, shouldering the duffel bag and putting his free arm around my shoulders. “Let’s figure out what to call mine.”

“With or without the extra features?” I teased.

“God, you really are the perfect woman.”

“It’s a good thing, too, ’cause you’re stuck with me. Now more than ever.”

“As long as I’m not stuck *in* you. I think we can both agree that was a little awkward.”

“Maybe don’t take me from behind next time,” I suggested. “A little eye contact would have made it better.”

“A fair point, but I make no promises.”

“Biological drive?” I asked.

“Biological drive,” he agreed.

I chuckled as I leaned into him, letting out a contented sigh. The only drive on my mind was the drive back home. I was ready to crash into bed.

When we reached the car, Cole helped me inside. He’d prepared a blanket and pillow on the seat for my comfort. I bundled up in them, and Cole blasted the heater.

As I let my body get loose and weary, I thought about all the work that awaited us when we got back to New Middle Bluff.

I’d never felt more ready for something in my entire life.

Chapter 8

Cole

Marley shifted in the seat next to me. She was still exhausted when we woke up for our flight back to New Middle Bluff. I couldn't blame her—I *had* run her ragged in the forest. Since arriving back at the townhouse, Marley had stuck to me like glue.

The first thing she did when we got to our seats on the plane was lift the armrest between us and nuzzle close to me. She'd stayed that way the entire flight, falling asleep shortly after we took off.

I adjusted my arm as she wriggled, trying to get comfortable again. I moved her just a little so she could lie on my lap. She was small enough to curl her legs up once she had her head on my legs. I ran my fingers through her hair, thinking of the night before when I'd finally found her and run her pretty golden braid through my claws.

I sighed as I looked down at her, my heart aching with my love for her. It killed me that she was still feeling so nervous about us. I was desperate to assure her that there was nothing she or anyone else could do to make me want to leave her.

Hopefully, now that I'd claimed her, it would serve as adequate proof of our mating bond until I could get a ring on her finger. I didn't plan on making her wait long, but it would be difficult to find the time to go ring shopping while we were busy with Travis's transition and all the work we had cut out for us with the pack—the fact that we weren't in the habit of spending much time apart notwithstanding.

I leaned back against the headrest and closed my eyes, taking a few moments to breathe and relax. Jack and Travis were somewhere deeper in the plane, probably making plans to shoot more B-roll and discussing what they wanted to highlight in their docuseries. According to the small screen in front of me, we were set to land in New Middle Bluff in less than an hour.

I was looking forward to seeing my son and my parents. I was not looking forward to the peanut gallery's looks and comments about my claiming Marley. Yes, my father had encouraged me to do it, but something about that made me feel uncomfortable. It was such a vulnerable and treasured moment for me and Marley, and I didn't want it to be cheapened or have other people in our lives poke fun at us.

I didn't have long to get more comfortable with the idea, though—besides, it wasn't the last time I'd have to worry about my scent now being merged with Marley's. Any shifter who came across us would know what I'd done.

I wish I knew why that notion made me feel so bad. It wasn't as if I'd forced it on her. She'd wanted to do it. And thanks to our growing connection as mates, I even had the biofeedback of her feelings to confirm it.

So, why did it make me feel like such a toxic, possessive piece of shit?

Maybe Marley was right. Maybe it was time for me to start going to therapy. I snorted to myself. Of course she was right. She was always good about that sort of thing, always emotionally intelligent, thoughtful, and empathetic. And it wasn't like the road was about to get any easier. I'd have more than just her and Noah to think about soon—I'd have an entire group of people depending on me and my calls. I needed to make sure my head was thoroughly screwed onto my shoulders.

Brushing my fingers through Marley's hair again, I willed a deep breath into my chest. I kept the recycled air in my lungs for a beat, then exhaled slowly. Then I did it again, and again, and again for the remainder of the flight. I tried my best to be

present, to be grateful for everything I had. To really internalize all I'd done right lately and all the things I was so utterly grateful for.

I stayed like that until the pilot announced our descent into New Middle Bluff. I brushed my fingers through Marley's hair a little more forcefully and leaned forward to talk to her.

"Marley, baby, we're landing. You gotta get up, sweetheart."

She groaned, draping her hand over her eyes and snuggling deeper into my lap. "Tired."

"I know," I said, unable to keep the adoring smile off my face as I watched her wiggle like a sleepy kitten. "But you know how these things are. Gotta be buckled in and have your seat in an upright position."

She groaned again, her lips curving down in a pout, her hand still over her eyes. "Okay."

I helped her right herself, supporting her weight so she could get settled in her own seat again. When she was up, her eyes were still closed, and her brow furrowed as she wobbled sleepily. I tried not to laugh as I reached over and buckled her in, tightening the strap so she was good and safe.

"Can I nap at home?" she asked.

"Sure, sweetheart," I said, stopping near her head to press a kiss to her temple. "We had a late night and a busy morning."

"Mmm," she said before letting her head loll back against the headrest again as she drifted right back to sleep.

I let her get the rest she needed, checking that she was still upright as we started to coast toward the runway. The skinny veins of freeways below us began to expand, the cars looking like little toys. Marley woke up properly when the plane's wheels scraped on the ground below us, reaching for my hand as we fully touched down and the plane reduced its velocity to a slow taxi.

I smiled at her as the pilot came on the speakers to tell us the weather and list the gates for various connecting flights. Marley squeezed my hand and rested her head on my shoulder.

“Love you,” she said in sleepy appreciation.

“Love you, too, baby,” I said.

It was tender moments like these, the little stolen affections, that I lived for. I wanted nothing more than to experience a lifetime of these little mundanities.

When the plane finally pulled up to the gate, Marley and I stayed seated. We figured it'd be better to wait to see Jack and Travis approach than try to fight the crowd to get our bags and wrestle out of the door.

When we finally saw them, Travis was almost glowing with excitement.

“Listen, Cole, I've got so many things to run by you. Marley, your brother is a fucking cinematic genius, by the way,” he rambled. “What do you think about me doing my first injection at your house?”

“My house? Why?” I asked, splitting my attention between listening to him and making sure my sleepy mate didn't bonk her head on the overhead bin. When I was certain she wouldn't hurt herself, I reached up for our bags. “What makes my place such an interesting location for the first dose of your gene therapy?”

“You guys said you're going to gather up the forces and start figuring out how to get things moving, right?” Jack said. “I thought it might be interesting to have the formation of your pack sort of line up with some of Travis's milestones as he makes the transition into being a shifter.”

“Jack, I don't mean you any offense by this,” I said, “but I'm not really interested in timing things for entertainment value.”

“No, no, no,” Jack said quickly. “Of course not. I'd never dream of having you do that. The narrative would be structured in post as far as the docuseries goes, and I'll get a contract drafted that gives you an opportunity to see the

footage and make sure you feel that everything is being presented in an accurate way.”

“Let’s talk about it a little more over dinner tonight,” I suggested. “Right now, Marley and I are both pretty exhausted, and I don’t have much on my mind besides reuniting with my son. That cool?”

“Yeah, dude, that sounds good,” Travis said.

Jack’s nod of agreement looked so much like Marley’s sweet, affirmative nod, it was uncanny.

We walked to the aisle, and Marley stretched her arms over her head, standing on her toes to stretch her legs, too. “I can’t believe I slept through the whole flight. Your lap is a very comfortable pillow.”

“Feel free to use it whenever you want,” I said as I hooked both our carry-ons onto my shoulders.

“Ew,” Jack said.

“Better get used to it,” Travis advised him.

“It was bad enough being their neighbors for the last week,” Jack grumbled, low enough that Marley wouldn’t hear it.

“What?” Marley asked.

“Your brother’s grouchy that he had to hear us making love,” I said.

“Ah! Shut up! You did not!” Marley yelped, her embarrassment so sharp, I felt it in the pit of my stomach.

“What the hell? How did you hear—oh, right. Shifter hearing.” Jack pulled a face.

“Yep,” I said. “And I hope you didn’t make any snarky remarks during our visit to my grandfather.”

“I may or may not have embarrassed myself a couple of times,” Jack said.

“Oh my god, oh my *god*,” Marley said, starting to panic behind me. “This is so embarrassing. I want to die.”

“Marley, baby, easy. It’s fine,” I said. “Your brother is playing stupid games and winning stupid prizes.”

“How would you feel if *your* sister told you when she got laid?” Jack asked me.

“Marley didn’t tell you. You assumed based on some noises you heard coming from next door,” I said.

“Don’t avoid the question,” he said.

“Dude, I wouldn’t care. My sister literally sent me a text a couple days ago about sleeping with one of Marley’s girlfriends. You think your sister is almost thirty and still a virgin?”

“No! But it’s not like I want to know the gory details.”

“Oh, believe me, you don’t,” I said with a smirk. “You have no idea what we’ve been up to.”

“Cole,” Marley hissed.

I turned my head to look back at her. She was beet-red and giving me a pleading look of despair.

My heart twinged at her expression, but I also couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, okay,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop, but only for you. Because,” I continued, speaking a little louder for Jack, “we have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“All right, all right,” Jack griped. “Christ.”

I pulled Marley close to me as we exited the aircraft, kissing her on the top of the head. “I’m sorry about that. Forgive me?” I said.

“Fine. But only for embarrassing me,” she said.

I tilted my head in confusion as we walked off the bridge and into the airport. “What else would you need to forgive me for?”

“That you didn’t tell me about your sister and Paulette!” she hissed in a whisper.

“What? Paulette didn’t text you immediately?” I was shocked to hear that the gossip of the century didn’t kiss and

tell. "I didn't say anything 'cause I assumed you already knew."

"No!" Marley cried. "What did Ginger say about it? Does she like her?"

"She slept with her," I said, combing my fingers through my hair. "So I assume so."

"Oh, come on. You know that's not how I mean."

"Marley, sweetheart, I don't know if you've noticed, but Ginge is not the most forthcoming when it comes to her feelings," I said. "I'm not even sure if she likes *me* half the time."

Marley pursed her lips. "I guess that's true. She's pretty dry," she allowed. "God, I can't believe Paulette didn't tell me after she was all up in my business about you! I'm gonna kick her butt!"

"I think it's adorable that you still barely swear even when kids aren't around," I teased.

"I feel like I sound weird when I swear," she said. "You and Lana and everyone else always sound so natural when you curse. I can only do it when I'm really, really mad, with the exception of a couple of words. I swear in my head a lot, though."

"Yeah?" I asked, chuckling as we moseyed onto an escalator. "Sounds like something you'd do."

"I am nothing if not predictable."

"Baby," I said, "nothing in that adorable little body of yours has ever been predictable. You surprise me every damn day. I just like to think I've gotten to know quite a bit about you at this point."

"Hmm," she said. "Well then, I suppose I'll have to find new ways to keep you on your toes."

"Tell you what. How about we make a wager?"

"What kind of wager?"

“Let’s have a competition to see who can surprise the other more by the end of the month,” I said. “We’ll both pull out all the stops and keep the other guessing.”

“Like funny surprises, scary surprises, or romantic surprises?”

“All of the above.”

“I don’t know if I want to agree to scary surprises. You’ll beat me at that every time,” she pointed out. “Also, I don’t want to be walking around all jumpy.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Fine. Silly or romantic *only*.”

“You’re on—wait, what do we win?”

“Bragging rights.”

“Boo! That’s boring.”

“Fine. What *do* you want to win, then?”

She pursed her lips and tapped her chin. “Winner gets to pick the location of our next trip. Anywhere in the world.”

“Oh, fancy,” I said. “Is this your way of saying you want me to take you on a vacation?”

She shrank a little bit. “Oh. I mean, you don’t have to.”

“Marley, I’m teasing you,” I said as we reached the bottom of the escalator. I grabbed her waist and lifted her over the grate where the contraption sank back into the floor. She giggled, and I took her hand, keeping a lazy pace behind Jack and Travis. “I would love to take you on a trip.”

“It’d be a lot of fun,” she said. “And I won’t ask you to go anywhere too crazy. Not like...Italy or France or something.”

“Oh, so you’re assuming you can win?”

“The best way to win is to believe you can,” she said, swinging our hands between us.

I chuckled and nodded. “Fair enough,” I said. “Here’s our baggage claim.”

We stopped flirting for Marley's sake. I didn't want to embarrass her further, although I didn't give a fuck if Jack was bothered. Once we'd done the standard impatient wait for our bags, we went our separate ways from Travis and Jack since Lana was picking them up.

Marley and I got into the car I'd left at the airport, finally making our way back to my mom's place.

The drive took a little longer than expected. There was plenty of traffic, thanks to some asinine march going on downtown. I thought it'd be related to some political initiative, but when we finally passed the city hall, we found close to a hundred people carrying signs that read "lycanthropy is a disease" and "abolish lawful transition."

My stomach twisted. "Holy fuck," I said. "We leave for a week, and the entire city falls apart."

"Do you think it's Lanyon Clover?" Marley asked.

"Them or the people they've radicalized," I said, forcing myself to look away from the protest. "I hope this town isn't falling to shit."

Marley nodded, worry clouding her expression. "Maybe it would be better for us to move after all," she said. "I know we talked about just doing a shelter and headquarters, but this feels so scary compared to Georgia."

"Yeah, it does," I agreed. "But I grew up here, I've raised my son here. We have to try to turn the tide and get the outsiders to stop corrupting our home."

"I think you're right about that," she said. "I just hope this movement doesn't get violent."

"We'll do what we can to be prepared for that," I said. "I'll talk to Farrah about getting our security officers trained and recruited. And you can hold your own against a shifter these days, so humans should be no problem."

"Hold your own is a little strong." She chuckled. "But yeah, I think I can fend off a grumpy dude with a receding hairline easily enough."

“Ah, yes. As we all know, the power is in the hair.”

“Explains why you’re so strong,” she replied. “I mean, sometimes you’re covered in the stuff.”

“Ha ha,” I said. “A joke about being furry. Never heard that one before.”

“You have no room to talk when you made that dog-lover joke last night.”

“Fine, that’s your one.”

“We’ll see.”

“God, I love you.”

We laughed, which was a welcome reprieve from the shock and worry incited by the nightmarish picket signs.

Not long after that, we pulled into my parents’ driveway. Marley was still exhausted, so I promised we wouldn’t stay too long. We both got out of the car, and before I could even make it to the stairs leading up to the front door, Noah came running out of the house.

I grinned and dropped to my knees, holding my arms out for him. He careened toward me at lightning speed, then suddenly veered off and wrapped his arms around my mate.

“Marley! You’re home!” he squealed.

Well, I couldn’t say I blamed him. Marley was much cuter than I was, so my son had inherited my good taste.

My parents hovered in the doorway, laughing quietly as they looked on. I shrugged and got back to my feet, approaching them as Marley and Noah enjoyed their reunion. I walked up the steps and hugged my parents.

“Guess he really missed me,” I joked.

“I’d look more forward to seeing Marley, too,” my dad quipped. “Less hairy.”

“Man, everyone’s got a bone to pick with my hair today,” I said. “How were things? Everything pan out all right?”

“He did just fine,” Mom said. “A few tears the first couple of nights, but he settled in after we reminded him how fun Nanny’s house was.”

“How’d the visit go?” Dad asked.

“Good,” I replied. “I can definitely see the remnants of the old ways there, some backward-thinking geezers when it came to Marley and me, but Grandpa Vic was kind and accommodating. Many of his upper leadership were happy to share information with me and give me some advice.”

“No trouble with, uh, other males?” Dad asked.

“No. Actually, the opposite. A few women tried to make a pass, but...” I looked over my shoulder at Marley. When I was sure she wasn’t paying too close attention, I lowered my voice a bit. “Can we not talk about that? It was pretty upsetting for Marley.”

“Yeah, we can drop it,” my father said. “Why don’t you guys come in for a minute? I’m sure you’re both exhausted from the day’s travel, but fall is coming, and it’s getting chilly.”

“Sure,” I said.

Marley picked Noah up, blowing a raspberry on his cheek as she walked toward us. My mom beckoned her inside with a huge smile.

That is, until a breeze blew past us. Then my mother’s expression changed real quick.

“Cole William Lucas,” she said under her breath. “You... you did not...”

“Marley smells like Daddy now!” Noah said excitedly.

My mother quickly comported herself and gave an uncomfortable laugh. “How about that, huh? They must have spent all their time hugging while they were away! Got their scents all mixed together.”

“Eww! Daddy, you hug girls?” Noah asked.

“Well, of course I do, bud. I mean, you’re hugging her right now.”

“That doesn’t count—she’s my mama. She’s not your mama,” Noah said, tightening his arms around Marley’s neck. My mate looked like she was trying not to implode on herself.

“Why don’t I get Noah packed while you guys talk,” Marley suggested, her face an adorable shade of pink.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” I said, knowing she wanted to be as far from this conversation as possible. I felt a little guilty to be putting her in this position again, but as predicted, my father had given me advice and hadn’t told my mother.

Once Noah and Marley were out of earshot, I looked at my mom. “Dad told me to,” I said. “Advised that it would be a good way to protect her from other shifters.”

“I don’t care if the fucking pope advised you to do it,” she said through her teeth. “I did *not* raise you that way. Marley is her own woman, and you’ve been together, what? A couple months?”

“That doesn’t matter,” I said.

“Like hell it doesn’t!” she said. “Cole, claiming is permanent.”

“And I plan on being with her *permanently*, so it’s not a big deal,” I retorted. “People were not taking our relationship seriously because I hadn’t sealed it by claiming her. She was feeling uncomfortable and wanted to experience being claimed. And as I said, I’m pretty sure I want to marry this girl, so—”

“Did you tell her that she won’t be able to get rid of the claim?” my mom demanded. “Ever? Did you tell her it was permanent, even if you two don’t wind up being forever mates? Did you tell her all of that?” She glared at my father. “Did *you*, Mister Ideas Man?”

My dad and I mirrored each other’s uncomfortable expressions and shifted awkwardly on our feet.

“Of course you didn’t,” my mother said. “I’m about ready to beat both of your asses raw.” She poked my chest with a rounded fingernail. “You discuss it with her tonight. All of it. If you don’t, I will.”

“I will,” I said, feeling sufficiently ashamed.

If I was honest, I hadn’t even thought about the fact that it would be permanent. I’d never considered that Marley might ever want to be in a relationship with someone else. Frankly, the idea filled me with so much despair and rage that I wanted to break something, punch holes in walls. I wouldn’t, but the drive was certainly there.

Marley and Noah came back out during that tense part of the conversation. Marley looked between me and my parents, then shot me a look that screamed *what the hell is going on?*

“I was just telling Mom and Dad that we’re exhausted, so we’re heading back to the condo,” I told her. “Got everything?”

“Uh, yeah,” Marley said. “Are you sure, though? We can hang out a little longer.”

“No!” Noah whined. “I wanna go back to the little house! Want my bed!”

“Oh, okay,” Marley said. “Home it is, then. I could use a nap, anyway.”

She smiled tightly at me and walked awkwardly past us to put Noah in his car seat. I looked at my mother, who was still giving my father and me the stink eye.

“All right,” I said, knowing full well that there was no way to avoid her anger or appease her while I was here. “I’ll call you both later.”

“Right,” my dad said. “Get home safe, son.”

“Yeah,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder and shaking him slightly. “Good luck.”

I left without much more pomp or circumstance, getting into the car and driving off with my little family. Marley was tense, naturally, and we were limited in what we could talk

about with Noah there. It was quiet for a while in the car before Marley finally spoke.

“Um, is your mom well?” she asked.

“She’s a little frustrated with me for making a mistake while I was away,” I said.

“What mistake did you make, Daddy?” Noah asked.

“Just a little miscommunication,” I said. “Nanny got mad at me, but I’m gonna make it up to her, kiddo.”

“It’s important to say sorry when you make a mistake,” Noah said sagely.

“You are absolutely right,” I said. “But it’s also important to make the changes in your behavior first so people know you mean it.”

Noah’s attention wandered as he gazed out the window and kicked his feet—a typical wind-down for a conversation with a five-year-old. I looked over at Marley and saw that her expression was crinkled with worry.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Just wondering if we did something...wrong,” she said.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” I said. “We just did something a little antiquated. And...there was a factor I didn’t really think about, so we need to talk about that.”

“And what is that?”

I looked back at Noah and then at her again. “Could we talk about it later?”

“No,” she said, anxiety coming into her tone. “No, we cannot talk about it later. I feel like I’m about to freak out.”

“Easy, baby,” I said. “I’ll talk about it now, but I have to be careful of little ears, all right?”

She was silent, but I saw her almost imperceptible nod from the corner of my eye.

“Give me just a second,” I said.

I reached toward her feet and handed Noah his souvenir—a set of plastic trains. It seemed to take his interest pretty immediately, giving me a chance to talk through things with Marley.

“So, the thing we did that made you smell like me?” I began.

“Yes?” she said tensely.

“I didn’t think to disclose that it would be a permanent thing,” I said. “It was an enormous oversight on my part, and I should have told you. That’s what my mom was upset about, aside from the whole antiquated aspect of it.”

“The thing we did is permanent?” she asked.

I braced myself for the fallout of this conversation, not because I thought I was about to be nagged, but because it was a huge oversight, and a really violating one at that. Especially to Marley, who had already had her autonomy challenged and pushed in so many ways by so many people.

Shame started coiling through me, followed by guilt and self-loathing. It’d been a long time since I’d done something so impulsive and selfish. It was a regular problem when I was a teenager and the reason Travis and I became such good friends back then. I was reckless, impulsive, and sometimes violent. I’d gotten so laser-focused on my abiding love for Marley that I hadn’t thought through the implications of claiming her. I was only thinking about how euphoric I was to have a woman in my life who accepted me completely, in a way no other woman ever had.

“Yes,” I finally said.

I left room for silence, allowing her to process before I said anything or tried to make it okay. The delay was killing me, but I had no right to do anything but wait. I’d made a mistake, and there was no excusing it.

“Okay,” she finally said, her tone almost unbothered by the information.

I almost swerved the car in surprise.

“Okay?” I asked. “That’s it?”

“I’m not going to lie to you. I’m a little upset that you didn’t tell me,” she said. “It worries me a little that you don’t think about me as my own autonomous person. But I know that doesn’t check out. You’ve always been supremely supportive of my rights and what I feel is best for me. The only exceptions were times when you were dealing with some of your own hang-ups.”

“I wish there were no times at all,” I said ruefully.

“Join the club, but it’s not like you get to choose that stuff. We all have difficulties when it comes to old aches and traumas.”

“So, you’re okay with it being permanent?” I asked.

“We did just talk about how we want to get married,” she said. “I don’t exactly have feelings like that for anyone unless I’m comfortable with them having a permanent spot in my life.”

“You guys are gonna get married?!” Noah piped up.

I cringed slightly and glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

“Someday, buddy.”

“Like, next month?” Noah asked.

“Uh, probably not that soon, kiddo. Gotta propose first,” I said. “But yeah, someday, Marley and I will get married.”

“When it’s Christmas?”

“Looks like someone wants a short engagement,” Marley said teasingly. “Sorry for opening that can of worms.”

“Technically, I was the one who opened it back in Georgia,” I said with a laugh.

“Dad! When are you getting married?!” Noah pressed.

“That’s up to Marley, kiddo,” I said.

“I need to think about it for a little while. Is that okay, Noah?” she asked. “I have to think really hard about the dress

I want to wear and the flowers I want in my bouquet, okay?”

“Oh,” Noah said, looking back out the window. “Yeah, that stuff is super-important. Okay.”

I smiled over at her. “You are very good at that,” I murmured.

She winked at me. “I’m a professional.”

We pulled up at the condo, and I sent Noah and Marley upstairs while I grabbed our bags. The sun was coming into the condo at a slant, and the air felt a little stuffy after the place was closed up for a week. Fortunately, cool air was already pumping through the air ducts, stirring sparkling dust into the sunlight.

I could tell just by looking at Marley that she was worn out. It was hard not to immediately melt into a puddle of comfort when you got back home from a trip, and with how little she slept and the exertion of last night, I was sure she was feeling it even more.

I set our bags down and closed the door before finding her and resting my hand on the small of her back. “Why don’t you take a nap? I’ll take care of dinner later.”

“I should put a load of wash on and get the clean stuff unpacked,” Marley said.

“We can do all of that later. Go get some rest, baby,” I said.

Marley smiled gratefully my way. “If you’re sure. I do feel like a zombie.”

“I’m sure. You want to get tucked in?” I asked, kissing her temple.

“No, I can handle it. You and Noah should catch up,” she said. “See you in a little bit.”

As she headed to the bedroom, my attention turned to Noah, who was in the process of getting comfy on the couch, kicking his feet up. I smiled at him, treasuring his sweet youth. “Hey, buddy, how about some father-son bonding time?” I asked him. “Wanna hang out together tonight?”

Noah's eyes lit up, and he patted the spot next to him on the couch. "Yeah! Daddy, let's watch some cartoons. I wanna watch more *Adventure Hour*."

It didn't take long before he crawled onto my lap. I gathered him to my chest and grabbed the remote from the coffee table, turning on the television and scrolling through until I found his favorite show. I chose one of the newer episodes and settled in with him. The animated characters had us both laughing, and I cherished seeing Noah so happy and carefree. Somehow, this show had become a symbol of the two people I adored the most—Marley and Noah. Regardless of its simplicity and the strange humor in each episode, it was hard to do anything but love the show.

During a commercial break, Noah turned to me with a thoughtful expression. "Dad," he started hesitantly, "can I ask you something?"

"Of course, buddy," I replied, giving him my full attention.

Noah fidgeted with his fingers and fussed with a button on his shirt. He was clearly pondering his words carefully. "Well, you know how I call Marley Marley? And I call you Daddy?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Marley said I could call her Mama if I wanted to," he said. "But sometimes I feel kind of funny if I call her Mama. So I switch between calling her Marley and calling her Mama."

I listened carefully, understanding his uncertainty. "You feel funny? In what way, Noah?"

He shrugged, searching for the right words. "It's just different, I guess. Calling you Daddy feels natural, but calling Marley Mama feels like I'm not really supposed to. But I don't know why it feels that way, and I don't want Marley to get sad that I'm not calling her Mama after I asked her if I could."

I wrapped an arm around him, pulling him into a warm hug. "It makes perfect sense, buddy. New things can feel strange at first. When I first met Marley, it also felt a bit strange to me. But now, she's an important part of our lives,

and the more time we spend together, the easier it will feel to call her special words like that.”

“Really?” he asked, looking up at me even as the commercial break ended and the show resumed. “You don’t think it hurts Marley’s feelings?”

“Absolutely not,” I assured him, my voice soft and comforting. “It’s okay to feel unsure. But over time, you’ll find that it’ll become more natural. Marley loves you, just like I do, and she’ll be happy to hear you call her Mama whenever you’re ready again.”

A small smile appeared on Noah’s face, and I saw the relief in his eyes. “Okay. I still want Marley to be my mama, but I don’t really know what it’s like to have one, so I think I need to practice at it.”

“That’s all I ask, buddy,” I said, giving his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Just remember, we’re a family, and we all love each other very much. Doesn’t matter if we call each other by our names or something else. Family is about how we treat each other, not what we call each other.”

Noah nodded. “Like how I call my grandma and grampa Nanny and Gramps. Other kids don’t call their grandma and grampa those things.”

“Yep, just like that. Remember when you did the family tree at school? No two trees are exactly alike, but they’re all still beautiful trees, right?”

Noah nodded and leaned into me, focusing his attention back on the television. “Yeah,” he said. “We’re a different family, but we’re still family.”

As the cartoons continued to play, we snuggled together. I cherished the bond between us all, the growing connection between me and Marley and between Noah and Marley. In the comfort of our home, surrounded by love and support, I knew our family would only grow stronger and more united. And as Noah grew and adapted to new aspects of our life together, I was grateful for the opportunity to witness his growth and the depth of our connection as a family.

* * *

We allowed ourselves to recover for a couple of days. Then, we started making calls to set up a meeting with our friends and family to discuss how we'd go about forming our pack properly. After a lot of irritating finagling, thanks to Jack and Travis's grand idea to do Travis's first injection at the meeting, we got the dates to coincide with the doctor's availability. Once we got the date set, it was relatively straightforward.

On the day of the meeting, Lana and Marley went to pick up some catered food while Jack, Travis, and I set up the condo to host the rest of the group. Paulette, Ginger, Houston, Rosie, Farrah, and Sylvia would all be in attendance. Noah would be at my parents' place to keep him out of everyone's hair. My parents were supportive of me forming a pack, but they didn't want to be involved with the politics. After their sordid history with my grandfather and, well, everything else, I couldn't blame them.

After setting the table for our guests, I treated Jack and Travis to a bottle of craft beer from my fridge, cracking open the cold ones and divvying them up. We tapped the necks of the bottles together, and Travis took several greedy gulps. Jack and I both sipped at our beers, watching him with some concern. When Travis had finished half the bottle, he took it away from his mouth and grimaced.

"You good, dude?" I asked.

"Yeah," he wheezed. "Just really fucking nervous."

"I thought you were sure that this is what you wanted to do?"

"It is, absolutely, one hundred percent," he said with a sigh. "That doesn't mean I'm exactly looking forward to the miserable body aches, nausea, and fever I'm going to experience anywhere from one hour to three hours from the time of the first injection."

"Don't psyche yourself out, man," I said. "For all you know, you'll have a super-easy time of it."

“Prepare for the worst, hope for the best,” Travis said, his face paling. “Would rather assume it’s going to suck and be surprised than assume it’ll be easy and be surprised.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Just don’t get drunk. I don’t want your girlfriend to kick my ass.”

“Why would I want to kick your ass?” Lana said from outside.

The door opened, and Marley and Lana came inside. “Lana, what the hell are you talking about?” she asked.

“She heard me telling Travis not to get drunk because I’m afraid of his girlfriend,” I said.

“As you should be,” Lana said.

Marley shrugged as she set the bags of food down on the dining table. “Yeah, I wouldn’t want to be at the business end of her rage.”

“I have such smart friends,” Lana said proudly. “How many beers in are you?”

“Just the one,” I said. “A little something to take the edge off. He just, uh, was drinking it a little more enthusiastically than I was expecting.”

Lana walked over to Travis and wrapped her arms around his middle, stepping onto her toes to give him a kiss. “You sure you still want to do this?” she asked him as he let his hand drift to the small of her back.

He smiled and nodded. “Of course,” he said. “Just nervous. Not getting cold feet.”

Lana smiled up at him and kissed his cheek again before glaring at me. “You’re lucky it took us a while to get here with all the traffic downtown. When I smelled Marley, I was about to skin you alive.”

I shrugged. “I’m sorry. The next time I feel like making a decision that’s between me and my partner, I’ll be sure to run it by you,” I said caustically.

“Good,” Lana said.

“Marmalade, what is she talking about?” Jack asked.

“Nothing important,” Marley said, trying to sound casual about it.

“Oh, fuck off. I know when you’re lying,” Jack said.

“Could we just not right now, please?” Marley griped. “I’ve got enough going on today without having to worry about this conversation. We can talk about it later.”

“You might as well get it out of the way,” I said. “Every shifter coming over is going to smell it on you.”

“Then we’ll address it all at once,” Marley grumbled. “If I realized it was going to be such a big deal...actually, no, that’s not true. But I’d rather get all the embarrassment out of the way at once, thank you very much.”

Jack sent a sour look my way, and I gave yet another shrug. “What the lady says goes,” I said.

Evening was approaching, and one by one, our friends arrived at our condo for the much-awaited pack meeting. The excitement in the air was palpable, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of anticipation as each familiar face appeared at the door.

First to arrive was Houston, wearing his trademark confident smile and a nice but rumpled gray suit. “Hey, man, how’s it going?” he asked, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “Nice to see you for something other than a psychotic ex and a tortured artist.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said.

“Where’s your mate?” Houston asked.

“I’m making our takeout look like I cooked it!” she called from the kitchen.

“See? That’s a woman who knows how to do it,” Houston said, poking my chest.

“You bet,” I replied. “Thanks again for coming, man.”

As Houston settled in, Rosie walked in next, her arms filled with a tray of cupcakes, which I was admittedly

surprised to see from the owner of a shifter gym. “I couldn’t come empty-handed,” she said. “And I have really been craving cupcakes, so...”

“You won’t hear me complaining,” I said, taking the tray before she risked dropping it. I hugged her with my free arm. “Though, I think you can eat a cupcake whenever you want.”

“I totally can, but I sleep better when other people are eating them with me,” she said with a sheepish grin.

“We don’t want you to lose any sleep over cupcakes,” I said. Make yourself comfortable. We’re waiting for just a couple more folks.”

As more people gathered, the atmosphere in the condo became livelier with laughter and chatter. Over the next half hour or so, Sylvia, Farrah, and Travis’s medical team arrived—a doctor and two nurses to prepare and administer the first injections for Travis. The last two to arrive were my sister and Paulette...walking hand in hand.

“Well, hello,” I said to them when I opened the door.

“Hey!” Paulette said, taking her hand away from Ginger’s and wiping it on her jeans a little awkwardly.

Ginger reached out and took her hand again, smirking at Pauline with *that* look. The one I was sure I made at Marley all the time. Paulette smiled and flushed, pressing her lips together and looking flustered.

“You gonna move out of the way?” my sister asked, looking back at me. “Or are we supposed to use a special password?”

“Cute,” I said, stepping aside to let them walk in. “I mean, you are a bit fashionably late.”

“We were busy,” Ginger said, wagging her brows.

“Okay, that’s enough of that for a lifetime,” I said, shaking my head.

They passed me as they walked in, and Lana and I exchanged a knowing look. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of Ginger and Paulette together. They made such a

wonderful couple, and I loved that they looked so happy, even if my sister was entirely too liberal with her innuendo.

As everyone settled in, Lana and Marley brought out the food. We all gathered around the dining table.

Naturally, it was Paulette who addressed the elephant in the room as loudly as possible. “Oh. My. God. Marley?! Cole claimed you?!”

Marley cringed and looked around the room. The other shifters all looked away awkwardly. I knew they all smelled it, but they’d had the social grace not to say anything or scream it at the top of their lungs.

“Yes,” I said, speaking for Marley as I felt her shame and embarrassment rise at lightning speed. “I claimed Marley while we were away in Georgia. I know it’s old-fashioned, but we were enmeshed in a far different culture. The women in my grandfather’s pack were not being respectful of our relationship because I hadn’t claimed her. We’d like to leave it at that. The rest of the details are no one’s business but Marley’s and my own.”

Sylvia shrugged. “It’s old-fashioned, but it’s not like you bit her.”

“Yes, and, for obvious reasons, it’s a really fucking personal decision and an intimate experience,” I said. “Let’s show some respect for my mate and not bring it up again. It’s not something we did without discussing it extensively, and if we’re going to be running this thing as a pack, then I expect you guys to treat us with the same respect as you would any other alpha and his mate.”

“Cole’s playing big daddy now,” Houston said with a grin.

“Damn straight,” I said. “Now, can we sit down and enjoy some dinner?”

The command seemed to take root because no one else fussed or poked fun as we sat down. I took Marley’s hand under the table and squeezed it. She squeezed back and gave me a grateful smile before we finally started digging in.

It was a nice meal. We caught up on recent business, including Ginger and Paulette, who were apparently in a “situationship,” a word I’d never heard in my life. It sounded like something made up, which made me feel even older than I already did. From what I could gather, they were taking things slow, but I could tell Ginger liked Paulette. If only because Ginger never seemed to like anyone.

Houston was doing the same thing, and one of Sylvia’s sons had visited her from out of town. Rosie had finally opened the gym and was seeing pretty substantial success with it. Farrah was doing well with her security firm, as always.

Finally, as the conversation petered out, it was Rosie who started us on the real reason we’d gathered.

“So, Cole, tell us more about your plans for the pack,” she said, sounding adorably eager in her unique Rosie way. “I’m sure you learned a lot while you were away, and I’m really excited to hear how this pack will be organized.”

The chatter around the table shifted from casual to a more serious discussion about the structure of the pack. I took a deep breath, knowing that this information was crucial for our pack’s growth and harmony.

“All right, everyone,” I began. “I want to talk about the structure of our pack and how we can incorporate humans into leadership roles.”

Houston raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Non-shifters in leadership? That’s a new concept, as far as I know. Granted, I haven’t done a ton of research on it or anything, but it would be the first time I’ve heard of it.”

I nodded. “Yes, it’s a modern hybrid pack structure that allows us to have a more diverse and inclusive leadership team. Now, it’s not as if we’re going to put any random non-shifter off the street into leadership positions, the same way that no one in this room is a stranger. Anyone who takes a leadership role will need to show that they have the wellness and success of the pack in mind. No egos allowed. After seeing the leadership structure in Georgia, one thing became

extremely clear to me: no one in a leadership role was doing it because they had a complex or wanted power.

“First, we have the alpha,” I continued, gesturing to myself. “As the alpha, I am the dominant leader of the pack. My role is to protect and lead the pack. I’m told that over time, I’ll even start feeling a biological link to pack members and be able to sense when people are in danger, intuit where they are, things like that.”

“Really?” Marley interjected. “Like how you and I can do sometimes?”

“Exactly,” I replied with a smile. “Though, it will probably be a little less intense. More like a chessboard, or maybe a vital sign monitor. For you and me, things feel more like a walkie-talkie. More personal.” I looked over to Travis and nodded at him. “Travis will be the beta of our pack.”

“So, is the beta a human?” Ginger asked.

I shook my head. “Not for long,” I said. “Travis is getting his first injection for his shifter transition today since we’re all here. I would like us to support him and celebrate it, if you all don’t mind.”

“That’s so exciting, Trav!” Paulette squealed. “Is that why you’re not eating?”

“Thank you for pointing that out, Paulette,” Travis said dryly.

Lana leaned forward, curious. “What about the other leadership roles? I mean, everyone here is a shifter except for Marley and Jack. What roles are they going to fill?”

“Oh, I’m not here to be part of the pack,” Jack said. “I’m just here to film a docuseries showing the intricacies of life as a shifter.”

Marley looked up at me in silent question, and I realized I hadn’t really talked to her yet about what pack role she wanted to play. We’d spoken about the dormitories for ousted pack members from other territories, but not about what else she would be doing.

“As of right now, Marley will help me scout sites for a shifter dormitory and headquarters,” I said. “One thing I’ve realized is that a lot of shifters get displaced because of poor matches with their packs, some even because of abuse. Marley wanted to champion the effort to set them up for success if they come to join us.”

“Oh my god, Marley, I love that,” Rosie said sweetly. “You’ve come such a long way, even from when I met you a couple months ago. I’m so excited for you.”

Marley gave a sheepish little smile. “Thank you,” she said. “I want to find more ways to help, too. Maybe I could train humans on how to defend themselves against shifters. I learned a lot about that while Cole and I were away.”

“No shit? Good stuff?” Lana asked.

I nodded. “Good enough to throw me off a few times.”

Houston gave an impressed whistle. “Good job, kiddo. We know you have the skills to teach, so this’ll be a great role for you. And it will be nice for non-shifters to train with someone they feel safe around.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Marley said. “I was so lucky to have fallen in with Lana when I escaped my abuser, so I’m glad I can pay it forward.”

“God, you are disgustingly perfect sometimes,” Lana said, but her smile was warm and caring.

I leaned over to kiss the side of Marley’s head before looking around the table again.

“Next, we have the security commander,” I explained. “Their role is to manage pack security and logistics, ensuring the safety of all pack members.”

Farah nodded. “That makes sense. Safety should always be a priority.”

“I knew you’d think so, which is why I wanted you here,” I said. “Farah, I was hoping you would take up that role. You’re the one with the most knowledge of what would be needed, the safest methods, sourcing weapons and knowing

which ones are legal for us to have, and so on. I know you're busy running your company, but—"

Farrah smirked. "I'd be happy to do it. Honored, even. I'll start recruiting some people I trust—with your approval, Alpha."

My stomach dropped. It was the first time someone had actually called me by the title, at least in this capacity. People back in Georgia had done it to show respect to my grandfather, but to hear it in this context, to hear someone ask for my permission and guidance for the first time? It was almost surreal.

"That would be excellent," I said, swallowing hard. "Keep me in the loop, and let me know if you need anything."

"You better get used to that quickly, *Alpha*," Farrah teased with a wink. "You're going to have your hands full very soon. Sooner than you think."

I nodded, a little flip of nausea rolling through me.

Marley took my hand and kissed it. "It's going to be wonderful," she said with a smile. "Don't worry."

It was always easier to believe Marley than when I tried to say such words to myself. As ever, I was so grateful for her.

I continued, "Then, we have the political pack liaison. This role is responsible for leading and mediating concerns with law enforcement and government officials that directly concern the pack."

Houston sighed and raised a hand. "I'm guessing that's why I'm here."

"Only if you want to do it," I said.

"I guess I could do you the favor," Houston said, giving a dramatic, drawn-out sigh.

"Listen, Houston, if you don't want to do it, you don't have to."

"Cole, I want to do it, but you're messing with my whole charming, wry, aloof act. Let me pretend to be a burdened

man.”

“Of course, my mistake,” I said with a laugh. “Continue.”

“Eh, maybe later. I’m too overworked and underpaid,” he joked.

As I shook my head, Paulette raised her hand. “And what about other non-shifters? What roles would they get? I assume Marley isn’t covering everything.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that…” I said, rubbing my chin. “I actually wanted to ask you guys what you thought about having a civilian human liaison. Their role would be to lead and mediate concerns, initiatives, and other issues between the pack members and any humans who are not in a position of authority. They would help build positive relationships and understanding between the two groups in the pack. Maybe even help with education initiatives to reduce ignorance around shifters.”

“That would be incredible,” Marley said.

“Would you want to oversee it?” I asked her. “Be the one to select a person for the job and give them their duties?”

Marley smiled and nodded. “I would love to.”

“We have a lot of leadership roles,” Rosie observed. “How will we manage all of that?”

“That’s where the pack coordinator comes in,” I replied. “The pack coordinator is like an office manager. They deal with pack issues before they escalate up the chain of command, ensuring that everything runs smoothly and efficiently.”

“And let’s not forget the pack healer,” Travis added. “Their role is crucial for the well-being of our pack members, taking care of injuries and supporting their overall health.”

“Who’d take up those positions?” Paulette asked.

“Well, the pack healer is a tricky one because you have to have a calling to do it,” I said. “It’s not something you can exactly train someone in. It’s something you’re born with or come into over time, like being an alpha.”

“I...” Sylvia began.

The whole table looked at her, and Sylvia looked nervous for the first time I’d ever known her. She sucked air into her lips, then breathed out heavily.

“I’ve always had a penchant for healing work,” Sylvia finally said. “The art started showing up when I had my kids, but I never pursued it since I wasn’t really in a pack and shifters were still pretty deep in the clawset back then.”

“No kidding?” Travis asked.

Sylvia nodded. “There’s a reason my kids hardly missed any school growing up,” she said. “I’ve just always had a knack for making them feel better.”

“If you want to do it, you’re more than welcome to the position,” I said. “We’d be happy to have you do it.”

After Sylvia agreed, I said, “It’s settled, then.”

“What about the rest of us?” Rosie asked. “Do we get to do anything?”

“Rosie, I’m going to need help teaching self-defense, if you’re up for that?” Marley asked.

“That would be amazing! And Cole, I can help you scout for sites, too, if you want,” Rosie said.

“That would be great. The place you snapped up for Shift into Fitness is perfect,” I said.

“We’re going to have so much fun!” Rosie exclaimed.

“We’re sort of in a hurry-up-and-wait mode for now,” I said. “The big thing we need to do now is figure out how to go about recruitment. I’d originally thought of just making things casual, making it more like a club than a proper pack. But now that I’ve seen how well a pack works when it’s running smoothly, I’m almost certain it would be in everyone’s best interest for us to take it as seriously as we can. I don’t expect you all to come at this with the same level of dedication I have, but I’m telling you all now that I’m going all in.”

“So am I,” Marley said.

“Yeah, me too,” Travis said, taking a sip of his second beer of the night.

“No kidding,” Paulette said. “You’re becoming a whole-ass shifter, you’re so dedicated.”

Travis rubbed the back of his neck and smirked. “Damn right.”

I smiled at him before glancing at Marley. I didn’t know when it happened, but she had shrunken into herself a little bit. I reached between us and took her hand, rubbing my thumb over her knuckles.

“You okay?” I murmured.

She was about to speak when someone cleared their throat from the living room. It was the doctor.

“I don’t want to interrupt,” the aging man said, “but we have everything sanitized and ready for whenever Travis wants the injection.”

I looked at the doctor and then back at Marley again. She smiled a little tightly and nodded. “We’ll talk about it later,” she said quietly.

I nodded. “Well then. Travis, that means the rest of the evening goes by your tempo.”

Travis took a deep breath and downed the rest of his beer before growling lightly. “Fuck it,” he said. “Let’s rip the damn band-aid off, shall we?”

The doctor smiled and nodded, gesturing to one of the recliners in my living room, where a small intravenous drip had been set up. One of the two nurses was seated on a folding stool, ready to do her phlebotomy.

Travis pushed up from his seat and walked to sit in the recliner. We all surrounded him, offering words of encouragement and support. Jack requested a few moments to set up his film equipment. Travis and the medical team obliged him, though Travis was getting more and more frustrated the longer it took.

“Jack, just fucking film the thing on your fucking phone if you have to,” Travis barked. “If I don’t do this now, I’m never going to fucking do it.”

“Fine, I’ll just hold the camera, we’ll stabilize in post, and ___”

“No one fucking cares, Jack!” he growled.

“Easy, Trav,” I said, sitting on the couch next to him. “You’re going to be all right. You have me here, plus practically every other shifter you know, and a really great medical team. No one is going to let anything bad happen to you. Just breathe.”

Travis forced a breath in through his nostrils and gave a tense nod.

“There ya go. Keep going just like that,” I said.

“I’m going to be fine,” he repeated a little breathlessly. “Lana?”

“I’m here,” she said, taking a seat on the floor next to the recliner. Travis reached for her, and she took his hand, smiling up at him encouragingly.

I watched as the tension drained out of him, as if just looking at her face righted every wrong, took away every worry. I knew that feeling. Marley had the same effect on me.

Lana modeled some slow breathing for him, and Travis followed along with her. The nurse sat by patiently, waiting for her cue. The doctor did the same.

Finally, after a few more tense minutes, Travis took a steady breath and looked at the doctor. “Let’s do this.”

The doctor nodded, and the nurse got to work. She swabbed Travis’s skin with an alcohol wipe, gently palpated the fold of his arm, then placed the needle inside. Travis closed his eyes and let his head drop against the back of the chair. He took a deep breath, and I saw his grip tighten on Lana’s hand. I could feel the weight of the moment, the anticipation and nerves of everyone in the room. This was a crucial step for Travis.

The doctor approached with a reassuring smile. “Travis, are you ready?”

Travis’s voice was steady when he said, “Yeah, I’m ready.”

The nurse placed the IV cannula into Travis’s vein with unnerving ease, then withdrew the needle and fastened the tube to his arm with medical tape.

The doctor stepped up to Travis’s side. “I’m going to hook up the IV now on a very slow drip. It will take about an hour.”

“Got it, Doc.”

“You remember what we discussed as normal and abnormal for the experience?” the doctor asked.

“Yep,” Travis said. “Let’s fucking do it, man.”

The doctor carefully administered the serum, and we all watched Travis’s body closely. We held our breath, waiting for any sign of change. Minutes felt like hours, and the tension in the room was palpable. Travis kept his eyes closed as the serum started to work its way into his system.

Around the ten-minute mark, Travis grimaced and clenched his jaw. “Fuck, that burns like hell,” he muttered.

“That should only last about five minutes. It’s the lactic acid building up in your body as the cells start to change over.”

“Okay,” he wheezed. Then, after a couple of seconds, “No. No, nope. Doc, it isn’t stopping.”

The doctor opened his mouth to speak, but Marley beat him to it.

“Try to get your mind off it,” Marley said in a soothing tone. “Imagine a waterfall is flowing over you, cooling down all of that burning, all of that aching. Every time you breathe, imagine it cooling down more and more of that pain.”

Travis took a shaky breath and squeezed his eyes a little tighter. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

Marley nodded. “Your thoughts can act like an ice pack. Just keep breathing, feel the beat of your heart, listen to the sound of the air filling your lungs.”

Travis's breaths slowed, and the stiffness in his limbs seemed to ease.

"There you go," Marley said calmly. "Just stay in that calm place."

It seemed to work, much to our collective surprise. Even the medical team seemed taken aback.

We continued to keep a quiet vigil. I found myself watching the bag slowly empty, wishing each moment that it would go a little faster—not because I was impatient, but because I was worried about my friend. Travis wasn't complaining about the burning anymore, but a faint sheen of sweat glistened on his face. Lana kept squeezing his hand in gentle support, whispering sweet assurances.

Finally, after close to an hour, the IV bag was empty. The nurse pressed a tuft of cotton to Travis's arm as she removed the IV cannula and pressed some adhesive bandaging into the injection site. The doctor offered Travis a water bottle from the same cooler in which they'd transported the serum. He cracked it open, taking a long, greedy drink from it.

"Congratulations, Travis," he said. "You've just made it through your first dose of the shifter serum. Welcome to your first day as a shifter."

Travis smiled. "Thanks, Doc."

"How does it feel?" Lana asked.

"Fucking awful," he said through a laugh. "But it feels good, too."

"Your trials aren't done," the doctor said. "The next session will be next week. Between now and then, you'll feel like you have a terrible flu: aches, fever, chills. Stay hydrated and stay away from mind-altering substances. I overlooked the liquid courage today, but trust me, you're not going to want it to muddy anything else going forward. Alcohol doesn't mix well with the serum, and you need to be careful with the upcoming doses."

"You got it, Doc," Travis said.

“There won’t be a problem with the beers this time?” Lana asked the doctor.

“There shouldn’t be,” the doctor replied. “It has to do with how the alcohol and serum interact with the activated genes. Makes for a miserable time.” He gave Travis a pointed look. “You get a free pass this time, but don’t do it next time.”

Despite that Travis had said he felt like shit, he grinned brightly. He looked so happy to be doing this among the people he cared for most.

Relief washed over me to see his excitement. The injection was a success, and it marked the beginning of a new chapter in his life. One filled with newfound strength and control.

And yet, I picked up on an undercurrent of sadness in the atmosphere. Not from Travis—no, he looked downright euphoric as he leaned down to press a kiss to Lana’s lips. The sadness was emanating from my mate. My mate, who’d managed to talk Travis through that moment of panic to the surprise of everyone present. My mate, who was watching me celebrate the first session of my best friend’s transition when I was refusing her the chance to do the same. My mate, who was getting closer and closer to being the only human in the room when it came to the pack.

I placed my hand on her back, and she looked at me, diverting her gaze from the sweet scene before her. It was more of something she wasn’t experiencing: two partners rejoicing in the small steps they’d taken to being closer, to being more linked as partners on a biological level. The smile she gave me was forced.

“You all right?” I asked. “Feeling a little achy emotionally?”

“Just remembering something uncomfortable. I’ll be fine.”

“Wanna tell me?”

“Later. I don’t want to ruin the moment for them.”

I wanted to press, but she looked away from me to focus back on Travis and Lana. Jack moved closer to the couple with the camera.

Marley was right. Now wasn't the time to dig up her painful memories.

Still.

I hated the uncomfortable feeling that settled in my stomach. I hated feeling like a wall was going up between us.

I hated it.

Chapter 9

Marley

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding with excitement and nervousness as Sylvia and I made our way to the location we'd designated for recruitment. This was an important step for our pack, and I wanted to make a positive impression on potential new members.

A week had passed since Travis's first injection, and despite the doctor's warnings about the challenges ahead, Travis was having a pretty easy time of it so far. Lana had told me that he'd been tired the day after and had hurled up his breakfast and been an insufferable baby all day—Lana's words, not mine—but that had been the worst of it.

Selfish as it was, I hoped the smooth sailing Travis was experiencing might help Cole see the value of me potentially becoming a shifter. I'd done my best not to bring it up or start any arguments about it. I managed to blame my emotional discomfort on a half-truth—that the ache in my chest wasn't a pang of sad, pining envy, but from my experience with Wyatt's aborted bite.

It wasn't entirely false—that was how I'd been able to soothe Travis through his discomfort. I remembered that burn and how horrible it was to be facing a pain that only seemed to grow. A volunteer at the hospital had taught me that method to get through it. She was a short glimpse of a kind face in a sea of horrid memories—memories I hadn't even thought about since they happened.

But that wasn't the true source of that ache.

I was a victim of my own wanting.

As we walked, I floated through those feelings as if adrift on some strange, churning tide. My body moved alongside Sylvia's, but my mind was far away.

"Are you up for this?" Sylvia asked, her warm smile putting me at ease. "You're awfully quiet."

Her words snapped me back to myself. I hadn't realized I was being so transparent. "Oh, yeah. A little anxious, but I'm excited about talking to people about our pack and our goals. I'm happy to get to have a part in it. How do you feel about it?"

"It's surreal," Sylvia admitted. "In a lot of ways, Cole still feels like a kid to me. I think he'll always feel that way."

"I can only imagine," I said. "It must make it difficult to follow his rules."

"No, he's a good kid. If anything, I'll struggle to keep my opinions to myself when I see him going in a direction I don't necessarily agree with. Even though he's not my kid, in some weird way, it'll always feel like he is."

I nodded. "I'm sure he'll appreciate your wisdom."

"Well, we can only hope. Ah, here we are," she said as we rounded a corner.

We were recruiting at a fair that catered to shifters in the area. The event was a couple of towns over from New Middle Bluff and was expected to draw over a thousand people. Cole had arranged a booth for us where we could give out information about our pack and try to meet other prominent shifters from our area.

Sylvia was usually the face of the company for Cole—she was the most practiced at talking to people, especially when it came to official business. As for me? I was just trying to help in whatever way I could, which didn't feel like much these days.

The event was large and took place in the local convention center. Sylvia and I had spent the past couple of days putting

printed materials together and having signage made for our booth. Though a modest set-up, the booth looked welcoming enough. It felt almost strange to set up water bottles and snacks as if we were trying to recruit for a book club or a soccer league rather than a pack.

As we finished setting up and sat down behind our booth, Sylvia looked over at me. “Still nervous?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m starting to wonder if I’m the wrong person to be doing this. It will be pretty immediately obvious that I’m a human.”

“That’s part of why we want you here, though, isn’t it?” Sylvia calmly reminded me. “Our pack is not for shifters alone; it’s for humans, too. And you’re an important part of that.”

I pursed my lips. She was right in many ways, but I couldn’t help the feeling that I didn’t belong and would stick out like a sore thumb.

Sylvia patted my knee. “Marley, you belong here. You belong with us, in our pack. So, own your space. You deserve it, you really do. And believe me, after watching what Cole went through with Olivia, if I thought you weren’t acting in Cole’s best interest—in the pack’s best interest—I would say something. Even though you are a human, you’re well-integrated with us. You know that.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I relented. “You’re right. I’ll put my best face on. I’ll represent the human side of things.”

Sylvia smiled and checked the watch on the inside of her wrist. “Event’s about to start. Let’s put our best smiles on and talk to all these amazing people who may need a place to call home.”

I smiled and nodded, standing up to greet folks as they started trickling into the convention hall.

I put on my best face for the duration of the event. Just as Sylvia had said, I met a pretty mixed group of people throughout the day. I met entire families with unconventional structures, just like what we were doing with our pack. I met

one family with two shifter parents and a human daughter who were looking for a pack where they could live in the city, but also be sure that their child would be treated well. Telling them that I'd be in charge of making sure humans were well-integrated and trained to protect themselves against shifters—trained to hold their own—made me feel good.

I met a number of couples with mixed dynamics, just like Cole and myself.

I talked to humans who had plans to transition into shifters. I talked to shifters who'd been adopted as children and didn't learn they were shifters until later in life. I met shifters who'd lived in more traditional packs and had been jilted and hurt by traditional pack dynamics.

Sylvia and I met so many wonderful, interesting people. Although it was tiring and overwhelming to be among such a large group of people, it was also wonderful to see people who might become our friends—maybe even our family—over time.

The event was a major success. We left with close to two hundred phone numbers and email addresses to follow up with people. We would have our work cut out for us, that much was certain, but it was a workload we were both happy to take on to make sure our pack thrived.

When the event was over, Sylvia and I decided to get dinner together, both of us worn out from the day of socializing and the loud humming of the fluorescent lights. Sylvia suggested pho. It had been a long time since I'd had any good Vietnamese food, but this area had a large Vietnamese population with a ton of amazing restaurants to choose from.

There was something about eating food after a long and arduous day that made it all the more delicious. We got a couple of appetizers to share along with our soup. We were quiet for the first few minutes after getting our food, both of us ravenous and focused on enjoying our meal. But once we dulled the sharper edges of our hunger, we started to talk.

Mostly, Sylvia told me about her sons. How well they were doing, how proud she was of them. How much she missed them.

“You’ll get to know that feeling soon enough yourself. I know Noah seems like a little baby boy right now, but that time will zoom by in the blink of an eye, and you’ll be wondering where it went.” She bit into a pork spring roll.

“You think so?” I said. “It doesn’t feel right to call him my son.”

“Cole told me he’s started calling you Mama every now and then,” Silvia said. “Do you not want to be a maternal figure to him?”

“What? Of course I do! I love Noah, and I love filling that role in his life for him,” I said. “But I sometimes worry that I can’t really provide him what he needs as a mother figure. Not the same way that you or Valentina might be able to.”

“What do we have that you don’t have?” Sylvia asked.

I looked at her from across the table and bit the inside of my lip. I knew this might get me in trouble with Cole and lead to another argument. But I had been chewing on it for weeks now and needed input from someone who wasn’t Cole. Someone who wasn’t as invested in me remaining the way I was.

“Sylvia,” I began hesitantly, “I’ve been doing a lot of soul-searching lately, and there’s something I could really use some advice on.”

Her eyebrows shot up, but her eyes were filled with concern. “Tell me what’s on your mind, Marley.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately about what the future looks like for Cole, Noah, and me,” I confided, my voice barely above a whisper. “And every time I think about it, whenever I think about all the moving parts and all the complications involved, the obvious choice is for me to transition and become a shifter. Thing is, every time I try to talk about it with Cole, he either forbids it or changes the subject.”

“Forbids it?” Sylvia gaped at me. “He knows better than that. His mother *and* I have taught him better than that.”

“I don’t think he means it like that. When we’ve argued about it, he’s made valid points—that it would be more dangerous for me since I already have an aborted bite, for example. And he doesn’t want me to make a permanent change just because I’m trying to fit in—”

“Is that why you’re doing it, though? To fit in?”

I pushed my spoon around my bowl. “No...I don’t think so,” I said. “I know you guys don’t see me as any different from you. I know Cole and Lana and Paulette and all the rest of them would never make me feel inadequate or bad for not being a shifter. But while I was in Georgia with Cole and seeing the pack interact with each other and going on moonlight runs—hell, even watching Travis get his first injection—all I can think is that I want to feel that for myself.”

Sylvia nodded. “It’s a level of camaraderie that’s hard to find anywhere else. And a lot of it is biological in nature.”

I nodded, trying again not to feel sick with envy at the thought of it. I’d known for a long time that there would always be some kind of fundamental separation between me and everyone else, despite Cole’s promises that he would ensure the pack was inclusive.

“Right,” I said. “If I do it, I would want Cole to support me while I go through it. I look at Lana and Travis going through this whole ordeal. I want that for myself if I choose to transition.”

Sylvia listened attentively, her expression thoughtful and understanding. “Marley, it’s important to prioritize your own happiness and well-being,” she said gently. “If Cole truly loves you, he’ll support you in whatever decision you make. And that means being there for you when you make the transition.”

“What do I do if he refuses?” I asked.

Sylvia looked at me soberly. “Honey, you and I have both been with controlling partners. You know what you need to do if Cole ever gets himself into such a protective tizzy over you

that he refuses to let you be exactly what and who you want to be. What would you draw from that?”

I looked down at my soup, suddenly losing my appetite. “I don’t want to leave him.”

“I know, and for what it’s worth, I don’t think you’ll need to,” she said, reaching across the table to pat my hand. “Cole is a good boy. I know he’ll choose what’s right. But if he gets too trigger-happy in his role as your protector, you need to make sure that you protect yourself.”

I nodded. “You’re right. Just because I love him doesn’t mean I have to be swallowed up by him.”

“Exactly,” she said. “Don’t worry. I’m sure he’ll come around.”

Her words offered me a glimmer of hope, but the fear lingered in the back of my mind. I cared deeply for Cole, and I didn’t want to do anything that might strain our relationship to the point of ruining it. Especially with Noah involved. These choices no longer affected only Cole and me; they would affect Noah and any pack members close to us.

My phone rang, buzzing and skittering across the table. It was Cole. My heart skipped a beat as I answered the call.

“Hey, handsome,” I said, trying to master my voice and not let on that I had just been talking through stuff with Sylvia. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Marley,” Cole said, sounding frantic. “Travis had a bad reaction to his second injection. An ambulance is taking Trav to the hospital now. Lana’s with him. I’m on my way over there.”

My breath caught in my throat, and my body went cold and numb. Without another word, I bolted to my feet. “Oh. Oh, god, we’re on our way. Wait, we have to pay. Uh, um—”

I was starting to panic and couldn’t sort out what to do first. Sylvia plucked my phone from my hand and put it up to her ear.

“Which hospital?” she asked Cole as she pinched the phone between her ear and shoulder, fishing out her wallet from her purse and handing it to me. “Blue card,” she said to me.

I nodded, opening the wallet and grabbing the specified card. While Sylvia handled things with Cole, I paid for our meal. By the time I was done, Sylvia had already hung up.

“They’re going to the hospital back in New Middle Bluff,” she said. “We’ll take the toll roads so we can get there as quickly as possible.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Are you all right?”

“Just worried. Worried about Cole and Travis and Lana.”

Sylvia nodded. “He’ll be fine. They have protocols for this sort of thing,” she said. “Come on, let’s go.”

We rushed to the hospital, Sylvia driving with surprising speed and efficiency. The air in the car seemed to crackle with tension, and the one update Cole had texted me hadn’t eased any of it. As soon as Travis had made it to the hospital, they’d had to rush him into a trauma bay.

Driving eighty down the highway felt like moving at a snail’s pace. Even so, when we arrived at the hospital, Cole and Lana were in the lobby, waiting. Lana was pacing back and forth, her arms curled around her waist. Cole was seated, his elbows resting on his knees, his head hanging in quiet focus.

The sight of my best friend and my mate in distress tore at my heart. Cole looked so dejected, and Lana was terribly pale. When Lana turned toward the door and saw me, her face crumpled. She ran over to me, pulling me into a tight hug.

With her strength, the embrace was almost painful, but I tried to return the pressure as much as I could. “Hey,” I said softly.

“H-hey.” Her voice hitched. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’m totally freaking out.”

“I bet,” I said. “I’m sure he’s going to be okay. We just gotta stay strong and come up with our best witty quips for when he’s awake again.”

Sylvia approached us, and Lana let go of me to talk to her. I heard a hushed question about something regarding healing, but I was too focused on Cole to hear much of it. I went to sit down next to him. He looked at me and took my hand in his.

“How are you holding up?” I asked him in a hushed voice.

“Not great,” he said. “I wasn’t there when it happened. He wasn’t feeling great when he and Lana got back home from the second dose. He got a sky-high fever and started seizing. Then he had a couple of really nasty partial shifts. The doctors looked grave and couldn’t really give us a prognosis.”

“He’ll be okay,” I said. “I know he will.”

Time dragged on, each passing minute heavy with anticipation and anxiety. The waiting room felt like a vacuum of collective worry, the atmosphere thick with unspoken fears. Lana and Cole seemed to switch positions like a changing of the guard while Sylvia and I did our best to keep them calm. Cole’s agitated pacing had practically etched a trail into the linoleum floor, a physical manifestation of his restless thoughts. Beside me, Lana’s fingers tapped a nervous rhythm against the armrest, her gaze locked on the door through which the doctor would eventually emerge. Hopefully, sooner rather than later.

At long last, the door swung open, revealing the doctor’s solemn expression. My heart sank as I braced myself. The doctor’s voice was measured, his words tinged with gravity as he detailed Travis’s reaction to the serum. It hadn’t been an allergic response, which was good, but it was still a severe enough reaction that they would have to alter plans for future injections.

“In cases like this where the patient has an extensive network of shifter friends and family,” the doctor said, “we usually recommend administering the next dose after a nasty reaction in a comfortable space with those closest to the

subject. Shifters, much like wolves, fare better in packs than they do on their own.”

“We’re starting a pack,” Cole said, looking over at Lana. “I can get my crew at the beach house to put a rush on finishing up repairs. We can do the next injection there with all four of us present.”

“That would work very well,” the doctor said. “Even if Travis isn’t fully transitioned, he will start feeling the pull and bond of his pack members. The more support he gets, the better.”

Lana nodded in agreement. “It would be good,” she said. “And it will help me feel a little better about the next dose, too.”

Cole’s voice broke through the tension, his determination cutting through the gloom. “We’ll do that, then,” he declared, his gaze steady as it swept across each of us. “We won’t let this stop us. But how is Travis doing now? Is he stable?”

“Yes, stable and resting,” the doctor replied. “We were able to sedate him through most of the painful shifting, and his fever has broken. He’ll probably be asleep for a few more hours, but he’s out of the woods. It was touch and go there for a bit, but if none of you have eaten in a while, I suggest you take care of whatever needs you’ve been neglecting. He’ll be fine. We just ask for no more than three visitors at a time.”

“Lana, you and Syl go on back to be with Travis,” Cole said. “Marley, you want to come with me to pick up some food for everyone?”

“Yeah, definitely,” I said. “You going to be okay without me for a bit, Lana?”

“Yeah, just—come back, okay?” she pleaded. “I know I need to be strong for Travis, but I’m not feeling super strong right now.” Her voice trembled, and a tear slipped down her cheek.

I nodded. “I promise.”

Cole and I left, climbing into his car before making our way to a fast food place to get something cheap and easy for

everyone to eat. I hadn't eaten much at dinner, but I wasn't feeling too hungry with everything going on. I was worried about Travis, and Cole, and my best friend.

"So, sweetheart," Cole said as he pulled onto the main road. "Why don't you tell me how you and Sylvia fared at the event?"

He was doing his best to alter his tone, to make it light. I could tell he was trying to salvage both our moods, and I appreciated him for it.

"It went well," I said. "We got a couple hundred people who gave us their information. There were lots of people with similar situations as us, or people who are just tired of the traditional pack structure. I think you'll like a lot of the folks."

"Where were you guys when I called?"

"We were at dinner. Sylvia was giving me some advice."

"Yeah?" Cole asked. "About what?"

"Uh..." I hesitated.

He looked over at me, raising a single eyebrow. "Marley?"

"We just talked about the whole...you know, me potentially becoming a shifter thing. She was giving me another ear."

He shot me a sharp look, irritation flashing in his eyes. "Marley, this is really not the time," he snapped.

My heart sank, the sting of his words hitting me harder than I'd expected. I knew he was stressed, but he'd asked me about it; I hadn't brought it up. What was I supposed to do, lie?

"I wasn't trying to start a conversation about it," I retorted. "I was just sharing what we talked about because you asked."

But Cole's irritation only seemed to grow, and he let out a frustrated sigh. "Why would you even bring that up with her? Why would you even need to discuss that with her?"

His reaction fueled my frustration, and I squared my shoulders, meeting his gaze head-on. "Because it's been on my

mind, Cole,” I said. “Is there an embargo on who I’m allowed to confide in now? It’s not like I’m talking about doing this tomorrow.”

“You shouldn’t be thinking about it at all!” He narrowed his eyes, disbelief and anger flickering in his gaze before he looked back at the road. “Especially with what just happened with Travis. He’s not even fully out of the woods yet, and you’re over here talking about it like it’s the same thing as getting a tattoo.”

“I am not!” I took a deep breath, willing myself to stay calm despite the rising tension. “And yes, it is on my mind. Even after that,” I affirmed, my voice steady. “But I need your support, Cole. No matter what decision I make, I need to know you’re there for me.”

His frustration boiled over, and the bitter anger in his voice cut into me. “Support you? After everything we’ve been through? You still want to go through with something so risky? Marley, I told you it would be even more dangerous for you because you’ve already been bitten.”

I refused to back down. “I’m not asking for blind support. I’m asking for your understanding, your willingness to stand by me while I consider my options. I haven’t even been able to entertain the idea because you act so overbearing any time I bring it up.”

His anger seemed to waver, replaced by a mix of emotions I couldn’t quite place. He raked a hand through his hair and down his face. “I don’t know if I can give you that,” he confessed. “Marley, I can’t just sit and watch you careen closer and closer to your death. I can’t fucking do it.”

Hearing that he might never support me, that he might never let me become part of his family—not in a true way—broke my heart. Silence stretched between us as he pulled up to a red light. The only sounds in the car were our labored breaths and the rumble of the idling engine.

Cole’s shoulders sagged as if a weight had settled on him, and his lips turned down. “Marley, I can’t deal with this right now.”

I nodded, my throat tight. “We’ll put it aside for now,” I agreed. “Things are too crazy right now, anyway.”

We were silent for the rest of the trip to the drive-thru. Cole just ordered whatever. I think we both knew no one had much of an appetite right now. Either that, or Cole just didn’t want to talk to me anymore.

I felt uneasy, not only because he was so upset, but because I was now facing the genuine possibility that I might have to leave him for my own good if things kept going the way they were going.

I tried to put it out of my mind, tried not to worry. This was just an argument. We could get through it.

Right?

I had to believe that if I was going to keep my head and keep myself from freaking out.

When we finally made it back to the hospital, Sylvia told us she was going home. Cole offered her some food, his jaw a little tight. I could tell he was masking his frustration with her for hearing me out earlier. Strangely, a small part of me wished Cole would say something to Sylvia. Part of me wanted her to stand up for me, to tell him to stop being so rigid and stubborn. But she only accepted the food and gave me a hug before departing.

I would have to figure out how to navigate this situation without being swallowed up by what my partner wished for me.

After we got onto the elevator, Cole finally looked at me. “Marley,” he said.

“Hmm?” I asked, not meeting his gaze.

“I’m sorry for shouting at you,” he said. “I know it must frighten you when I’m like that.”

I bit my lower lip to keep my eyes from tearing up. “Yeah, it’s a pretty miserable place to be. I hate when you’re angry, especially when it’s because of me.”

“I know,” he said. “And Marley, I know forbidding you from doing something would be just as bad as forcing you to do something you didn’t want to do, but I can’t lose you. I can’t.”

“I can’t just sit by and be an accessory on your arm, Cole. I can’t...I can’t stand seeing everyone bond together while I stand over here by myself, barred from feeling like I’m part of things, all because I’m missing a vital component that everyone else gets to have.”

“Marley—”

“No, Cole. You’re going to need to make some hard decisions,” I said. “Because I’m finished with having to make them all by myself. I’m not yet decided on whether or not I’m going to become a shifter. There’s still a lot I have to consider. But if I decide that’s what’s right for me, then you need to be ready to support it. Or you risk losing me regardless of whether I make it through the transition.”

“That’s it?” Cole said. “Your answer to me begging you to not risk killing yourself is to give me an ultimatum?”

“Yes,” I said. “Because I am tired of being *alone*, Cole. I am tired of being alone and scared and weak. And if you are so attached to your anxiety and fear that you would condemn me to a life of those feelings, then maybe we really aren’t good for each other.”

The elevator door opened, and I glanced at Cole. His chest rose and fell with the intensity of his emotions. I could feel the little barbs of it within me, could feel how I was hurting him.

Could he feel how much he was hurting me, too?

“We need to put on a good face,” Cole said. “We don’t get to be just Marley and Cole anymore. We have to be pack leaders now.”

“After you,” I said, gesturing him forward, my words a little sharper than intended.

As the night stretched on, the hospital room became a cocoon of tension and subdued worry. Travis’s condition seemed to stabilize more, with his breathing becoming

steadier. It was a small but significant victory in the face of uncertainty. We took turns sitting beside his bed, a silent vigil punctuated by whispered conversations and the soft hum of medical equipment.

In an unspoken agreement, Cole and I kept our heated emotions in check. Our earlier argument seemed to lose some of its significance as we focused on our friends. Yet, beneath the surface, the subtle tension between us lingered, a reminder of the unresolved issues that still lay between us—the ache of the aggression and raised voices we hadn't apologized for yet. It would have to wait, though. Cole was right—we were serving as leaders, protectors, and supporters right now, and our argument wasn't going anywhere.

Lana slouched over Travis's bed, her head cushioned by her folded arms. Her breathing was steady, a sign that the sleep she'd so desperately needed had finally claimed her. On the other side of the room, Cole and I sat in silence, each lost in our own thoughts.

I sensed Cole looking at me, so I lifted my gaze to meet his own and gave him a questioning look. Cole's gaze softened, and he broke the silence. "Why don't you go back to Lana's place with her?" he suggested. "She needs some rest. I'll stay here with Travis and call when he wakes up."

Even when we were arguing, he was still so considerate. His suggestion made sense, and I knew Lana could use the company and support.

"Yeah," I agreed, despite how loath I was to leave him when we still had issues to hash out. "I could use some rest, too."

Carefully, I rose, my body stiff from hours of sitting. Cole mirrored my movement, his expression a mixture of weariness and what looked like reluctance to see me go. But maybe that was just wishful thinking. We exchanged a silent understanding, the unspoken acknowledgment that despite our differences, we were united in our care for Travis and Lana. United in our care for each other, even though that seemed to be the very thing pushing us apart at the moment.

I walked over to Lana's side and gently touched her shoulder to rouse her from her slumber. She blinked groggily, then focused on me.

"Hey," I whispered. "You need some rest. Let me take you home. Cole's going to stay here with Travis and call when he wakes up."

Lana nodded, her expression relaxing as she slowly sat up. "I wanted to be here when he woke up," she murmured, her voice heavy with exhaustion. "But I'm so tired."

I nodded. "It's been a long day. Let's get you home so you can be full of energy when he's awake."

"Can I get a ride with you? I rode here in the ambulance."

"Yeah, girl. I'll take you wherever you wanna go. Your place, my place, whatever you'd like."

Lana nodded and stood, gathering her things. I offered her a reassuring smile before turning to Cole. He was already settling back into his chair by Travis's bedside, his presence a steady anchor in the dimly lit room. Our eyes met once more, and I almost said something. Almost apologized or asked for forgiveness. But I bit my tongue.

With a final glance at Travis, I quietly left the room with Lana, the weight of the night's events following me into the hallway. As I walked alongside Lana, supporting her through her exhaustion, I couldn't help but hope that Travis's recovery would mark a turning point not only for him but for all of us. A chance to mend the fractures that had emerged in our pack and our relationships.

I could only hope that Cole would change his mind about the transitioning process. I wasn't ready to lose him, but I also wasn't ready to lose myself in another man's decisions and convictions. I was done following other people's rules. It was time for me to make my own decisions.

I still had a lot of soul-searching to do, but if I did choose to become a shifter and Cole couldn't support me in a decision that would change both our lives, then...then maybe he didn't deserve me.

And even though leaving him would be one of the hardest decisions I would make in my life, I would do it.

I would do it to protect myself.

I would do it to protect the identity I had worked so hard to build.

Chapter 10

Cole

I was relieved when Marley left with Lana, though I hated to admit it. I needed time and space to process the argument we'd had.

I knew I'd messed up and been wrong to go off on her like that, but her ultimatum had completely blindsided me. Where the hell had that come from? She told me she was prepared to leave me if I didn't support her decision.

It stung more than I wanted to admit. Not because I thought I should be able to stop her—I understood why she felt she needed to do this—but because it hit home how little control I really had over my fate and hers. No matter what I wanted or how hard I tried to influence things, everything ultimately came down to her choice.

Maybe it was good that I'd been reminded of that. Maybe I really was out of line. Maybe I was no better than Wyatt after all. It bothered me so much to think that way. I loved Marley. I appreciated everything about her. I praised her. I worshipped her and the ground she walked on. And now she was telling me that we might not work out if I didn't let her put her life at risk?

I looked at Travis, who was still dead asleep, propped up by many pillows, his pale brows knit together, his chest rising and falling. He could have died today. He could have died, and he didn't even have the history of an aborted bite to complicate things. Marley did.

She believed that her choices were her own and that she would die on her feet rather than live on her knees. I respected that about her. In fact, it was one of the many reasons I was so attracted to her. So why did her request feel like such a betrayal?

Because it was. Deep down, I feared losing her. Losing someone who made me vulnerable. Someone who made me question my own beliefs and push myself beyond my limits. Someone I loved more than anything in the world, save for my son.

What had she told me? That I risked losing her either way?

It was hard not to resent her for saying that to me. I wanted to yell and fight, to grab her by her shoulders and shake her and tell her that she didn't need to change. That she could stay exactly how she was and be accepted and celebrated in the pack.

Couldn't she understand how scared I was of losing her? I wanted to beg her to reconsider. All these impulses warred inside me until I was certain that if I spoke to her again, I would say something irreversible. Something neither of us could come back from.

"You look like someone shit in your cereal," a ragged voice said.

I jolted and looked at the bed, finding Travis awake and looking at me with heavy-lidded eyes. He gave me a smirk and lolled his head to the side in a groggy haze.

"Hey, man," he said.

"Trav."

He nodded, taking note of the tense silence between us. "So, what happened? Haven't seen you look like that since Olivia was still in the picture."

"Just a disagreement," I muttered. "It's not important. Let me get the doctor."

He shook his head. "Don't bother, I'm fine. Just fucking disoriented as hell. How long have I been out?"

I snorted, a small smile cracking through my bleak demeanor. “Most of the day. We got here around dinnertime. You just missed Lana. She waited by your bed from the minute we were allowed in.”

Travis grinned, rolling onto his side. “God, I love her,” he said. “Tell me, was she freaking the fuck out the whole time?”

“You seem entirely too excited about the idea that she was,” I teased.

“When you’re with a woman as strong and sharp as Lana, sometimes it’s nice to know that she would be crushed without you,” he said. “Call me terrible if you like, but I’m an insecure fucker who’s obsessed with his girlfriend.”

I deflated. “You and me both.”

Travis studied me for a moment. “Look, Cole, I don’t mean to pry, but...” he trailed off, hesitating.

“What is it, Trav?” I asked, suddenly on guard.

“You and Marley have been through a lot together. I don’t know what you guys got into it about, but it seems pretty intense. Maybe you should try to understand her better. Try to see things from her perspective.”

I looked away, rubbing my temples. “I’m trying, Travis. I swear I am. It’s just...she wants to become a shifter. She thinks it’s the only way to truly be with me. And I don’t agree.”

Travis nodded. “You can’t fault her for wanting to be true to herself, especially not when you love her. Not with how much she loves you.”

“No,” I agreed. “I suppose I can’t. But she’s already at risk because she’s been bitten before, and look at how your second dose turned out. Travis, how am I supposed to tell my mate ‘sure, go ahead, risk your life’ when everything in my biology makes it so I want to tear people apart who dare try and hurt her?”

We sat in companionable silence for a few moments. “Listen, Cole,” Travis began gently. “Have you asked her why

she wants to become a shifter?”

“I already know,” I said.

“Okay, but do you really know, or do you only know in that way you know things when you won’t let people get a word in edgewise because you think you know best?” Travis’s tone was wry and knowing.

“It’s complicated,” I replied, avoiding his eyes. “But then, most things involving me tend to be.”

The corners of Travis’s mouth twitched upward in a slight smile. “That’s right. And if anyone knows that, it’s definitely you. The two of you need to sit down and actually talk instead of you just assuming you’ve got everything figured out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t patronize me.”

“But it’s so fun to do,” he joked, then yawned. “Shit, all I’ve done is sleep, and I’m fucking exhausted. I guess I just don’t really understand what has you so worked up about this whole thing. When I told you I was going to transition, you didn’t even bat an eye.” He settled back against the pillows behind him. “You didn’t ask any questions or express any fear or uncertainty. You just said okay. So what’s the difference? Why are you so against Marley doing the same thing?”

Travis pressed on, arching an eyebrow at me. “If you love her enough to protect her with everything you have, then surely you must believe she’s capable of making her own decisions about her own body?”

My jaw clenched as I balled my hands into fists. “I do trust her,” I whispered. “It’s just...the dangers. The risks. What if something goes wrong? What if she dies?”

“Cole, you’ve never been one to live your life based on what may or may not happen,” Travis said. “Don’t start doing that now. I mean, what happened in the argument? If you’re such a mess over it, I take it that it didn’t go well.”

“She told me that she wasn’t sure if she wanted to transition, but if she does make the decision, she expects me to support her through it. And that if I don’t, she doesn’t know what we’re doing together. She gave me an ultimatum.” My

voice sounded distant, even to my own ears. “Basically, if I don’t support her, she doesn’t see the point of us being together.”

“Jesus Christ,” Travis muttered, his eyes wide. “I thought it was bad when I was dying earlier, but that takes the damn cake.”

I rubbed my temples as a headache started to bloom. “I don’t want to lose her. I love her, Travis. I can’t imagine my future without her in it. But it feels like every time I turn around, there’s another hurdle in our path. Another challenge to overcome.”

“Love isn’t easy, Cole,” Travis replied softly. “Sometimes it means sacrificing parts of yourself or accepting that the person you care about might not always make choices you agree with. That they might surprise you and shock you and push you to your breaking point.”

“We aren’t talking about a cross-country move or a burgeoning desire to become a professional dominatrix, Travis. This could fucking kill her. This could kill her, and she and you both seem to think that I should just be fine with that!”

“I’m not telling you to be fine with it,” Travis said. “I’m telling you to trust your partner and the decisions she makes for herself. Because let me tell you something, dude, sometimes it fucking sucks to be a human surrounded by shifters. It’s a really lonely fucking existence, and with me transitioning, Marley’s about to be the only human in our entire group of friends. Why wouldn’t she want to transition?”

“That’s a bullshit reason to want to transition,” I muttered.

“Oh, fuck you. Who made you the arbiter of transitioning? Be honest—is there any acceptable reason *not* for her to become a shifter?”

“No,” I admitted reluctantly. “There isn’t.”

“Then stop being so goddamned stubborn and talk to her,” Travis suggested. “Let her explain why this is so important to

her. Maybe then you'll finally understand where she's coming from."

"Fine," I muttered. "You're right. I'll talk to her. "

"Good," Travis said. "And actually listen to her and what she says. Don't go in ready to fight or argue—really fucking listen to her, man."

I nodded and sighed. "Yeah. All right. I will."

I studied him again. He looked so pale, and there were dark circles around his eyes. I tried to imagine how I would feel seeing Marley convulse and scream and bleed. Just thinking about it had bile rising up my throat.

I needed to think of something else, so I decided to get some insight instead. "You said it sucks to be a human among shifters. But why did it suck for you? We've never treated you any differently."

Travis shook his head. "Nope. Never. You guys were always good to me. Probably too good, considering." He chuckled. "But yeah, it still sucked being around everyone else who could shift and change and grow while I was stuck as a human. It made me feel like I was missing out and that no matter how hard I tried or how much I accomplished, I would always be inferior to you and Sylvia. To your parents. You know that protective urge you have for Marley? I have that urge for Lana, but I can't protect her as a human. If another shifter came after her, I could never do anything to protect her. All I could do was watch as she got torn to shreds. And that is fucking awful, man. I mean, shit, why do you think I get so cagey about you getting aggro?"

"I thought it was because you were frightened of me," I said.

"A little, sure," he said. "It's also because if you get in a fight, I'm so weak that I can't back you up like your best friend should. For a long time, I felt like an outsider. Even though you guys welcomed me with open arms, it still stung. It made me feel like less than them. Less than a shifter. And I hated that feeling."

I nodded. “You think Marley feels that way?”

“I can’t even speculate what Marley feels,” he said. “And the fact that you’re asking me tells me that you haven’t discussed this enough with her to make a fair judgment over why she wants to transition. If you don’t know, then you have no right to be pissed about anything because you haven’t even let her talk.”

With that, Travis closed his eyes, settled back onto his pillows, and let out a deep breath. I could see the exhaustion etched into every line of his face, and I knew he needed rest more than anything. But I couldn’t stop myself from probing further.

“Why do you think she wants to become a shifter?” I asked. “What is it about the lifestyle that appeals to her so much?”

Travis opened his eyes again, looking at me with a mixture of frustration and sadness. “Isn’t it obvious? Shifters are stronger, faster, smarter. They can take control of their lives and bodies in ways humans can’t. If you’re going to spend your life with someone who can shape-shift, it only makes sense to have the same abilities. Besides, who wouldn’t want to experience the thrill of becoming a wolf? Of running through the forest with your pack?”

I thought of the night in Georgia when I ran with the other shifters. I’d left Marley alone only to have a stranger make a pass at me while we were apart. What if the roles had been reversed? How would I have felt if Marley had run off in the forest and told me later that a man had tried to touch her naked body? How would I have felt if she’d simply told me not to worry about it because she’d put him in his place?

I felt so ashamed because I would never have been okay with that. The truth was that I’d been expecting Marley to operate in a way that relied on her implicit trust in me, and I hadn’t extended the same courtesy to her. Instead, I’d expected her to behave a certain way because that was what I wanted, not because that was who she was. Not because that was the type of woman she aspired to be. No, I’d expected her to stay

within the boundaries I'd set, to act in accordance with my desires rather than hers for my personal comfort. And while those desires were borne out of wanting to protect her, they'd made me act like an asshole. I'd never even given her the opportunity to talk things out with me.

God, I'd been such a selfish dick. I'd allowed myself to forget that she was her own person, capable of making her own decisions.

As these thoughts swirled around my head, I found myself growing angrier and angrier. Not at her, but at myself.

"Calm down, big guy," Travis muttered. "You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to beat yourself up. When you know better, you do better."

His words were enough to bring me out of my self-loathing spiral. I nodded. "Yeah, you're right," I said. "You're right."

"I'm always right," Travis said.

"And so very humble," I said with a grin. "I told Marley and Lana that I'd call when you woke up. Want me to do that?"

"Nah," Travis said, getting more comfortable in his bed. "I think I'm gonna pass out again. Why don't you just hang out with me till I conk out and head back home to get some rest yourself? Maybe have some makeup sex with Marley or whatever?"

"I don't think it's going to be that simple," I said. "But yeah, I think I'll hang out here with you for the rest of the night. It's probably a good idea to give Marley some space, and I've got meetings tomorrow to scout for a location for headquarters."

"Fair enough," Travis said. "Since you're staying, why don't you grab the nurse and see if she can pull some strings to get me a slice of that good ol' hospital meatloaf? I'm fucking starving."

"Your wish is my command," I said. "Just don't let this go to your head."

* * *

I only caught a few hours of sleep after arranging for a hospital meal to be brought to Travis. The lounge chair in the room pulled out into a bed, but it was about a foot and a half too short for me to sleep on comfortably.

Rehashing the fight with Marley wasn't doing me any favors, either.

I called Lana early in the morning, just after the sun came up, to tell her that Travis was awake and lucid. She said she'd be over soon with Marley. I made myself scarce before they arrived because I wasn't ready to see Marley. If I saw her, I'd want to have it out with her right there, and I still needed to process what exactly I wanted to say to her after my conversation with Travis. So I left the hospital, using the excuse of needing to scout a location for the pack headquarters and citing that I'd had to cut my search short the day before.

I drove aimlessly for hours, lost in thought. The memory of the argument with Marley replayed itself over and over again in my mind until it became a loop. Finally, I remembered what I was supposed to be doing.

I pulled over to the side of the road, taking out the piece of paper Sylvia had given me. There were three potential locations listed—an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town, an old military base further north, and an abandoned hotel that some mogul had started to build but never finished because he went bankrupt.

I gave a frustrated shake of my head. None of these options seemed ideal. The factory would likely be too much work to refurbish. The military base was decent, but might give a lousy impression; we didn't want to give anyone the idea that we were a militaristic pack. The hotel could work, but it was more than an hour's drive away from town. It was workable, just not ideal.

Still, I decided to start with the closest option—the factory. Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as I imagined.

As I drove toward the factory, my thoughts returned to my argument with Marley. The guilt over not being more understanding of her desires to transition sat like a heavy weight in my stomach. As much as I hated to admit it, Travis was right. My insistence that she remain human felt selfish and controlling. Surely, if she loved me enough to stand by me in spite of the danger involved, she deserved the chance to live the life she chose.

Even if that meant becoming a shifter.

When I finally reached the abandoned factory, my mood hadn't improved. The place was even worse than I expected—riddled with rats and filled with the stench of decay. No wonder nobody wanted to buy it.

Inside, the place looked like it had been abandoned for years. Rusty machinery lay strewn about, the floors were covered in broken glass and debris, and the air smelled of rot. The rust was so severe that we'd have to do a full-scale demo before we could break ground on anything.

This place wouldn't do. Not at all.

I scrubbed a hand over my beard. Okay, so the factory was a no-go. It couldn't hurt to check out the old military base.

The base was ugly and last used in the '60s, from what I could tell. Maybe for the Vietnam War. There was an eerie ambiance to the place. The med bay still had hospital beds and bed pans littered throughout. It was covered in graffiti that I couldn't decipher and trash that told me people had spent time squatting there.

I checked out the barracks, but they were too small for what we wanted to do with them. Once again, I was left with no real solutions.

This scouting mission was turning into a disaster. If I couldn't find a suitable location for our new headquarters, we might need to leave the city. Everything seemed to have issues, whether it was cost, accessibility, or simply the fact that it was located in the middle of nowhere.

Frustration bubbled up inside me, threatening to spill over, and I gripped the steering wheel in lieu of punching it. I was too agitated to calm down and missed Marley's cheerful exuberance. Despite a few exceptions, usually related to causing me problems or other people causing issues in our relationship, Marley was such an optimistic bright spot in my life. She made me feel more capable and helped me believe in the version of me she saw. If she was here, if things weren't so tense between us, she would have been telling me not to give up, to keep looking. She'd have reminded me that it would be worth the work.

But she wasn't here. I was alone, trying to figure out where to go from here. I couldn't help but feel like I was failing at everything and that nothing was working out the way it was supposed to. Like somehow, I had managed to screw everything up.

At least she was safe for now.

And yet, despite everything, the nagging fear that I was going to lose her refused to leave me alone.

The thought of living without her by my side—of facing a world without her smile, her laughter, her unwavering faith in me—was almost too much to bear. Every fiber of my being ached for her, yearned for her, and yet, I couldn't help but feel like I was pushing her away by being so protective of her.

What I needed to do was figure out if I could really support her if she decided to go through with transitioning. I knew I couldn't be half-hearted about it, that it would be difficult and scary and I'd have no way to escape my fear. I would have to face it head-on until she was out of the woods.

It was one thing to worry about losing someone you loved—everyone who had ever been in love had been there before. It was another thing entirely to actually feel like you were going to lose them. To feel like you were standing on the edge of a cliff, teetering back and forth, knowing that one wrong step would send you plummeting into darkness. That was how I felt whenever I thought about her getting those injections.

I wasn't going to feel right about this until I talked to Marley. We needed to work things out if I was going to be able to face the ever-more-likely reality of her risking her life to become a shifter.

I checked the clock on the dashboard, then decided to drive out to the hotel location Sylvia had given me. It would give me enough time to make sure Marley was ready to go when I went back to the hospital. I also hoped the mountain air would help me clear my head.

It took me a while to find the hotel, which was hidden behind a thick copse of trees that shielded it from view. Once I got closer, however, it was apparent why Sylvia had recommended it. It was a magnificent, sprawling Victorian mansion built on the edge of a lake. The water sparkled in the afternoon light, reflecting the autumn leaves falling from the surrounding trees.

I parked my truck and walked up to the front door. I'd assumed when Sylvia told me the site was an abandoned building project that it would look like a half-built building with missing sheetrock and unfinished framing. Instead, it was a large-scale renovation project.

There was no mistaking it—this place was something special. It had clearly been abandoned mid-construction—tools and materials were scattered everywhere, and it was evident that whoever had run the project had gone bankrupt before completing it. But even incomplete, it was a marvel.

The architecture was breathtaking. The exterior consisted of rich red brick with towering turrets and gabled rooflines. Inside, the lobby was grand, with sweeping staircases and ornate detailing that spoke of a wealthy patron who had commissioned the place over a century ago. As I explored, I discovered that the rooms were equally impressive—huge windows overlooked the lake, and hardwood floors creaked pleasingly underfoot. In many ways, it was perfect, and it had plenty of space for us to set up shop. The views alone were worth coming out all this way.

However, there was one major problem—the location. The mansion was magnificent, yes, but it was also miles away from the rest of the town. The logistics of using this place as headquarters would be a pain in the ass. It was more than an hour's drive out of New Middle Bluff.

Still, there was something undeniably special about the place, and Sylvia had been right when she'd said it was different. It had charm in spades. Though the journey would be long, it was hard to deny that it might be worth it. After all, if we could get past the practical concerns, this place could truly be a sanctuary for us. A home where the pack and all its people could build their lives together.

That thought made me pause. I'd been so focused on the argument and the money and the work associated with this whole thing that I'd forgotten about zooming out and looking at the big picture. What kind of life did I envision for myself and my mate? For my son? For the rest of the pack members I wanted to support? As much as I loved New Middle Bluff, I'd been stressed every moment since returning from our blissful time in Georgia.

Sure, this place was far from town, but it wasn't an impossible drive. It was an easy day trip when necessary, and a peaceful location for any people coming to us as refugees. It was the perfect place for people to get back on their feet. I wasn't trying to create the same thing my grandfather had. We wanted a facility for people when they needed it, but we wanted them to live their lives the way they wanted to. And with all of those things in mind...well, it would be the perfect place for us to create our home away from home.

As I stood and took it all in, trying to decide if the hotel was worth pursuing, I heard footsteps behind me. I turned around to see a familiar and unwelcome face. She was smiling that ever-present, saccharine beam that made her look so very approachable and friendly. The smile that had been present the first time we met on the beach.

Ms. Paulson.

“Are you following me?” I snapped. “What the hell do you want?”

“My, my, you’re testy today, Mr. Lucas,” she said gleefully. “No need to get grouchy.”

“I don’t take kindly to being stalked,” I said.

“Well, ain’t that a bit of pot and kettle?” she said with a giggle. “A wolf telling a human he doesn’t care to be stalked? Kind of ironic, don’t you think?” she continued, seemingly impervious to my anger. “Your kind is always lurking around, keeping tabs on things, seducing poor human girls, trying to influence our children with your inclusive schools. Now that the shoe is on the other foot, you don’t care for it?”

I clenched my jaw, fighting the urge to grab her by the throat and toss her aside like the annoying fly she was. Instead, I narrowed my eyes and shook my head dismissively. “You’re delusional,” I said. “All any shifter wants is to live their lives like anyone else. We have our own dreams and desires that have nothing to do with you or any other humans. Not all of us are diabolical and paranoid.”

“Not diabolical?” She giggled again. “Honey, we know you’re starting a pack! That you’ve been recruiting. That your best friend is becoming a shifter, and that you and that sweet girl you’ve brainwashed have been fighting about her becoming one, too. How do you plan on forcing her to do it, hm? Threatening her?”

I laughed bitterly. “You really have no idea what you’re talking about, do you? I don’t know who you have watching me, but they suck at their job. If you’re having someone eavesdrop on us, at least make sure they get it right.”

“You expect me to believe that you’re on the opposite end of that argument? That you’re refusing to let her do it? Come now, Mr. Lucas. I know I’m not the brightest bulb, but I’m not that naive.”

I sighed heavily, my patience wearing thin. “Look, Ms. Paulson,” I began, my voice low and dangerous, “If you must know, Marley wants to transition because she believes it will

keep her safe. She has seen too much violence at the hands of humans to ignore the potential benefits of being a shifter. And while part of me wants to protect her from harm, another part of me knows she is strong and capable and does not need me to tell her how to live her life.”

“It’s so convenient that you’re so accepting of something you claim to hate,” she remarked.

“Can we cut the shit?” I hissed. “If you know I’ve been setting up a pack, you’ve been following me for a while. If you’re approaching me now, I assume it’s because you have some message for me. Let’s get it over with.”

Her smile faltered a little, and I could have sworn I saw rage flash across her face. It was gone by the time I blinked again.

“I’ve come to warn you, but also give you an opportunity to divert the course you’re on,” she said. “You need to halt your efforts to create a pack, or you’ll wind up in a lot more hot water than you’re prepared to deal with.”

“Why should I listen to you?” I snapped. “Your organization discriminates against my kind and threatens to widen the split between those born as shifters and the non-shifters they care about and call friends. I don’t trust you.”

“Perhaps if you understood our intentions better, you wouldn’t harbor such animosity toward us,” she countered calmly. “Anti-shifter organizations aren’t solely filled with monsters; there are many individuals who simply seek peace between species and hope to establish boundaries without resorting to violence. Divided not only for our benefit, but also for yours.” Her tone shifted to one of condescension. “If you think about it, your kind isn’t exactly welcome among the human population anymore. Look at the news for the last ten to fifteen years. The violence, the danger—it’s all only made things worse. We all know your kind exists now, but it would be better if we all lived separate lives.”

“What makes you think we’ll buy into your bullshit?”

“Because if you don’t, the consequences will be dire,” she said cheerfully. “Your pack would never stand a chance against us. Our resources, our manpower, our connections—we far outnumber anything you could possibly put together. And the human population would surely side with us. Who would you turn to then? Don’t you see, Mr. Lucas?” She smiled again. “Cooperation is key here.”

I looked at her skeptically. “Just how far are you willing to go to uphold these so-called ‘boundaries?’”

“Mr. Lucas,” she said, a hint of respect coloring her tone, “there’s no reason to continue down this path you’re on. Join forces with our group, and we can ensure both sides are protected equally under our guidance. With your help, we can work in the best interest of both shifters and humans. We can work together to restore the natural order of things. All we have to do is get on the same page.”

I was starting to pick up on what she was getting at. She wasn’t interested in working together; she wanted me to work under her. She didn’t necessarily want me to stop building my pack; she wanted me to build a pack, but run that pack as her puppet.

What better way to convince shifters to stay in their place than to have another shifter telling them to stay there? She wanted me to betray my kind, to become a poster boy for well-behaved shifters smoothing things over with humans by allowing them to turn us into their glorified lap dogs.

I would have no part in it.

“No.” My tone brooked no argument. “If you want a dog to train, buy a puppy.”

Her laughter dripped with venomous spite. “You really are such a stubborn beast of a thing. It’s almost sad how much you’re going to regret saying no to this.”

“Tell it to someone who gives a shit,” I said. “And in the meantime, while you look for them? Stay the fuck away from me, my family, and my pack. I’m not interested in what you’re selling.”

The corners of her mouth tightened in displeasure. “Foolish boy,” she murmured. “Do you truly believe we can coexist alongside one another forever?”

“Let me make myself perfectly clear,” I replied, my gaze unflinching. “I will not collaborate with your cause nor allow myself to be used as a means to control my own kind. We may share similar goals, like wanting to maintain peace between our two groups. But your methods? They’re poisonous to everything we aim to achieve.”

Paulson’s expression turned vicious, her lips pulling back from her teeth in a feral grin. “Very well,” she said, turning her back to me and walking back out the way she came, her feet strangely quiet. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Her voice carried a menacing undertone. Despite my bravado, a chill ran down my spine. I realized just how much danger lay ahead, not only for my pack, but potentially for Marley and Travis, too. We were no match for Lanyon Clover, at least not when it came to numbers. It didn’t matter how strong a shifter was. If dozens of humans decided they had a problem with a single shifter, it wouldn’t be that hard for them to overpower that shifter.

It was becoming increasingly clear that we needed to double our efforts when it came to recruitment. We needed strength in numbers. I couldn’t guarantee our safety alone. My decision was firm and resolute, grounded in my love for Marley and Travis. In a world full of dangers and threats, forming a solid alliance with other shifters was essential for survival. Our only weapon against adversities was unity, and I refused to let fear prevent me from achieving that goal.

I’d intended on heading straight to Marley after visiting the hotel that was looking more and more like the place my pack would call their home away from home. But after this, I had a fire burning in my belly that I wasn’t ready to snuff out.

When I climbed back in my truck, I didn’t turn back toward New Middle Bluff but went deeper into the lakeside town.

It was time to make more allies. My personal life would have to wait.

Chapter II

Marley

Cole was avoiding me.

I tried to rationalize it by telling myself that he was just busy—we both were. Most of my time was spent helping Lana and Travis, and helping Sylvia recruit people for our pack. Cole was focused on getting the beach house finished so Travis could get the third dose of the serum in a safe, comfortable place that was familiar to him. Because of all that, Cole and I hadn't had a chance to talk things out yet.

It wasn't as if we hadn't spoken to each other at all. We caught up in the evenings while we had dinner and took care of Noah, and we chatted for a few minutes before we crashed out of exhaustion. But it never seemed like the right time for me to bring up what we'd argued about. It never felt safe to do it. With everything going on, I didn't want to risk making him so angry again. It had been hard enough to get to our tenuous peace without me bringing that up.

Everything felt precariously balanced lately, like it could tip over with barely a touch. As the days wore on, it became harder and harder to suppress the niggling feeling that something bad was waiting just around the corner. But as long as I kept moving forward, kept doing what needed to be done, maybe everything would work itself out. Maybe things weren't as dire as they felt sometimes. Maybe it was just my anxiety playing tricks on me.

Travis's next injection was the next day, and I was marveling at how fast time had passed as I drove to Lana's place. When I got there, Lana was already waiting outside. She

waved, smiling at me as she slipped into the passenger seat of my car.

“It’s nice to see you smiling today,” I said as she buckled in.

“Girl, I just got some of the best sex of my life,” she said. “Don’t let it fool you, though. I’m still a nervous wreck about tomorrow.”

“Ew,” I said.

“Oh no, you don’t,” she said pointedly. “I have to smell your man all over you all the time. You should be happy for me!”

“I am extraordinarily happy for you,” I said. “I just don’t like to think about Travis having sex.”

“Well, maybe you should. Because he’s only getting better at it with every single injection,” she said proudly. “And that is how I am trying not to implode with anxiety and dread about tomorrow.”

I laughed softly. “That sounds tough, Lana. Travis still seems excited, though. He keeps cracking jokes about it.”

She nodded and shook her head at the same time. “Trust me, I know excitement when I feel it. He’s just as anxious as I am. The only person who was more of a wreck than me over the complications with the last dose was, well, him.”

“He’s a lucky guy to have you there to support him.”

Lana gave me a grateful smile. “I’m lucky, too,” she said. “You have been so helpful this last couple of weeks. I appreciate you being here for me during this whole process. It reminds me that no matter what happens tomorrow, good people will stick around and support each other. Support Travis and me.”

“Good people always stick around. And after you literally saved me last year, this is the least I can do for you, Lana.” I gave her a small smile. “We’re both lucky to have met each other and become friends.”

As we pulled away from her home, I glanced at her. “What’s on the to-do list for today?”

“Mostly just getting things to be comfortable tomorrow,” she answered. “I had Travis’s blankets professionally washed so we won’t mess up your sheets. And you mentioned needing some items now that the house has been put back into sorts, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. We should probably do a big grocery run, too. There’s nothing in the house right now. Honestly, we should probably just buy whatever tickles our fancy. I know Cole got the furniture delivery covered a couple of days ago, but everything in the house smells like soot and mildew. So, I should probably just...restock everything.”

“Can you afford all that?” Lana asked.

“Cole kinda just gave me carte blanche. A while ago, I said I wanted to decorate our condo, and now whenever a choice like that needs to be made, he leaves it to me. It’s actually kind of nice.”

“Are you guys better now? I know you said you needed to have some big talk with him.”

“I haven’t had the talk with him yet,” I admitted. “We’ve been too busy.”

“What exactly was it that you needed to talk about, anyway?”

“Well...uh,” I said as I pulled up to a stoplight. “I haven’t talked to you about this whole thing yet, but I have been considering making the transition into becoming a shifter.”

“Really? Because of Travis?”

“No, not necessarily. It’s something I’ve been considering for a long time,” I admitted. “Since the whole thing happened with Curt on the beach. But Cole doesn’t want me to do it. He says it’s too risky.”

“Yeah? I mean, I guess he isn’t wrong,” she allowed. “But do you want to become a shifter? Is that what you want for yourself and your life?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I admitted. “But it’s hard to think clearly about it when even talking about it upsets him. Some of our arguments have gotten really heated and...I don’t know. After Wyatt, I just want to be with someone who respects my autonomy. Who will support me in something because it’s important to me, even if it causes him worry.”

“Hmm,” Lana said, propping her chin on her hand as she gazed at the road ahead.

“Hmm?” I repeated. “Kind of a non-committal response from you.”

“Huh? Oh, no, I’m just kind of distracted, that’s all. Where are you taking us?”

“Oh, there’s a new department store in the area where Syl and I went to recruit people. I thought we’d go there. Is that fine?”

“Fuck, yeah! Day trip, let’s do it.”

We drove on the highway, listening to music and chit-chatting. The conversation turned to safer topics, like restaurants we wanted to try and gossip about Ginger and Paulette. We reached the mall in no time, or at least it felt that way with our carefree conversation making things nice and light. We parked and hopped out of the car before grinning at each other conspiratorially.

The mall exterior unfolded before us, a sprawling expanse of modern architecture against the sky. The department store’s entrance was a seamless blend of glass and steel, a reflective façade that mirrored the changing hues of the day. A wide expanse of sleek, tinted windows beckoned shoppers, their transparency offering a glimpse of the bustling activity within. Tall, pristine pillars that seemed to touch the sky flanked the entrance. Above, the mall’s name was displayed in bold, sophisticated lettering, a promise of the myriad possibilities that awaited within. The meticulously landscaped flowerbeds on either side of the entrance provided a burst of color against the backdrop of concrete and glass.

Inside, the mall hummed with an energy that mirrored our own excitement. Shoppers bustled past, drawn by sales displays and tantalizing offers. The air swelled with laughter and conversation as families browsed the racks, children in tow. An atmosphere of camaraderie permeated the space, with strangers united in the pursuit of retail therapy.

I hadn't been shopping in a long time, not for anything aside from the absolute necessities for work or some kind of souvenir for someone on a trip. After passing several sections, we eventually arrived at the department dedicated to bedding and bath linens.

Countless rows of crisp sheets, plush duvets, and luxurious pillows surrounded us. Fragrant candles infused the air with scents of lavender and sandalwood, creating an ambiance of relaxation and indulgence. Our fingers drifted over velvet throws, softening with each stroke along the silken fabric.

"We need to find bed linens for Noah before I get too distracted," I said with a laugh.

"Let's start with the comforters, then move on to the sheets," Lana suggested.

"That sounds good to me," I agreed.

Together, we began looking through different styles of comforters. Well, it was more like we looked at the various children's comforters. Noah had a dinosaur one that he loved, but I thought it would be fun to give him a new set, especially since we'd be helping him get re-acclimated to living at the big house.

"What about these ones?" Lana asked, holding up a bed set that had everything we needed. It was a set of *Adventure Hour* sheets and blankets, complete with a double-sided comforter. One side featured a large print of the main cast of characters, and the other had a tiled pattern of different kinds of imagery related to the show.

I gasped and grabbed it from her. "Oh my god, it's perfect. He's going to love it!" I squealed. Then, after looking at it a

little more, I said, “Man, I kind of want one of these for myself.”

“Ha! You could use a bit of whimsy in your life!” Lana teased.

“True,” I conceded with a small smile. “But seriously, wouldn’t this make Noah’s room look absolutely adorable?”

“It totally would,” Lana agreed. “Plus, it would make you the mom of the year. I can only imagine he’ll brag to all the kids at school about them.”

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I think these are the winners.”

Our journey continued down the row of various bed sheets. We searched for the most comfortable options available. As we sampled each type, we discussed thread count, durability, and potential allergies.

“So...” Lana said. “I don’t mean to pry, but...when Cole and Noah move back into the beach house, are you going with them?”

“Yeah, I think so. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, it’s just that the way you were talking in the car. It sounded like you were getting ready to dump Cole.”

“I’m really hoping it doesn’t come to that,” I said. “But you know, I’m trying not to lose myself in another man the same way I did with Wyatt. I don’t want to get bossed around and told what I can and can’t do, even if it’s for my supposed benefit. Like I said, I’m not even sure I’m going to transition, but it’s the principle that Cole wants to forbid me from something that’s bothering me.”

“That’s fair,” she said, but she said it with a sort of airiness that implied she had a caveat to add.

“That’s fair...but?” I prompted.

“Marley, I don’t side with any man who tries to boss you around or tries to act like your keeper, let me make that super clear,” she said. “But I gotta tell you, watching Travis go through all of this has been one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” She lowered her voice. “He’s putting himself through

hell just to be stronger for me, for his friends. And every step of the way, I feel guilty that he's putting his body through this, knowing how much pain he's gone through already. When he started seizing the other day, when his brain was swelling and his fever was raging...I realized I might lose him because of this thing I supported him in doing. And I was beside myself."

I was quiet for a moment. "Don't you think he'll be able to protect himself even better, though? Once this is all over?"

"Yes, and that's what keeps me going and smiling, but—and if you ever tell him I said this, I will kick your adorable little ass—I regret encouraging him to do it. I didn't research what it would be like; I was just excited to have him share this biology with me. I was excited to go on runs with him and snuggle up in our wolf forms. But if I'd realized it could kill him, I wouldn't have done it. For the first time, I've had to face the reality that he could actually die because of this, and...I can't lose him."

I'd never seen Lana look so conflicted, so scared. She'd always struck me as incredibly confident, almost arrogant at times. Frankly, it was something about her that I deeply admired. But now, seeing her vulnerability made me realize how strong she was inside.

"There's nothing easy about watching someone you care about suffer like that," I said. "I'm so sorry if I seemed flippant about it."

"No, I didn't think you were being flippant. It's just...fuck, Marley, I'm terrified," she said, biting her thumbnail. "I haven't been able to sleep. I put on my best face to crack jokes with Travis, but I just finally met a perfect partner after years of shitty alpha bros who couldn't keep up. And now that I might have to lose him—" Lana swallowed hard and looked up at the ceiling, biting her trembling lip. "Fuck," she said in a whisper. "This is so embarrassing." Lana's voice quivered slightly, betraying her deep anxiety. There was a crack in her normally confident demeanor.

"You shouldn't worry about losing him yet," I comforted. "Travis looks pretty resilient to me, considering everything

he's going through. Just remember that right now, he needs you more than ever. Keep showing up and being strong for him."

"He does," Lana agreed, calming somewhat. "And he's helped me through some rough times. Like when I wasn't there to protect you, and all the bullshit at the school and dealing with our asinine superintendent—"

I was surprised to hear everything she was going through. A lot of them, I realized, I should have been able to glean. But I had been so absorbed in my own chaotic life that I had hardly shown up for Lana.

Putting down the bedding on a nearby shelf, I pulled her into a tight embrace. "Lana, I'm so sorry," I said. "I've been a horrible friend to you."

"What? No, you haven't."

"I haven't been checking on you. Not at all."

"Marley, you almost died like a month ago, and before that, you were being stalked. It's not something you have to worry about." Lana huffed but hugged me all the same. "Marley, you're sweet. This wasn't my way of trying to be back-handed about you. I'm just venting."

"I know it wasn't, but I want you to know that I do care, even if I fail to show it sometimes," I said.

"Girl, you've been so helpful to me through this whole process," Lana said. "Believe me when I say that I know you've got my back whenever I need it. Hell, even this hug is a godsend."

I chuckled. "Thank you for saying that. I'm happy I'm here for you."

"You always are," Lana replied with a slight grin. "Now, enough of this sappy stuff. Let's focus on picking out those sheets."

I followed her lead and dropped the sappy stuff. "Wanna help me pick the ones for the guest room?"

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” she responded. “Especially since that’s where I’ll likely be sleeping tomorrow. Gotta sleep in style.”

“I would expect nothing less from you,” I teased.

Lana and I strolled through the aisles of the home goods section, grazing the fabric of various curtains as we talked about the pros and cons of each one. After careful consideration, we settled on blackout curtains—a sleek gray option with cozy, velvety lining for the guest room, and a pretty turquoise one to increase the beachy vibes in my and Cole’s bedroom.

In the bath section, stacks of fluffy towels in varying shades beckoned us. We chose a mix of teals that matched the bedspreads and crisp whites. Imagining them neatly folded in the bathroom reminded me that we still needed a few other things for those rooms. We added some new cookware and throw pillows for good measure before heading back into the main area of the mall.

We spent some much-needed time together just enjoying a bit of shopping. In some ways, it felt like we were getting away with something, but we’d also needed the break and the space to vent about everything going on. I bought a couple of new outfits after making sure Cole would be all right with the extra spending. Luckily, he seemed pleased about me getting something for myself.

Lana opening up about her own struggles had helped us talk and vent freely about the things that were bothering us. I’d gotten an opportunity to really hear her out about her own stressors. It was so nice to be there for a friend who had done so much for me.

“You mentioned the superintendent,” I said. “Has there been a lot going on with that?”

“The Lanyon Clover people got their grimy little hands on him,” she said. “He’s been slowly trying to dismantle Polar Shift from the inside out. He’s started hiring these aides and teachers that are making my day-to-day a fucking nightmare. Every time we try to organize something for the kids, they

kick up a fuss. The parents are wondering why the kids are so separate. Bullying has been a problem. It's just—it's a fucking nightmare.”

“What can we do to help?” I asked.

“Get everyone you can to the polls when I fucking run for superintendent this winter,” she muttered.

“Hold on, what?” I said. “You're running for superintendent?! Of course I'll vote for you. I'll campaign for you, for fuck's sake!”

“Did Marley Cage just drop an F-bomb?”

“You're damn right I did!” I exclaimed. “Lana, that's a huge deal! I didn't even know we were having an election so soon.”

“Well, that's not exactly set in stone yet,” she admitted. “I'm going to petition for a recall vote. But I'm fired up after you were let go and watching this wedge get driven into our school despite all my best efforts to teach these kids to be kind to each other.”

“I think you'd do an incredible job as superintendent,” I gushed. “I'm so excited for you. When you have that petition ready, let me know 'cause I'll sign it. I'm sure Cole will as well.”

“Absolutely. You'll be the first person I'll bring it to,” Lana said with a wink.

After finishing our mall trip, we decided it was a good time to head back to New Middle Bluff and get some lunch. We wound up getting some amazing sushi from a place that had opened downtown, but the meal was a bit soured by the presence of the protesters. There were even more than when we got back from Georgia.

“I kind of wish we'd gotten our food to go,” I told Lana. “Seeing these protesters really makes me feel stressed about what things are coming to.”

“I wouldn't worry about it too much,” Lana said as she popped a tuna roll into her mouth. “I've been doing more

research into Lanyon Clover. You know why we only just found out about them?”

“No, why?”

“Because they’re mostly coming from some backwater town in rural Florida. They look through all the shifter-related news online, pick a place to set their sacred mission in, and cause problems until they either get run out of town or succeed in whatever bullshit they’re attempting.”

“How often do they succeed?”

“Not often enough for us to be worried about it,” Lana said. “These people are basically protesting tourists. People with way too much fucking time on their hands.”

“Gross,” I said. “I hope you’re right about them.”

Lana sipped her drink, her eyes fixed on the protestors outside. “The world can change quickly, and we’ve witnessed that firsthand recently.”

“True,” I agreed. “But sometimes it feels like there’s no escape from all the stress and uncertainty.”

Lana placed her hand on mine in reassurance. “Just try to take it one day at a time, Marley. You may not be able to control everything happening around you, but you sure as hell can control how you react to it.”

Her words brought a faint smile to my lips. “Thanks, Lana. Honestly, hanging out with you always makes me feel better about whatever’s stressing me out.”

She returned the smile and squeezed my hand. “Anytime. And trust me, this isn’t just about this situation. Whenever you need support, I’m there. Always. You know that, don’t you?”

“I certainly do,” I said, returning her reassuring gaze. “Which is why I value our friendship so much.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, girl,” she teased.

When we left, we avoided the protestors as much as we could and hopped back into the car to head to the grocery store. I was grateful we weren’t hungry, because even with our

sated appetites, Lana and I went a little overboard getting snacks. We gave ourselves the excuse of needing comfort food for the next day, but I found myself a little nervous about how much we'd bought after I dropped Lana off at home.

My nerves got worse as I drove to the beach house. It would be the first time I'd be home to see Cole with enough time before bed to have a real conversation with him. And I would be starting that interaction by bringing home a car full of stuff I spent a bunch of his money on.

My heart was thundering as I pulled in under the new carport and got out of the car, popping the trunk to unload everything.

Cole appeared in the doorway, concern marring his handsome face. "Baby, you doing all right?" he asked.

"Wh-what? Yeah! Why?" I cringed at how jumpy I sounded.

Cole walked over to me and looked into the trunk, letting out a low whistle. "You brought the whole store home with you," he teased.

Heat crept into my face. I'd overdone it. I should have stopped or slowed things down. I should have—

I felt Cole's hand on my arm and looked up at him. His brows were furrowed, his eyes gently concerned. "Marley, sweetheart, I can hear your heart jackhammering away. I can feel that you're upset, so what's that all about? Did something happen with Lana?"

"No," I said. "Did I buy too much? I was worried you were going to be angry."

"I mean, you bought a lot, but it mostly looks like food. We have two shifters in the house and a guest coming over, so it's not like it's going to go to waste. As for the other stuff... unless you brought home some fancy-schmancy vase, I'm sure it's fine."

"But...I think I spent close to a thousand dollars today," I whispered.

Cole shook his head. “Marley, baby, I don’t mean to make you feel weird, but I’m just wondering where this stress is coming from. I’ve never gotten upset with you for spending, and I certainly wouldn’t after I asked you to do it for me as a favor.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, realizing that was true. Hell, I wasn’t sure why I was so worried and stressed out, either. “I don’t know,” I finally said.

Cole cupped my face with his hand, brushing his thumb over my cheekbone. “Tell you what, you think about it for a while. I’ll get these groceries put away, and you can get your little treasures situated in the house. Noah is staying with my parents tonight and tomorrow to keep him out of the way for Travis and Lana, so when we’re all done, you can show me our new house and we can talk about what you figured out.”

I forced myself to take in a deep, slow breath before nodding. “That sounds good.” I managed a small smile as relief coursed through me. Cole wasn’t angry. “If you need any help putting things away, let me know, okay?”

“I appreciate it,” he said. He kissed me lightly on the forehead before disappearing inside.

I took a moment to gather my courage, reminding myself of Lana’s advice earlier. Taking a deep breath, I carried my purchases into the house and began unpacking everything. I put the new bed linens in the bedrooms, folded the new towels, and put out our new toothbrush holders. After folding my new clothes, I put them away in the new dresser Cole had gotten for our bedroom. Now, instead of just having a couple of drawers for my things, I had an entire half of the wardrobe, which felt strangely validating. He still wanted me to take up space in this home. A home that was more and more starting to feel like it was mine as much as his and Noah’s.

I put away the new cookware last. Cole had really gone all out with our new kitchen and living room, with their updated, quiet-close drawers and cabinets, lazy Susans, pull-out racks for implements, and so on. The color scheme remained largely the same, but everything was more polished.

When I was done, I looked over at Cole. He was staring thoughtfully out the window, watching the tide come in as the sky turned a pretty shade of marigold and magenta with the coming evening.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I asked.

He turned to me and smiled, stretching his arm toward me. I moved toward him, and he enveloped me in an easy embrace. “I missed this view more than I realized,” he said, swaying me softly. “It feels nice to be home finally.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s beautiful out here. It’s so nice to be near the shoreline again. I missed the sounds of the ocean,” I admitted. “Far preferable to the sound of cars late at night or our neighbors at the condo.”

“Yeah, it’s almost eerily quiet now,” he said. “I was missing you before you came back home.”

I smiled and snuggled into him. I knew we needed to address the elephant in the room, to talk about the fight, but I was even more loath to do it now that Cole was at ease for the first time in what felt like forever.

“So, did you think about it? That anxiety?” he asked.

Damn. Spoke too soon.

“I did, yeah,” I said. “But I don’t want to ruin the good mood. We can talk about it later.”

“I think we’ve swept enough under the rug for now, don’t you?” His tone was soft and his expression was kind, but guilt coiled like a snake in my stomach. “Tell me what’s on your mind, baby. It’s a rare opportunity that we get to focus on *us* for a while.”

I pressed my lips together and fussed with a button on his shirt. “I don’t want you to get mad at me again,” I said quietly. “I think that’s why I keep avoiding talking to you about everything, and why I got weird when I came home with all that stuff.”

Cole frowned as he considered that. “Are you saying that you’re scared of disappointing me financially after what

happened before?”

I sighed and shrugged helplessly. “Partially, yes. But also, I think there’s part of me that maybe expects you to resent me or grow tired of supporting me, especially given everything else that’s going on right now. Between Travis’s transformation, Noah, all the work you’ve been taking on, and the...the whole me becoming a shifter thing.”

Cole’s voice was gentle when he replied, “Marley, sweetheart, remember who you are talking to. You know that I worship the ground you walk on. A thousand bucks? Babe, that’s a drop in the bucket right now compared to everything we had to do to the house. Hell, we even have some money left from the insurance settlement. It’s no big deal.”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh, feeling a little better after hearing that there was money left. I fussed a little more with his button. “Cole,” I began softly, “I’m sorry about the fight we had.”

His face softened. “I’m sorry, too,” he replied sincerely. “I never want to fight with you, Marley. And I’m sorry for shouting and being so stubborn. I’m sorry for scaring you and reminding you of Wyatt. I hate that I got so upset. But when you gave me that ultimatum, I was so terrified. It felt like I would lose you either way.”

“It’s okay,” I said, wrapping my arms tight around him. “I understand now why you reacted the way you did. It’s because you care about me.”

“And I hope you believe me when I say that I will never, ever try to control you or tell you what to do, just like I hope you believe me when I say that I am fully committed to helping you feel like you belong among all of us in the pack. Part of why I’m so against the idea is because I don’t want you feeling like it’s something you have to do to belong.”

“That is part of the reason, but you know it’s not the only one, Cole. I mean, I’ve been trying to talk to you about all the reasons, but you’re so quick to change the subject when I bring it up that it’s been kind of hard to get a word in.”

Cole grimaced. “Yeah,” he acknowledged. “I know I’ve been a bit of an ass, to be sure. But you already know why I’m against it.”

“I do,” I said. “But Cole, I might decide to do this, and I need to know that you’re going to be with me every step of the way, just like you’ve been with Travis so far. If I can’t rely on my mate to support me in the things that are important to me, I’ll have to start asking what I’m doing here, you know?”

He nodded, looking appropriately contrite, his brows low and his lips dipped down at the corners. “That’s fair. You deserve my support. Even if it’s something I disagree with, I will still support you. Because it’s your decision, and I love you. I just ask that you try to understand where I’m coming from, too, babe.”

“I do,” I said. “And I promise I’ll try to communicate better, too. We’re a team, Cole, remember?”

He reached down and held my hand. “Yes, baby. We’re a team,” he agreed. “So...does that mean you’ve made your choice then? About transitioning?”

“No,” I admitted. “Not yet. I still have a lot to think about before I make that leap. But it’ll be a lot easier to decide what I really want if I know I can trust you to support it.”

All the tension in Cole’s body seemed to dissipate at that, and I tried not to let that reaction bother me as I leaned into him. What mattered here was that he was willing to try, not that he did things perfectly right from the beginning. And I needed to do my best to meet him halfway, too. If he was going to be working on being supportive, I needed to work on being more resilient when he was uncertain. I needed to work on having enough confidence to make up for the shortcomings when it came to his support.

“I’ve really been missing you lately,” I said softly.

“I’ve missed you, too,” he said. “This stalemate has been really fucking brutal for me. I’ve had to do everything I could to stay busy so I didn’t drive myself crazy with it.”

“Me too,” I said with a little laugh.

Cole reached out, brushing his knuckles over my cheek. “I love you,” he said, his eyes filled with warmth. “And I’ll always support you, Marley. Even if you’re scaring the shit out of me. You might just need to give me some time to adjust.”

His words touched my heart, and I felt a swell of appreciation for him. In that moment, the love we had for each other overshadowed our differences once again, something I’d been missing terribly in our interactions. It felt like a return to normal, and I was so grateful for it. Cole was my best friend, and being at odds with him made me feel all out of sorts in the worst ways.

“So,” I said, “tell me what you’ve been up to while you’ve been avoiding me.”

“Oh, with pleasure,” he replied with a smile. “But let’s crack open some champagne to celebrate being back home, shall we?”

I laughed and nodded. “I could use a little buzz, anyway. I’m kind of nervous about tomorrow.”

Cole told me about everything he’d been up to—finding the abandoned hotel project up by the lake, running into Ms. Paulson while he was there, applying for the federal grant to start building the infrastructure for our pack. When we were fully caught up and about halfway done with our glasses of bubbly, I pulled my knees onto the new couch and propped my head on my hand.

“So, we’re going to move out of town?” I asked. “I thought you wanted to keep things central to New Middle Bluff.”

“I do,” he said. “But the only available places that are big enough are too much of a mess to buy up and start fixing. Some of them are fucking health hazards, even.” He rubbed his chin the way he always did when he was deep in thought. “It’s a commutable distance. We could drive back and forth every day, but I’ve gotten more and more stressed out about how things are becoming here in New Middle Bluff. This is supposed to be one of the most shifter-friendly cities in the United States. If we can’t trust our sense of safety here, maybe

it is better that we have a compound like my grandfather's. At least eventually."

"Honestly, I felt safer there than I do here—even as a human," I confessed. "It may be better."

"I just hate that it feels like I'm giving up," he said quietly. "I grew up here, Marley."

"I know, but we can always come back. We don't have to sell your property or anything. It may be a good opportunity for you to start making some passive income—through renting and stuff."

"My little businesswoman," he teased, brushing some hair away from my face. "My little sunbeam full of great ideas."

Laughing, I took a sip of my champagne. "Now you're just flattering me."

"Am not," he insisted. "I mean it. You always come up with clever ideas. That's a big part of why I want you working with me on putting the pack together."

"In that case, I think we should do it."

"Do what?"

"I think we should get the unfinished hotel. You said yourself that the bones are good, the land is pretty, and we'd have plenty of room to house those seeking refuge. The lake will lend itself well to training and exercise and helping shifters blow off steam, and its remote nature will make it feel more healing and comfortable for people who are recovering from abusive packs." I paused for a moment. "Plus, you know, it will be something we can truly do together. I won't feel so much like a leech on your hospitality if I can help with things."

His brow creased in dismay. "You helped with the condo."

"And I loved it a lot, but I can tell you're not as comfortable there," I said. "I can tell you missed this house. Maybe the lake house will feel more comfortable for all of us and feel like a home we're making together."

He smiled and placed his hand on my bent leg, tugging me closer to him. “Is that what you’d like? To feel like we’re building a home together?”

I smiled, feeling my face start to warm from the champagne and the slight flustered feeling that came along any time he manhandled me, even with such a brief and innocuous touch. “Yeah,” I said. “I want...I mean, this probably sounds stupid, but I really like feeling like...like we’re married. Like I’m your wife.”

He smiled and cupped my face in his hand again. “I love feeling like you’re my wife,” he said, his voice like honey. “I love coming home to you every day, and I love how you take care of Noah, and I love how much you’ve started to feel like my family.”

I smiled and closed the distance between us to kiss him. It was a slow, lingering kiss that telegraphed a blissful night together. I had missed entangling my body with his. I’d missed feeling him inside me.

“I love you,” I said, brushing my nose against his.

A low hum rumbled inside his chest. “Can we talk more about this later? The only thing I can think about right now is how much I want to make love to you.”

I smiled against his lips and nodded. “Funny, I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Well then, let’s not waste any more time.”

He took my champagne glass out of my hand and set it on the coffee table. Slowly, he climbed to hover over me on the couch.

He didn’t bother carrying me to the bedroom. We were done waiting.

* * *

“Christ, this place fucking reeks of you two,” Travis griped when we entered the house the next evening. He covered his

nose, and Lana smirked. “How do you guys even handle this elevated sense of smell? I walked by a dumpster and almost vomited, and now I feel like I’m a teenager again and just opened Cole’s secret stash of spunk socks in his dresser.”

“Could we maybe not talk about that in front of my mate?” Cole asked.

“Masturbation is normal, dude,” Travis said.

“Hoarding jizz-covered socks is not,” Lana pointed out.

“I wasn’t hoarding them, I was hiding them,” Cole said, cringing as he caught my eye. “Seriously, can we change the subject?”

“So, your senses are heightening?” I asked Travis, trying to help. I wasn’t particularly bothered by the line of conversation. After all, I had an older brother and my own gross anecdotes from when he started puberty. “That’s pretty exciting.”

“It’s super weird, is what it is. There are all of these foods I used to love to eat, but I can’t stand them now,” Travis said.

“He’s tried to throw away about half the food in my apartment, telling me it’s gone bad,” Lana said with a little chuckle. “He’s been horrified to find out what food actually smells like.”

“Really?” I asked. “Like what?”

“Like meat,” he said. “Dude, raw beef smells absolutely fucking disgusting.”

“I told you to stop buying those frozen steaks at the market,” Cole chided. “It’s way better to buy it fresh or get the grass-fed stuff.”

“Yeah, I know you have,” Travis said, sounding a little exasperated. “I just also thought that you were being a snobby prick.”

I laughed and shook my head. Cole’s fridge was always well-stocked, so I’d never given much thought to where he got his food, but it was fascinating to hear about this side to

something as mundane as groceries. It was something I'd never really thought about.

"He's trying to distract himself from his nerves about the third injection," Lana explained.

"Which was working pretty well before you brought it up," Travis grumbled. "But seriously, guys, if you're going to fuck, can you keep it to the bedroom? This is technically my place of work."

"Oh, we used the bedroom," Cole said with a grin. "And the living room. And the bathroom. And the—"

"If you say guest room, I'm going to piss in your fucking cereal," Travis said.

"Actually, I was going to say the pantry," Cole said.

"He's kidding," I said, giving Cole a pointed look.

"So, you guys didn't christen the entire house? Good," Travis said, sounding relieved.

My face flamed. "Uh, well..."

"She means that I was joking about the pantry," Cole said, grinning.

"Oh, fucking Christ," Travis groaned as he stomped down the hall. "I'm getting the bleach."

I gave Cole a pleading look, and he kissed my forehead. "Don't worry, baby," he said. "He's fucking with us. He's fine."

"I'm not fine!" Travis called from the hall.

"Serves you right for the party up in the mountains after prom," Cole called back.

There was a brief silence from the hallway. "Can we maybe not talk about that in front of my girlfriend?" Travis asked.

We all laughed. It felt wonderful to laugh even when we were all feeling stressed and uncertain about the results of today's injection. We very rarely got to be just two couples

hanging out together, two sets of best friends spending a night together.

Once Travis got over the fact that Cole and I occasionally had sex with each other, we settled in to make dinner. Lana had been dying to learn how to make fresh pasta, so I passed on the recipe and method I'd learned from Valentina while Travis micromanaged Cole in cooking up a few steaks.

By the time we were finished eating and cleaning everything up, Travis's medical team arrived at the house and administered the third dose of shifter serum. As always, it was quite anticlimactic. Once the IV was placed, we made small talk while we waited for the serum to enter his bloodstream fully, and then the doctor gave us care instructions before heading on his way along with the rest of his team.

We decided to watch a movie to pass the time and distract Travis from any psychosomatic sensations that might result from his anxiety. It worked, or so it seemed, until the effects of the medication started to set in. Travis started to complain about the heat and then about feeling achy, so we got him set up in the guest bedroom. Cole and I focused on supporting Lana with whatever she needed for Travis—cool compresses, water, anti-inflammatories.

The night was long, and there were a few touch-and-go moments, but Travis finally fell asleep when his fever broke and his chills stopped. Cole looked exhausted when I looked up at him, and I reached out a hand for him from where I sat with Lana. He walked over to me and put his hand in mine. I brought it up to my lips and kissed his knuckles.

“Why don't you get some sleep?” I said to him. “I can tell you're tired. Lana and I can keep things going from here.”

Cole nodded and pressed his lips to the top of my head. “Thanks,” he said. “If something starts going wrong, just give me a holler.”

I nodded. “Good night.”

Lana and I watched Cole leave. Once he was gone, Lana leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder. “I'm glad

you're here for this one," she said. "I know I play boss bitch all the time, but I really think I would have been a mess without you here."

I let my head rest on hers. "I'm glad to help. Hell, I figure it's the least I can do after everything you've done to help me."

"You know I don't think that way," Lana said. "I'm just happy you're thriving. I'm happy I got to help with that."

"I'm happy, too," I said. "I mean, all things considered, as bad as it has been sometimes and with all the stress, it's still a vast improvement to my quality of life. Even with the stalking and everything that happened with Wyatt, I'm so much happier now than I ever was with him."

"Yeah," Lana said. "I can't tell if that's a testament to how strong you are or how fucked up your life was up to this point."

"Maybe a little of both," I said.

"You and Cole seemed a little less tense today," she commented.

"We had a talk last night, hashed some things out," I said. "We're both feeling a lot better about things now that we aren't avoiding each other. We're still sort of at an impasse until I make my decision, but he promised to do his best to be supportive either way."

"Have you decided?" Lana asked. "I mean, what do you think about all of the shit that's gone down with this?" She gestured to Travis.

"It's scary, of course," I said. "A lot of good things are scary at first. But no, I haven't made my decision yet. There's a lot I want to take into account."

Lana nodded, still looking at Travis. "I really don't want you to be hurt, Marley. I want you to live for a long fucking time because I can't imagine my life without your friendship in it. And even though I wish I would have taken Travis's transition more seriously, even though I regret a bit that I went along with it so willingly, I still want you to be whoever you want to be. Even if that might put you at risk."

“Really?” I asked.

Lana nodded. “You can’t live your life to make other people comfortable. You have to live your life as you see fit, you know? Because no one is more of an expert on you than you. And you’re the only one answering for your decisions at the end of the day.”

I nodded. “I don’t want to build resentment doing something because someone is telling me what’s best for me. I don’t think Cole could ever be like Wyatt, but that doesn’t mean I have to accept being told what is and isn’t okay for me to do.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “How did he take it when you told him that?”

“At first, not great. But he seemed to be on board when we spoke about it.”

“Good,” she said. “I like you guys together, and I really didn’t want to have to get on the dump-your-boyfriend train.”

“Yeah, I would hate to be on that train, too,” I said.

“Travis is stable now, so you ought to go get some sleep, too, Marley,” Lana said. “It’s late, and I want to see if I can get some sleep myself at this point.”

“Okay,” I said. “Just come knock on the door if you need us. The room is soundproofed, so we may not hear you if you shout.”

“Of course it’s soundproofed, you dirty birds,” Lana teased, pinching my side.

I yelped as I got back up to my feet. “Well, it’s either that or subjecting poor Noah to childhood trauma,” I said as I reached the door. “Good night, Lana.”

“Good night,” she said with a smile. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I walked down the hallway and carefully opened the bedroom door, slipping in and closing the door as quietly as possible so as to not wake Cole.

“I’m not asleep,” he said from the bed, making me jump.

“You’re not?” I asked, turning around.

“Couldn’t,” he said with a sigh before rubbing his face. “Been thinking too much.”

“About what?”

I peeled off my clothes as I walked over to the bed, shimmying out of my pants and pulling off my shirt. I thought about getting myself some pajamas, but decided against it. Now that I was about to get into bed, I was vividly aware of just how exhausted I was.

I sat on the edge of the bed and reached behind me to unhook my bra. Just as I was about to catch the strap, Cole grasped it with a single hand and undid the clasp.

“Let me,” he said.

I nodded gratefully, allowing him to slide the straps off my shoulders. As I did, I looked back at him and saw his gaze move appreciatively over my body. My skin tingled with the soft undulation of sleepy arousal.

“Thank you,” I murmured, lying down.

Cole scooted closer to me, pulling me into his strong arms and squeezing me close. My lips twitched, and I was pleased to be back in his arms and not feel so uncomfortable. Pleased we were back on good terms.

“So, what have you been thinking about?” I asked again.

“You,” he said, kissing the space behind my ear.

“About me transitioning?” I asked. “If you’re worrying about it, don’t. I told you I haven’t made my decision yet.”

“No,” he said. “I’m not worrying.”

He kissed the hollow of my neck, right where it met my jaw. A soft breath escaped me, and I blinked slowly as another wave of tingles moved through me, this time accompanied by a familiar heat building in my stomach. “Then, if you’re not worrying...”

One of his hands drew a slow, torturous path up the outside of my thigh before he curled the seam of my underwear around his finger, pulling the garment taut so it pressed into the curve of my backside.

“I’ve missed you,” he said. “I’ve missed touching you, smelling you, tasting you. I can’t stop thinking about it, can’t stop thinking about how much I want to ruin you.” His voice was rough with desire against my ear. “To devour you, to bite into your flesh, to taste every part of you.” His fingers traced a slow line up my waist, stopping right below my breasts.

A thrilling tremor ran through me, and I arched into his touch. I felt the heavy swell of his cock, not yet a full erection, but a sign that his arousal was building, too.

“Is that what you want?” I asked, my voice trembling. “I was sure you wouldn’t want to do that while Travis and Lana were here.”

“The room is soundproofed,” he said against my neck.

“That’s true,” I said with a needy whimper.

I felt his lips curve against the slope of my shoulder.

“What’s so funny?” I asked with a soft gust of laughter.

“You’re adorably transparent when you’re turned on,” he said.

I giggled breathily, feeling myself flush in embarrassment and excitement. “Shut up. You’re one to talk.”

“True,” he agreed, his cock now fully erect and pressing against my backside. I could feel the swollen head pressing into the small of my back, his length pushing firmly against my ass cheeks.

I rolled onto my side to face him. His eyes were hooded and almost drowsy, his clean hair messy in a way I desperately loved. He cupped my breasts and gave them a generous knead.

“Marley,” he growled. “You have no idea how much I love these. How much I think about your body. How good you feel in my hands.”

He lowered his mouth to mine. He was demanding and quick, not like the usual slow build of tension. His lips were insistent and aggressive, forcing mine apart to sweep his tongue into my mouth to tangle with mine. I moaned into his mouth, returning his hunger and meeting him in a wild dance.

My body pressed against his with an urgency that matched his own. Our hands roamed freely over each other's bodies, mapping and exploring like we were experiencing each other for the first time again. In some ways, it felt like we were making love for the first time after being at odds for so long.

Cole trailed his lips to my neck, nibbling on my sensitive skin. I shifted closer to him, seeking more friction, wanting him to take everything from me. His hands slid over my curves, grazing my sides, tracing the lines of my legs.

His touch was delicate yet possessive, a careful caress that spoke volumes about his yearning for me. His fingers found their way beneath my panties, stroking that most delicate and sensitive of skin at the apex of my thighs. They brushed against my entrance, checking for that silken wetness before sliding two fingers in deep.

I gasped, my back arching as he moved with a merciless pace. He adjusted us, moving me onto my back to get a better angle. He set to work, thrusting his fingers in and out, each time brushing the tips of them against my most sensitive spot and coaxing me to higher pleasure.

The sensation was incredible. Cole knew exactly what I needed; his touch was masterful, skillful, and attentive. At that moment, nothing else mattered except the exquisite intensity of our connection.

Our passion built upon itself, growing hotter and more intense.

I felt his fingers flex inside me, stretching me to accommodate his size and drawing a soft whimper from my throat. The air was thick with sexual tension, his every touch setting my blood ablaze. He was the flame, and I was the fuel. Each stroke of his fingers sent pleasure coursing through my veins, leaving me weak and pliant.

Suddenly, he withdrew his fingers, causing me to let out a low groan of disappointment. He smirked at my reaction, knowing just how much he was torturing me. I could feel his enjoyment and amusement through our bond.

He grinned mischievously. “Something wrong?”

“You’re cruel,” I said.

“Only when I know it will be fun for you, sweetheart.”

My heart raced with excitement and trepidation. I hadn’t expected him to ask for something so soon. I knew we had only started to make up after our fight, but I could tell this was important to him. A way for him to show me how much he cared for me. If I agreed, it would mean something special between us.

“Okay,” I whispered hesitantly.

His smile grew wider. “All right then,” he said, his voice dark and sexy. “I’ve teased you. I think it’s only fair that you tease me back, don’t you?”

I couldn’t tell if he meant fair for me or fair for him. Maybe it was both.

A shiver ran down my spine. “I’m not sure,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I could tease you, but I feel like you always have more fun when I worship you.”

“Worship me?” he asked. “When have I ever asked you to worship me, baby? I’m not so vain.”

“What else would you call me dropping down to my knees?” I asked.

His brows shot up, and he inhaled tightly through his nose. “So much for not teasing me,” he said roughly. “Where should I set up your altar?”

I bit my lower lip and rolled to the edge of the bed before sliding off it to kneel on the plush carpet just a few feet away. He sat back on the bed, looking at me with dark intention.

“Turn around,” he said, his voice quiet but firm with command. “Back to me.”

I swallowed tightly, my heart slamming painfully against my ribcage. I couldn't quite describe what it did to me when he slipped into this persona, when he became equal parts affectionate and dominant. I loved being able to surrender to him, knowing he would never hurt me in this vulnerable position.

I turned my back toward him as he'd commanded.

"Don't move," he said.

I obeyed, holding my breath as I waited for whatever came next. I heard the rustle of fabric, followed by the gentle glide of his hands as he positioned me perfectly.

He stepped forward, his warm breath tickling the nape of my neck. His fingers ran along the length of my spine, tracing the curve of my shoulders and down my back. He paused at the base of my spine, sending a shiver through me.

"Stay still," he warned, his voice a low rumble.

I swallowed hard, trying to calm my racing pulse.

My breath caught in my throat as I felt the cool fabric being tied securely behind my head. The darkness enveloped me, blocking my vision. All I could hear was the sound of my own breathing and the occasional rustle of fabric as Cole moved around me.

His hands trailed lightly across my shoulders, down my arms, and back up again. I shivered and sighed, tension coiling taut inside of me.

"Do you remember what I taught you about non-verbal safe words, sweetheart?"

"Yes," I said, thoughts going back to that night on the rooftop, surrounded by mountains of blankets and drunk on wine and love for him. I remembered that I was meant to draw an X on his thigh if I needed to stop.

"Good girl," he said, his voice low and gravelly. "Are you ready?"

"Mm," I said.

“Open up.”

I opened my mouth wide, preparing for what would follow. My vision was completely blocked out by the makeshift blindfold. He let me wait for a few long moments before something finally broached my lips: his thumb, pressing down against my tongue.

He withdrew it, placing both his index and middle finger in my mouth in its place. I suckled on his fingers as he pressed them deeper into the back of my mouth until they encroached on the opening of my throat.

“You look delectable, sitting and waiting for me like this,” he purred. His hand retreated again, and I was once again left in the dark and silence as I waited for what came next.

After a moment, he combed his fingers into my hair and pulled slightly, the tension on my scalp a delicious sensation. He held me fast, his other hand going to my shoulder and stabilizing me. My heart racing, I opened my mouth more, letting my tongue perch on the edge of my lower lip.

“You are impeccable, Marley. Keep open just like that,” Cole said, his voice husky with desire.

A few seconds later, I felt the silken skin of his swollen cock slide against the tip of my tongue. I tasted the faintly salty sweetness of the bead of moisture that had gathered right at the tip. I heard the rough sound of Cole sighing as he slowly pushed further in.

I parted my lips, allowing his cock to slide easily into my mouth. As I took him in, his other hand moved from my shoulder to cup the back of my head right where my nape met the base of my skull, encouraging me to shift the angle of my head so he could slide in even deeper.

I was so full, and the soft texture of his pubic hair brushed against my nose. I placed my hands on his thighs just as they contracted, and he pressed in more. Beneath the blindfold, my lashes fluttered. Feeling him fuck the back of my throat was pure ecstasy, and the slow tempo was like enjoying a well-aged whiskey. The taste of it lingered on the tongue, savored

over time, every sip bringing forth new layers of flavor. It was the same with our lovemaking. Cole was patient, taking his time, exploring every inch of my mouth while I acquainted myself with the ridges and textures of his flawless cock.

He started to move, his hands still holding my head in place as he pulled slowly away from the opening of my throat, drawing out almost all the way to my lips before pushing back in again fully.

I was in heaven. The deprivation of my sense of sight made it so I could focus on every sensation going on between my lips. I found myself becoming more adventurous, swirling my tongue around him and dragging my teeth over his flesh, delighting in the way he gasped and thrust his hips into me, taking more of my mouth. Things became messy as he started to move with reckless abandon, losing control to how I was making him feel.

My hands remained on his thighs, clutching at him as my nails dug into his skin. With each thrust, I gasped, feeling the depths of my throat stretched by the intensity of the action. The sounds he made were primal, a mix of pain and pleasure, and I reveled in the knowledge that I was the one responsible for them.

The room filled with the scents of sweat and sex. Each movement caused a cascade of sensations to travel through my body, leaving me trembling. I wrapped my hands around his ass, feeling the muscles shift beneath my palms. He groaned and moved faster, rocking into me with increasing force. He pulled out slightly and then thrust back in, driving deep.

My legs started to quiver, the pressure building within me, wanting release. I increased the pace of my strokes, matching his rhythm and urging him on.

Cole cried out, gripping my head tightly as he came undone. He held me there, his grip strong but tender as his hot seed pulsed deep within my throat. I took him in one last time, milking the final drops from him, feeling his cock twitch as he tried to hold on to his climax.

Without releasing my head, he pulled out, and I gasped for breath. His panting slowed as he recovered. The space between my legs felt woefully empty, and I found myself sliding my fingers into the moisture between my thighs.

“Who told you to touch yourself?” Cole asked.

His question wasn't a demand, and it wasn't cruel. He meant to engage my reflection rather than shy away from my behavior.

“Did you think I would let you go to sleep without rewarding you for what you can do with that beautiful mouth of yours?” he asked.

“I just thought...since you finished...” I said.

“Oh, I am not finished, sweetheart. Not remotely.”

I reached behind the back of my head to undo the blindfold, but as I brushed my fingers against the knot of the fabric, Cole grabbed my wrists.

“No, no. That stays on,” Cole said firmly.

I groaned.

Cole led me over to the bed, positioning me so that I was sitting at the edge. He laid me back, spreading my legs so my molten core was on display for him. I felt so wonderfully vulnerable like this.

“Stay there,” he ordered.

I obeyed, holding still for a long, tense moment. When I felt his touch again, it spooked me. His hands brushed a tender path under my forearm. I heard the faint, tinny sound of a buckle opening before soft, buttery leather slid around one wrist, then the next. He tightened each cuff, checking the tension by slipping a finger underneath it.

“A belt?” I asked.

“Cuffs,” he said. “I used the opportunity of buying new furniture to outfit our bed with a bit more...mmm... hardware.”

I could hear the smile in his voice as he smoothed his hands down my arms to my breasts, where he gave them a deep knead. “Is this okay?” he asked as I writhed beneath his hands, my wrists pulling taut against the restraints. “Do you still feel safe and in control?”

“Mmm...hmm...” I moaned, trying to make my mouth form words.

He pressed my hardened nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “Answer me, sweetheart. I need to know you’re okay.”

“I f-feel safe,” I whimpered.

“Good,” he said, flicking my other aching nipple.

I squirmed under his attentions, arching my back. “More, please,” I begged, my voice barely above a whisper.

I felt Cole’s lips kiss me gently, moving silkily against mine. I couldn’t help but lean into him, seeking the comfort of his love. His hands softened, and he returned to that gentle pawing of my breasts.

“Let’s take this slow,” he said. “I want to savor every second.”

“I don’t know if I can’t wait any longer,” I replied. “I feel like I could come just from just you touching me like this.”

He withdrew his hands and kissed me again. “Don’t worry, sweetheart,” he said. “Just because I said we’re taking our time doesn’t mean you only get to come once. In fact, I want you to come multiple times tonight. If I have to fuck you until your thighs are raw, I will.”

“Oh,” I breathed.

He vanished again, and once more, I was left in darkness, anticipating, wanting. When he touched me again, it was a slow kiss on the inside of my thigh, the scruff of his groomed beard tickling the sensitive skin there.

With the next kiss, he slid his fingers inside me and slowly pumped them in and out, spreading them apart each time he pulled out, drawing them against every surface inside me.

I wanted to touch him and forgot I couldn't. I tugged my arms and heard the solid clang of the strap against the bed. Cole chucked against my thigh, then suddenly added a third finger to the first two, picking up a steady rhythm.

I felt every delicious inch of his thick, velvety fingers moving in and out of me. He worked slowly, taking his time to tease and torment me, knowing how much I craved his touch. His expert fingers curled and pinched, finding all the secret buttons deep within me.

My hips bucked wildly, trying to match his rhythm, driven by the need to climax. His pace never faltered, nor did the intensity. As I felt the pressure building within me, I realized it wasn't about reaching an orgasm. It was about losing myself completely to the sensations he was creating in my body.

The pleasure Cole brought me, both physical and emotional, was beyond anything I had ever experienced. I began to lose track of reality, my senses overwhelmed with his touch. Every inch of my body felt alive with the most intense sensations, as though each of my cells were vibrating with excitement. Cole had taken his time, allowing us to immerse ourselves in the act. And now, it seemed, he was determined to take full advantage of my heightened state.

Just as I was about to reach climax, he put his mouth on my clit and circled it slowly with his tongue. I came, but he didn't stop. He continued fucking me with his mouth and his fingers while my hips bucked uselessly. I became so overstimulated that I used my heels to shuffle away from him.

He laughed, letting me flee as shockwaves of pleasure coursed through my body. My arms bent around my head as I squeezed my thighs together, trying to ride out the overwhelming feeling of being pushed beyond the brink.

"I thought that might happen," he remarked.

He seized my ankle and pulled me back until my hips were at the edge of the bed. He scooped his hand under the small of my back and placed a pillow under my hips. A moment later, another leather cuff was strapped around my upper thigh.

I fought this time, not because I was frightened, but because I wasn't ready to experience more pleasure. Any more, and it would encroach into pain.

But it was pointless. He was so strong, it took nothing for him to strap my first knee and then the other, pulling me open. It felt like he was putting me on a pedestal to be displayed for him.

"I'm not done with you, sweetheart," he said, brushing his hand down the inside of my thigh, eliciting a violent tremor from me.

"Please," I begged, feeling my walls crumble, the last barrier of resistance evaporating under his touch.

"Mmm, that is such a pretty sound," he said. "Please what, baby?"

"Please don't torture me," I begged. "Please don't make me wait too long like this. I feel like I'm going to fall apart."

Cole chuckled as he ran his fingers along my sides, tracing a pattern on my skin that made me squirm under his touch. "You'll hold up just fine, sweetheart. Trust me."

"But I don't understand," I said, struggling to find my voice amidst the roaring wind of arousal. "Why do you want to push me so far? What does it matter if I come multiple times?"

"It matters because I love making you feel good," he said. "To see you writhe under my touch, hear your pleas for release—those things bring me immense satisfaction. I want to give you multiple orgasms tonight because I know how much you enjoy them, and I want to watch you come undone under my touch. I want to remind myself that you love me and that you're not going anywhere. I..." He broke off, his voice lowering. "I want to feel like you're here to stay. Like we really are okay."

There was a stark vulnerability in his voice. The sexy menace had faded, and beneath it was a very real uncertainty—an uncertainty I'd partly sown. I didn't regret my ultimatum. It had been an important part of me learning to operate and set

boundaries for my own safety. I'd had to put my foot down so I didn't become hopelessly enmeshed with Cole.

But the fact remained that it had triggered an old trauma. Olivia had left him, and from what I could piece together, she'd left at the first sign of not getting what she wanted. Remembering that, I thought of how hard it must have been for Cole to be on his own with Noah in the beginning. How hard it must have been to feel like he was responsible for the mother of his own child being out of their lives.

I took a shaky breath. "Cole," I murmured, "you don't have to convince me to stay by fucking me senseless. As fun as all of this is, I'm not just going to run away at the first sight of discomfort. And you making me melt into the mattress isn't what I came to this relationship for, anyway."

I wished I could see his face. I wished I could look him in the eye so he knew I was being sincere.

I heard a sniff. Then Cole's hands went to the cuffs on my thighs, undoing them.

The silence continued for a while longer as he unbound my wrists. Then, he slid off the blindfold.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his breath hitching a little. I got myself upright and scooted over next to him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders. He looked at me, his eyes glassy with tears.

"Cole," I said, laying my palm on his cheek. "Baby, no. Don't cry."

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "I lied when you asked me what I was thinking about. I think after all of the tension between us got resolved, my mind relaxed enough to remind me how fucking broken I would be if you left me. I was just tossing and turning in bed, trying to rationalize that we're good now."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, sniffing and bringing up a hand to brush his tears away. "Everything in my life feels so fragile

right now. I thought if we just had some nice makeup sex, I would feel better, but...”

“Did it help?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I love fucking you, and it felt good to have you want me. You always make me feel amazing—you’re so attentive and focused on me...but it made me feel like I had something to prove. Like I had to fuck you silly so you wouldn’t see me as disposable.”

“Well, you don’t,” I said. “Cole, you’re so much more to me than a good lay.”

“But you were so ready to leave,” he said, his voice softly breaking.

“No, I wasn’t,” I said. “I wasn’t eager to leave; I didn’t even want to. But the only thing I want even less than leaving is losing myself in you. And I’m sorry the ultimatum was scary. I’m still figuring out this stuff, and maybe I was too heavy-handed. But I can’t...I can’t be where I was with Wyatt. I can’t be there ever again.”

“Am I like him?” he asked.

“No, you’re not,” I said vehemently. “I mean that. You are nothing like Wyatt, okay? This was just a bump in the road, Cole. I’m not leaving. We aren’t falling apart. And you don’t have to remind me how worthwhile you are by rendering me comatose with your penis. I love you, you doofus.”

Cole laughed. “Is it okay if I need more reminders of that?”

“Of course it is,” I said. “Cole, believe me, I don’t want a monopoly on being the one who always needs assurance. I want you to feel safe and stable with me, even when we’re at odds. I’ll try to be a little more careful with my threats going forward, okay?”

“You can’t blame yourself fully for that,” he said. “I really kept pushing the conversation back, trying to avoid it. I had my part in bringing you there.”

“And now we both know that, and we know a little more about the things that trigger us to lash out so we can be more conscientious of them,” I said. “You know, we got so close so fast that I think we sometimes forget that we’ve only been together for a few months. We have to give ourselves room to learn about each other and make mistakes.”

He nodded and took my hand in his, kissing my knuckle. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“Do you know what I’d really like?”

“What’s that?”

“I think I’d really like to get cleaned up, lie back down, and spend tonight talking,” I said. “We haven’t really done that lately. I’ve missed just chatting and joking with you. I mean, it’s been at least a month since we’ve talked about the peanut butter and tuna sandwich. We’re really falling off our A-game.”

“Damn, you’re right. What were we thinking?” Cole cupped my face with his free hand and leaned down to kiss my forehead. “Honestly, I feel guilty for not fucking you properly.”

“We’ll fuck properly later,” I said. “Another day, when we’re not holding vigil over Travis and fresh off our first real, substantial, prolonged fight. Tonight, let’s just remember what it feels like to be blissfully in love.”

He smiled at me and sighed. “I couldn’t forget what that was like even if I wanted to.”

Chapter 12

Cole

We did exactly what Marley suggested: took a shower, brushed our teeth, and got into bed. We stayed naked because it felt right after such a vulnerable night, and having the warmth of her nude body against mine was fantastic. It wasn't even a sexual enjoyment. I just loved feeling close to her.

We talked about emotionally difficult things and about nothing important at all. We laughed and spoke with hushed voices, like we were teenagers sneaking around, trying not to wake our parents. In the end, I watched her drift to sleep mid-sentence as she was telling me how much she wanted to learn to roller skate, but was certain she would kill herself trying it.

Once she was asleep, I admired the soft curves of her slackened face, the fall of her lashes and how they brushed the edge of her cheek, the way she nuzzled closer to me when the air conditioner kicked on. I'd been thinking about how much I wanted her in my life permanently for a while, but now that we'd had this night, now that she'd stopped me right before I was about to pull out all the stops the way I hadn't done since Olivia or a rare night with Farrah, I knew for certain that I wanted to make her my wife.

I didn't want to wait around for it any longer. If she wanted a long engagement, I would give it to her, but I had never felt so certain of anything and wanted to put the wheels in motion.

I stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows dance across it, thinking about how I could ask her to marry me. How would I do it? Would I surprise her or lay it all out there? What if I screwed it up? What if she said no?

Then I remembered what she'd said: that she wasn't going anywhere, that she wanted me in her life. I remembered the moment in Georgia when she'd blushed as she admitted that she would love to be my wife.

Maybe she would say no. But I knew that a no would really be a *not quite yet*. I knew I could wait for her. I could spend my whole life happily waiting for her to be ready and never grow resentful because I also knew she would never treat me as disposable or pointless.

My hands found hers where they rested on my chest, and I laced our fingers together. I stroked my thumb over her knuckle, letting the soft skin slide under my touch. The thought of putting a ring on that finger enticed me so much that I resolved to get one.

Sure, it was unconventional to get engaged this early, but we were an unconventional couple. All that mattered was that Marley was happy with it, not what anyone else thought about the speedy engagement. And if she wanted to put it off, I wouldn't make her feel bad about it. Knowing that Marley truly loved me made me feel unendingly patient because I knew the conclusion would be the one I hoped for.

I finally fell asleep when the sky shone pink outside with the rising sun.

When I woke up, Marley was already awake, sitting cross-legged on the bed and sipping coffee from a white mug. She offered me some, which I accepted gratefully.

We spent the morning relaxing, catching up on sleep and conversation. Once we had rested enough, we ventured out into the bright afternoon sunlight, finding Travis making breakfast...or was it lunch? In all honesty, I wasn't even sure Travis himself knew. He'd made everything from steaks to pancakes to sandwiches, all set out on the kitchen island. Enough food to feed a soccer team.

Lana gave me a wry look from where she sat at the breakfast bar, sipping a smoothie. "He's ravenous," she said. "Been eating since this morning."

“Uh, is there any food left in my house?” I asked.

“There’s still some oatmeal in the cupboard,” Travis said a little sheepishly. “I...I mean, I’ll restock the pantry.”

“It’s fine, dude,” I said with a chuckle. “This is exactly why the ladies went grocery shopping. I’m just surprised you’re still eating.”

“This is for all of us,” Travis said. “I figured you guys would be up soon after Marley got coffee.”

“We’ll try not to ruin the second breakfast,” I joked.

Travis, with his new appetite that rivaled a lumberjack’s, approached the food like a man on a mission. He loaded his plate with a hearty assortment of scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, and a stack of fluffy pancakes that teetered dangerously. On a second plate, he piled one of the ridiculous sandwiches he’d made and a healthy serving of gooey mac and cheese.

I couldn’t help but grin at his voracious appetite. It was clear that his shifter biology was getting stronger. Soon enough, he’d be shifting with the rest of us. It was almost surreal to think that I’d soon be able to go on a run with him, both of us as wolves.

On the other side of the table, Lana and Marley were engaged in animated conversation, their voices a soothing melody. They spoke of their plans for the day, their laughter harmonizing with the clinking of cutlery. After going through their mental calendars, they both determined they didn’t have much to do that day. At least nothing overly time-consuming.

“Marley, since it’s a lax day and Travis seems to be doing well, would you mind giving me a hand with a few tasks for my campaign to become superintendent?”

Marley’s face brightened with a warm smile. “Of course, Lana. I’d be more than happy to help! What do we need to do? I think I have some poster paint lying around the house somewhere.”

“Of course you do,” Lana teased. “Miss Overprepared.”

“You can never be too prepared,” Marley shot back.

As I listened to their exchange, an idea struck me. Since the girls were spending the day together, it seemed like the perfect chance for Travis and me to bond a bit. And it would be a good chance to get his help with the whole asking-my-girlfriend-to-be-my wife thing.

I cleared my throat. “You know, Travis,” I began, “I’ve been contemplating a potential location for our pack headquarters. There’s an abandoned hotel up in the mountains by the lake that I’d like you to check out. Wanna go up there with me? I could use my accountant to help me determine if it’s something we can actually afford to do.”

Travis looked at me with a mixture of curiosity and interest. “Fuck, yeah,” he said with a mouth full of food. “You’ve really been doing some moving and shaking, huh?”

“No rest for the wicked,” I said. “We’ve got a pack to run.”

“No kidding,” Travis said.

With the hearty brunch devoured and plans set in motion, our time at the dining table came to an end. Lana and Marley shared a final laugh as they cleared their dishes, their laughter echoing the camaraderie that had developed within our little family. Travis and I pushed back our chairs, keen to get on with the day.

As I stood, I reached over to Lana and gave her a brief, affectionate hug. “Good luck with the campaign work,” I said, offering a supportive smile. “You know we’ll be rooting for you. If you need any help with the financial—”

“Don’t even think about it,” she cut me off. “I can do fine on my own, and the last thing you need when you’re starting up a pack is any documented political affiliations.”

My mouth dropped open and then closed again. I hated to admit it, but she was right. I couldn’t be as open about my affiliations now, not without alienating potential pack members, or worse, the powers that be when it came to pack licensing and financial aid. The idea didn’t sit right with me,

and it must have shown on my face because Marley patted my chest.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll work hard and safely. We’ll get that old jerk who fired me canned, you’ll see.”

“Damn fucking straight,” Lana said, her eyes flashing with fury. “Once I set my mind to something, you’ll be hard-pressed to watch me fail.”

“You guys are going to rock it,” I said. “And we’ll have some exciting news about the potential pack headquarters when we get back into town.”

Marley nodded in agreement, pride lighting in her eyes. “Absolutely. We’ll all have something to celebrate when we reconvene later.” She stood to her toes and kissed me. “We’re going to head out now, but I’ll keep you updated on things throughout the day.”

I nodded. “Yeah, we will, too,” I said, kissing her forehead. “Be safe, okay? You know where to find me if anything goes wrong.”

“Don’t worry, boss,” Lana said, linking arms with Marley. “I’ll keep her safe.”

They left with a wave and a smile, and I heaved a soft sigh as I heard the car start up and pull out of the driveway. When I looked over at Travis, he was looking strangely at me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“So what else are we doing, big guy?” he asked. “I know what you look like when you have a plan in mind, and I know for a fact that we’re not going to look at real estate.”

“We are,” I said. “We’re just going somewhere else first.”

“Where?” Travis asked. “What’s so secretive that we couldn’t tell Lana and Marley?”

I rubbed a hand over my face. “I don’t think it’s in style to tell your girlfriend that you’re going shopping for her engagement ring,” I said dryly.

Travis blinked rapidly, then his face split open with the biggest smile I'd seen in a good long while. He pulled me into a bear hug, slapping my back.

“Cole, you old dog! This is the best news I've heard all day,” he said. “Let's go buy a fucking ring.”

We hopped into the car and made our way out of town in case Marley and Lana wound up doing some shopping for Lana's campaign. We talked about this and that, catching up on other things I'd been too busy to keep abreast of with all the stuff I'd had to do for...well, for Travis and the pack.

He and Lana seemed to be doing really well. They were talking about getting a place together, which was exciting to hear. It'd been years since Travis seriously dated anyone, and I'd been wondering if he would wind up a permanent bachelor.

I told him about Marley and me making up and the conversation we had the night prior.

“It was that conversation that made it clear to me that I didn't want to wait another moment to give her a ring,” I said as we pulled off the highway. “Even if she says no, I want her to know that I'm serious about her and ready to put my money where my mouth is.”

“How do you think you're going to do it?” Travis asked.

“Do what?” I asked.

“The proposal, you dipshit.”

“Oh...I hadn't really thought about it,” I admitted. “Maybe dinner?”

“Don't do it at dinner, man. That's lame as hell,” he said, shaking his head. “How many people do a dinner proposal?”

“What do you recommend, then?”

“You gotta do something public. In front of all the people who know her and love her, man.”

“I don't know how we could possibly get all of those people in the same place,” I said. “I mean, we're talking about people from here to the school, to the gym, to my parents. I

want to surprise her. If I throw a big party for her, it'll be obvious what's coming."

"Then don't plan a party for her," he said. "Plan it for me."

"What?"

He rolled his eyes. "Come on, I'm not being an egotistical prick. But think about it—I'm getting the last dose soon, and I *have* to shift after. It's a perfect scenario to bring the pack together, and that pack is comprised of most of Marley's friends. It's also great for setting expectations for pack members so they know you won't put up with any bullshit when it comes to your mate. And, it will be super romantic for her."

"What if she feels pressured to say yes to not jeopardize my standing within the pack?" I asked.

Travis gave me a deadpan look. "Bro, you guys are obsessed with each other. She's never going to say no."

"Bro, we've been dating for, like, three months. She might and would be well within her rights to say no."

"Why don't you just say when you ask that you'd like her to think about it and that you'll take her answer whenever she's ready to give it to you? Then, if she knows, she can do the whole 'a thousand times yes' thing and wave at her misty eyes before kissing you in front of everyone."

I pursed my lips as I pulled up to a stoplight, rubbing my chin in thought. "Hmm. That's actually pretty smart."

"Don't say 'actually' like you're fucking surprised, you cocksucker."

I laughed, accelerating as the light turned green. We turned into a parking lot for a jewelry store that had good reviews and bespoke pieces. "Let's say we do it this way. When will we need to do this?"

"Next injection is in a couple weeks," he said. "So, enough time to order a custom piece if you dish out the dosh."

I snorted as I pulled into a parking spot. "Fine. We'll throw you a party. I guess you deserve it."

“So very kind of you,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “I think I would really like to see that place you’re thinking of for HQ, though. Or are we only ring shopping?”

“No, I legitimately want to get your opinion on the place,” I said as we went into the store. “We’ll go after this.”

Travis did his duty as my best friend and helped me pick the best ring and spend the most money. I couldn’t help but notice that he was asking a lot of questions about the rings and even looking at a few. Knowing Travis too well, I didn’t think he was getting ready to propose to Lana yet, but I also knew him well enough to know that he planned big purchases years in advance.

Occupational hazard, what with him being an accountant and all.

When we were finished at the store, I drove Travis to the hotel and showed him around the place. I gave him the rundown about how much had been done to the place versus how much needed to be done. I could see him calculating the expenses in his head as I walked him through it. When we reached the top of the building, a penthouse looking over the shimmering lake, Travis crossed his arms and turned around to face me. His face looked oddly serious with the backlighting.

“So, you’re looking at a pretty sizable injection of capital needed to finish things up here,” he said. “As you mentioned, the wiring and plumbing were already redone, which is great. But even if we do most of the work ourselves, we’re still going to need hundreds of thousands of dollars, and that’s after the purchase of the—what was it?”

“Couple million,” I said.

“Yeah. And it’s not like we’ll be making any profit from this whole deal.”

“So, basically, we need to get that grant from the government if we’re going to make this whole thing work,” I said.

“Bingo, bango,” Travis said. “We ought to meet up with Houston and call Vic to get some help. We don’t wanna fuck it

up.”

I nodded, adding that to the quickly growing mountain of tasks already set before me. “Sounds good,” I said. “We probably ought to head back into town. It’s getting late, and I don’t want Marley suspecting anything about why we were here so long.”

“Come on, man. You think I can’t spin a lie?” Travis said as he walked past me, bumping his shoulder against mine.

I was taken aback by how much stronger he’d become. I put my hand on my shoulder as Travis exited the room. It was strange to watch him vanish and realize he was becoming ever more a true peer.

It wasn’t as if I hadn’t thought of him as an equal before this moment. He’d always been my best friend, a true brother to me. But I realized that some part of me had always thought of him as someone to protect. It was something I’d never thought about explicitly, more like a subconscious drive. The same drive I had with Marley.

And then—possibly for the first time—I really understood what Marley had been trying to drill into my thick skull.

Even though I didn’t think any less of Travis or Marley for being non-shifters, I would always see them as something fragile, something that needed protecting. That wasn’t a failure on their part, though; it was a failure on my part. A subconscious fear, maybe mixed with a bit of a prejudice, too.

And now that I saw it, I could finally work on bettering myself in that regard. When I finally proposed to Marley, I could be sure that whatever she decided—whether that was to stay human or become a shifter—I knew I would do everything in my power to support her and truly see her as an equal. Not this bullshit standing in the middle—thinking of her as my equal but fundamentally breakable. I would do everything I could to see her as she really was.

My beautiful, powerful, amazing, irreplaceable mate.

A few weeks later, I stood next to Travis, watching the tide go out near my home. He'd found some excuse to be close to me the whole day, even separating from Lana when she left to get ready for the event. I knew he was nervous, and I began to wonder if he was picking up on some of the biological comforts of being near other shifters.

He lifted his thumb to his mouth to chew on his nail for the umpteenth time.

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Keep chewing on that finger of yours, and it'll be gone by the end of the day."

He huffed and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm fucking scared shitless for tonight. I know it's going to suck, and I don't want it to suck. But I also don't want to put it off any longer. I don't know how the fuck to feel."

"Just let it roll through you. Whatever it is, man," I advised. "Let it run its course. The more you fight it, the worse it's going to feel."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," he grumbled. "It's hard to fucking relax."

I nodded. "Do you want to postpone? We could."

"Fuck, no," he said. "And have everyone know I chickened out? Absolutely not."

I laughed and shook my head. "You have nothing to prove, Travis."

"I know," he said. "Still, though, putting it off isn't going to make it any easier. It would just be more of this feeling later on."

"Well, if that's how you feel, it's time to head up the mountain and get shit started," I said. "Marley and Syl are already up there getting stuff ready. I'm sure people will be starting to show up any moment now."

"Yeah," he said. "You're driving, though. If I do it, I might crash the damn car."

"Yeah, I'll drive. You're back on driving duty after this is all over, though, so you better not get used to it," I joked.

“Come on, man.”

We hadn't bought the property yet, but we were making moves toward it. Instead, we'd talked to one of the locals with a big swath of land. They were shifters, too, and they were happy to offer up their place for the event in exchange for a modest fee. Their property was set up right on the edge of the forest, which was all government land.

Houston had done his due diligence, making sure that we'd be okay to do a full moon run in the forest and wouldn't wind up getting our asses handed to us by some weirdo with a shotgun, or by state troopers coming out to stop us and hand us a fine. Marley and I had had enough bad publicity to last us a lifetime, and I didn't want anything ruining this day. Not for me, not for Travis, and not for Marley.

I felt the weight of Marley's engagement ring in my pocket and on my heart. I knew Travis was scared of tonight, but I was pretty sure I was tied for first place in the “Who's Most Scared” awards.

After a few more moments, I clapped Travis on the back and nodded back toward the house. “Come on,” I said.

We packed into the car and rolled out. Noah was staying with my mother for the night, much to his dismay, but I'd watched some videos of the first shifts of freshly transitioned shifters and knew it wasn't something Noah would want to see. It was a frightening, bloody affair that even I wasn't looking forward to seeing. Least of all when it was my best friend who'd be doing the shifting.

It didn't take us long to get there, even with the property being on the other side of the lake. Marley and Lana were standing near the entrance for the cars, with more than half a dozen cars already parked on the huge gravel drive behind them. I recognized the vehicles belonging to Houston, Farrah, Sylvia, and Lana.

I rolled down the window as I pulled up to Marley. She hurried over, her long golden hair in a bouncy ponytail, her nose crinkling with her smile. “You're here!” she said cheerfully.

“We are,” I said.

She stood up on the step bar of my truck and poked her head in to give me a kiss. “I missed you,” she said.

“I missed you, too, sweetheart,” I said. “How are things going? People showing up yet?”

“Not quite,” she said. “But we told everyone to get here in about an hour, so I’m sure people will start trickling in. A lot of people show up just a little late because they don’t want to be the first ones to arrive at things like this.”

I nodded, looking out to the water as it reflected the evening’s lilac skies. We were fully in twilight now, and it wouldn’t be long before the skies darkened to night. The moon was already starting to show its face in the sky, and the stars would soon join it.

“I’m gonna go park. I hope you have things for us to do,” I teased.

“Not me, but I’m sure Farrah does,” she said with a wink. “She’s been keeping this whole day running like a well-oiled machine. Took care of everything from the lighting to the seating to figuring out the route for the run.”

“Sounds like her. You’re not getting swept away in it, are you?”

“No, not at all. She’s been great,” Marley said. “Mostly, she’s just unnervingly competent.”

“Yep, that sounds like her,” Travis chimed in.

Marley dropped off the side of the truck and went back to Lana. I pulled past them, going to park by Lana’s car.

Travis and I hopped out and started walking around to get a proper look at the place and what they’d set up while we were getting Noah situated and handling some last-minute business in New Middle Bluff. It looked pretty damn great. Marley had taken charge of organizing the look and feel of the event. I’d originally suggested something simple—plastic tables and chairs, a few pizzas. But Marley didn’t want it to be so spartan and had insisted on making it something people

would remember. Not only because of Travis, but because it would be our first run together as a pack.

She'd arranged everything with comfort in mind, just like in Georgia. I spotted lots of cushioned seating around a fire pit that was waiting to be lit, while rental tables draped with fine tablecloths were stocked with plenty of fresh fruits and snacks. Tastefully rustic tin tubs filled to the brim with ice, beer, soda, water, and sparkling wine. There were antique-style lights strung across the space with gentle music already playing from a PA system, not too loud to disturb our hosts or the other locals. It was just so nice, so cozy. Very much like a scene you'd see at a family cookout, or maybe even a sweet little wedding reception.

I slipped my hand into my pocket, rubbing my thumb over the smooth velvet box, trying once again to keep calm. Marley was getting better at sensing my feelings, and it was getting tricky to keep secrets from her.

As I looked around, people started to show up. Rosie arrived first, followed by Paulette, who arrived with my sister. Ginger had her arm around Paulette's shoulders and gave her a knowing smile before kissing her temple. She nodded hello to me, which was usually greeting enough between us. Jack arrived not long after and quickly took over minding Travis. They caught some B-roll for the documentary and recorded some of Travis's final "non-shifter thoughts."

More people arrived, some new faces I didn't recognize along with a few other folks who had become fast friends. Even the owners of the property came out to have fun with us.

Once the moon was high in the sky and everyone was chatting, drinking, and generally having a good time, Marley slipped in next to me.

"Meter maid duty done for the night?" I asked, pulling her into my arms and swaying with her.

She wrapped her arms around my middle and looked up at me. "Meter maid?" she repeated with a sullen pout. "I prefer event coordinator, thank you very much."

I chuckled. “My mistake. How about...event queen?”

“Ooh, a promotion! I love it.” She gave a cute little yawn.

“Tired?” I asked.

“Long day.”

I brushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear. “Well, hopefully we’ll get some much-deserved time off after this. Feels like we’ve been going non-stop with the pack and Travis transitioning and...hell, everything.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” she said. “I feel like I barely get to hang out with Noah lately with how much I’ve been gone from the house. Every time I get home, he’s fast asleep.”

“Well, regardless of whether or not I get to have a break, you are definitely getting one. And some much-needed pup time.”

“Sounds heavenly,” she said. “Did you eat yet?”

My mouth quirked. “Nah, I’m not too hungry,” I said. “My appetite has been a little messed up lately.”

“Do you think it’s from nerves? I can feel how on edge you are in my gut,” she said. “Travis is almost out of the woods, and Sylvia said even if the final injection can be a little dramatic, it’s also the fastest one with the least complications. The doctor didn’t even bat an eye when she asked to administer the last dose.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, using the out she gave me to my advantage. “I probably won’t feel entirely right until it’s over and done with.”

Marley nodded. “Yeah, that’s fair. Well, it looks like things are starting to slow down. Should we maybe check in with Travis and see if he’s ready to get started?”

“Good idea,” I said. “You get a spot near the center of the group. I’m going to make an announcement before the whole thing, and I want you to be by my side for it, okay?”

Marley gave me a blissful smile. “Okay!” she said, scurrying off.

I had to clench my teeth to keep from jumping out of my skin.

I checked in with Travis, and he told me he was ready. He was still a nervous wreck, maybe only slightly more than I was. But he followed me to the middle of the large group that was gathering at the center of the party. The space in the center cleared a bit more when I got there, and a few moments after the crowd quieted, Houston handed me the mic for the PA system.

As the moon cast its silvery glow over the forest and the lake and the gathering of people all around me, I felt my heart squeeze in my chest. Only a couple of months ago, I was more than content to keep things going as they were. Now I was surrounded by what looked like a hundred people, all of them quieting down to hear me speak. All of them calm and happy and ready to work together.

I looked over at Marley and forced myself to take a deep breath. It was now or never. I brought the mic to my lips.

“Thank you all so much for being here for our second’s final injection and first shift. I can’t tell you how much it means to me, my mate, and Travis that you’ve all gathered to support someone on this momentous occasion. When I first started putting these things together, I was so scared that none of it would ever work out, that I could never lead a group of individuals who were as strong and hard-headed as me.” At that, the crowd laughed a little. “But I’ve learned over the last couple of months that it really is steel that sharpens steel. We hone each other as we come together and bump into one another, make mistakes, and learn from each other.”

I looked out over the crowd. “When I see you all gathered here like this, it really does feel like one enormous, happy family. I’m so excited to see how we learn and grow together.”

I put my hand out to Marley, and she blinked at me before looking around as if to see who I was beckoning. Chuckling, I waved her over. “Yes, sweetheart, I’m gesturing for you,” I teased, drawing another laugh from the group. “Come here.”

She gave me a funny little look, a cross between curiosity and a desire to pummel me for pulling her out in front of everyone. Despite her initial reluctance, she finally ventured out from her spot in the front and shuffled over to me.

“This beautiful woman,” I began, wrapping my free arm around her shoulders, “is my mate, Marley Cage. For those of you who don’t know, this wonderful woman is the one who arranged everything for this little soirée. All the decor, the food, the drinks, the music—it was all her. Let’s give her a nice round of applause!”

There was a chorus of clapping and a few hollers and whistles. Marley shrank further against me. “Cole,” she whined. “Come on, you don’t have to do all of this. I was fine standing over there. People don’t care about me.”

“I care about you,” I emphasized. “And if I care, my pack members should care, too.”

“I don’t want to make an idiot of myself.”

“You won’t, baby. I would never let you look silly. Just give it a moment and trust me, okay?”

She squinted at me and pursed her lips, but she nodded.

“Good girl,” I said, kissing her temple before talking into the microphone again. “Marley and I have been together for about...what? Four months now?”

“Feels a lot longer,” she said jokingly.

A laugh rippled throughout the group, and I joined them. “Yeah, it can be that way with me. But when I first met Marley, she took my world and flipped it upside down in all the best ways. I was ready to live my life as a single father with a moderately successful business. I figured I’d get back around to dating when my son was in high school, or just live a contented life as a bachelor. But this little sweetheart careened right into me while I was holding a cup of coffee, and I swear it was the closest thing to love at first sight that you get these days.

“We’ve only been together for a few months, but I’ve never been so sure about a person in my life.” I turned to

Marley. “So sure that you’re the only one for me, the only person I want to spend my life with.”

A hush fell over the crowd, the group seeming to realize the gravity of the moment a few moments before Marley’s expression shifted. I heard her heart race in her chest and felt the flip of her stomach as it became clear to her what I was doing.

I dropped down on one knee, pulling the small velvet box from my pocket. The pocket that had carried the weight of a life and a promise for the entire day.

Marley’s eyes widened in surprise, her hand flying to cover her mouth as I opened the box and revealed the engagement ring.

“Marley Cage,” I said, “you’ve taught me how to love again, and you’ve reminded me how important it is to have someone in your life who can call you out on your bullshit, encourage you to grow, and pick you up when you fall.”

I looked into her beautiful eyes and smiled, feeling tears starting to gather on my lower eyelids. “Now, I know I’m dropping this on you out of nowhere, so if you’re not ready to give me an answer, you can tell me later. But Marley, would you do me the absolute honor of becoming my wife? Would you make an honest man out of me, and a wonderful mother to my son, and a permanent part of my pack and my family?”

She gave a quick nod, dropping her hand from her mouth and holding it out for me. “Yes. Of course I will, you idiot,” she said through tears, drawing another laugh from the group.

I pulled the ring out of the box and slid the slender band onto her finger. It looked exactly like I’d hoped it would on her pretty little hand. It was white gold with a faceted moonstone set at the very center with two small diamonds off to the sides. All the stones were framed in complex floral filament work, the little flowers and leaves seeming to grow out of the stones before twining through the rest of the band.

Her hand was still shaking as she lifted it to look at it. “Cole, it’s beautiful,” she gasped. “God, I love it. I love you.

I...I'm so happy.”

I stood and swept her into my arms, leaning down to kiss her deeply. “I love you,” I said, quietly enough so only she could hear it as I brushed my nose against hers. “Thank you for making me the happiest man in the world.”

“Thank you for being the world’s most amazing mate,” she said, beaming blissfully.

It was so intoxicating to feel her joy, to feel it compound my own. I hoped she could feel the same joy emanating from me. I was so excited to live the rest of my life with this woman. And I knew after all the trials of fire we’d already endured that we could make it through any challenge that came our way. Including the one today.

“Ready to do what we came here for?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s time to see Travis through the end of this thing.”

I nodded and parted from her, still holding her hand as I looked over the dozens of faces for one familiar one. I finally found him, his face as pale as moonlight and as serious as death.

“Travis Green,” I said. “Let’s finally meet your wolf.”

Chapter 13

Marley

The group around us spread out a little after Cole's proposal—his proposal!—at Sylvia's request. I went to stand next to my brother and Lana as they got things set up. It was the simplest set-up so far for Travis's injections: a simple folding chair, a small table with the serum in a tiny bottle, and a syringe. This final injection would be a highly concentrated dose, intentionally potent to shock the system and force a shift. To date, it had a ninety percent success rate, which was the best that could be hoped for in Travis's situation.

But if for some reason it didn't go well, even a hospital wouldn't be able to help him.

Beside me, Lana's worry and tension felt like a live wire. She wanted to be near Travis and hold his hand as he went through it, but Sylvia told her to stand back and give him room for anything nasty that might happen. A lot of people had been mistakenly mauled after a first shift just by being too close, and no one wanted that for Lana. Or for anyone else in the group, frankly.

Travis took off his shirt and sat down on the chair. Cole stood a little in front of me, his back to me as he looked at Travis. He hadn't said anything about it, but I was almost certain that he was putting himself between me and Travis in case something went horribly wrong and Travis came right at me and Lana.

I brushed my fingertips over my ring, grateful for Cole's determined, protective nature. Even if it caused problems sometimes, it was nice to feel so precious to someone.

Just past Travis and Cole, Sylvia approached the table and picked up the small bottle. She drew the serum into the syringe before pressing the plunger to get the air out of it.

Travis sat with his hands resting on his legs, both of them curled so tightly into fists that his knuckles were nearly transparent.

Lana reached for my sweater as Sylvia brushed an alcohol wipe over the fleshy part of Travis's upper arm. I looked at my friend and squeezed her hand with just enough pressure to give her some calm and reassurance.

"Take deep breaths," I said. "You're going to be okay, and Travis is going to pull through this just fine. Just you wait."

Everyone held their breath as Sylvia carefully injected Travis with the potent mixture.

His face was impassive for a few moments—his eyes closed, his lips set in a hard line. The only thing that changed was the rate at which his chest rose and fell. It became faster and faster until he was almost hyperventilating.

His expression contorted in pain, and sweat began to pour down his face and his body as the muscles in his arms started to spasm.

"Is he okay?" Lana whispered in a panic.

"He'll be fine," Cole reassured her, his tone firm but gentle. "This is normal. Just give him some time. It's going to get worse before it gets better, but you need to stay right there. We don't want anyone too close."

Sylvia backed away from Travis, taking the small table with her to get it out of the way. The arm where Sylvia had administered the injection started to jut and spasm in a way that looked incredibly painful. I watched in horror as his muscles seemed to grow and bunch, like they were trying to change shape but had nowhere to go. His forearm started to thicken, looking almost cartoonish as the muscle started to form a bulge. The bulge in Travis's arm grew larger and larger, the skin stretching thin and translucent, going purple with the bruising.

Lana's hand tightened in mine, her nails digging into my palm. I tried to keep my own hand steady and offer her silent reassurance, but it was difficult as we watched the grotesque scene unfold.

"Shit," Jack muttered beside me.

The veins in Travis's arm were now visible, pulsing with blood as the transformation began. His entire body seemed to be filled with energy, his muscles flexing and straining against his skin.

Cole stood with his arms crossed, watching the changes intently. He looked like a statue, his face emotionless, but his eyes betrayed his concern. I could feel the helplessness aching in his chest like it was my own.

Travis's skin began to tear, ripping open along the lines of his muscles in a bloody mess. Sweat poured off him in large quantities, and his screams of agony were deafening. The sound was unlike anything I had ever heard—a primal, animalistic cry that sent a terrified chill through me.

Despite the gruesome sight before us, everyone remained still, holding our collective breath. It felt wrong to look away. It would feel like an abandonment of Travis in this time of great need.

Lana's breath hitched, her eyes wide with fear and amazement. She couldn't take her gaze off Travis, who now resembled a hideous, disfigured monster covered in a sickening mixture of blood and bruises. His face was twisted in pain, his teeth bared in a snarl as his jaw cracked, sagged, then reformed in record time. It started to elongate and change.

As I watched Travis's transformation, I found myself wondering if I could handle such a drastic change. Perhaps Cole was right. The transition could kill me. At this rate, I was starting to fear that it would kill Travis.

His muscles kept straining against his skin, pulling, ripping, bleeding. It was hard to believe that this creature had been human mere minutes ago. It was also hard to believe that it would somehow become a wolf.

My stomach lurched at the gruesome sight. My heart raced, pounding in my chest as if to escape the horror before me. Involuntarily, I moved closer to Lana, seeking comfort in her presence despite knowing she needed it much more than I did.

We clung to each other as we kept vigil over this horrible scene. I could only hope that it was almost done.

As Travis continued to change, he began to grow larger, losing his humanity completely as he transformed into a wild beast. His pants ripped, falling off his body in strips.

The moon was high overhead, casting its eerie light upon the scene as if approving of the ghastly spectacle before us. The world around us seemed to fall silent as we held our breath again, our hearts racing in our chests. Time seemed to slow as we waited for the agonizing process to finally end.

Then, it happened. Some critical point in the process was achieved, and Travis's body started to heal itself. His skin was still covered in blood, but his wounds began to stitch themselves together. His blond hair expanded down the back of his neck, his rearranged shoulders, and the curve of his spine before elongating into a beautiful, fluffy tail. Between one blink and the next, his hands transformed into massive paws covered in that same golden hair. Finally, the fur bloomed over his brow and nose—no, his snout.

Travis raised his head to the moon and let out a sorrowful, melodic howl. It was like a croon, an offering to the moon and to all that she offered him back. A plaintive plea and expression of gratitude all at once.

I looked over at Lana. Her hand was cupped over her mouth, tears spilling out of her eyes onto her cheeks and rolling over her fingers. She looked like she was experiencing a multitude of different feelings, too. Fear, sadness, pride, love—all mixed in her eyes as she looked at Travis's golden form.

I smiled, my heart aching for her. "He's beautiful," I murmured with awe.

She dropped her hand and glanced at me, her pale blond hair almost luminescent in the moonlight. “He is,” she said on a sob. “He’s beautiful, and he’s mine. And—and he’s...he’s one of *us*.”

I nodded, trying not to feel the ache of longing in my chest. I blinked out a couple of sympathetic tears. “You should go to him,” I said. “As your wolf.”

She blinked as if she hadn’t considered it, but quickly wiped the wetness off her face as she sniffed. “You’re right,” she said, shouldering off her coat.

She shifted in seconds, revealing a gorgeous white wolf with a silvery stripe down her back. She approached Travis in his new form, and they brushed their noses together before curling around each other, their heads finding a spot on the other’s upper back like a sweet embrace of reunification. I couldn’t help but think that they looked like the sun and the moon—one wolf pale as moonlight, the other golden like the sun. It was gloriously beautiful.

They were perfect together. The moonlight reflected off their fur, making them seem ethereal. They danced around each other, their movements as fluid and graceful as water flowing over rocks. Their howls were a harmonious and melodic duet, filling the night air with a sense of peace and belonging.

The others around me shifted and joined in, their voices echoing through the forest and creating a chorus of joy and celebration. The sound was hauntingly beautiful, a symphony of nature and power.

I stood nearby, watching them, admiration and envy warring inside me. I wanted to shift with them, to experience that connection with someone else. To know that kind of bond, that level of trust and understanding.

Then, as if led by instinct, all the shifted wolves came together and started to race toward the tree line. We didn’t even have to announce anything; they just did it, like they all felt the mood of this huge victory and needed to feel the dirt under their feet and the breeze through their coats.

Cole looked back at me with slight worry, but I gave him an encouraging smile. “Go on ahead,” I said. “I’ll hold down the fort here. Have fun.”

He smiled back at me and shifted into his own lupine form. He brushed his muzzle against the palm of my left hand. I pet him a bit before holding his massive head in my hands and leaning forward to nuzzle my forehead against the bridge of his nose.

“I love you,” I said softly.

He gave a low throaty sound, contented and sweet, before finally peeling out and sprinting to catch up with the others.

All who remained at the site were me, Jack, and a few other human friends and family of the pack members who had all torn off into the forest.

Jack stopped recording and took the camera off its perch on his shoulder. He looked over at me and pulled me into a caring side hug. “All right, Mopey Marmalade, let’s get you a glass of champagne to celebrate your engagement and cool off that burn of being left out of something beautiful like that.”

I blinked. “I didn’t say—”

“Mar, I’m your brother. I know you very well,” he said. “Come on.”

I thought about fighting him on the matter, but decided against it. Cole wasn’t here to feel guilty about it, and none of the pack members would know if I moped a little. And it sure as hell would give me plenty of time to process that pining ache of wanting to be included in these pivotal moments.

So, I allowed Jack to lead me over to the table, my thoughts swirling in the wake of the crazy night. There had been so many ups and downs, so much love and joy and fear and sadness. The moments all muddled up inside me.

Upon reaching the table, Jack grabbed a bottle of unopened sparkling wine. He popped the cork and poured us each a tall glass. He clinked his glass with mine and smiled. “I mean, it’s not Chandon, but it works,” he teased. “Congrats, Marmalade. You got engaged before your big brother did.”

“Honestly, I was half-expecting you to question me for saying yes,” I said. “It is a pretty quick engagement.”

“You guys have been through three years’ worth of drama and struggle in about three months,” he said. “The whole reason you date before getting engaged is to make sure you can handle the ups and downs, and you guys already know that you can. Besides, divorce is always an option if it doesn’t work out.”

I scowled. “I don’t want to think of it as one.”

“Yeah, I know. I just mean...you know, nothing is etched in stone. If you’re happy, then I’m happy. And the moment you’re not happy, I know you can leave. More importantly, *you* know you can leave.”

I nodded. It was true that I should internalize that idea as an option. It was hard to imagine ever wanting to leave Cole—or needing to leave him, for that matter. He was the perfect partner.

Then again...so had Wyatt once.

“Are you, by the way?” my brother asked. “Happy, that is?”

His expression was one of genuine concern. He wanted to ensure that I wasn’t affected by whatever had transpired earlier.

I forced a smile, taking a sip of the cold liquid. “I’m fine,” I said. “Just feeling a bit left out. I always do at these things. I always wish I could be part of the runs. Sometimes it feels like I’m missing a crucial part of being Cole’s mate. Like half of his life will always be cordoned off from me.”

Jack nodded, taking a sip of wine. “Is that feeling strong enough to want to transition into a shifter yourself? Or is it something you think you can process over time?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And to be honest, I can’t tell if I’m being childish or not for pouting over not getting to participate in something. I mean, it’s normal for couples to have spaces they don’t share. It’s normal for Cole to have things in his life that aren’t open to me.”

“But?” Jack prompted playfully.

I huffed, looking at him before gazing back out at the two dozen or so people left over after the rest of the pack went off running.

“But...I just wonder if I can truly be part of the pack when I can't even understand the fundamental parts of a shifter's lived experience,” I said. “I can't tell where the line is between Cole and I having separate lives, and Cole and I being unable to ever connect the way two partners should. The way a husband and wife should.”

“Marley, I don't think he'd ever leave you,” Jack said.

I nodded, looking down at the opalescent stone in the beautiful engagement ring. “I know,” I said. “I actually know that's true, for once. I finally believe I've found the person who loves me as much as I love them. But because I love him so much, I don't want to experience a half-connection. I want the real thing, Jack. I want to be as close to Cole and Noah as I can. I don't want anything to get in the way.”

Jack sighed and drained his glass. “Well, listen. I can't lie to you and tell you that I have no reservations when it comes to the idea of you becoming a shifter. Not because I have any problems with you being one, but after watching Travis's body literally tear itself to shreds, I don't know if I could fully support something like that happening to you.” He paused. “But I will tell you that I don't think you need to think yourself into a headache about it. The answer will become clear as you keep reflecting on things and learning about what life in the pack is going to be like for you.”

I took a deep breath and let it out nice and slow, nodding as I lifted my glass to my lips and took a sip. “Yeah,” I said. “You're right. I'm probably just psyching myself out.”

“Yeah,” Jack agreed. “So for now, why don't you just enjoy your engagement and help build the pack with your fiancé? Worry about the big decisions later. Stick to the day-to-day life stuff for now.”

He was right. I was once again putting the cart before the horse and forgetting the things that were truly important. I wasn't certain why I was so fixated on this particular issue. Maybe because it had been such a prominent conflict between me and Cole. So, I'd put it away for a while and focus on the things I knew could make me feel happy and fulfilled: Noah and Cole, being close with my friends and family, learning how I could make myself useful.

Jack and I sat for a while longer, talking about this and that, coming down from the stress and brutality of Travis's final injection. It was nice to get a little tipsy and get to know some of the other non-shifters. One of them was a young man who was the only kid in his big family not to have the shifter gene be dominant. He was a teenager and still figuring out whether he wanted to become a shifter. Then there was the middle-aged mother of a twenty-year-old shifter who had been longing for a community for a long time, especially since it was just him and his mom. She expressed gratitude for the pack, having experienced a lot of guilt for not being able to get her son properly acquainted with such an important part of himself.

We all were roasting marshmallows by the fire when the pack trickled back from the forest. Cole was part of the first group back, and after he shifted back into his human form, he ran right up to me, gathering me in his arms and spinning me around with a bright laugh.

"Here's my perfect, beautiful mate," he said, nuzzling my neck and nipping at it. "God, I missed you while I was running around. How are you feeling? How's your energy level?"

"I should ask you that," I said with a laugh. "Did you find some wolfnip out there or something? A gallon of coffee?"

He chuckled. "A run is always exhilarating," he said. "It's difficult not to feel the elation from it for several hours. Especially when the love of my life just agreed to marry me."

"Well, good. I'm glad you had a great time," I said. "As for my energy level...I'm doing just fine. Got a few more hours left in my tank, I think."

“Good,” he said, then his expression turned serious. “But...I did feel a little twinge of something as we all took off on the run. You handling all of this okay?”

“Is it okay if we don’t talk about it here?” I asked. “There’s a lot of really good hearing around here, and I don’t want to cause a scene, even a subtle one.”

“Yeah, sweetheart,” he said. “Of course. We’ll chat when we get home. In the meantime...” He pulled me toward the little makeshift dance floor that had come together since the shifters returned. “I want to show you off. Come dance with me.”

I laughed, following after him. “Only if you let me stand on your toes. I’m doing my best not to embarrass myself here.”

“As if I would ever let you embarrass yourself,” he said, sweeping me into his arms.

Just as he did, a howl tore out from the forest. It wasn’t a victorious howl, nor was it gleeful—even I could tell that. Cole’s vision snapped to the tree line, his dark brows knitting together.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Distress call,” he said. He looked down at me, his brows rising. “Marley, I—”

I shook my head, answering the question on his face. “Go. Make sure our pack is okay.”

He heaved out a soft breath of relief and gave me a terse nod. He set me gently on the ground and turned on his heels, shifting in the blink of an eye. He almost took off running, but then he paused.

Cole looked at me and then back to the forest as if weighing something. When I was just about to ask him what he was doing, he sat back on his haunches and gestured with his nose to his back.

Another howl pealed out of the forest. I wasted no more time, leaping onto his back and tangling my fingers into his

fur.

He sprinted toward the forest, clumps of damp ground and grass flying in the wake of his blurring speed. The cool mountain air was clarifying as I held onto his back, watching as the trees and foliage streaked into indiscernible shapes around us. I knew we were running to address an emergency, but the rush I felt as the wind whipped through my hair was exhilarating. It made me long to be a shifter even more—to run as fast as Cole and Travis and the rest of them.

As we ran, the howling continued, morphing into a chorus of two or three wolves. When we finally broke through to a clearing in the middle of the forest, we saw four shifters standing around a bloodstain in the dirt, an abandoned shoe, and what looked like a small amount of vomit.

Cole knelt so I could get off his back and then shifted back. The other shifters followed suit, and I was surprised to find that one of them was a panicked-looking Ginger.

I'd never seen her look so upset. She wasn't crying, but her skin was ashen and her eyes were wide with terror.

"They took her, Cole," Ginger said. "They took her and... there was the other one...the cute one from the gym. We have to go after them. We have to go. They're in the forest, so we could catch up if we—"

"Hold on, slow down," Cole said, putting his hands on his sister's arms. "What are you talking about? Who was taken? Who did the taking?"

My blood turned to ice as I started to put information together before Ginger could even come up with an answer. The athletic shoe...the blood...

"P-Paulette!" she screamed. "Paulette and the girl from that stupid shifter gym! I was running with them. We were racing. When I started to win, I heard a whimper. I thought it was Paulette whining about losing, and then I turned around and..."

"That's Rosie's shoe," I said numbly. "I saw her wearing them when she arrived."

“If she lost one of her shoes...” Cole started.

“Then they must have gotten them to shift back into their human forms,” I said, reaching the same conclusion.

Cole lifted his nose to the air and sniffed. He closed his eyes as he tried to discern the scents, but I could only imagine that the blood and vomit nearby were overpowering his ability. But after a few moments, he let out a low growl.

“It was Lanyon Clover,” he said. “I can smell that Paulson woman’s shitty floral perfume.”

“We have to go after them,” Ginger said. “We have to go now. That...that blood is Paulette’s blood. And if they can somehow force shifters to take their human form, we’ll have more problems.”

Cole turned to me. “Marley, I’m going to start searching. I need you to go back to the group and order all hands on deck. Ginger, let Marley ride on your back.”

“Fuck that! I’m going to look for my girlfriend!”

“You and I both know that you’ll kill the first human you get your hands on,” Cole said. “And it wasn’t a suggestion. It was an order.”

His voice rang out in a way I wasn’t used to. It tickled some primal edge down the length of my spine—an urge to obey. Ginger seemed to react to it even more strongly, stiffening and looking over at me before finally nodding and shifting back into a wolf. She waited beside me for me to climb on, but I looked at Cole, cringing.

“Will they even listen to me?” I said. “I’m not their alpha.”

“You’re my mate, and in my absence, your word is just as good as mine,” he said. “Trust in your own authority. Own it. Make yourself heard. We’re all depending on you.”

I swallowed nervously, then looked back at the remaining clues of the violence perpetrated against two women I considered dear friends. I didn’t have time to be nervous. Cole was right. I knew my place in this pack, and it was time for me to rise to the occasion.

I nodded and took a deep breath. “Be careful,” I said to my mate.

“I will be,” he promised.

I climbed onto Ginger’s back and held on tight. She didn’t wait to make sure I was secure before sprinting back toward the party. As she ran, I practiced what I would say in my head—the tone I would use, the words I would say, the expression I would wear. I rehearsed scenarios in my head where people asked me what right I had to order them around or just turned around and left. My heart raced and my stomach twisted.

I was sure I could do this. I had to be sure.

As soon as we got back, I leaped off Ginger’s back and approached the mic that was still set up by the seating area. More people had gathered back here since Cole and I ran away. I wondered if they hadn’t heard the howls, or if Cole had been tuned into the sound because of his position as an alpha. Maybe it was Ginger who’d howled, and Cole knew his sister’s howl that well.

Whatever the case, I approached the microphone and tapped it to check it was on. It took a bit of finagling, but with Ginger’s aggressive bossiness, we finally got the music turned off and the microphone working. I lifted it to my mouth and cleared my throat.

Everyone looked at me, and for a moment, I blanked on what I was going to say. All the rehearsing and planning I’d done on the way here eddied right out of my brain. Nonetheless, I clenched my fists and steeled myself.

“We have an emergency,” I said, my voice steady and calm. “Two of our pack members have been taken. We don’t know for sure, but we suspect that this is Lanyon Clover’s doing. We need all able-bodied shifters to assist in the search. Ginger, standing here to my right, can take you to the abduction point.”

Every set of eyes across the party was solemnly focused on me. They were listening to me. They trusted me as the voice of the alpha.

“We suspect that Lanyon Clover may have some way to force shifters out of their lycan form,” I continued. “Proceed with caution and at your own risk. Stay together in teams of three or more. Do not exhaust yourselves. If anyone has any questions...well, I can’t promise I’ll be able to answer them, but I can promise to do my best.”

I looked over to Ginger, who gave me a curt nod before lifting her head to the sky and giving a rallying cry.

I watched as dozens of people in the crowd shifted, naturally gathering into groups of three or more, just as I’d instructed. They followed Ginger as she sprinted back into the forest to search for Paulette and Rosie.

I knew Cole had ordered her to stay, but I also knew there was no way that would ever happen. If the shoe were on the other foot, Cole would have ripped through anyone standing between him and me. Hell, I knew I would do whatever I could to tear anyone apart if Cole was taken. I watched them fade into the distance, catching sight of a few familiar wolves—Travis, Houston, and Lana.

When they were gone, I was flooded by another several dozen shifters who hadn’t left. They asked me what felt like hundreds of questions, and I had answers for very few of them. I did the best I could—a few shifters requested permission to go home, and I stressed to them that they never had to ask for permission to leave. We had single parents, elderly members, and young wolves who were too young to stay out too long past curfew. There were also a few shifters who found Lanyon Clover genuinely terrifying.

I didn’t blame them.

I sent them off with my blessing, urging them to stay safe by staying on main roads and near other cars if they were driving.

As the crowd thinned and dispersed. Sylvia approached me, leaning down to look me in the eye. “How you holding up, kid?” she asked.

“I... uh...” I stammered. “I’m so...what do I do?”

“What do you mean?”

“My friends are missing,” I said a little breathlessly. “What do I do?”

“For now, you and I have done what we can,” she said. “I’m old and slow, and you’re human. So now, we call the police and rest while we wait for Cole’s next orders.”

“It feels wrong to rest when Paulette’s blood was soaked into the dirt,” I said.

“Marley, this is something you’re going to have to get used to. There is always going to be more to do. So you have to rest when you’re able.”

I nibbled on the inside of my lip and gave a nod. “You’re right. Let’s call...I guess it’d be park rangers up here, right? Who cares, I’ll call everyone I can.”

Sylvia laughed and put an arm around my shoulders. “Come on, the hosts offered us their kitchen. Let’s go make some coffee. It’s probably going to be a long night.”

I tried not to look daunted by that statement as I let Sylvia lead me into the nice shifter couple’s home. After brewing coffee and coming up with a game plan, we sat down and got to work. Sylvia and I set up our makeshift command center in the yellow glow of the kitchen. Our hosts provided us with several maps of the area, highlighters and pens, and sticky notes. A method started to naturally form while we looked over the maps and talked back and forth with Cole, Travis, Farrah, and the other shifters out searching. We were covering a good amount of ground, but as the updates became slower and slower, coupled with the shifters’ diminishing energy levels, it was becoming clear that we would need help from agencies with the proper infrastructure.

I called the local police department, a sense of caution mingling with my hope. After a brief and somewhat disheartening conversation, I ended the call and frowned. “They’re claiming it’s not under their jurisdiction.”

Sylvia let out a deep sigh, her hand raking through her hair in exasperation. “Typical,” she muttered. “Let’s give the park

rangers a shot. Maybe they'll assist in the wilderness.”

I dialed the park rangers' office number. After a few minutes on the call, I ended it. Dejected, I looked at Sylvia. “The rangers agreed to send a couple of people, but they didn't sound too enthusiastic about it. It's crazy that no one seems to be taking this seriously.”

Sylvia leaned back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest. “Unfortunately, it's not uncommon. Non-shifter law enforcement often don't see shifter matters as their problem. If anything, they only begrudgingly assist to avoid bad press. But their help is rarely anything to write home about.”

“Why are we doing this, then? If we know it's fruitless?”

“Because we leave no stone unturned, Marley. Once they come out, we can trust that we've done everything we can to help find our friends.”

I didn't like that answer. It was disappointing, and it held the subtle implication that we may never find Paulette and Rosie.

In the quiet of the late night, minutes stretched into hours. Our search party was thinning out as people got exhausted or disheartened. It felt less and less likely that we would find our friends.

Finally, a knock on the door disrupted our silence. We hurried to answer it, opening the door to two park rangers standing on the doorstep, their enthusiasm visibly lacking.

I greeted them with a tight smile. “Thank you for coming. We're facing a grave situation and need to organize a search party for some missing shifters. There were some clear signs of a struggle, and we worried they might be in danger. Here, let me pull up some photos—”

One of the rangers put a hand up. “No need. We've just come to take a statement, and we'll be on our way.”

My frustration surged. “A statement? That's it? Lives are in jeopardy out there, and you're telling us you won't assist in the search?”

The rangers exchanged a stoic glance. “We’re following protocol,” the younger ranger explained. “Matters between shifters are most safely handled by other shifters. We just need accurate information for our records.”

“We need help, though,” I urged. “There’s hundreds of acres of forest, and most of our shifters have never even lived outside of the city.”

“Perhaps you should have been more cautious about visiting unfamiliar parts of town,” the ranger said, making steady eye contact with me.

I knew I should have seen this coming, but I also couldn’t help how much it pissed me off. Were there no decent humans? Were they all horrible like this? It was starting to feel like they were. I was starting to hate working with other humans because of their apathy in every single interaction.

“Fine,” I said finally. “Tell us what you need to know.”

The search went on until the small hours of the morning. When I ran out of things to do, I took to coordinating the effort to get everything broken down from the party. I felt numb and cold. I didn’t feel any sense of responsibility for what had happened. Instead, I felt like I was inconsequential. Like there was nothing I could have done about this scenario to protect my friends.

When everything had been torn down, I walked with aching feet to a huge pile of cushions ready to be loaded into the car. I collapsed onto them. Grabbing a blanket, I pulled it over me, shivering beneath the damp fabric as I stared up at the moon and the stars, making their slow journey across the sky.

My exhaustion caught up with me, and I must have fallen asleep because I jolted awake at a sudden weight shifting the makeshift bed. Strong arms wrapped around me, crushing me close, and Cole’s familiar scent tickled my nose.

Just beyond the disheveled wisps of his hair, I saw the pretty pink sky in the distance. I’d been asleep for a few hours,

but it'd only felt like moments.

“Cole?” I asked.

“We couldn't find them,” he said. “I'm so sorry, Marley.”

I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around him, knowing he needed as much comfort as I did, if not more.

“I'm sorry, too,” I said. “We won't give up hope. Paulette and Rosie are strong. We just have to meet them halfway.”

Cole's ribcage expanded, then shuddered as he sobbed. I knew his tears weren't from sadness but from frustration and heartbreak. The tears of a leader who felt he'd failed.

“Yeah,” he said. “Between their strength and our stubbornness, we'll bring our friends home.”

We had to believe that if we were going to make it through this. I had to believe it to make it through the danger I could feel barreling straight for my mate.

Chapter 14

Cole

I was so grateful for Marley. Without her help, I didn't think I would have been able to keep things in balance. Every time I had the urge to tear out of our house and go searching for our missing members, she reminded me that we had a shift order put together and that we didn't constantly need to be at our wit's end.

The New Middle Bluff police had been about as helpful as we'd expected, which was to say they were hardly helpful at all. A few of Ginger's friends came to pitch in when they were off-duty, helping us organize our efforts more efficiently, but we lacked the full support we needed. So, after running it by my parents, I made a call to Georgia.

"How many people do you think are coming tonight?" Marley asked. "Should I make dinner, or should we order something?" She sat at her laptop, combing over the maps of the region, noting where we'd been and where we still needed to go.

"I think I'll just order pizza, keep it easy. Gramps didn't tell me how many he planned on bringing out. Whatever we don't eat tonight, I can take to the search party of the day and let them polish it off."

Marley nodded and looked back down at the screen. I watched the light shift as she clicked to another website—to order pizza, I was sure.

I'd learned a lot about Marley's talent as a coordinator in the week that had passed since Rosie and Paulette's abduction.

Every time I talked to her about something needing to get done, it was done a few moments later or had been set in motion. For every complex action I said I needed to take, she was in the background, facilitating the whole thing. If I told her I was getting hungry, she either had food delivered or cooked something for me. If I had a headache coming on while discussing a plan with someone, she materialized some shifter-strength ibuprofen and a bottle of water. When I told her I was having a hard time keeping track of where we'd been and where we needed to go, she'd been keeping track without even telling me. She'd printed a set of maps and handed it to me a few minutes later.

It was strange to consider, but I felt like this whole situation was making our synergy and rightness for each other all the clearer. I felt in sync with her in a way I'd never been before.

A knock came at the front door, and Noah zoomed out of his room, making the sounds of an airplane the entire way to the frosted glass door. I chuckled as he reached for the locked doorknob and gave it a jiggle.

"Daddy, I can't reach the lock," he complained.

"I know. And that's a good thing 'cause we didn't check the camera yet, did we?" I reminded him. "Remember, we have to see who's at the door before we open it."

Noah had started picking up the habit of opening doors without me, whether at home or in the car. I'd been teaching him how to be safe and never open the door for strangers. There was no telling who was out there and what they were planning. The idea of Noah opening the door just to be yanked out of my home was enough to make me want to move to a different country.

I rose from the couch and walked to stand next to him, pointing at the new screen. "Remember what button to press?"

He nodded and pressed a round button emblazoned with an eye. The screen flicked on, revealing my grandfather and about a dozen other shifters standing behind him. I was so relieved to see so much new blood. Our ranks were wearing

out, and an infusion of fresh-faced shifters would do so much for our morale.

I unlocked the door and nodded at my son, prompting him to let them in. He opened the door and beamed up at our visitors. “Daddy’s gramps!” he said brightly.

Vic laughed down at Noah, instantly kneeling to pick him up. “You can call me Grampa Vic, all right?”

“Grampa Vic!” Noah repeated.

“Come on in, everyone. You’re all welcome,” I said, stepping aside to let them in.

I could hear a few faster clicks from Marley as she finished ordering the food. After a minute, she came to greet everyone from the Georgia pack. She smiled and hugged Vic first. River, who’d first taught Marley how to hold her own against a shifter, was among those who had come. He made his way over to greet her.

“It’s good as hell to see you, Marley,” he said, opening his arms as she finished her half-hug with my grandfather. “You look like you’re holding up well.”

“Something like that,” she said. “As well as I can with my friends missing.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find them,” River said firmly.

“Come on and sit down. We’ll get you guys all updated on the state of things,” Marley said. “We only have a few more places to look before we have to consider the possibility they’ve been taken across state lines. Maybe to somewhere that isn’t as stringent about protecting shifters.” She added, “I ordered a bunch of pizza. It should be here soon.”

“Sounds perfect,” Vic said.

We all sat down, and I was grateful I’d invested in better furniture for the lounge. Now, we actually had the room to host a group. Between the sectionals, recliners, and a few seats from the dining table and the breakfast bar, everyone had a place to perch.

I stayed standing, as did Marley. Noah seemed content to play with my grandfather's hair and crawl all over him like he was a jungle gym. My grandfather, in turn, was happy to act as his entertainment. I enjoyed seeing my son interact with him and watching my grandfather handle him so well. After shooting them a grin, I turned my attention to the entire group.

"We've scoured pretty much every surface of the mountains and most of the regions around where the pack members went missing," I said. "We have a few things with their scent for you guys to check out, along with a packet of maps we'll hand out to show you what's been searched and what hasn't.

"We caught a few trails, and we're trying to figure out where they lead. One is in the easternmost part of the city, adjacent to the mountains and right along the state border, which is why we're considering that they've been taken out of state. The other trail is by the canneries on the shoreline, about an hour's run from here."

"Should we split up?" River asked.

Marley pursed her lips. "We think it's really unlikely that they're being kept at the canneries, so Cole and our second are going to scope that out. They're some of the faster runners in our pack. If it ends up being a dud, they can join you guys at the state border really fast." She paused. "Actually, let me go print those maps."

She hurried away, and I leaned against the breakfast counter. "I want to sincerely thank you for coming out here to help my pack," I said to Vic. "It's not something I would have ever expected from you, and I'm not taking it for granted."

"I know you said you and your second were going on your own, but I think you should take a few people with you for backup," Vic said. "It's dangerous to go on your own, even if you think you'll be safe."

I shook my head. "Respectfully, Gramps, we'll be fine. We're fast and vicious. I'd rather have you guys where we need you."

“Maybe you guys should all go together,” Marley suggested as she returned with a stack of maps. “I don’t think a detour will make or break the search. A few hours won’t make much of a difference at your speed.”

I rubbed my hand over my chin and sighed. “I suppose if we leave a couple of hours earlier, we can have that lost time overlap with the search party that’s already going.”

“Yeah,” Marley said, smiling as she handed the stack of maps to the person nearest her. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Well, if you guys are okay with a longer shift tonight, we can do it that way,” I conceded.

“Sounds good to us,” Vic said. “We’re all pretty well-rested and ready to go.”

“Then it’s settled,” I said. “Pizza first. We’ll look over the maps together, and then we’ll head out.”

The doorbell rang. Noah hopped off Vic’s lap to run to the screen, clicking it on. A pizza delivery boy showed up on the screen, and Noah looked back at me. “Pizza’s here, Daddy!”

“Perfect timing,” Marley said, hurrying to the door with her wallet.

About an hour later, we set out for the canneries a few towns over. I appreciated the shorter days of the coming winter that gave us the cover of darkness we needed to make it there on foot instead of having to deal with a caravan of cars or traffic. We moved silently across the dense, damp stretches of the shoreline close to the water, never stalling, never slowing down.

It took us around ninety minutes to finally make it to the corrugated metal buildings that smelled of fish and brine. The closer we got to the buildings, the stronger the smell got, and before long, we all had to shift out of our lycan forms to save ourselves from the stench burning our sensitive noses. It was Travis who shifted first, gagging and pulling his black polo shirt up to cover his nose.

“Fuck,” he said. “How are you guys putting up with this? It’s fucking horrible.”

We all shifted in quick order after that, confirming that we weren’t handling it well, either.

“It’s not great,” River said. “You get used to awful smells after being a shifter for a long time, but this is one of the worst I’ve dealt with.”

“Let’s just get this done with so we can get gone,” Vic said.

“Let’s split into groups. We can cover ground faster that way,” I said.

The fifteen of us split into natural groupings. Travis stuck with me. River, Vic, and a few others I didn’t recognize formed another group. A woman—the one who’d made a pass at me in Georgia—grouped up with a few other women. All told, we had about five groups split off from each other as we quietly made our way through the dingy warehouses.

I stayed vigilant, knowing Lanyon Clover wouldn’t hesitate to attack again if they were here. My gut told me they wouldn’t be, but something kept itching in the back of my mind, a feeling that I was missing something obvious. It was the same feeling I’d had about the smell of turpentine when Curt went after Marley at her place.

My senses were heightened and my instincts were on high alert as I searched for any sign of our missing pack members. And any signs of the hunch that was starting to make itself more and more known in the back of my mind. I couldn’t shake the instincts that were clawing out of me.

Travis suddenly sprinted ahead, kicking up damp sand and foul-smelling air in his wake. I didn’t think—I bolted after him, sure he’d seen or smelled something with his brand-new enhanced senses. Something I must have missed. But he just tore off onto one of the docks, bending over the edge of it to vomit into the black water below. I groaned and pinched the bridge of my nose.

He hurled one more time before standing upright, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. “S-sorry, bro. I just got overwhelmed by the stench and—”

His voice was interrupted by the sound of something flitting through the air and thunking into his side. He froze and patted his hip.

“Trav?” I asked. “Are you alright?”

He gave something a hard yank and held an object before him, holding it under the moonlight to inspect it.

A dart.

“Fuck,” he slurred before crumpling into a heap on the swollen wood of the dock.

I lunged to grab him, fumbling to stabilize the dead weight of his unconscious body. I tried to keep myself upright and inhaled deeply to call out to the others, warn them that there was someone nearby with tranquilizer darts so they could shift and make a run for it. To save themselves.

But before I could, I suddenly felt a sharp blow to the back of my head. I lost my footing and slammed into the dock. My vision went black as a pair of combat boots came into view.

When I came to, my head was pounding brutally. I blinked in the harsh light overhead. Where was I? What had happened? My memory was blurry and smeared as I tried to jog myself up to speed. In the end, it was the horrible smell that brought everything into focus.

We’d been lured here and ambushed. And now I was tied to a metal chair, steel-cord bike locks wrapped around my forearms and legs.

“Well, bless your heart, you and your pack just fell for our trap hook, line, and sinker!” a familiar voice rang out.

I gritted my teeth. The sound of heels clicking against the concrete floors foreshadowed her arrival just before a smiling face came into view. “Get it?” Ms. Paulson grinned. “Hook, line, and sinker? And we’re in a fish cannery. Funny, right?”

“Fuck you,” I snapped. “Where’s my pack?”

“Oh, don’t worry, you’ll be joining them soon enough. You see, Cole, we’ve been working on a little experiment.” Her eyes gleamed with malice. “We’ve developed an injection that will make the shifter gene dormant. Sort of like what your little friend went through, but in reverse. It will render all of you powerless. You’ll be normal humans with no ability to shift. Just the way that God intended.”

“You can’t do this,” I growled, clenching my fists. “You have no right to tamper with our DNA, to take away what makes us who we are. We aren’t your fucking lab rats.”

Ms. Paulson chuckled gleefully. “Oh, but we can, Cole. We have the resources, and we’re willing to do whatever it takes to protect the world from the dangers of your kind.” Her face became unnervingly serious, her eyes glassy and dark. “We are tired of living in fear. We are tired of being attacked. We are tired of losing our loved ones to you *monsters*. And if we have to tie you down like this and force you all to be exactly what you’re meant to be—*normal*—then we will.”

“We are not dangers or monsters,” I growled. “We’re individuals with unique abilities, just like humans who have their own strengths and weaknesses. What you’re talking about could kill people.”

“A price I’m willing to pay.”

“That’s not a choice you get to make,” I barked, thrashing against my restraints.

Her smile widened. “Oh, I’m sure you truly believe that. But our research shows that shifters can be unpredictable and volatile. Your life became forfeit when you were born as unrepentant abominations.”

“Let me make one thing clear,” I growled. “We won’t let you do this. We won’t be your guinea pigs.”

Ms. Paulson’s expression darkened. “You don’t have a choice, Cole. We have you all under our control now. We have you separated. We have you weakened. And by the time anyone finds you, our work will be done.”

My mind raced, searching for a way out of this dire situation. But as I struggled with the steel cords, I knew escape was not an option. Lanyon Clover had prepared for every contingency, and they wouldn't let me go without a fight.

Chapter 15

Marley

It had been a horrible, miserable, agonizing week.

After my initial meltdown when Cole had fallen off the radar, I had done nothing but try to organize efforts to find him and everyone else who'd gone missing with him. I had tried to appeal to our local police, and Ginger had pleaded with her colleagues, but Lanyon Clover had fully infiltrated the force, thanks to some local non-shifter politicians who were wrapping them up in red tape. We were told to come back when we had hard evidence that the shifters had actually gone missing and hadn't just gone wild, consigning themselves to a life of permanently being in their lupine form.

After a few days, it became clear that there was nothing we could do. I had to make the heart-wrenching decision to send out a message to the rest of the pack that we were hoping to secure evidence, and I'd look for other ways we could take the burden on ourselves. I ordered the rest of the pack not to go anywhere near the canneries and to stay vigilant.

The day after I sent that order, in the wee hours of the morning, I jerked out of a fitful sleep when I heard banging on the door. I sat up from where I'd fallen asleep, going through the numbers over and over again, combing through every pack member and trying to figure out if we had the manpower for a full-scale rescue mission. I rubbed my eyes as I picked up my phone and found that I'd missed ten calls and about fifteen texts from—

“Open the fucking *door*, Marley!” Lana shouted from the other side. “You think you can put through a command like

that and then ignore all my calls and texts? Open the fucking door!”

I stumbled over to the door and unlocked it. Lana stormed in, grabbing the collar of my shirt. “You get the pack together and tell us to go save everyone?” she growled, only inches from my face.

“Lana,” I said softly, “you need to calm down.”

“Fuck you,” she snarled. “Travis has been missing for *four days*, and I call Farrah for an update and find out that you’ve called off the search?”

“I called off the search because we already know where they are!” I screamed, my head threatening to explode. “Fifteen able-bodied, powerful shifters went to the canneries and never made it to the eastern border. That’s the only place they can be.”

“So then we go get them,” she snapped.

“Farrah told me that we don’t have the manpower.”

“So, what? We just let them fucking die?”

“No, of course not. You think I don’t care? You think I haven’t been racking my brain, trying to come up with ideas to get our family back?” I gestured back toward the dining room table, which was a mess of maps, notebooks, pens, and highlighters. “I am doing everything I fucking can, but unfortunately, it isn’t very much.”

“Call the Georgia pack,” she said.

“They told me to fuck off.”

Lana clenched her fists. “Then we use our own people.”

“Sure, let’s send a bunch of single parents and elderly people into the same environment that took out Cole *and* his powerful grandfather. Great fucking idea,” I snapped. “Like I said, Lana, I’m already doing everything I can. But putting everyone in danger to save them won’t fucking work.”

Lana breathed hard for a few more moments, her nostrils flaring. The silence was deafening as we glared at each other.

Then tears welled in her eyes, and she let out a whimper as she crumpled into me. I wrapped my arms around her.

“I know,” I said as my vision blurred. “I feel like I’m imploding, too.”

“I can’t sleep. I’m so worried about him. He’s supposed to be safe now. He’s a shifter.” She wept against my shirt. “What can we do? There has to be something we can do. There has to be someone in the world who cares. Someone who...who is just pissed off enough about shifters getting shafted that we can get them to help.”

I had a refusal on the tip of my tongue when something clicked into place. “Oh,” I said softly.

“What?”

“I...have an idea. A really horrible fucking idea.”

Desperate times called for desperate measures, and I was willing to push boundaries to get Cole back home. And this was as desperate as it got.

A month or two ago, Cole told me about visiting some strange country club for shifters who thought like Curt. It seemed like the best way to find him. I hitched up my strapless bra again as I walked with Lana up the long driveway.

“These heels are fucking terrible,” I complained.

“Yep,” Lana agreed. “So is this idea.”

“Yeah, but what else have we got?”

The clubhouse looked more like a bumping nightclub than an elite meeting spot for wealthy lycan supremacists. The distant thumping of music grew louder with each step until we made it to the door.

A huge statue of a man scowled down at us. “Why’d you bring the snack?” he asked Lana, referring to me.

“Because my alpha is inside waiting to devour her, obviously,” Lana said with a wicked curl of a smile. “I don’t

recommend pissing him off, by the way. He's twiggy, but he's brutal."

"Oh, you're one of his," the bouncer said with an eye roll. "All right, go on in."

He stepped aside, and we hurried in before he changed his mind.

Inside was a wild party, and the energy in the air was palpable. There was a whirlwind of lights, colors, and dancing bodies. It smelled like sweat and booze. I scanned the room, searching for Curt. It didn't take long to overhear a conversation near the bar.

Two shifters were speaking loudly over the music, arrogance dripping from every word. "Did you get a good lay from that snack cake last night?" one of them jeered, a wicked grin on his face.

The other shifter chuckled, raising his glass in a mocking toast. "Obviously. Non-shifters are so eager to please, it's almost too easy. I gotta tell you, I'm glad Alpha started lightening up on the rules. I've been drowning in pussy ever since Curt said it was cool to fuck a non-shifter."

Disgust churned in my stomach, but I couldn't let it distract me. I had the confirmation I needed now: Curt was here. Now I just had to find him.

My focus narrowed, and I started to weave through the crowd, seeking out the man we needed. Somewhere along the line, I discovered that Lana wasn't with me anymore. Scanning the crowd frantically, I was just about to start calling for her when a cool gust of breath brushed against the shell of my ear.

"What is a claimed mate doing in a party full of rutting males looking for conquest?" the familiar voice asked. "Is Cole's performance so unsatisfactory that you need to find a new plaything?"

I spun around to face him, equal parts relieved and concerned. Curt smiled as he stood to his full height and slid his hands into his hoodie pockets.

“So, you’re here dressed like a common skank,” he said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Can we go somewhere quieter?” I asked.

He gave me his dark-eyed stare for a long moment before sighing and shrugging half-heartedly. “Come on.”

I followed him outside, and he led me to a hedge maze. I hesitated at its entrance, staring at him with a skeptical look.

He looked back at me, hooded eyes giving me an unbothered, questioning look. “You wanted quieter. This is quieter.”

“It’s also hidden,” I said.

“I don’t bite,” he said with a smirk.

I glowered at him.

“Too soon?” he asked.

Curt looked at me from head to toe, then back up again. I felt a little too naked in the strapless dress I’d borrowed from Lana, especially as his eyes followed the jagged edges of the bite scar on my shoulder. I lifted my hand to obscure it from his view, not dropping my eyes from his face.

I was determined not to let him bully me. If this was going to work, I needed to keep a firm handle on the negotiations. If I let him throw me off with his flirtations or comments, I would definitely end up on my back foot.

“Are you going to toy with me the whole time I talk to you, or are you going to actually listen to me?” I asked.

“Marley, baby, I’ve already removed myself from my own party to come and talk to you,” Curt said. “I could have just laughed in your face and told you to get the fuck out. Actually, I could have done far worse than that without anyone stopping me. I’m not someone who likes to waste my time, especially if I’m in the middle of spending that time surrounded by beautiful women worshipping me.”

“So why didn’t you?” I asked. “Kick me out, I mean.”

He gestured with a paint-covered hand toward the hedge maze. "Sit down with me like a normal person and find out," he said, lips curving upward lazily.

I hesitated before dropping my hand from my shoulder and walking again. He waited until I was next to him before he slipped his hand into his pocket and started leading me into the maze. My stomach flipped and twisted as the humming bass of the music inside the clubhouse grew farther and farther away. Finally, we reached a quiet fountain with dim lighting and a few benches around it. Curt sat down on one of the benches, pulling his knee onto it and sprawling his arm across the back of it.

He nodded toward the small bit of space left for me, and I shuffled over, sitting as far away from him as I could. This looked like a make-out spot, and I didn't like it. Even more, I hated that he knew how to get to it so quickly.

There was a time in my youth when an edgy bad boy like Curt would have really gotten my blood and hormones pumping. He reminded me of the emo boys I used to idolize when I was angsty about...well, everything. I tried not to look at him as I sat in silence.

In my peripheral vision, I watched him reach into his pants pocket and pull out a box of cigarettes and a lighter. He opened the dented cardboard and held it toward me.

"Take one," he said. "We're gonna do this over a smoke break."

"I don't smoke," I said.

"I wasn't asking," he said. "You crashed my party and started making demands. Now it's my turn."

I glared over at him, flattening my lips before begrudgingly taking one and putting it in my mouth.

He huffed a laugh before lighting his cigarette with a worn, windproof lighter. After taking a long drag from it, he held the flame out for me.

I leaned forward to light my own cigarette, hands faintly shaking as I held it between my fingers. But just as I got close

enough to ignite it, he slammed the metal lighter shut and closed the distance between us.

I was just about to retreat when he grabbed my wrist and held me there. He pressed the glowing end of his own smoke to the end of mine, bringing our faces uncomfortably close. I was so surprised by it that I gasped, pulling smoke from my cigarette too fast and burning the back of my throat.

He was still holding my wrist as I recoiled from the bitter taste, turning my face away from him as I coughed and wheezed. Ribbons of silver smoke drifted up into the moonlit sky. He laughed, releasing me and leaning back as he watched me struggle to catch my breath.

“Wrong pipe?” he asked.

“Fuck you,” I wheezed.

“Well, if you’re offering,” he said, taking another lazy drag as he settled back into his lounging position. “So, again, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

I held off on the urge to bark at him over his innuendo, flicking the ash off my cigarette before taking a much smaller puff.

“I have a situation, and we don’t have the infrastructure to handle it,” I said, getting straight to the point.

“Infrastructure? You mean that pitiful little daycare you guys call a pack?”

I bit my tongue and sighed. “Yes, our pack.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“Nothing. Yet. But this is one of those ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ scenarios.”

He quirked an eyebrow at me as he let out a large cloud of smoke from his nostrils, hitching an ankle onto his knee. “You came to ask me for my help?”

“Yes. Albeit begrudgingly,” I said under my breath.

“What’s going on?”

I gave him the rundown of everything: Rosie and Paulette being taken, the search parties, Cole and the rest of our strongest and most loyal members going missing at the canneries, some pack members being abducted since. By the time I was done talking, my cigarette had burned down to nothing.

I stamped it out on the stone bench while Curt lit up a new one for himself, looking thoughtful.

“So, you think humans are somehow managing to grab these shifters,” he said as he exhaled. “That right?”

I nodded. “We’ve seen some posts on social media that have hinted at that. Some of the emails coming out from Lanyon Clover are full of thinly veiled hints that they’ve trapped some shifters. They talk about things like kennels, leashes, and so on.”

Curt clicked his tongue derisively before sucking his teeth. “Always with the fucking *dog* rhetoric,” he said, lips pressing into an enraged line. “If any of these humans had an idea of the carnage we’re capable of, they wouldn’t fucking dare.”

“Right,” I said, my voice warbling a bit. “That’s why I thought you might help. Maybe it’s enough of an insult to you that you could overlook your disgust for our pack long enough to help us save it.”

He looked at me, all traces of flirtatious humor evaporating. My heart sped up so much that it pounded in my ears. I saw a flash of his hateful stare in the painting in New York, his lip curling back from vicious rows of teeth. I dug my nails into my thigh to keep myself from spiraling into a full-blown panic attack.

“You smell like him, but you’re still a weak little coward,” Curt said with disgust. “You know, Marley, for a human, you impress me sometimes. You let the man claim you as his, like any self-respecting mate should. You fought against me tooth and nail when I came after you. You put that stupid cuck Wyatt on tilt like it was nothing.” He took a long, slow drag from his second cigarette. “But then your little heart hammers in your

chest like a rabbit, and I remember what you are. I remember that you're just *prey*."

"Does that mean you won't help me?"

"I'll help," he said. "But only because my hatred for Ms. Paulson and her squadron of discount commandos outweighs my hatred for the weakness of your mate and his pack." He flicked the remnants of his cigarette into the water fountain and got to his feet. "We done here?"

"Well, don't you...shouldn't we come up with a plan?" I asked.

"Leave the planning to the capable adults," he sneered as he stalked away from me, hands in his pockets. "Just go back to your pretty home and play house with the pup. You'll have your mate back soon enough."

He vanished behind one of the walls of the maze, leaving me alone with my thoughts and my terrible sense of direction. I stood and walked over to the water feature in the center of the courtyard. Brilliantly colored koi swam in lazy circles, shimmering in the moonlight.

I reached into the water and picked the cigarette butt out of the fountain, watching as the fish scurried away from the intrusion. I looked up at the moon and wondered if Cole could see it, wherever he was.

Stress lay heavy on my heart. I could only hope that I'd made the right choice.

And I could only hope that Curt's influence on our pack and our lives would be as easy to remove as the soggy cigarette butt between my fingers.

Chapter 16

Cole

Everything hurt.

My bones, my muscles, my head, my eyes. A fire seemed to blaze in me the entire time. The only peace I got was when I managed to sleep.

When I slept, I dreamed of Marley. Her light soap-and-floral scent. Her serene smile. The silky softness of her lips against mine. It was the only respite I got from the acrid stink of vomit and the bitter taste of my own failure as I listened to my friends and packmates suffer.

I hadn't slept in a while, though. The injections they'd given me so far weren't doing anything to change my nature. I'd checked a number of times that I could still shift when the Lanyon Clover goons were off doing whatever it was they did.

But I was getting weaker.

I wasn't sure if that was because of the injections, though. They were barely feeding us, and I was still strapped to that same chair I'd been in when I came to. They didn't even grant me the dignity of pissing properly. A few times a day, someone would bring me a bottle to piss in.

It was demoralizing, and beyond that, it was the first time I'd ever felt so powerless and unable to control my own fate. It felt like they were trying to break us, and with some of us, they were beginning to succeed. They kept us in darkness, they kept us hungry, they kept us afraid.

I let my head roll back when I heard the door open. When the light clicked on, I winced, trying to get my eyes to adjust to the sudden flood of brightness after being kept in the dark for so long. By the time I got my eyes to focus fully, my visitor was right by my side. Ms. Paulson, as per usual.

She pulled up a chair and sat next to me. “You really are my favorite to visit, did you know that?”

“Fuck you,” I said.

“Such a foul mouth on you.”

She produced a small glass bottle from her pocket, filled with the black serum I had grown so used to seeing. I sneered as she filled a syringe with it and popped off the protective cap that hid the needle from sight.

I strained against my bindings, but the fighting was fruitless.

“See?” she said as she neared, her nose crinkling in amusement. “You still fight every time, and you look downright silly doing it.”

She neared me with the needle, and just as she was about to press it into my skin for the umpteenth time, something clattered loudly beyond the door, the brief sound of shouting following it.

My captor looked toward the door. While she was distracted, I leaned forward with all the force I could muster and headbutted her right in the temple.

She yelped and toppled over with a thud. She didn’t move.

“In here!” I shouted, my ears aching with the bellow of my own voice.

I heard quick, boot-clad footsteps on concrete floors before the door suddenly burst open, swinging so widely that it smacked the corrugated steel wall. I was hoping for Houston, or maybe even other members from my grandfather’s pack, but the person standing in the door frame was neither.

Lanky, limber, and smelling of turpentine, the person scanning the room was none other than Curt Fowler. The very

man I wanted to take a long walk off a short pier.

“What the fuck?” I blurted.

“My thoughts exactly,” he said. “They got you with *bike locks*?”

“Tell you what,” I griped. “You switch spots with me, get injected with mystery drugs, and tell me how easy it is to get out of these bonds.”

“I’m not into bondage,” Curt responded flippantly.

He walked over to Ms. Paulson, who lay motionless on the floor. I worried for a moment that I’d hit her with enough force to kill her, then I saw the slow, rhythmic rise and fall of her chest.

Unconscious. Good.

Curt crouched next to her and manhandled her. I watched him closely. Regardless of whether or not I hated the woman, I wasn’t about to watch her be taken advantage of while she was unconscious. Luckily, though, he mostly just adjusted her limbs and weight while he looked for something.

He produced the item after a few seconds: a lanyard attached to two keyrings with about fifty tiny keys divided between the two. Curt let out a long, discouraged sigh.

“Great,” he said, scowling at me. “Needle, meet fucking haystack.”

“Most people bring bolt cutters to things like this,” I pointed out.

“Most shifters don’t get abducted by humans,” he countered, hurrying over to me and starting to try every key on each of the four bike locks keeping me bound to the chair. “We gotta make this quick. We’re going to have company soon.”

“How many of you are here?” I asked.

“About two dozen, but this place fucking reeks, and some of them aren’t doing so hot.”

“Yeah, that’s what happened to us, too,” I said. “Have you been able to help anyone else?”

“Kinda busy,” was all he said, trying the fourth key on the ring.

I pressed my lips and clenched my fists. I really didn't want to be an asshole, but he was the only link I had to any information. I was feeling a little impatient about getting all the information from him that I could.

We sat in tense silence for the next few minutes as he tried each key individually. Finally, he got one of the locks open, the one on my right arm. It popped free, and I made quick work of sliding my arm out from it, shaking my hand and rolling my shoulder to lubricate the joints that had become stiff and uncomfortable.

“Fuck, that feels good,” I groaned.

Curt fussed with the keyring until he managed to get that key off. He was about to throw it when I stopped him.

“Try it on the other ones first,” I said. “Sometimes they can key more than one lock to the same key.”

“That's stupid. There's no way they need this many keys,” he said. “That would mean there are fifty shifters in here.”

“Would you just fucking try, dickhole?” I snapped.

He growled and tried it on my left arm.

The bike lock clicked open.

Silence fell between us again. This time, a little more poignant. The reality had sunk in that every key on this ring represented an abducted shifter who was currently being tortured in one way or another.

I'd always thought Lanyon Clover was harmless. Irritating and hateful, but harmful in the way that any bigoted person could be. To think that they'd been keeping shifters imprisoned...I had to wonder how many they were keeping with them as they traveled from town to town. And how long the shifters had been imprisoned.

Curt started moving again, unlocking the locks around my ankles. “I'm going to slaughter every fucking piece of shit human in this place,” he ground out.

“No, you’re not,” I said as he unlocked the final binding.

“You may be an alpha, but you’re not my fucking alpha. Keep your commands to yourself.”

I stood slowly, my leg and hip muscles fighting me the entire way. I wondered if it was just from sitting in the same place for a week, or if it was because of the serum shot into my veins. I did what I could to bring back blood flow and mobility, but it was proving difficult.

“Listen,” I finally said, “I know you’re pissed off, but I’m weak and my pack mates probably are, too. If you need to get a vendetta out of your system, do it on your own time. I need to prioritize saving my pack.”

“If your pack members are saved, we’ll have even more power in numbers to take out all of these psychotic pricks,” he sneered.

“Which would be murder,” I pointed out. “If you’re going to commit a crime that gets you put on death row, do it on your own time.”

“All time is my time,” he said. “The only one on borrowed time here is *you*.”

I heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of my nose. I held out my hand for the keys. “Fine,” I said. “Thank you for saving my ass. Give me the keys, and we can part ways right now. You can go on your merry little murderous way, and I’ll go on mine.”

Curt studied me, then glanced at Ms. Paulson. He scowled and unclipped one of the key rings, handing it over to me. “We’re locking her in here. In fact, we’re locking her the way they had you locked up.”

I watched as Curt hefted her up and set her on the chair, binding her tightly with the bike locks. He took the key he’d used to free me and threw it across the room, where it slid into some dark, forgotten corner.

He looked satisfied with himself. “I’ll keep things clean for now, but when we’re done here, I get her.”

“Curt—”

“If you want to be a weakling, that’s your prerogative. But I don’t take kindly to human trash binding up and torturing our kind,” he said. “You’d think as an alpha, you’d feel the same way. An example needs to be made here.”

It wasn’t so much that I didn’t want to make an example of the woman; more that I wanted it to be done in a way that other humans could digest. I didn’t want to fight cruelty with cruelty.

But looking over at Ms. Paulson, who had a bruise beginning to bloom on her temple, I had to wonder if there was some truth to what Cole was saying. Was I being too forgiving? Too lenient? If I didn’t think death was a fair punishment for putting the lives of my entire pack at risk, then where did I draw the line?

“Fine,” I finally said. “Let’s just get going. I want to get the hell out of here and back to my mate.”

“That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said since I got here,” he said.

From there, it was brutally efficient work. Some rooms had a handful of guys wearing discount tactical gear. I was too exhausted to shift, but Curt doing it prompted many of them to run away. The ones who didn’t? Well, I tried to get to them before Curt to reduce the amount of bloodshed.

Curt...for everything I hated about him, I had to admit that he had changed. He was stronger, more assured. Or maybe it was just that he had been playing a game of incompetence when I first met him. It had fit better into Wyatt’s narrative, after all.

Finally, after releasing about twenty captive shifters, we found Rosie. She looked terrible, crumpled into a little ball in the corner of a dark metal room. When we turned the lights on, she shielded her eyes and shrank further into herself.

“No, no, no, no,” she whimpered. “Please, no more.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” I said, kneeling next to her. “You’re all right. You’re done now, okay? We’re going to get you out of

here, Rosie.”

She was wearing a huge T-shirt covered in grime and sweat. I wondered what had happened to the clothes she’d worn when she was abducted. Maybe she’d torn through them with a partial shift in a last-ditch effort to protect herself when at her weakest. Unlike the other shifters, she was only bound by a single shackle around her ankle.

She wouldn’t look at me. I didn’t want to frighten her, but I could tell she wasn’t really *here* after everything she’d experienced. I tentatively brushed my fingers through her soft, curly hair. It was sticky with oil and sweat and tangled, but still so soft.

“Rosie,” I said a little more softly. “Can you look at me, please?”

She stilled and sniffed. She pulled one hand away from her face and looked at me.

“C-C-C-Cole?” she whimpered. “Is...are you...did we die?”

My heart broke, and guilt skewered me right through the gut. If I’d been smarter and more careful, Rosie would have been out of this place a week ago. Maybe even sooner.

“We’re very much alive,” I said. “We got really lucky. Curt and his band of misfits came to help us.”

“I didn’t know you got caught,” she said, looking over my shoulder at Curt.

I nodded. “They’ve got things down to a science.”

Curt came over and started trying keys in the lock on her foot. We were running out of keys to try, so we released her pretty quickly. When Curt was done, I moved to pick her up, but he stopped me.

“Let me get her out of here,” he said. “I know the way out, and I don’t think she should be in here any longer than she needs to be.”

“Well, look at that. You do have a heart.”

“Fuck you,” he snapped, moving to Rosie’s side and putting her arm over his shoulder. “Come on,” he said to her. “Let’s get you out of this stinking shit-hole.”

Rosie looked from him to me. I knew she recognized him, so I gave her an encouraging little nod to let her know he was safe—at least for now.

They left the room and vanished down the corridor. I picked up the keys and kept going.

I systematically cleared everything. Some shifters stuck with me, helping me intimidate other non-shifters into backing down as we released the captives. Some took the opportunity to run. There were a few shifters I found who said they’d been stuck under Lanyon Clover’s thumb for nearly three months. They were mostly lone wolves who’d made the mistake of pulling into the wrong town and getting swept up into something they’d wanted no part of.

After about an hour, the place got very quiet, and I was finally able to locate Paulette. She looked much more worn-down than Rosie, but far more fiery. I wondered if that was what had gotten her into her current condition—if she’d been fighting tooth and nail to get back to my sister and gotten the shitty end of the stick because of it.

I entered and walked toward her. Her gaze was downcast, but her lips were etched in a permanent, angry frown. I got close to the seat she was bound to in the same way I had been. I kneeled right before her, putting a gentle but firm hand on her leg.

She looked at me and blinked quickly, as if trying to clear dust out of her eyes. She let out a soft breath before her expression finally changed to something fragile and scared. “Oh my god,” she wept softly. “I thought I was going to die in here.”

I nodded, biting my lip and feeling my own eyes burn with tears. “I know,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Can you get me out of here?” she asked. “Please?”

I took the final key and unlocked her shackles. When I was finished, I mustered my strength and picked her up, then started walking in the direction I'd seen everyone exiting through.

As we got closer to getting out, we started running into shifters with fresh faces. They were familiar to me from the Georgia pack or my own. They gestured to tell us where to go and asked if there were any others. I couldn't really make myself answer. The fact that I was about to leave this hell and see my sweet Marley was all I could really think about.

I stepped outside onto the soft, worn wood, letting my legs lead me as I took in the magnitude of the rescue mission. Massive industrial fans blew the stench away from the shoreline. Gas masks had been discarded in a pile near the doors. There were pop-up tents with pack healers, people handing out food and water, and several young shifters running through the area frantically.

Off toward the ocean, I saw Houston and a handful of other lawyers handling citizen's arrests.

I saw Lana weeping and holding on to Travis like she was trying to melt into him. Curt must have gotten to him first.

But I didn't see Marley.

Ginger approached me, her expression stoic but her eyes wet with tears. "Hey, you big dummy."

"Which dummy are you talking to?" I asked.

"The other one," she said, nodding toward Paulette. She smiled and let out a quiet sob, her composure failing. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry that this happened while I was right next to you. I should have been protecting you—"

"Shut up, dummy," Paulette said quietly. "Just get me a burger and take me the fuck home."

Ginger took Paulette into her arms, giving me a nod of thanks. "Your mate is over by the chain-link fence, trying to get the police to take her seriously."

"Sounds like her," I said with a chuckle.

I walked slowly, body aching, toward the gathering of uniformed men. I couldn't see Marley past them—she was so small in comparison—but I could hear my fierce, beautiful, unrelenting mate.

“Do you hear yourselves?!” Marley shouted. “If this shit-show had happened to humans, it would be national news. You would be frothing mad, and now you're saying you might not even arrest them? You have to. This is kidnapping, false imprisonment, assault and battery, and—”

I got close enough to finally see her impassioned face between two of the men's shoulders. She stopped short when her eyes met mine. I gave her a weak smile.

Without another word, she scrambled past the police officers and came barreling toward me. She closed the distance between us so quickly that I had no time to brace myself for impact. Marley slammed into me so hard, I tumbled backward into the damp dirt. She peppered kisses on me from the top of my head, to my cheeks, to my brows, to my lips.

I laughed softly as she did, so glad to have a woman who was willing to greet me like this when I smelled like a bag of gym clothes.

“Cole,” she said, looking down at me and brushing some hair away from my face.

The sky stretched on above her, the sun shining behind her head and making her look like an angel.

“I missed you so much, baby,” I said, my body relaxed and blissful. “I missed you so much.”

“You're so thin.” She began to weep, brushing her hand down my cheek. “We need to get some food in you.”

“Gramps?” I asked.

“One of the first ones they got out.” Her thumb kept tracing gentle circles on my cheeks.

“Noah?”

“Noah is safe and sound at your mom's.”

I let out a soft breath and closed my eyes. “Good,” I said, finally able to relax now that I knew everyone was safe.

I didn’t remember falling asleep.

* * *

“Bro, you have got to stop fucking sweating,” Travis told me. “This is the fourth shirt you’ve sweat through.”

“I know,” I groused.

“What the hell are you even nervous about? You already got her to say yes to marrying you once. Now you’re just making it official.”

“I don’t know why I’m fucking nervous. I just am.” I yanked off the tie around my neck and popped open the shirt without much care. Buttons dislodged and tumbled all over the kitchen floor of our lakeside property, the sound echoing off the still-unfinished walls.

“You guys don’t even have a real group gathered out there,” Travis said. “Just your parents and Noah and Marley’s folks and a few friends. You’re flipping out.”

“Did you not just hear me say that I don’t know why I’m nervous?” I asked him, grabbing the fresh shirt from his hands.

“No, no, no, no,” Travis said. “You need to towel off and calm down first, man. Come on. Just have a seat already.”

Travis gestured to a director’s chair that had been set up for Marley’s makeup earlier in the day. I grumbled as I climbed into it, brushing a hand over my face and taking in a deep breath.

“Seriously, dude, what is up with you?” Travis asked me, walking over to a cooler with back-up drinks for our miniature reception and grabbing a chilled bottle of water. He brought it over to me, and I accepted it, pressing it against the side of my neck to cool myself down.

Travis leaned against one of the countertops we’d just finished installing and crossed his arms. “I know you well

enough to know that you've got some kind of mental block going on in there. Why don't you just spit it out so we can handle it already?"

I brushed my free hand through my hair and settled back into the seat. He was right. Something was bothering me, but I didn't want to say it. It felt like bad luck to mention insecurities on my wedding day. But at this rate, I wouldn't make it to the altar if I didn't stop worrying about it.

"Do you think I'm a shitty mate?" I asked.

Travis gave me a strange look. Then, without missing a beat, he said, "I mean, listen, man. You know I love you, but not like that."

"Oh, fuck off," I said, cracking a smile regardless. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do," he said, rolling his eyes. "I do wonder why you're asking me that, though."

"After the Lanyon Clover thing a couple months ago, and the shit with Curt and Wyatt...I'm starting to wonder if I can even protect my family, let alone my entire pack. That's the one thing Marley should be able to expect from me no matter what—protecting her. But I don't have the best track record."

"Both of you have been in danger, and both of you have gotten each other out of those dangerous situations," Travis said. "You guys are pack leaders. You're going to have to be strong for each other if you want to make this whole thing work. You're going to have to learn how to keep your head on straight when things go wrong."

"What happened at the cannery was traumatic—it was traumatic for all of us, frankly," Travis continued. "It was a shit deal for everyone involved. So, you know, it makes perfect sense that you'd still be fucked up about it. But that doesn't mean you have to remove yourself from the joys in your life. I would imagine there'd be no mates or packs at all if that was the standard we had to adhere to, don't you?"

I'd been working on not being too hard on myself in therapy, but it was a slow process, and I didn't know if I would

ever get it fully right. After being freed from the cannery, we'd had a lot to clean up, literally and figuratively. Ms. Paulson was still a missing person, and the rest of Lanyon Clover was still in and out of jail and court. It was all hard to keep up with.

We were also waiting for the analysis of the chemicals they'd pumped into the air and our veins so we'd know if there'd be any long-term side effects. I still needed to make an appointment with the doctor, but I'd used the wedding and the court cases as an excuse to put it off. To be honest, I was nervous about what I would learn.

My therapist told me that I shouldn't put my life on hold while I processed things. That I should still do the things I had planned to do before the trauma. But...

"Yeah, you're right," I said, letting my breath drain out of me. "I'm certain of Marley, but I also know we're going into all of this super quickly. I don't want her to look back on today and feel like I was trying to rush her into something. I don't want her to regret it."

"If she regrets it, so what?" Travis said. "Don't give me that face, you dick, I mean it. If you or me or Marley—fucking anyone—go through life avoiding regret, then nothing is ever going to happen in life, good or bad. If you guys crash and burn in a couple years, you'll have this pretty day to hang on to, and the rest of your lives to make up for the lost time. But to be honest, bro? I think you guys are perfect for each other, and you just need to stop psyching yourself out."

I sighed and closed my eyes, sure he was right—about all of it. I'd felt really wobbly on my feet ever since the night I was abducted. I'd had to swallow my pride and allow Curt to help me. It was like imposter syndrome on steroids. I felt like I was constantly doubting myself. My grandfather said it would pass after a few years, but it felt like it was only getting stronger.

The more I learned, the more I realized I didn't know shit about running a pack.

But if it really would get better over time, maybe that was the problem.

“Gramps told me to be patient, but I’m not too good at that,” I said finally.

“No shit,” Travis said sarcastically. “You’re about to get hitched after a three-month engagement. You think I can’t tell that you’re a squirrely little fuck?”

I snorted and finally cracked open the water bottle, gulping it down. I closed it and tossed it aside before picking up the new shirt and sliding it on.

“You sure you’re good?” Travis asked. “That’s our last shirt, bro.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I said. “I’m feeling a lot better. Thanks for bringing me down, man.”

“What the hell else are best men for if not talking your buddy out of being a runaway groom? Now, come on. Let’s go wait for your mate to walk down the aisle.”

We took a few minutes to get my tie back on and double-check that I didn’t look like a mess from running my fingers through my hair and across my face. Once we were sure everything was in the clear, we headed out to the arch where I would meet my mate and future wife.

Somehow, Marley had planned the date perfectly for our elopement. By the time she’d finished planning the whole thing, we’d gotten our grant money from the government and had just enough time to get through escrow at the half-built hotel up in the mountains.

The lake this deep into winter was beautiful and serene. The pines surrounding us were still a lush green, the ground blanketed in snow that absorbed most of the sound except for our shoes crunching in it. Already standing under the arch was Houston, who’d practically begged to be allowed to officiate. Standing off to the sides were my family, Marley’s family, and a few of our friends. Paulette was looking better, standing arm in arm with my sister. The hollow, haunted look in her eyes was starting to let up, and Ginger looked as in love with her as ever.

Lana looked well and was finally growing her hair out. It suited her.

My son was adorable in his little tux. Something I greatly looked forward to taking pictures of.

I stood at the altar and looked around. Was Marley still getting ready, or had she just been waiting for me to figure my shit out? I didn't have to wait on tenterhooks very long, though. Before I knew it, music drifted out of a little speaker near the doorway to the building. The music was controlled by Marley, so it didn't start until she was ready to walk.

I stiffened and looked over to the door, watching with narrowed focus as it opened. I saw Marley's father first, who was uncharacteristically warm as he stepped into the snow in his gray suit. After a bit of a hanging pause, she appeared.

She looked like a snow queen.

Marley's blond hair was pulled up and away from her face in soft, undulating curls. A few wisps of hair fell out near her ears, the sides of her face, the nape of her neck. Sparkling crystals shaped like snowflakes and doves twinkled in her hair. Her dress was immaculate, lace dotted with pearls going all the way up to her neck. Her sleeves came to delicate points at her index fingers. The pearly skirt plumed out like a princess's, trailing behind her in a long, luxurious train.

She'd told me her dress was a winner, but I wasn't expecting to be greeted by royalty.

My throat tightened painfully, and I had to fight the urge to break down into tears. She was so beautiful. My Marley. My mate.

She beamed at me as she walked down the snowy aisle, and I smiled right back at her. Her father approached with her, offering me her hand, and I took it as she came to stand in front of me.

Houston looked between us with a smarmy little smile on his lips. I was starting to learn it was the only smile he had, really.

“Well,” Houston started, “the couple has requested the short-and-sweet version of things, so that’s what we’re going to do. Then we’re going to go into that old-ass building, get drunk as hell, and paint some walls, everybody.”

Marley laughed as she looked up at me. It seemed neither of us could take our eyes off each other.

“I’m going to do an extremely truncated version of this ceremony,” Houston continued, “because these two look like they’re going to melt into a puddle over each other if we don’t.” He paused. “We gather here today for these two lovely people to be joined in marriage...”

We said the traditional vows. To have and to hold, richer or poorer, sickness or health. We also wrote our own vows, but we decided to save them for a private moment between the two of us. We both craved the intimacy of being alone to share those deep thoughts, and we didn’t want to worry about anyone around us joking about them.

I said my vows first. When I finished, I basked in the glow of hearing Marley repeat them back to me.

The words Houston said following that filtered right through me as I just admired my mate. I rubbed my thumbs over her fingers and lost myself in her eyes. Then I watched the subtle shift of her brows, the worried quirk to her mouth.

“Cole?” she murmured.

“Huh?”

“Houston asked for the rings,” she whispered.

“O-oh,” I said, reaching into my jacket pocket and pulling them out.

“He’s so busy ogling his soon-to-be wife that he’s forgotten to marry her first,” Houston stated, eliciting laughter from the crowd.

We made our declarations, promising ourselves to one another. Marley took my band and slipped it onto my finger, then I slipped her ring onto hers. I watched her admire the ring

I'd had made for her—white gold with a brilliant diamond in the center. She looked back up at me as Houston spoke again.

“So, normally, this is where I ask if anyone has any objections,” Houston said. “But to be honest, this relationship has been so complicated that I don't want to tempt fate.”

“Agreed,” Marley said.

“Works for me,” I said.

“Then by the power granted me by the state of South Carolina, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride, my man,” Houston said with a grin.

I reached down and cupped Marley's perfect face in my hands. I looked at her for one long moment, committing her face to memory, wanting to remember this perfect, peaceful moment forever. Then I leaned down and kissed her.

And just like that, we were married.

Chapter 17

Marley

The night before had been a blissful blur. We drank and ate and—well, we actually did get some painting done in our headquarters. Cole had promised to plan our honeymoon, and as the night wore on, I'd started to worry that we were missing a flight or even that Cole had completely forgotten about it. But in the small hours of the morning, our guests all said their goodbyes, and Cole's parents—my new in-laws—took Noah with them and went home.

Once we were alone, I looked at Cole with a curious tilt of my head. He smiled at me, told me he had a surprise, and then led me to the top floor of the building.

The surprise had been our room in the headquarters, fully furnished and decorated in minimalist whites and grays. There were rose petals strewn everywhere. Flameless candles flickered throughout the space.

"I left things a bit plain," he said. "I know you like to decorate, but I couldn't think of a better place to spend my wedding night with you than the home we're about to build together."

We made love until we collapsed in each other's arms from exhaustion.

I woke to soft kisses on the curve of my bare shoulder and the smell of maple syrup.

"Wake up, sweetheart," Cole said. "We have a plane to catch in a few hours."

“Did you make me pancakes?” I slurred as I rolled onto my back to look up at him with bleary eyes.

“I sure did,” he said with a chuckle.

“Oh my god, I love you,” I said in a sleepy stupor, sitting up.

“I would hope so. You’re my wife.”

I grinned so hard, my cheeks hurt. “Mrs. Lucas,” I said. “And you’re my husband.”

He smiled, leaning in to nuzzle my nose before pressing a lingering kiss to my lips. And then another...and another...and...

“Nope!” he said, suddenly breaking off the kiss. “We really are on a time crunch this morning, and if we keep doing that, we’ll lose much more time than I have to spare.”

He handed me my plate of perfect pancakes and a fork. I smiled up at him dreamily. “Thank you,” I said.

I ate breakfast, and while I did, Cole started gathering our things. I was surprised to find that he’d packed both our bags and hidden them away in the building a few nights prior.

“You thought of everything,” I marveled.

“Did you think I was only going to do this for our honeymoon?” he asked, sweeping his arm over the room.

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t have minded.”

“Well, I would have,” he said as he opened a nearby window, letting the freezing air breeze into the room.

“Cole!” I yelped.

“What? It will help wake you up for the trip,” he teased.

I stuck my tongue out at him before taking another bite of my food. “Where are we going?”

“We are going to Paris. The one in France,” he said, winking at me. “I thought about doing Hawaii, but I figured we ought to change up our usual scenery for something new.”

“Paris?! Cole, I don’t know if I still have a passport.”

“You do,” he said. “I called your mom, and she shipped it over to me. We got lucky. It expires at the beginning of next year.”

“How long are we going for?” I asked.

“Two wonderful weeks,” he said with a sigh. “Things are stable enough within the pack that we can spend a little time away and—”

His head suddenly snapped up as another breeze wafted through the window. “Shit,” he said.

“What is it?” I asked in alarm.

“Curt.”

Even though he’d helped us, I knew his presence here was not a good thing. He’d made it clear that he expected me to pay him back for his help. I just hadn’t thought he’d come collect so soon.

I got dressed and followed Cole downstairs to meet with our uninvited guest. By the time we reached the foyer, we saw Curt looking around at our freshly painted walls.

“Nice place,” he said, his hands balled up in his hoodie pockets. “Big.”

“Thanks,” Cole said tightly. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“So chilly already?” Curt asked with some soft clicking of his tongue. “After I saved your hide?”

“You were thanked,” Cole said.

“By you,” Curt said. He smiled as he looked over at me. “But not by her.”

I blinked and opened my mouth to speak, but Curt put his hand up. “Don’t bother. That’s not what I’m here for, really.”

“Then what?” Cole asked.

“A bit of a notification. A declaration, if you like.”

A chill swept through me. I couldn’t tell if it was from his ominous tone or the frostbitten air coming in through the open

front door.

Cole said nothing, only waited.

“My pack is going to war with yours,” Curt finally said, looking at us with his impassive, black-eyed stare. “I have a plan, and that plan is to win. And when I do, I won’t just take control of your pitiful little pack and set it to rights. I might even take your mate.”

My heart raced and my skin burned as a single thought thundered in my mind.

Over my dead body.

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* * *

My love for the alpha will either transform or destroy me...

If I want any chance of marrying Cole and adopting his son, Noah, then becoming a shifter is my best hope. But Cole is still reluctant for me to undergo the dangerous lycan gene therapy that could jeopardize my safety.

I somehow need to convince him I’ll be able to protect myself better if I’m a shifter. And right now, the ability to defend myself has never been more important with the anti-lycan group, Lanyon Clover, still putting us at risk.

With word spreading about a possible violent terrorist protest targeting those we love, Cole’s old enemy, Curt, approaches us. He promises to support Cole’s newly formed pack and help us defeat the Lanyon Clovers. Only his offer seems too good to be true, and together, we must decide who we can trust.

Except trusting myself to know what’s right when I’m no longer sure who I am could be fatal...

Read The Alpha Daddy's Destiny Now So You Don't Miss
Out!

Claiming The Wolf Daddy

Breaking Pack Rules: Book 2

Roxie Ray

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