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MAYHEM

MAKERS



ZEPHYR HILLS PHANTOMS MC BOOK TWO
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DARLENE TALLMAN

THE SAA

A MAYHEM MAKERS NOVEL

ZEPHYR HILLS PHANTOMS MC

BOOK TWO

DARLENE TALLMAN



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DARLENE TALLMAN

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THE SAA - ZEPHYR HILLS PHANTOMS MC - A MAYHEM MAKERS NOVEL

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The SAA is a shifter MC; there may be situations, language, and adult content that may make you uncomfortable. It is intended for mature audiences and as such, recommended for ages 18+ for the above-captioned reasons.

CHARACTER LIST

Fox - President

Sly - VP

Chaos - Enforcer (Tressa)

Stealth - SAA

Popeye - Secretary/IT

Ledger - Treasurer

Ogre - Road Captain

Lobo - Patch

Bolt - Patch

Attila - Patch

Prospect

Prospect

Nicole aka Nini (Tressa's best friend)

Teeny - club girl

Becca - club girl

Renda - club girl

And, of course, any author friends whose names show up in
this book!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There's a saying that it "takes a village" when it comes to raising a child. Well, in the case of this book specifically, it took a village of my friends and family to ensure it would get done!

Thanks to Alesia, Liberty, Nicole, and Cheryl, for reading along and calling or giving me little notes to suggest things. Thanks to Renee for repacking my inventory for my next signing, packaging up the book bundles from my recent release, *and* making sure I ate on a regular basis. This book, which I had already had to push the preorder ahead, almost didn't get finished thanks to a three-day road trip, a weekend signing, and getting ready for an upcoming surgery.

But my friends kept up the encouragement, telling me I'd get it done. Without them, well, I'd have gotten it done but probably had to cancel the preorder which would've hurt me for the next year. Thankfully, that's not an issue and I'm eternally grateful. I hope you, the reader, enjoy this next installment of the Zephyr Hills Phantoms MC!

XOXOXO

Dar

DEDICATION

Dedications are so freaking hard sometimes, but not in this case. Earlier this year, when I saw how my signing schedule was lining up, I asked my sissy if she wanted to go along for the ride. She said sure since she works remotely and as long as she has internet, she's golden. So, I went to Georgia the third week of July, we got all my stuff sorted and ready, then hit the road. First to BRAE, then back to her house, then to RRR, then to Texas. We spent a few days at the Kalahari Resort where it was a gazillion degrees and even I got a little bit of sun!

Then, it was to my house, where between getting ready for two different signings, going up to Wichita to rescue a Persian kitty that was going to be euthanized, we worked on getting my house organized for my upcoming surgery, before finally going back to Georgia.

All in all, I think we spent six or seven weeks together and it was the best summer I can recall ever having! Somehow, I think Mom and Dad know how we've cultivated a solid relationship as adults and are tickled pink. I love you to the moon and back, Cheri!

XOXOXO

Dar



Prologue

NICOLE

(TEN YEARS AGO)

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU’RE NOT GETTING WHAT I’M saying, Nicole,” Jeremy sneered. “The bottom line is this, I no longer want to be with you. Plain and simple. You’re not my type. You never were and you never will be.”

“I was your type three months ago when you said all the right things, lured me to your bed, and took my virginity,” I dryly replied.

Don’t let him see you cry, Nicole. He doesn’t deserve to see your tears, I internally chant.

Right now, I’m holding back my tears of sorrow by a sheer force of will. I refuse to let him see how his words are hurting and affecting me. Breaking me. To think that I’ve wasted almost a year on someone so unworthy, somebody who has turned out to be so shallow and downright rude had me angry at myself.

“Pssh, it was a pity fuck,” he snidely retorted as if he’s some sort of prize.

“I see, so you’re saying I was a pity fuck that warmed your bed and whom you continued to manage to get there several times a week since then.”

“Until something better came along.” He did not just go there! The nerve of this piece of shit! What gives him the right to treat me this way?

“Well, you can see yourself out. Please, don’t let the door hit ya where the good Lord split ya.” Standing, I pulled my sweater closed and moved to my front door. After I opened it, I continued to stare Jeremy down and waved him out of my place until he stomped out, huffing and puffing like he was the big bad wolf and wanted to blow my house down.

While I wanted to slam it shut, I wouldn’t give him or any man that sort of satisfaction or give him enough control of seeing how hurt I was, so I quietly closed it behind him then made sure it was securely locked before I slid down the wall to the floor and hugged my knees to my chest, crying silently at the horrible, hateful things he had spewed at me.



A GOOD CRY AND A SHOWER LATER, I MANAGED TO GATHER all the things Jeremy had left behind at my house and shoved them into a garbage bag then dragged it out and set it out by the curb near the other trash. He could come pick them up or let the neighborhood strays piss all over them for all I cared. Grabbing my phone, I opened up our text stream.

Me: Your stuff is in bags out by the curb. Since trash runs tomorrow, you might not want to wait to come pick them up otherwise, head to the dump. Have a nice life.

His response was less than stellar, but I kept my head high and poured myself a glass of wine before settling in to read.

It was my escape from reality, had been for a long time, and now that I recognized my happily-ever-after was never going to happen like it does in my favorite novels, I would focus on my book boyfriends only. At least they don’t make promises they won’t keep.



Chapter 1

STEALTH

EVER SINCE TRESSA'S BEST FRIEND, NICOLE, OR NINI AS Tressa called her, stormed into the clubhouse that fateful day, I've been out of sorts and discombobulated. I know in my gut that she's my fated mate, something I never thought would come to light or happen to me. The thing is, I've been alone and lonely for so damn long, I'm unsure how to proceed and that's just not like me. I've always been cool and collected, but she confounds me and has me questioning my every move. She's only been gone for two weeks now, and there's still another week or so to go before Chaos and Tressa head to her so they can help her pack everything up and bring it here, yet it feels like it's been years since I've laid my eyes on her.

Stalking into the kitchen, I see Nonna cutting up biscuits and right on cue, my stomach growls. "Morning, child. There's a fresh pot of coffee already brewed, and I grabbed the creamer from the store for you, the brand you like since I noticed the other day that you were out."

"Thanks, Nonna," I mumble my gratitude, before I make my way over to the coffee pot to pour myself a much-needed mug of the nectar of life. It's the key to my morning happiness. It's the only thing that'll wake me up and put me in a better, less sullen mood.

"You're not sleeping again, Stealth," she says accusingly, slathering the biscuits with a copious amount of honey. When she sees me watching what she's doing and drooling, she smiles. "I know you boys love these things. Got bacon in the oven cooking now, so when these are done, you can eat your fill."

“No, I’m not,” I finally reply, adding just a little bit of creamer to sweeten my coffee before taking a long, appreciative drink.

“There’s enough time for you to go for a run. I’ve found over the years that it clears my thoughts when they’re jumbled,” she suggests.

“Y’know what, Nonna? A run sounds like a fantastic idea,” I convey.

Finishing my coffee, I rinse the mug and set it off to the side to dry since I’ll use it again after I get back from letting my wolf stretch his legs. Nonna nods, so I know she won’t put it in the dishwasher; she’s used to how we do things around here.

Once I’ve stepped onto the back porch, I stretch my arms in the air to loosen my muscles for the impending run, and quickly strip down, placing my folded clothes in one of the chairs then swiftly shift into my wolf counterpart. As big as I am in real life, my wolf is also larger than the average wild animal, which is a good thing seeing as I’m the club’s sergeant at arms. Letting out a long, anguish-filled howl, I finally start running toward the back quarter of our property, allowing the small prey the luxury of living and not running in fear of me since my sole focus is on setting things right in my head space again, not hunting and eating.

Besides, while I enjoy the occasional snack and pursuit when running, why fill myself up on unsatisfying morsels and fur wedged in my teeth when I have Nonna’s honey biscuits with bacon to look forward to? Shaking my head, I increase my speed, getting lost in the memories of how I came to be in the Zephyr Hills Phantoms Motorcycle Club, a member of a brotherhood that took me in when I was lost, bereft, and alone.



“STEALTH, YOU HAVE TO GO,” MY MOTHER WHISPERED AS I LAY groaning on the ground. “He’s going to kill you one of these times!”

I want to snort, “no shit” but I ache too much to deal with the repercussions of being smart mouthed. “I know, Mama,” I replied, taking stock of my numerous injuries.

Being the third oldest son to the Alpha of our pack, I shouldn't be a target in his sights, yet now that I'd begun showing signs of being an Alpha myself, my father took it to mean I would be that and that I'd eventually be challenging him for the head position.

As if I wanted to take over the pack he'd ruled with an iron fist and kept them bound to him out of fear instead of respect. I might have his blood coursing through my veins, but I never understood the mindset he had. My two older brothers had already been killed by his hands for the same reason, even though neither of them wanted to assume his role. All of us wanted nothing more than escaping his heavy-handed methods.

“I mean it, Stealth. I can't lose another son, another one of my precious children,” she cried while trying to help me get up off the ground. “You have to go, Son. You have to run.”

“Right now, I need to get back to my room so I can heal, Mama,” I stated. “Then I'll figure out where I'm going to go.”

“Good, good,” she murmured, her strong arms practically holding me upright as she walked me into the house and up to my room. “He's leaving tomorrow for two weeks. Has a council meeting about territories, disputes, and that kind of thing. I think you'll be good to go in a couple of days. You'll be healed enough to get as far away from his enclave as you can.”

Sadness washed over me as I limped into the bathroom to take a shower while my mother gathered her healing herbs and bandaging supplies. While my shifter abilities would enable me to heal quicker than the normal person, her poultices would also help cater those natural attributes until they kicked in since my father had beaten me so severely. Under normal circumstances, I'd already be mostly healed and able to care for myself. But just like my brothers before me, he'd kept up a steady barrage of blows that temporarily shut down my wolf's

ability to do so. Not only did he damage my physical body, but he injured my wolf with his silver studded rings.

The hot water sluiced over my battered body, eliciting a few choice words as the deep cuts and abrasions stung. "Where am I going to go?" I muttered once I'd caught my breath enough to begin washing the blood, dirt, and grime from my battered body.

In the big picture, it didn't matter; I'd find somewhere to live where I didn't have to worry that I'd draw my last breath at the hands of my own father. At least with me gone, my father would turn his attention to other things, since all that would remain would be my sisters and he didn't view them as a threat to his kingdom.

I scrubbed myself raw until the water ran clear, no longer tinged with tints of blood, then stepped out and quickly dried off before slipping into a pair of loose sweatpants. Walking back into my room, I saw my mother fidgeting and waiting, and I gave her a half smile, which was all I could muster at this point to express my gratitude.

"Thanks, Mama," I said, moving toward where she motioned for me to sit.

"It'll break my heart for you to leave, Stealth," she replied as she began putting her salves and poultices on my various injuries. "But I've heard of a place and community where others who are like you can live in harmony."

"What do you mean, others like me?" I asked, hissing in a breath when she applied some of her stuff to a particularly deep gash on my face.

"There's a town in Texas called Zephyr Hills. The majority of the men there are from other packs, but they all have one thing in common, they're all Alphas in their own right."

"How is that possible? How are they not challenging each other to be top dog?" I questioned.

"The town itself was established by shifters who had nowhere else to go. They'd either been banished or were branching out on their own. One of the town's laws or rules is that all can

seek sanctuary there, and no one shifter will rule over the others. I think that's where you should go, my son."

"I'll check it out, Mama," I said, knowing it would be in my best interest to be gone before my father returned to finish me off. While I hated the thought of leaving my mother and sisters behind, I preferred being on the breathing side of the grass.



I FINALLY ARRIVE AT THE CREEK THAT RUNS THROUGH THE property and start drinking from the stream to slake my thirst. Pushing the brutal and troubling memories aside, I once again think about Nicole. From the things I observed while she was at the clubhouse, she doesn't think she's got much worth to anyone. Including herself. I saw how after her initial meltdown, when she was demanding to see Tressa, she was polite to everyone but really only opened up around Tressa and Nonna. Whoever hurt her is going to pay dearly. I just have to find out the name of the fucker first. My thirst slaked, I turn on my paws and start heading back toward the clubhouse because I'm sure breakfast is finally ready and I'm here for it.

Bursting through the trees that border the backyard, I lope up the stairs, shift, then quickly redress before heading inside.

"Morning, Brother," Chaos says, piling his plate high. "Shoulda said something, I'd have run with you."

Shaking my head, I grab a plate and start adding food. "It's all good, Chaos. Needed to clear my head is all."

More brothers come into the kitchen while we're sitting and eating, the smell of bacon luring them from their party infused sleep. I snicker to myself when I see how rough several of them look. One of the things I can say about my brothers, they work hard, but they party even harder.

"Shut it, fucker," Ogre grumbles.

"No one said you had to try and tie one on last night," Fox retorts. "When are you assholes going to learn that we

metabolize shit too quickly to ever get more than a buzz.”

Ogre shrugs while piling his plate so high I fear for the plate’s integrity. “Always worth a try, Fox,” he reasons through a mouthful of food. “Besides, Renda and Teeny issued a challenge, and you know *I* can’t back down from one of those.”

Fox shakes his head in dismay before getting up to grab another cup of coffee. “When’s your woman coming back?” he asks me.

“Not my woman,” I coolly reply.

“*Yet,*” he says. “We all know the truth, Brother. Saw you walking around like a lovesick dog.”

“Well, we are wolves,” Sly adds before bursting into a peal of laughter. I’d hit him, but he’s the club VP, and I really don’t relish getting fined for acting rashly to his comment, so I keep my mouth plastered shut.

“She should be here in the next few weeks, maybe a bit longer,” Tressa says, having come into the kitchen to catch Fox’s question. Turning to me, she smiles as she plops down on Chaos’ lap. “You could always go and offer to help her get stuff packed up, Stealth. I mean, my office area alone is going to take days.”

“Maybe I will,” I mutter. “Wouldn’t hurt for her to have some protection, after all.”

Now I *know* my wolf’s trying to take control. He thinks we should’ve gone with our mate in the first place, even though the prickly little dynamo has no clue that’s what she is to us. However, if I went early, I could ease her into it, right? Something to think about.

“Do we have anything going down I need to be aware of?” I ask after taking another sip of coffee.

“Naw, the Bastians have all been put to ground, the businesses are booming, and unless one of these assholes goes off on the deep end, I think we can spare you,” Fox replies, smirking at me.

Since Nonna's still in the kitchen, prepping several crockpots for soup, I content myself with discreetly flipping Fox off instead of verbally uttering a word. She may be used to us and our foul mouths, but we still try to be as respectful as possible. Tressa must see me, however, because she starts snickering and giggling until Chaos kisses her, effectively shutting her up.

Finishing up my meal, I stand and carry my dishes to the sink where I rinse them then put them into the dishwasher. Seeing Nonna with her arms full, I head in her direction and take the bulky packages from her arms then set them on the counter for her.

"Thanks, Stealth," she says, going over and washing her hands before she picks up a huge knife.

Seeing that, I smirk and reply, "Looks like that's my cue to go."



MY RESTLESSNESS HAS INCREASED DESPITE WORKING ON MY bike to make sure it's road ready, going for another run with several of the brothers, and taste testing Nonna's soup. I didn't earn my position by not listening to my gut and my wolf is going positively bonkers. Looks like I'm heading to where my mate's at earlier than I'd anticipated. I just hope she's ready for me to come rolling in.



Chapter 2

NICOLE

IN THE TWO WEEKS SINCE I'VE BEEN HOME, I'VE MANAGED TO pack up Tressa's office, her bedroom, the living room, the kitchen, and most of my bedroom. Since the half bath in the hallway was only ever used for guests, I've also stripped it down to the bare essentials — toilet paper, soap, and a hand towel.

“What on earth?” I say as I walk into the house and see most of the boxes torn open, the contents that'd been sorted and packed strewn all over the place.

Fear and then anger engulf me as I look around at the damage someone caused. As far as I know, I don't have any enemies that I'm aware of, and neither does Tressa. I mean, we're both homebodies at heart. Couch potatoes that enjoy sitting and reading a good book as opposed to going out and partying. She works from home, and I work outside of it, but who could I have pissed off enough at my menial bookstore job? Sighing, I pull out my phone and call the police to report the break in. I doubt they'll do anything, not much they can do outside of filing a report at this stage, but at least there'll be a record in case anything's been stolen, and we have to file a claim on our renter's insurance.

As I pace and wait for them to arrive, I casually look through the other rooms and see that pretty much every box in three of the rooms was opened and emptied. All of my hard work dumped on the floor. I stomp my foot in aggravation and whimper. It's going to take me ages to get things back to rights. A knock on my door has me sprinting over, and peeping through the tiny hole on our door. Anxiously, I fling it

open to see two uniformed police officers standing there with bored expressions on their faces.

“We understand you had a break in?” the male officer asks, looking around to take in the mess.

“Yes, apparently so. I came home to this,” I reply, waving my hand through the air at the disaster that’s readily apparent.

“Can you tell if anything was taken?” the female officer questions, putting on a pair of latex gloves.

“Not until I go through everything,” I admit. “But I didn’t want to touch anything in case you were able to dust and get fingerprints.”

“That was a good idea. Let me see what I can find, okay?” she asks.

“Okay.” I sigh, feeling defeated. I’m not a fool, I know that if the perpetrator used gloves himself, it’s a lost cause.

I mean, what else can I do? While she’s dusting everything and trying to get fingerprints to lift from the surfaces of our apartment and moving boxes, the male officer continues asking me a variety of questions. Some make sense, some don’t. Like, why would it matter if anyone saw me carrying boxes inside? I did mention that a few times I felt as though someone had been inside the house, which he wrote down.

It wasn’t anything concrete, of course, but the night I first got home from my trip to the clubhouse, I could’ve sworn my bed was neatly made. I *always* make my bed, yet it looked like I had rolled around and slept in it! Another night after work, when I came in, the remote was on the couch and I distinctly remembered putting it on the table next to the couch. Both times, I was freaked out, then convinced myself that it was possible that I didn’t put it where I thought I had since I was trying to get so much stuff done at once, I might have just forgotten. Now, I’m beginning to suspect I was wrong, and there has been someone coming in and out of our home like they own the place when I’m not here watching over everything. I wish the landlord had let us put in an alarm system; at least then, I’d feel like I’ve got something

protecting me while Tressa's gone, but the jackass, he refused, even though we told him we were going to pay the installment and monthly fees.

Thirty minutes later, they're both done and thanking me for my time. I want to cry when I think of the hours it's going to take me to reorganize, and pack everything back up. Sighing, I head into my bedroom to change into my packing clothes, grateful that I'm off work for the next two days so that I can hopefully catch back up to where I was before this disaster happened. It's going to put me behind schedule, but hopefully, I'll get caught up again and make a little progress. I want everything ready to be loaded when Tressa, Chaos, and some of his brothers come to get our things collected and moved.

As I'm changing into comfortable clothes that I can breathe in, so I can start repacking and going over the inventory, my thoughts wander then sway to Stealth and whether or not he'll be one of the brothers that comes. Not that it would matter; there's no way a man like him would ever be attracted to me. He's cover-worthy material, and I'm... not.

"Except he's not fully man, he's a shifter, a yummy wolf, and you know how the books say they find their one. Their true mate," my brain whispers.

"Shut up," I mutter out loud, back talking myself. There's absolutely no sense in getting my hopes up. Too many of my dreams have been crushed for me to ever believe that anything good like that could or will happen to me.



"THIS IS FOR THE BIRDS," I MUTTER, TAPING ANOTHER BOX closed and making sure it's marked to go into the right room. So far, I haven't seen anything obviously missing, but I've only made it through half of the ones that were stacked in Tressa's office. "Time to take a break and relax. This shit will be here tomorrow."

And thankfully, I'm off tomorrow since there's still so much to do. Right now, I'm going to grab a shower, then put in an order for Chinese food while I watch my favorite movie.

Beauty and the Beast, the live version, not the animated Disney movie we all loved as a kid. I'm not sure if it's the music, the story, or all the books in the Beast's library. Giggling to myself, I pick up the last box and place it in the stack against the wall, making sure it's labeled appropriately.

"Of course, it's labeled, you nerd," I say out loud in admonishment. "Your OCD wouldn't let you just pack boxes without making sure the inner contents were clearly noted! Who are you trying to kid now, Nicole?"

Shaking off my obstinate thoughts, I check to ensure the door is locked, making a note to get a chain lock to add to the deadbolt and turn lock that's already on the doorknob. If nothing else, it might be a deterrent if the person who broke in tries to gain access again. Of course, the cops didn't see any signs of forced entry either. As I head into my room to get comfortable lounging clothes together for my shower, my phone rings. Seeing it's Tressa, I hurry up and answer it, then head into the kitchen for something to drink before going back toward my bedroom.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask once the call's connected.

"Does anything have to be up for me to call and talk to my bestie?" she retorts, giggling. "I haven't talked to you today, and since I didn't feel like going for a run, I thought I'd call you instead."

"Where are you at?" I ask her, visualizing the clubhouse.

"On the back deck with Nonna. She says 'hey', by the way," Tressa says.

"Tell her I said hello back, please."

"So, what have you been doing? Did you turn in your two-week notice yet? Were they okay about it? About you leaving? Have you started packing? Are you okay being there alone?"

She fires off questions left and right, not giving me a chance to get a word in edgewise before asking another one. I start

laughing because this is typical Tressa. When she runs out of steam, I'll answer.

"Okay, I think that's all I have right now," she states through my giggles.

"Let's see, I've been working, of course. They didn't have an issue with me turning in my notice of resignation, although I halfway thought they might tell me to just go instead of putting me on the schedule almost every day. Tomorrow's the first day I've had off since I got back!"

"That means you haven't had a lot of time to pack. Maybe I should tell Chaos I need to come early to help," she muses, making me laugh again.

"I've been able to pack, woman! In fact, your office, the half bath, your room, the kitchen, *and* the living room are done and dusted," I retort. "In fact, I've got a lot done in my room as well!"

"Well, damn, Nini, that's freaking awesome! I still feel bad that I didn't come home with you to help," she muses. I can almost hear her cog wheels turning.

I'm shaking my head in response even though she can't see me. "I know there's probably a difference between what we've read about shifters and the reality, but I couldn't see Chaos letting you just take off when y'all are newly mated."

She snickers and I can see the blush on her face even though we're not connected on FaceTime. A lot of her confidence, which her step-monster demolished, is coming back now that she's got a mate who worships her. I know he loves her which makes my heart happy. Maybe someday, I'll have a love as heartwarming as hers, but I'm not holding my breath. Jeremy did a number on my psyche; I thought we were building something unbreakable, and was happy that he didn't care that I'm curvy as hell. Well, actually, I've got a fuller sized Rubenesque figure if I'm being totally honest with myself. I tame my rolls and muffin top with shapewear, which makes it hard to breathe sometimes. Oh well, no use crying over spilled milk, as my granny always said when I'd cry to her over something.

“You make a good point,” she finally says, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Oh! I was going to tell you, I’ve just about got your suite of rooms in the clubhouse ready!”

“What do you mean? I was going to rent an apartment,” I stammer.

“No, no. This place is big enough and each room is very cozy. You have a small kitchenette, plus a sitting area complete with a fake fireplace. Well, I think it’s fake, it might be one of those gas ones. I’ll ask Chaos to be sure. A huge bedroom, double-sided closet, and an en suite bathroom.”

“Okay... how much is my rent going to be?” I ask. “I have to find a job when I get there, but I’ve got my savings.”

“Silly, you don’t have to pay rent!” she exclaims. “Don’t worry about any of that right now, alright? It’s all going to work out the way it’s meant to.”

I shake my head because she’s been all over the place as usual. “So, what about our furniture here?” I question.

“We’ll figure out what we’re going to bring back when me and Chaos get there. I know my bedroom furniture can be donated to a good cause since I don’t need it any longer.”

“Good point. Should I place a call to one of the charities and have it picked up?”

“No, wait until we’re there. It’s not like we’re going to arrive, load up then hit the road again. We’ll be there a few days and may have more things we can just donate.”

“Okay, that makes sense to me.” Starting over may be what we both need.

I don’t tell her about someone coming into our home and going through the boxes already packed, nor do I let her know that I’ve had that sensation of someone watching me. It’s probably my imagination, at least the part about being watched. I have the physical proof in the form of a police detective’s card with the police report number on the back to prove that someone did come into our home. There’s no need to worry her, even though I’m a bit skeeved out right now.

“Good, so we should be there late next week, I think,” she says.

“Whenever y’all get here will be soon enough,” I tease. “Are you sure about me living at the clubhouse? I don’t want to impose. I know I probably made a poor first impression on the crew with how bossy I was.”

“Oh, you made an impression alright,” she replies, giggling.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask in alarm.

“Well, let’s just say a certain sergeant-at-arms has been all grumbly since you left,” she teases.

“No way, Tress. I’m not his type,” I rebut.

“Yeah, you are, Nini,” she softly replies. “Jeremy was a stupid douche canoe who didn’t know how good he had it when he had you in his life. His loss is Stealth’s gain, especially since these guys take their responsibility of being someone’s mate seriously.”

“I. Am. Not. His. Mate,” I bite out between clenched teeth. “Shit like that doesn’t happen for me, and I’m okay with that, Tressa. It’s enough that you and I will be living with each other.”

“Fine, have it your way, but I’m telling you, you’re about to have your mind blown in a good way.” Her taunting has me getting huffy. I wish she’d stop making me daydream about probabilities that won’t happen. What’s the luck that two besties would be mated to two club brothers? None, that’s not plausible.

“Whatever. Let me run, I need to shower so I can settle in for the night, okay?”

“Love you, Nini. Don’t work too hard, we can help wrap things up when we get there.”

“We’ll see, Tress. Love you too. I’m sure we’ll talk tomorrow at some point.”

“Bet on it.” She’s gotten so damn sassy!



I'M AT THE PART IN THE MOVIE THAT MAKES ME CRY EVERY single time when I think I hear a noise outside. My heart racing, I pause it, then quietly stand on wobbly feet and go to peek through the slats of the blinds. When I don't see anything, I return to the couch and restart the movie once again, getting lost in the sheer beauty of the story itself. I may or may not sing along to the various songs, but by the time it's over and the credits roll, I'm drowsy and ready to head to bed.

Tomorrow is another day, after all, and it's one day closer to a whole new world.



Chapter 3

STEALTH

THE RIDE TO WHERE TRESSA USED TO LIVE AND NICOLE STILL lives doesn't take all that long, but any time I can get out on my Harley, and allow the open road to ease what ails me is a good thing. The only thing that tops it is when I'm in my wolf form running through the expanse of our property. Then, whether I'm running by myself or with my brothers, I feel like nothing can stop me. Like I'm invincible. As the miles fly by, my sense of unease grows, which I don't fully understand. I mean, I've seen the connection that Chaos and Tressa now share, but outside of me recognizing that Nicole is my mate, and a brief touch here and there in passing only, we haven't done anything for the bond to start forming and snap into place.

Maybe I should call Nonna and ask her; she's got wisdom well beyond her years, that's for sure. All I know is my wolf wants to take over, which isn't happening since the fucker doesn't have the opposable thumbs needed to operate my bike. Shrugging, I hit the throttle and increase my speed slightly so I can get there faster.

Do I know how I'm going to approach her? Fuck no. She'll wonder why I'm there early, and since the world of shifters is brand new to her, I'd rather her find out about our connection with Tressa nearby to help ease her into it. Regardless, I'm not leaving her unprotected from whatever threat is looming overhead. That's my job and I take my role as her mate seriously.



IT'S LATE WHEN I FINALLY ARRIVE. PULLING MY BIKE INTO A secluded area, I shut it down, then while I still have my faculties about me, do a perimeter check around my mate's home. When my wolf goes completely apeshit, I realize he's picking something else up, so I move back to where I've put my bike, strip down, and lock my clothes in my saddlebags, then quickly shift and do another sweep, the fur on my haunches now rising and my snout snarling.

I can *feel* the anger and rage someone has against my mate in the scent they've left behind. It's strongest on the walkway and the small porch attached to the apartment, but I can pick it out in varying degrees at different spots around her place. I don't remember her mentioning feeling as though she was being watched; but it's obvious, especially near a tree that looks into a bedroom which I presume is hers, that someone's been keeping an eye on her from the shadows.

Unbidden, I howl; a promise to whatever is threatening my mate that I'll find them and end them. For every fear-filled minute she experiences, I'll give them one filled with dread and torture. When I see the blind flick, I manage to take a step back and out of sight so she doesn't see me.

While I patrol overnight, keeping my mate safe, I memorize the scent of the person I'm going to maim and kill. Thankfully, there are small prey nearby since I didn't take the time to stop on my trip down for anything outside of gas or to take a piss. It'll hold me over until I shift back and go to grab something to eat. When I see Nicole coming out, dressed as though she's headed to work, I decide to change back to my human form and get some food, then find somewhere to get some rest. I'll let her know later that I'm in town and willing to help.



“ARE YOU NEW IN TOWN, OR JUST PASSING THROUGH?” THE waitress asks as she sets down a cup of coffee.

“Passing through,” I reply, quickly scanning over the menu. “Can I get the special with my eggs sunny side up, white toast, crispy bacon, and a short stack of pancakes? Oh, and an order of sausage links.”

“Anything else?” she questions with her eyebrow raised at the amount of food I’m ordering, writing everything I told her down. When I shake my head, she smiles. “Sounds like it’s plenty to get you started. Any juice?”

“Orange juice and an ice water to go with the coffee, please,” I request.

“I’ll get that in and have it out to you shortly,” she says, leaving me to my own thoughts.

I’m no closer to any answers when the waitress arrives with my drinks as well as my food. Pushing everything to the back of my mind, I focus on eating so I can get back to Nicole’s place and watch over her. I don’t like that someone’s been sneaking around, possibly watching her every move. Not only that, but the scent I caught gave off waves of rage. If the person decided to direct that rage at Nicole, she could be seriously injured or worse.

Nope, not on my watch. Now to figure out how to tell her that she’s my fated mate. A snicker escapes when I picture her, hands on her hips, toe tapping, as she glares at me with her beautiful chocolate brown eyes. She’s stunning, and I don’t think she’s aware of that fact, but there’s not a thing about her that I’d change. Her curves had me walking around half hard at the clubhouse, and my hand has seen more use than it did when I figured out whacking off felt good, for fuck’s sake.

Thank heavens I never really used the club girls, especially since they live at the clubhouse as well. I shudder thinking

about the cat fights avoided thanks to my reluctance to stick my dick where my brothers have been. Granted, we don't get sick and can't catch diseases like humans, but still, no woman should have to face their significant other's past sexual partners on a daily basis as far as I'm concerned.

"Anything else?" the waitress asks.

"No, thanks."

"Alrighty, I'll leave the check here. You can leave payment on the table or if you're using your card, take it up to the register. Have a nice day."

"Appreciate it," I reply, pulling out my wallet. I place the money for my meal, along with a sizable tip underneath my coffee cup, then stand to leave.

Only to catch a whiff of the scent that's burned into the memory bank of my nostrils. As I walk through the diner to head out, I casually look around and spot a nerdy looking guy at one of the counter tables, drinking coffee. Pretending to stumble, I bump into him which causes him to spill his coffee. When he turns, a snarl on his face, I hold my hands up in a placating manner and say, "Sorry, man, sometimes I trip over my own two feet. Let me get your breakfast as an apology." I then toss down a twenty, which should more than cover anything he orders, and walk out the door to my bike with one question screaming.

"Who the fuck is he and why has he been sneaking around Nicole's house?"



Chapter 4

NICOLE

“HUH, THESE DON’T LOOK LIKE THE NORMAL GEMSTONES,” I murmur, as I bag the stones from one of the vases I use to put water lilies in. Shrugging, I close the Ziplock bag and place it in the box. While I’m unsure of what they are, I’ve got too many things to do to worry about the mystery of it for long.

“Another box finished,” I say in triumph as I tape it shut then carefully label it before I carry it over to the wall where all the other boxes are currently stacked.

It took me hours to fix the disaster I came home to, but thankfully, when I got home from work today, everything was as I left it. I was *supposed* to be off, but one of my coworkers called out and my manager called me in a panic earlier this morning. While I wish my manager wasn’t letting me work out a two-week notice because I’d really prefer to have everything ready when Tressa gets here, the money will come in handy once I get to Zephyr Hills. Now with an extra four-hour shift added into my paycheck, I’ll probably have overtime, which is always a good thing.

“Should I keep going or stop?” I wonder out loud. “Eh, may as well keep going since I’m on a roll.”



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, I’M OUT OF BOXES SO I DECIDE TO RUN up to the big box store and buy some more. I also need more

bubble wrap since I've got a ton of knick knacks that need to be carefully wrapped and packed. It doesn't take me long to slide some shoes on, grab my purse and keys, and head out. As I slide into my driver's seat, I think I hear a motorcycle starting up, and I briefly wish that Stealth was here.

"Wishful thinking, Nini, you'd have better luck winning the lottery," I mutter to myself as I navigate out of my driveway and to the stop sign so I can travel into town to grab more boxes, wrap, and stuffing. "Tressa's just all loved-up from being mated to Chaos, so she's seeing things that aren't really there. There's no way Stealth sees me as more than Tressa's friend."

My phone rings through my Bluetooth so I hit the button on my steering wheel. "Hello?"

"Whatcha doing?" Tressa asks.

"Speak of the devil, I was just thinking about you," I reply. "I'm heading into town to grab some more packing boxes, as well as some bubble wrap. Why did you let me buy all of those glass figurines?"

"Because they were of *Beauty and the Beast*, remember? Oh shit, that's right, you've got a lot of them." She starts to giggle so I make a face at the screen that depicts our phone call.

"It's not funny."

"Well, you can always grab something to eat at Tsao's Chicken. We don't have anything like that here so you're going to wanna get your fill. Tick tock... time's winding down, Nini."

"That's not a half-bad idea. I think tonight's half-price wing night too. Bonus!"

"Okay, so I have it on relatively good authority that Stealth may already be there, have you seen him?" she asks.

"Wait, what?" I shriek.

Suddenly, I feel flushed, as though I went through a round of cardio, which I can guarantee is in no danger of happening any time soon. Taking a deep breath, I blow it out then say, "I need

you to repeat that, please. I thought I just heard you say that Stealth may already be here.”

“Yep, you heard me correctly. He took off from here already. Are you sure you haven’t seen him?”

I shake my head while saying, “Nope. Of course, I’ve been at home when not at work, so he might be, and I’ve missed him.”

“Huh, that’s weird. I’ll call you back, maybe I misheard. Love you, bye.”

My music comes back on, only I’m still stuck on the bomb Tressa dropped on me. If he’s here, does that mean what Tressa *thinks* is going on is true? *Could* I be his mate? A shudder courses through me when I remember the somber yet intense man. Actually, he’s probably very intimidating to those who cross the club; he likely crosses those thick, muscular arms over his wide, well-developed chest and glares at them. I start giggling at my farfetched thoughts, then quickly sober because I went toe to toe with him more than once during my brief stay at the clubhouse.

Yet he was always respectful and acted like what I was saying or doing had merit. “You were a shrew, Nini,” I whisper, horrified by my actions the day I met him for the first time. “A screechy, demanding nag. There’s no way if you’re his mate that he’s going to be happy about that fact. Not at all. Aside from the fact he deserves someone who’s tall and svelte, something you’ve never ever been, he probably won’t be able to handle your silly habits.”

Another song comes on, but I’m so lost in reciting all my flaws, I don’t sing along like I normally do. Instead, I continue my litany out loud. “Okay, so you’ve got some good qualities, Nini. You’ve got great hair, you’re organized, maybe too organized for some people, but still, it’s a good thing, you get along with most people, you can cook and bake, and you like your living area neat and clean. These are all attributes, but I don’t think they’ll hold a man like Stealth’s attention for very long. Now, the not-so-good things include the fact that you’re curvy with plenty of bounce to the ounce, you’re not very tall, and you’re sometimes directionally challenged.”

Another deep sigh erupts because outside of the fact he's definitely someone I wouldn't want to cross paths with in a dark alley, he also exuded a gentleness toward me. Jeremy wasn't gentle, not even when we first started seeing one another. Everything was always about him, with little to no regard about what I wanted or liked. So, just thinking that someone like Stealth could possibly be interested in me makes me slightly giddy. Even if the reality of it all is, it's only in mine and Tressa's imaginary mind.



I END UP STOPPING AT TSAO'S CHICKEN FOR DINNER BECAUSE Tressa's right, their food is awesome and if they don't have anything comparable in Zephyr Hills, I need to eat it while I can. Thankfully, they're not too busy since it's a weeknight, so I'm in and out in under forty minutes. Now fortified with some great food, I'm ready to accomplish the rest of my room. As I drive toward home, I sing along with the radio, determined to turn my previously morose thoughts around. In less than two weeks, I'll be in a new place and the opportunities are endless. Plus, I'll be with my best friend.

When I finally get into the house, I feel like something's not right, but shrug it off since whoever broke in the other day is highly unlikely to come back, right? After I lock the door, I grab something to drink then take one of the rolls of bubble wrap and head to my bedroom.

"I'm losing my mind, I don't remember closing my door," I whisper as I reach over and shakily turn the knob. The condition of my room doesn't immediately register but when it does, my drink slips through my hand, the bottle exploding when it hits the floor. "What the hell is going on?" I cry out, my eyes taking in the utter disaster strewn across my floor and bed. As fear settles deep inside and tears well up, I reach for my phone, only to realize I left it in the kitchen on the charger. Rushing down the hall, I start to tremble when I see a shadow cross in front of the living room window. A sharp knock

nearly drives me to my knees until common sense reminds me that if it was the person who managed to decimate my hard work in less than two hours, it's highly unlikely that they'd knock and ask my permission to come inside.

Peering through the peephole, I see... Stealth? His deep voice rumbles out, "Nicole, I know you're home, your car is in the parking lot. Let me in."

"Don't have to ask me twice," I mutter, undoing the locks and flinging the door wide. I'm pretty sure I look like a hot mess with tears streaming down my face, but I'm so glad I'm not alone right now, I don't think about the fact that it's *Stealth* seeing me this way.

His arms pull me close before he cups my face in his hands, his thumbs swiping my tears away. "Why are you crying?" he asks, sounding harsher than he did a few seconds ago. "What has upset you?"



Chapter 5

STEALTH

I WAS ABLE TO FOLLOW HER AROUND TOWN WITHOUT HER seeing me, but when I pulled back into the parking lot, I could smell the rage, so I quickly shifted and did a perimeter check while she was carrying her boxes inside. When it dawns on me that the fucker came back, and we were only gone for a short time, I need to put my eyes on her, so I shift back and quickly dress, then knock on her door. I know immediately when she's on the other side, so I state, "Nicole, I know you're home, your car is in the parking lot. Let me in."

Her sweet voice mumbles but I'm able to hear her say, "Don't have to ask me twice," before a ridiculous number of locks and whatnot are disengaged and she flings it open.

Seeing her face covered in tears, I can't resist pulling her close and cupping her face in my hands as I swipe my thumbs across her cheeks in a useless move because she doesn't stop weeping. "Why are you crying?" I ask. "What has upset you?"

Her beautiful eyes hold me captive, while my wolf wants to take over and find the threat so he can eradicate it. The fear wafting off my mate has my senses on high alert. The overwhelming stench of the man from the diner has me nearly murderous, especially since I know she's terrified and trembling at this point.

Instead of answering, she burrows even closer to me, her arms wrapping around my waist as she breaks into hysterical sobbing. My hands are now buried in her hair while I try to soothe her so I can understand what she's currently stammering. Granted, my wolf doesn't want to wait for her

explanation, but there's no way I'll go off half-cocked in a place where I'm not known. So, I murmur nonsensical things while moving my hands across her back. I barely manage to keep from growling as her scent envelops me; pumpkin pie and the smell of freshly cut grass after it rains. Both are favorites from growing up, so it's not lost on me that perhaps Mother Earth has a sense of humor since my mate smells like home to me.

Because she is going to be your home, dumbass!

Once she calms somewhat, I ask again, "Why are you crying? Who or what has upset you?"

Instead of answering, she turns while grabbing my hand and attempts to drag me behind her. It's nearly laughable, because of our size difference, but when I grasp that she wants me to move with her, I do so until we come to a room that looks like it was tossed on its side then righted again. "What the hell happened?"

"That's what I want to know too!" she wails, her arms waving back and forth in front of her. "I got stuck working for a few hours today, but when I came home, I started in here since most of the rest of the place is done, only I ran out of boxes. So, I went and got more boxes, ate dinner since I was already out and about, then came home to this. I swear, Stealth, it wasn't like this when I left!"

"I believe you, darlin'," I reply, having already picked up the scent of the man I 'met' while at the diner earlier today. "How long has this been going on?" I inquire, barely keeping my anger in check because both me and my wolf are infuriated that someone was in our mate's den.

"This is the second time," she admits. "The other day, it was all the boxes that are now stacked up in the living room."

"Did you call the police? Why didn't you call and tell Tressa? We'd have been here right away."

I watch her shoulders drop before she practically falls onto the bed, tears steadily streaming from her eyes once again. When she sits up, I know she's ready to explain her reaction, as she

swipes her hands against her cheeks while taking a few deep breaths. “Okay, so, right before Tressa left for the book signing, I had felt as though someone was coming in and moving stuff, because I might occasionally forget I’ve done something, like put up dirty dishes, you know, that kind of thing? But not all the dang time! And it was happening a lot. Then, everything happened with Tressa, and I left in a hurry, so when I got home, I figured maybe I *did* forget to make my bed, and shrugged it off. Now, though, I know I didn’t pack up boxes, then tear them open and throw the contents around!”

“Nicole, who would be stalking you to this extent?”

It takes everything in me to keep my temper in check. I don’t want to scare her, but someone is obviously looking for something based on the current destruction I can see. What if they decide to go after her? My wolf snarls in my chest, anxious to protect our mate.

“I don’t know! I mean, I go to work, come home, and am otherwise something of a homebody. When Tressa was here, of course, we’d go out to eat, or shopping, but since we’re getting ready to move this whole place, it makes no sense to buy more stuff that’ll have to be hauled to Zephyr Hills! So, I haven’t done any of that.”

“What about an ex of yours or hers? Any family member holding a grudge?”

I watch her scrunch her nose as she looks toward the ceiling, occasionally shaking her head as she goes through people she knows. At least, that’s my presumption, but regardless, she’s fucking adorable while she does it; she wears her emotions on her face, which bodes well for me down the road.

“I mean, Tressa’s stepmonster loathes her, but I can’t see her doing something like this, because in her mind, Tressa’s so far beneath her, she wouldn’t stoop to something so classless, if that makes sense to you. Nancy is all about appearances, so stalking or even worse, breaking and entering, would never cross her mind. She’s the type that would spread an ugly rumor around, one likely to destroy someone, before she’d lift her own hands and dirty them.”

“Okay, doesn’t sound like something this bitch would be involved in,” I reply. “What about exes?”

“I... well, it could be one of my exes,” she slowly admits. “But why do something like this after all this time? We were through a *long* time ago, before I ever met Tressa, in fact. So why now?”

“Fuck if I know. Maybe he heard y’all were moving? Did he have things he left here?” My wolf gouges my insides at those words, but it’s a legitimate question; she’s a beautiful woman and didn’t know me before Tressa and Chaos got together. So, for me to expect she would remain in a locked case, chaste and untouched, is ridiculous as far as I’m concerned.

“No, I don’t think so. When he broke up with me, I gathered all his stuff, put it in bags, and then set it out by the curb.”

“Could you have forgotten something?” Because my bet’s on the ex being the one coming inside and doing what’s been done. Especially since there’s at least one television that would fetch a pretty penny at the pawn shop or be sold on the street corner for someone looking to fence stolen items. I can also see a jewelry box on her dresser which hasn’t been touched. Granted, I have no clue if it’s full of costume jewelry or not, but most burglars would just grab and go, not take the time to search through shit. Plus, she wasn’t gone all that long, which means they wouldn’t have had the opportunity to pick and choose.

“Maybe? I don’t really know. He had a game system and some games, a few jackets, two hats, a pair of shoes, and some other odds and ends, but I got all of those. Except like I said, we’ve been over for *years*, Stealth, and I haven’t let anyone get that close again.”

“Has he tried to contact you?” I ask, while my wolf prances around at the thought she hasn’t really dated since that fucker. Why he’s acting like this is anyone’s guess but if I had to do so, I think it’s because he knows she’s not pining over someone else.

“Not that I’m aware of, but I blocked his number, so if he’s tried to call using that, I wouldn’t know.”

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m calling Fox to let him know, then Chaos, which means Tressa will know here shortly, so brace yourself. We’re getting y’all out of here sooner than expected.”

“But I’m working out a two-week notice!” she exclaims, standing up and glaring at me.

Well, at least she’s not crying any longer, which makes my wolf happy. He’d prefer seeing her feisty and ready to fight against whoever is fucking with her.

“You need to let your boss know that shit’s changed, Nicole,” I reply, using my SAA voice. Instead of her shoulders slumping in acquiescence, I watch her square them, take a deep breath and prepare to fuss. “No, ma’am, not this time,” I retort. “Someone’s fucking with you, and since you know what I am, you gotta know, it’s fucking with my wolf. You belong to us, and he’s ready to go on a rampage through this town until he catches the scent of the fucker who is doing this so he can shred him.”

“You can’t do that,” she whispers, her eyes wide in shock. “You’ll get caught and then the club will really hate me!”

“The club doesn’t hate you, babe,” I tell her. “You gotta understand the guys aren’t really used to a lot of normal women being around, just the club girls.”

She starts giggling then says, “Yeah, don’t think I could be mistaken for one of those.”

Why do I feel as though she’s putting herself down? It pisses me off because she’s more beautiful than anyone I’ve ever met. Maybe it’s the fated mate thing, maybe not, but regardless of the circumstances, I won’t have my woman doing that to herself. Whoever fucked with her sense of self will have a lot to answer for if I ever find them. No matter their shape or size, women are beautiful, period.

“Not that I’ll ever give you the chance to find out, but woman, if you think you wouldn’t attract that kind of attention, you need to think again. Do you understand me?” I question her.

“I think you have to say that, if what Tressa told me is real,” she murmurs, no longer meeting my gaze.

“Look at me, Nini,” I command, gentling my voice as much as I can. It must work because her eyes meet mine and I continue. “If Tressa told you that you were my mate, she’s correct in that aspect. You are. That being said, we’re going to wait to deal with that until I have you safe and tucked away in Zephyr Hills. But outside of that, I don’t want to hear you bashing yourself again. If it was an ex who made you feel as though no one would want you, well, they’re an ex for a reason so fuck them. Because my opinion is the only one that matters, and I think you’re fucking perfect.”

“I’ll... I’ll try,” she replies. “But, Stealth, just to say, it’s been something I’ve heard most of my life. What he said just reinforced it is all.”

“Well, I’m the one who’ll knock those reinforcements down so much they’ll look like toothpicks. Now, you go call your boss while I get in touch with the club.”



I HEAD OUTSIDE FOR PRIVACY AND CALL FOX. “YEAH?”

“Hey, listen, we need to move them in the next few days. Gonna need some more muscle because something hinky’s happening, Brother,” I say.

“What’s going on, Stealth?” His voice is more alert, which I’m grateful for since I need my president’s head in the game. I may be the club’s SAA, but he earned his position due to his ability to think multiple steps ahead of any situation. He’s always one chess piece ahead of the board which is why he wins against his opponents no matter what the stakes are. “Should I call the brothers in and have church?”

“Naw, you can share the info once we’re off the phone. Gonna call Chaos next, though. What’s happening is someone is stalking Nicole and probably has been for quite some time. My

wolf picked up on the rancid scent of hate around their place, but when she came back this evening with more boxes and I realized the scent was strong again, I knocked on the door. The fucker was inside, Brother,” I growl out, my anger building once again. “And it wasn’t the first time, either. It happened after she got back, but before that, she had occasionally noticed stuff appeared to be moved, only she chalked it up to having done it herself, or even Tressa having done it.”

“Do you know who the dead motherfucker is?” Fox asks once I give him a break to speak.

“Funny you should ask that, Fox. I was eating at a diner and actually bumped into the asshole. No clue what his name is, but it doesn’t matter in the long run, does it?” I counter.

“No, not really. Okay, I’ll let everyone know, including Chaos. You keep your woman safe, and we’ll be there probably tomorrow afternoon. I know I’ve overheard Tressa talk about donating shit, but at this point, I’d feel better if we were on our own turf. They can give away shit once we have them safe behind our own walls, Brother.”

“I agree. I’ll help her fix shit and let her know what the plan is,” I reply. “Y’all ride safe, Brother, see you tomorrow.”

Disconnecting the call, I check around the property once again, before I head back inside, making sure I lock the door behind me. “Nicole?” I call out since she’s not in the living room. My gaze sweeps the room, but it looks as though she’s got everything packed out here except for the furniture and the television. I smirk when I see the throw at the end of the couch; her scent emanates from that area, so I know it’s ‘her spot’ and mentally promise to create a haven for her in our rooms, my wolf rumbling his approval.

“I’m back here,” she replies.

Technically, I have no problem finding her, since her scent is like a beacon on a lighthouse, calling to me and showing me my way home, but I need to remember that she’s human and I need to behave accordingly. Well, she’s human right now. Once I claim her, I’m looking forward to meeting her wolf. I suspect she’s going to be a gorgeous chocolate brown, maybe

with some red highlights. I shake my head at my current thoughts; the priority right now is keeping her safe until my brothers arrive.

“What are you doing?” I ask, stepping across the threshold of her room.

“I’m getting my clothes packed into suitcases. Makes it easier to move them,” she says.

“Glad you’re still packing. How did your boss take your call?”

“She wasn’t happy, but she understood. I gave her the address for the clubhouse for my last paycheck. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s more than fine, darlin’,” I state. “Spoke to Fox, they’ll be here tomorrow at some point with the truck. We’ll get it all loaded up and then head back to Zephyr Hills.”

“But... but Tressa said it wasn’t going to be a quick trip like that, we’d have time to donate what we didn’t want to keep,” she replies.

“Fox figures since there’s a stalker, it’s better to pack it all up, then worry about what’s going to be donated when we get back home,” I advise. I see some of the tension ease from her shoulders and realize she’s far more afraid and tense than I was aware.

“Maybe that’s for the best,” she murmurs before she turns to her dresser and starts putting clothes inside the opened suitcase once again.

“Tell me what you want me to take care of,” I instruct. She grins at me and goes over to the boxes that were torn open.

“Can you make me new boxes to replace the ones that were destroyed? Some will be able to be used, but I don’t want Tressa worrying, so figured I’d toss any of them that were damaged.”

“You won’t be able to keep it from her forever, Nini,” I warn.

“I’ll do what I can for the time being,” she retorts. “Once I’m done with the dresser, I’ll start repacking the stuff. Since it sounds like they’ll be here at any time, and now I don’t have

to work tomorrow, I don't have to worry about stopping at a particular time to go to bed."

"You're not staying up all night, Nicole. We'll get it done so you can get some rest."

"Whatever, Stealth," she sasses. "I'll stay up as long as I need to in order to make sure it's taken care of and that's that."

"We'll see."



Chapter 6

NICOLE

“INSUFFERABLE MAN,” I GRUMBLE, PUNCHING MY PILLOW. Once my bedroom was straightened and packed up, he sent me to bed like I was a small child. Granted it was two in the morning by the time we got it wrangled into a sense of normalcy, but there’s still a lot to be done before they arrive later today.

“I heard that,” he hollers down the hallway. “Get some sleep, Nini. It’s going to be really busy in a few hours.”

“Fine,” I hiss out between clenched teeth.

If there’s something I hate with a passion, it’s being told what to do. It makes me want to do the exact opposite, only if I did that, he’d know since it involves the remainder of the kitchen, and a few odds and ends in various closets.

“Not trying to be an ass, Nicole. It’s been a long day for you is all. My job is to make sure you’re safe and protected, and one of those ways I can do this is ensure you get enough sleep. Sheathe your claws, little one, and get some rest. We’ll knock the rest of it out when Tressa and the brothers get here with the truck.”

“I’m sorry I’m being such a witch.”

I feel strange talking through walls, but since he can hear me, and I *am* snuggled under my covers, I don’t want to get out of bed. I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact I’m his mate. I mean, up until Tressa and Chaos, I thought shifters were make-believe, a fictional creature for lonely women to fantasize about. Only... they’re not fake, because now, my

best friend is one of them! Wait, I wonder if that means I'll be one too once Stealth claims me; it's something to ask Tressa when we're alone because I don't want to sound stupid around him.

"You're not a witch, or a bitch, or a shrew, Nini. You're a woman who's been thrown into a situation she's never faced before. Besides, if anyone calls you any of those names, they'll answer to *me*. Now, go to sleep."

"Good night, Stealth." I wish I had the guts to tell him I was scared, because I am, so he'd come in and hold me while I sleep, but I'm not quite that brave. Maybe someday.

I hear his chuckle since I just had to say one more thing, but his voice is like a caress when he replies, "Good night, Nini."



I MANAGE TO SLEEP FOR A FEW HOURS, BUT THE WARRING emotions of excitement over Tressa arriving, and fear over the fact someone's broken into my home at least twice now that I'm aware of, has me ready to hit the floor running and bolt from this town. Grabbing the clean clothes I sat aside for today, I head into the bathroom to take a shower. Stealth wasn't clear about the timing of the club's arrival, but I'm pretty sure I'll have enough time to head into town to pick us up some pastries and drinks before we get started with the remaining packing that needs to be wrapped up. Hopefully, he'll let me go by myself, although I should be fine since nothing's happened when I've been out and about, only within the walls of my home.

As I finish dressing, I'm working on my arguments for why I *should* be able to do this, only to come up short when I realize I'm alone and there's nobody here to argue with. I quickly strip my bed, then take my sheets and the towel I used and throw them into the washing machine, so they'll be ready to pack. Since Stealth's not inside, I put my shoes on, grab my purse and keys, then head outside toward my car.

“Where are you going, Nini?” he asks, scaring the ever-loving shit out of me. I shriek and spin around to face him, only to see him smirking while casually leaning against the side of my house. Well, apartment building, but Tressa and I have lived here so long now that I forget we’re in an apartment complex sometimes.

“Are you trying to kill me?” I yell, my heart still racing a mile a minute. “I’m gonna run out and get us some pastries and coffee.”

“You sure that’s a wise idea?”

“I should be perfectly fine. Nothing’s happened when I’ve been out and about around town before, Stealth. I’m not going to be gone for long.”

“Whoever it is seems to be ramping up, sweetheart. That’s my only concern.”

“I’ll be fine,” I airily reply. “Plus, I’m sure you’ve gotten an update on the club’s estimated time of arrival, which is why you’re out here.”

He chuckles but nods. “Yeah, they should be here in the next thirty or so minutes. Go, get the coffees and pastries, I’m sure it’ll be just fine.”

I’m unsure where my boldness comes from, but I reach out and squeeze his hand, then quickly turn and head to my car as though the hounds of hell are traipsing on my heels. As I climb inside and sit in the driver’s seat, I take a quick peek at him from under my lashes, and notice that he hasn’t taken his gaze off me.



“I SHOULD BE PERFECTLY FINE. NOTHING’S HAPPENED WHEN I’ve been around town before, Stealth. I’m not going to be gone for long.”

Right now, I want to kick my own ass for throwing this out into the damn universe. As I work feverishly at the knots in the rope that are tying my hands together, I can't believe I was so stupid. In fact, I hope at this point that the club has arrived at my place, because at least Tressa will know where I came to get the donuts and pastries. At least then there's a chance they might be able to find me.

Fucking Jeremy. Still the bane of my existence after all this time. Apparently, because he's the jerk who's been breaking into the house and tearing our shit up. It's been over a decade at this point since we broke up, so I'm quite confused as to why he decided to snatch me. Well, he actually stuck a gun in my back and whispered that unless I wanted the clerk to get hurt, I wouldn't utter a peep.

"Not sure why you refuse to tell me what I want to know, Nicole," he sneers.

"If I understood what it is you're asking me about, maybe I would tell you, Jeremy," I reply. "Why have you been breaking into my home and snooping through our stuff?"

There's a part of me that now wants to leave everything behind or maybe even burn it all since *he* had his hands on our things. But common sense prevails; it would cost too much to replace all of it, although I think I'll be buying new panties and bras. Just the thought that he might've pawed through my underwear drawer creeps me out.

"Didn't have to break in, bitch, I've still got a key to your place." His egotistical attitude, and flippant response has me beyond irritated. What gives him the right to come into my home uninvited and shuffle through my belongings? He's just as whacko as he was back then. Thank gawd I had the good sense to let him go when I did. Granted, he was the one who broke up with me, but even still, I never stooped down to his level or begged him to come back. He's a bit unhinged right now, and the blank look in his eyes tells me no one's home and his anger is in control of his actions.

"I never *gave* you a key," I retort.

Hell, the only reason he had the things in my house that he did was because sometimes, after we were done having sex, he'd go out to the living room and play his game. The clothes and whatnot were ones he left on my floor so they got washed and hung up, because I couldn't deal with shit tossed everywhere.

"Nope, so I had one made one day from the spares I found in your well-organized junk drawer. Since you had them numbered, I didn't dare take one of them," he states, laughing at me. "You should see the look on your face right now. I bet you feel stupid as hell, don't you?"

I might, but I'm sure not going to confirm that, at least not to him. Instead, I just remain stubbornly silent. My own OCD tendencies about labeling everything is why he was able to gain access to my things and get a spare key made for himself. How many times since we broke up, so long ago, has he been inside, and we didn't know? Instead of answering him, I decide to ask him a few questions of my own.

"We've been over for a long time now, Jeremy, so why hide stuff in my house?"

"Because no one would ever expect you, or your goody-goody best friend, to be involved in anything that was illegal or nefarious," he says, triumphantly shrugging his shoulders as if he doesn't have a care in the world. "I've used your place to stash stuff ever since we split up. The first time, it was pure luck. The cops had a description of me, and I knew they'd want to search here, so I remembered I had your key on my chain and lo and behold, neither you nor Tressa were home that day!"

So, we became his stash house? That makes me feel dirty and like an unwitting accomplice.

I want to vomit at how proud of himself he sounds, but I swallow the bile down and ask, "What kind of things have we unknowingly held for you?"

At that, he bursts into laughter, then replies, "You name it, I've likely hid it somewhere in your house at one time or another. Everything from jewelry, to guns, to drugs. Kinda makes me

hard thinking that you and Tressa could've gone to prison if you'd have been caught with most of it."

"God, you're an asshole," I mutter. Now I hope that Stealth and his brothers catch Jeremy; he deserves to be eviscerated for putting two innocent women in danger the way he did.

"Never claimed differently, dear," he retorts. "So, are you going to tell me where they are?"

"Depends on what you're looking for," I sass, which earns me a fist to my cheek.

"I don't remember you being such a smart ass before," he says, grinning at me as I glare at him. "But, to answer your question, I'm looking for some gems. They're not exactly small, but I tossed them into a container that had flowers in it or some shit floating in it. I'm also missing a flash drive."

I think of the gemstones I bagged the other day, and realize I had stolen goods under my very nose... *again*. "I'm surprised you didn't find them then, because all the glass vases have been packed, which means the contents were also packed up in the boxes," I reply. "As far as a flash drive goes, you'd need to be a bit more specific because Tressa uses them as well, so if I found one around the house, I either tossed it into the container she had on her desk that's full of them, or I flung them inside of my purse. Can't really say for sure, though."

"You're just deliberately making things harder for yourself, aren't you?" he asks, hitting me again. I can taste blood from where I bit the inside of my mouth; that metallic, coppery, icky feeling now has me wanting to throw up all over Jeremy.

"No, actually, I'm not," I reply. He may not think I'm being truthful, but I typically don't lie. It's not worth it to me to have to remember what lie I told and to whom so I can cover my tracks. It gets confusing to keep the fibs straight. I just don't feel as though Jeremy is being one-hundred percent truthful; he claimed if I got him what he was looking for, he would let me go, only the way he's acting, I think my time is measured. He's not going to let me walk free and have a witness on the outside that could put him away behind bars. The gun he keeps waving around doesn't help my sense of unease, either.

“Please, realize I’ve been gone too long and come looking for me,” I chant over and over as I continue to work on loosening the rope’s bindings.

“Fine, then we’re going to your place to get the stones,” he decrees, snatching me up and practically dragging me toward the door. My feet hardly touch the floor which makes it ten times harder to keep up with his long strides.

“There’s probably going to be people there,” I warn. “You figured out we’re moving, which is probably why you’ve ramped up your efforts to find your stuff that’s actually not yours, is it?”

“Guess they’ll let me in and won’t mess with me when I show them this,” he states, waving his gun around yet again. I’d wish him luck, but I don’t want him to have that on his side. My only saving grace is that he’s not aware of the existence of shifters. They have the upper hand over him because projectiles have nothing on sharp teeth that could shred a human’s skin in zero point three seconds, and the speed of four paws that makes them faster than a speeding bullet.

Instead of answering, I simply shrug. I feel pretty confident that Stealth and his club brothers will be able to handle a bullet if they’re even remotely like the shifter stories I’ve read over the years. It’s another one of those questions I tuck away to ask Tressa once I’m safe at home.

He shoves me into the passenger seat of my *own* car, but doesn’t buckle me in, which makes me nervous because he’s not a safe driver to begin with, but I keep my mouth shut once again. I silently pray the pedestrians on the streets have the good sense to avoid him.

As he heads toward my apartment, I send up a silent prayer that if Tressa is there, Chaos keeps her protected and no one gets in Jeremy’s way. I’d rather be the one who gets injured if it means my best friend stays safe and sound.



Chapter 7

STEALTH

“BROTHER, DIDN’T THINK Y’ALL WOULD GET HERE THIS SOON,” I say as soon as Chaos hops down out of the driver’s side of the box truck.

“Yeah, well, when my mate heard what was going on because she was *eavesdropping*,” he says, stressing his words while giving her a playful yet scathing look that has her mirthfully grinning from ear-to-ear, “we had no other choice. Where’s Nicole?”

“Hell, she should be back by now. She went into town for some pastries and coffee for everyone,” I reply.

“Oh, I bet she went to DeFilippos!” Tressa exclaims, while doing some crazy-ass dance with her arms up and fingers pointing to the sky. “God, I love her so much! Their muffins and donuts are freaking phenomenal.”

“How far away is it?” I question, still concerned about the fact she’s been gone for well over an hour now. This town isn’t big enough for the lines to be that long and the streets here are never congested.

“Uh, it’s just in town, so maybe a few minutes away... max, depending on traffic. How long ago did she leave?”

“Close to an hour and a half ago,” I answer, shuffling my feet.

“Something’s wrong, Chaos. It shouldn’t take her that long to go there, buy out the place, and come back,” Tressa insists, tears beginning to form in her eyes. “I mean, she won’t buy out the place exactly, but she’ll definitely get a decent variety of their awesome pastries. Please, can we go look for her,

Chaos? Her being gone this long has me anxious.” When she admits that, my protective instincts roar inside of me. We can’t give her more time, we need to verify that she’s okay and no harm has come to her. And if it has, I’ll burn this motherfucking town to the ground until I locate her. Then the fucker who dared lay a finger on her, will wish for an easy death... which he won’t receive.

“I’ll take my bike, y’all take the truck. Wait, where are the rest of the brothers?” I ask.

“About an hour behind us at this point. Tressa just couldn’t wait, so Fox sent us on ahead of them because he said she was giving him a headache.”

“Hurry, please?” Tressa asks, moving toward the box truck. “Something’s not right, I can feel it.”



WHEN TRESSA HEARS THE CLERK SAY THAT NICOLE LEFT WITH Jeremy, she turns so pale that I worry she’s going to pass out. Since the clerk couldn’t say which direction they headed in, and Nicole’s vehicle isn’t in the parking lot, but it’s not at home either, we’re heading back to the house to come up with a game plan to find my mate. Personally, I’d be fine with driving around until I found her vehicle or scented her, but that’s not exactly logical, even if my wolf demands it is, because they could be in his vehicle for all I know. Neither is me shifting into my wolf so I can track her down using his senses, which was my other idea, as well as his. I try to soothe him so I can think clearly, him howling inside of my head isn’t helping matters. We’re both on edge and could snap in the blink of an eye if I’m not careful and give him my skin.

All I know is I feel my anxiety rising which is not normal for me. I may be a moody bastard most of the time, but I’m typically calm and laid back. When we pull into the parking lot, my wolf goes wild, instantaneously on high alert which has me wobbling and nearly has me laying my bike down

instead of putting the stand down to stabilize it, shutting it off, then getting off like a normal person in control would.

“She’s been back,” I whisper, stalking toward her car which is now parked in her assigned spot. Looking inside to scan the contents, and to see if there’s been a struggle, I notice there are big bags full of various pastries, but the cup holder carrying the coffees has been knocked over and has spilled all over the interior. My heightened senses pick up her fear, as well as Jeremy’s rage-filled stench that’s always adhered to his person. “And she’s scared, but why?” I vocalize aloud.

When we get inside, I see two boxes have been reopened and realize that *Jeremy* was looking for something specific when he came into their house. Unfortunately, she’s not still here, although I’m picking up a metallic, coppery scent mixed in her essence, which means she’s hurt. My fists curl, my claws break through my skin, and I don’t even try to stop the howl that erupts past my lips; that fucker will die by my hands.

“She’s not here!” Tressa calls out from the back of the house, having checked all the rooms while I followed Nini’s scent. “But she’s been back inside, you said?” she asks, looking at me.

“Yes. I need to find her, she’s hurt,” I reply, heading toward the front door once again. I will find her, and I *will* eliminate the threat to her.



I’M RIDING THROUGH TOWN, MY HEAD MOVING FROM SIDE TO side as I sniff and look for a vehicle that’s holding my mate. The downside is I have no fucking clue what the prick is driving, but I’m hoping our bond, while tenuous, will help guide me.

I will not fail.

I *cannot* fail.

Because if my screaming instincts are correct, Nicole is in imminent danger beyond the trifling that Jeremy started out with, and that can't happen. Not before I've tasted her lips against mine. Not before I've felt her warm, wet heat wrapped around my cock. Not before I've spent the rest of my long lifetime showing her she's the best treasure I could have ever hoped to find.

My phone rings through my helmet and I silently thank the makers of Bluetooth as I hit the button to connect the call. "Hello?"

"Brother, you wanna tell me why we just passed a vehicle that had a woman in the passenger seat who looked remarkably like Nicole, but none of our men are the drivers of said car?" Fox asks, sounding calm and collected, though I have an inkling he's anything but if his sharp words are any indication.

"Where?" I bark out.

"Did you forget who the fuck you're talking to, Stealth?"

"Sorry, Pres, Nicole's missing, figured Chaos had informed you of that fact by now. Where did you see this car and what kind was it?"

"I knew there was something suspicious about that bullshit. Headed in the direction of Zephyr Hills. We're turning around and going after her? We're probably closer than you are, we can round 'em up like cattle and ensure they go to the clubhouse," he replies. "As far as the car, it's one of those four-door hybrid pieces of shit?"

I chuckle, because unless it's a Harley, Fox rarely pays attention to cage makes and models. If you were to ask him, we have four trucks at the clubhouse for those times when the prospects have to pick shit up in bulk. In reality, we've got two Tahoes, a Ford F-350 dually, and an old, rusted Chevy. But to him, they're all trucks.

"Yeah, Pres, we'll be right behind you because I'm unsure how far behind them I am at this point. I left Chaos and Tressa at Nicole's place, though. I couldn't wait because I have a bad feeling about the whole thing."

“We’re on it, Brother. Keep it shiny side up,” he demands before disconnecting.

With a direction in mind, I hit the Bluetooth button and give the order, “Call Chaos.”

As soon as the call connects, I say, “Brother, Fox just called and for some strange reason, they’re headed in the direction of the clubhouse. Think you should lock things up and head there as well in case you’re needed.”

“Got it, Brother. We’ve got your back. Don’t do anything until I get there, I don’t want to miss out on the fun.” He’s making a joke, but I know it’s because he doesn’t want me to do anything foolish and get caught by a bystander or caught on camera when I rip the fucker’s head from his spinal cord.

“Won’t make promises I *might* not be able to keep, Chaos. However, my focus is getting Nini to safety, so if that means that fucker is on hold for a little bit, so be it.”

“We’ll be on the road shortly after I make sure everything’s locked up nice and tight,” he replies before disconnecting.

Once again, I’m left with my treacherous thoughts, which are swirling and becoming more dangerous by the second. First and foremost, after I’ve ensured that Nicole is safe and unharmed, Jeremy will be visiting our guest accommodations for some good, old-fashioned interrogation and ass whooping. I want to know what it was he was looking for, and why whatever it is, was placed at Nicole’s house in the first damn place. What the fuck is that prick involved in and is it going to cause issues for my mate?

Shaking my head, I increase my speed and head toward the interstate which will lead me home.



Chapter 8

NICOLE

“WELL, YOUR LABELING CAME IN HANDY ONCE AGAIN, I SEE,” Jeremy states as he holds the bag full of gemstones. “Now, if the flash drive is here, we’re good to go.”

I barely hold back my snort; I have no unrealistic illusions that he’s going to leave me alive and breathing when he finds what he wants and takes off. He’s an asshole of epic proportions and I can’t believe that younger me fell for his poetic line of bullshit. Granted, I’m older and have a bit more life experience under my belt now, but even still, how could I have ever thought he was attractive?

Maybe it’s his attitude. He’s cocky, condescending, and acts as though his shit doesn’t stink. Well, I’ve got a newsflash for him, it does. I just don’t remember him being this way ten years ago, but if he’s involved in nefarious, illegal acts, that probably has a lot to do with his persona now. He’s harder, more jaded. To me, he looks like a monster.

“Let me check my purse since it wasn’t in the box where the others were packed,” I suggest. I begin to diligently search through every nook, cranny and pocket inside of my purse, but come up empty. Then I remember how Stealth dumped out my purse at the clubhouse and wonder if maybe in all the ensuing chaos, it fell on the floor or something. Even thinking that, an idea strikes... *If I can get him to the clubhouse, I can alert the masses that something’s wrong.* Someone there will save me from him.

“Do you have it, bitch?” he asks once I set my purse aside.

“It’s not in there either,” I say, grinding my teeth.

“Where the fuck did it go?” he seethes, now pacing back and forth across the floor like a madman who’s lost his last marble.

“It could be at the clubhouse. My purse got dumped out and the contents went flying everywhere,” I admit, hoping to entice him to head that way.

“Fine, let’s go,” he insists, grabbing my arm roughly and yanking me. I barely manage to snag my purse before I’m basically dragged out the door and shoved into the passenger seat of what is apparently his vehicle.

A slight glimmer of hope begins to burn when it dawns on me that I don’t see Stealth or his bike right now. Maybe, when he returns from wherever he’s gone, he’ll see my car and put two and two together. That’s my hope, anyhow.



“CAN YOU PLEASE SLOW DOWN?” I ASK, GRABBING ONTO THE ‘oh shit’ handle as Jeremy’s erratic driving throws me against the passenger door and tosses me around. “We’re not in a race.”

“This fucker isn’t going to merge over,” he retorts, cutting the steering wheel slightly, which has the passenger side tires hitting the rumble strips on the shoulder. He attempts to overcorrect just as the other vehicle clips the front end slightly and I watch in horror as he loses control.

Almost as if everything is happening in slow motion, we slide through a small space in the guardrail and the car plunges down the embankment. I can’t help the scream I emit as trees of all sizes flash by the windows, the car picking up to a rapid speed since we’re parachuting downhill. The windows start splintering and shattering with each impact, and soon, I’m covered with cuts thanks to the flying glass. When I see the huge boulder ahead, I close my eyes and whisper a prayer that if I don’t make it through this, they don’t let Tressa see my body in this condition.

We end up smashing into the boulder headfirst and the airbags deploy, smashing into me from the front and sides. My mouth is flooding with the taste of blood; I feel agonizing pain wracking my entire body; all I can hope is that someone saw us go down the side of the culvert and they called emergency services for help.

As darkness descends, all I manage to utter is, "Stealth, help me."



Chapter 9

Fox

“FUCK, FUCK, FUCK,” I BELLOW OUT THE MANTRA AS I WATCH the car that holds my brother’s mate inside plunge over the guardrail and soar down the embankment.

Almost as though we rehearsed it, Ogre, Sly, and I pull over to the shoulder, and start sliding our way down the dirt and grass to the car. Ogre has the presence of mind to grab his first aid kit, but I suspect, from the damage I can see, that what he has in it would be comparative to trying to stick your finger in a gushing hole to stop the impending deluge of water. It’ll be nothing more than a band aid, but it’s better than nothing considering the goal is to keep Nicole breathing.

“Sly, Ogre, you check him, then get him out since we want to transport him to the clubhouse,” I command as I manage to get to the passenger side of the car and peer inside.

Nicole is unconscious, her head, face, and arms are covered in blood. I have no clue if it’s from the fractured glass, or if it’s really even her blood or his. All I know for a fact is that her pulse is weak and thready, which isn’t a good sign. Using my shifter strength, I manage to open the mangled passenger door so I can crouch next to her and catalog her copious injuries.

“C’mon, pretty girl, your mate’s on his way so you need to stay with me until he gets here, and trust me, seeing you like this is gonna send him wavering over the edge of sanity. Open your eyes for me so I can ask you what hurts for a better evaluation,” I mutter, pleading, my hands gently palpating her arms and legs. Her right arm and leg are at awkward angles, and I can see where the engine broke loose from its bolts and

was thrust through the dashboard and eventually went through the metal of the passenger side dashboard, because there's a piece of steel that's embedded into the meat of her lower leg.

"Pres, she doesn't look good," Ogre says as he comes to stand next to me. At my devastated look, he states, "We've got the driver contained, so once Chaos gets here with the box truck, we'll toss him inside before the authorities arrive." I can't help but wonder how far behind us the ambulance and police cruiser are. Surely, someone called it in. We're running out of time to fix this before one, we lose Nicole. Or two, we're asked a myriad of questions we don't want to answer. "It's her I'm worried about right now. We need another cage because there's no fucking way she's going to be able to ride on the back of *anyone's* bike."

I'm torn right now as to what to do, and I don't like the feeling one bit. Normally, I'm so far ahead on the potential scenarios, complete with all of the possible outcomes, that I act on my gut instincts without thinking things through. It's one of my "gifts" so to speak, but right now, I'm at a loss.

"I'm going to give her some of my blood."

"Won't that bind her to you?" Ogre asks.

"No, because it'll be a healing infusion, not a claiming mark. If Stealth were here, he could do it himself and it would accomplish the same thing," I advise. "The problem is, because of how she's situated and sitting, I can't get the blood to drain into her mouth, and the seat is busted, so I can't lay that back either. Fuck, I hate this!"

"Let's get her out and lay her on the ground," Sly suggests. At my glare, he shrugs. "We're going to have to get her out of the car at some point, Pres. If we do it now, you'll be able to do what you've gotta do to save her. At least she's passed out so she shouldn't feel the pain from being shuffled around. But we need to make it quick, her heartbeat is slowing some more, and she looks a bit gray."

"Okay, gonna need all three of us so we don't jostle her too much," I reply.

Reaching in, I manage to cradle her head and upper torso in my arms, although it's not straight on, it's more at a sideways angle, but for now, it's the best we can do with what we have to work with. Sly eases her legs out from the gully of the floorboard, using his strength to snap the piece of metal so all that's left is the piece embedded directly in her leg, then we ease her out with Ogre stepping in to use his arms as a backboard of sorts. We move away from the car until we find a somewhat flat area, then gently set her down.

"Pres, I called and one of the prospects is on the way with a spare cage, shouldn't take him long to get here," Sly informs me as I take Nicole's left arm in my hands.

It's bruised up and there are several cuts that are scattered from her hand to her bicep, but nothing that will prevent me from trying to help her.

"Here goes nothing," I murmur before I extend my incisors and bite into my arm, then lower my wrist to her face so that I can force my life essence into her mouth. It takes her a moment for her survival instincts to kick in, but slowly, she begins to swallow. As my blood slides down her throat, I notice that her pallor is improving and it's less grayish and more ivory.



Chapter 10

STEALTH

WHEN I SPOT MY CLUB BROTHERS' BIKES STOPPED ON THE shoulder of the road, I get a sinking feeling in my gut. They wouldn't stop unless Nicole was involved, so I pull over and park, shut my bike down, and pocket my keys before I walk over to where there's a break in the guardrail and look down.

The sight below me has my wolf wanting to break free and take over so he can decimate the bastard who hurt my mate. I can see her spread out on the ground, Fox, Sly, and Ogre crouched around her, but she's not moving, and my heartbeat accelerates to an unnatural rate.

"Nini," I whisper as I practically run down the embankment until I'm by her side. "What the fuck happened?" I ask, hoping my brothers can use CliffsNotes to fill me in on what caused her to be splayed on the ground, covered in blood, bruises, and cuts with obvious fractures. "And where's the dead motherfucker who did this?"

"He's knocked out over there, we're waiting on Chaos to bring the box truck so we can get him back to the clubhouse," Sly advises.

"As far as what happened, it was really a fluke accident. Some asshole wanted to merge in front of him, he wasn't having it, apparently, because he sped up which caused the other vehicle to hit his. He lost control and was in the right place at the wrong time because his car slipped through that gap up there and went rolling down the embankment until it met the boulder," Fox says. "And because she was fading, I gave her a healing infusion."

I shudder to think what might've happened had Fox not seen them and turned around. The outcome could've been so different it doesn't bear considering. "Thanks, Pres," I whisper as I lean in and place my forehead against hers, uncaring that I'm now covered in her blood. "How are we getting her back to the clubhouse?"

"Sly called and one of the prospects is bringing a cage. He'll ride your bike back."

"Better not put so much as a scratch on it," I growl out. Not that right now that matters, but it's a knee jerk reaction to someone riding my bike, my possession. My wolf is very territorial.

"Yeah, yeah, as long as your mate is okay, you're not gonna give a fuck," Fox advises, smirking at me.

It's as if he was reading my mind. Fucker. But he's correct in his assumption. The reality is, if he does, I won't care because at the end of the day, my mate will be alive.

"Alright, sweetheart, wish this was under better, more pleasurable circumstances," I murmur, moving so I'm at the juncture of her shoulder and neck. Lengthening my incisors, I nuzzle the area then swipe my tongue across where I plan to place the claiming mark. Normally, this would happen with the two of us naked in bed, our limbs entwined, but the circumstances dictate that I do it now to save her life and heal her wounds.

As my teeth puncture her flesh, I feel our mate bond snap into place. For long moments, I push my healing blood into the bite mark I created in an effort to further jumpstart her healing. Hopefully, she's not too far gone and will begin showing the outward signs of the change my bite has generated.



NOT TOO LONG AFTERWARD, CHAOS ARRIVES, AND HAULS Jeremy, who's now gagged because he woke up and started

screaming, up to the box truck where he's summarily tossed inside. While I'll gladly listen to his wails of terror once he's on our turf, right now, my focus is my mate, who still hasn't woken up, but is showing outward signs that she's healing. Tressa chose to stay with us and has been using the wet wipes in Ogre's first aid kit to clean her up.

"Where the fuck is the prospect?" I ask Fox, who just hung up his phone. We've gotten lucky so far that the cops haven't arrived on the scene, but I'm not holding my breath that no one will notice a band of bikes parked on the side of the road and the mangled guardrail.

"He got hung up at the railroad tracks, should be here in a few minutes. We just leaving the car?" he questions.

"Don't see why not. If I need to, I can force a shift on Nicole so her broken bones heal. The rest looks like surface stuff, although it's fucking with my head because she hasn't woken up yet," I answer.

"She will when she's ready," Tressa adds, interrupting our conversation. "Can I ask that Nini be allowed to help end Jeremy?" Love that she's thinking about my woman, but ending a life is harder than it looks. It leaves scars that don't always heal.

I'm already shaking my head in response as Fox uses his presidential voice and replies, "Sorry, darlin', that's under the bylaw of club business."

"Considering he was stalking *her* I think it kind of makes it her business too, though," Tressa asserts, harrumphing.

Fox looks at me and I shrug; she's not my mate, so I have no say over her actions. That's all Chaos. But I kind of agree with her to a point. Maybe Nicole needs to face him and give him a piece of her mind before we end his pathetic life. My wolf howls his agreement, although I suspect he'd love it if Nicole appeared in her new wolf form to scare the hell out of Jeremy. It's something to think about and run by Chaos. Granted, he's our enforcer so he's normally over the interrogations and shit, but with this involving my mate, and as the SAA, I'll be there as will Fox, since he's got questions of his own, and blank

spots that need to be filled in. Such as, what the fuck was he so intent to get his hands on, and why?

To forestall any more of Tressa's comments, I put my hand up while giving her my best, grim glare that usually puts an end to anyone speaking. She grins at me, so I know she probably won't stop pushing the issue. Obviously, she's grown immune to any kind of intimidation tactics, but with Chaos as her mate, I understand why since he's as overbearing as I am sometimes. Not to mention, mates are an anomaly when it comes to our barks that have our enemies quaking in their boots. However, they don't always work on our mates, and by the gleeful smirk on Tressa's face, I think she's already figured that out, and is pressing her chances that my techniques won't work on her either.

I finally hear the sound of one of the club vehicles driving up, so I walk over to where Nicole is laying, although she's now covered in a blanket that Tressa brought with her from their place. She doesn't look as pale or lethargic, thankfully, but she's still knocked out. Reaching down, I gently scoop her up into my arms, holding her close to my chest while scanning over her to see how the restorative healing is progressing. Even her arm and leg look better; in fact, the piece of metal that we left in her leg pushes out and drops to the ground because the wound is stitching back together, leaving behind a faint pink scar. I know from experience that'll fade as well, but even if it didn't, I wouldn't care. As far as I'm concerned, it's a badge of honor showing she survived what should've probably killed her. And it would have if she didn't have a mate on standby to save her from the fate and danger her ex put her in.

"Sweetheart, gonna take you to the clubhouse now," I murmur against her temple as I efficiently carry her as quickly, yet as carefully as possible back up the embankment to the waiting Tahoe.

Sliding into the backseat with her in my arms, I smirk when I see Tressa hop into the driver's seat. When the prospect goes to say something, I stop him and say, "Go ahead and take my bike back, Prospect. Tressa knows her way to the clubhouse."

“Got it, Stealth,” he replies, tilting his head in respect as Tressa puts the Tahoe in gear and hits the gas.



I KNOW I’M A COLD-HEARTED SON OF A BITCH, BUT WHEN Tressa tries to come into my room, I can’t help the growl that emanates from deep inside. My wolf isn’t having it. He’s being protective and territorial right now, and since he’s so close to the edge, I’m glad Chaos, being sympathetic to the situation, took her by the hand and led her away. I’ll apologize to her later; but my animalistic side is in control. I need to clean her up and the only way I know how to do that is by undressing her and bathing her. I refuse to let anyone, even her best friend, see her nude.

While the thought of having my hands on her has my dick standing at attention, this is about more than sex or physical intimacy. It’s about taking care of my mate in all ways. I just hope she handles it well when she realizes it was me who took care of her.

Smirking, I gently put her on the top of the bed before I head into my en suite and start running the tap water in the tub. Once I’m satisfied with the temperature, I put the plug in the drain so the tub fills, then add some Epsom salts. As far as I know, they’ve got curative properties. At least, that’s what my mother always swore by, anyhow. While the tub fills, I gather several towels and a washcloth, then re-enter my room so I can get her undressed.

“Which will be better?” I ask myself as I stare down at her. “Put her in front of me so I can use my body to hold her up, or risk her slipping under the water while I’m kneeling alongside the tub?”

At my wolf’s snarl, I grin, since he feels we need to get in the tub with her to protect her from drowning. Since I agree with him, I quickly undress myself, then strip off her clothes, doing my best not to get lost in her curvaceous body. I want to spend

hours worshiping every dip and curve until she's panting out my name.

"Soon," I promise my dick which is now proudly jutting out as I pick her up and walk back into the bathroom.

I step inside, then manage to sit down and maneuver her in front of me without dropping her, or killing either one of us, which I consider a good thing. Since she has blood in her hair, I tip her head back over one arm, then carefully pour water over her strands until it's wet enough for me to shampoo.

I'm always amazed at how quickly we heal; even as I care for my mate, I see various bruises lighten until they ultimately disappear, and the small superficial cuts and scrapes are almost nonexistent at this point. Even her arm and leg are slowly straightening as the bones realign, but I know once I have her cleaned up and in bed, I'll need to force her to shift to ensure they calibrate properly.

In no time at all, I have her clean, and while I've enjoyed touching her, albeit in such an innocent manner, I honestly can't wait for the time to come where we can enjoy a bath together in a more carnal way. My dick jumps at the thought, and I can feel precum leaking from the head.

"Now's not the time," I mutter as I somehow get up with her situated in my arms. Grabbing the towels, I head into the bedroom, then after I lay her down, I gently dry her off. Her beautiful hair will have to wait; I'm hoping the shift will help with that if I'm being totally honest.

Leaning close, I command, "Nicole, shift." Even though she's still unconscious, her wolf will obey my Alpha command, and I watch in fascination as fur extends from her follicles and starts to ripple down her arms and legs.

Within seconds, a gorgeous, auburn-coated, brown-eyed she-wolf is staring at me.

"Nini, it's me, beautiful. I forced you to shift and I'm sorry for that, but the car accident left you with some broken bones. Shifting to your wolf is the best way to ensure you fully heal. Do you understand?"

A low yip passes through her muzzle as she looks at me. I'm sure she's confused, because she hit her head hard enough to knock her out, but I'll explain everything in due time when she's turned back into her human form. I'm unsurprised when she scoots closer to me, her head nudging my hand.

"You're stunning, Nicole. Absolutely stunning. Are you feeling okay?" She yips again so I start stroking her pelt, causing a low, contented growl to emanate from her chest as she closes her honey brown eyes. "The best thing for your healing would be for you to stay in this form for a little while. Don't be shocked or surprised if you wake up and you're back to yourself, okay? The first few shifts for a new wolf are somewhat unpredictable, and since I forced this one on you, I don't know how long you'll stay in this form. Your wolf will do what's best for you."

When she seems to understand, moving over to one side of the bed and then burrowing in after she sniffed the whole area and has accepted my scent, I head over to my dresser and slip on a pair of basketball shorts. I pull out a T-shirt for her because I don't think she'd be too thrilled to wake up and find herself naked and set it on the nightstand. Confident she's settling in okay, I go back into the en suite, pull the plug so the tub will drain, and toss all the clothes in the hamper. Satisfied that everything's as good as it's going to get, at least tonight, I slip beneath the covers, then send a text to Chaos so he can assure Tressa that Nicole is going to be just fine.



Chapter 11

NICOLE

I'VE DIED AND GONE TO HELL, ALTHOUGH FOR THE LIFE OF ME, I can't think of anything I've done that warrants such a thing. As that thought crosses my mind, clarity fully returns, and I realize there's an arm banded around my waist. And a hard, very hot body is pressed firmly against my back.

“What in the world?” I murmur out loud after looking down and seeing I'm wearing a shirt that's most decidedly *not* mine since it hangs down to mid-thigh... at least.

“What do you remember?” a raspy Stealth asks against the nape of my neck. No clue how, in my sleep-addled mind I know it's him, but there's a rightness about him being here that I can't explain.

Shivers course through me at the timbre of his voice; it resonates through me, and I instinctively know that somehow, he managed to save me yesterday. Turning so I'm facing him, I'm once again taken aback at just how handsome he truly is, at least to me. His gaze is penetrating, and normally, it would make me uncomfortable but today, at this moment, it makes me hot.

“Um, let's see. I went to DeFillippos for coffee and pastries for everyone,” I start off saying. “Then, Jeremy showed up and pushed a gun in my back and told me I was going with him. Well, I think it was a gun, but I didn't know for sure at the time. I got the treats I'd planned to, somehow managed not to tip off the clerk because he had threatened to hurt them, then we took my car to his place where he tied me up while he asked me some stupid questions about stuff.”

Stopping, I reach out and run my fingers across Stealth's jaw since he seems to be clenching his teeth. When he relaxes a little, I continue with my story. "Did you know he had made a key to my home? He's been hiding his ill-gotten gains under the very roof where me and Tressa have lived and slept, and he started doing so shortly after we broke up! Can you believe the gall of that jerk face?" I ask.

"Do you know what he was looking for?" he asks, his hand now clasping mine as he laces our fingers together.

"Some gems and a flash drive. I found the stones, which is why we were back at the apartment, but the flash drive wasn't in the box that those were packed in, and it wasn't in my purse either, which was the only other place it could've been stashed. I guess the day my purse was dumped at the clubhouse, the flash drive must've fallen out or something, and when I told Jeremy that, he said we were coming to the clubhouse to find it!"

"Shhh, it's okay, Nini," he soothes. "Take your time. As for the flash drive, it did fall on the floor, and when I found it, I gave it to Popeye to see if he could figure out what was on it."

"Well, I'm glad y'all have it then. I honestly have no clue what's on it, but I'm sure, based on the fact he told me he's hidden everything from stolen jewelry to *drugs* under my roof, it's nothing good," I reply.

He nods at me to continue so I take a deep breath and keep going.

"We were on our way to the clubhouse when he wouldn't let someone merge over in front of us. The other car clipped his front bumper, and we were forced down the side of an embankment. The last thing I remember was smashing into the boulder and the airbags deploying. After that, I got nothing."

He chuckles, then leans in and kisses the tip of my nose. I don't know why that simple gesture has goosebumps rising on my arms, but it does. Maybe because so many of the heroes in the books I adore do little things like that with the women they fall for, who knows? When his eyes darken and he cups my

jaw, I feel something inside of me stir, almost as if I'm being scratched from the inside.

“Stealth?” I question, my voice breathless and shaky. “What happened after that?”

As his thumb strokes across the apple of my cheek, I feel myself relaxing against him. Then, he leans in and lightly touches his lips to mine, which ignites a fire deep inside of me to erupt. He deepens the kiss, and soon, I don't really care what happened after I passed out. No, all I want are his lips on mine as our tongues duel with each other. Holy hell, can he kiss or what?

He finally pulls back, and says, “There's quite a bit that happened, and I'll fill you in, but I needed to know how you tasted, Nicole. When I saw the car crumpled, and the condition you were in, that was my biggest regret, that I wanted us to wait until we were here, at home, to finalize our mating claim. That being said, Fox ended up giving you a healing infusion because you were dying when he, Sly, and Ogre arrived on the scene. It won't bind you to him, but I gave you a mating claim when I got there to save you. If you're feeling kind of odd, that's the reason why. You're now a shifter, sweetheart.”

“Holy shit, just like Tressa!” I exclaim, smiling at him.

“Well, personally, no offense to your best friend or anything, but I think you're prettier,” he emphatically states, which makes me giggle at his fierce expression. “I forced you to shift last night once I got you cleaned up, Nini, because you had multiple broken bones. You turned into your human form at some point while you were sleeping once the bones were healed properly.”

“Who... wait a second, you cleaned me up?” I ask, mortification causing me to blush profusely. “You saw me *naked*?” I shriek, overlooking the comments about a healing transfusion and a mating claim completely.

The diabolical look he gives me would probably cause a lesser person to shake, but I'm so embarrassed right now, that it morphs into irrational anger. I feel like a fool, an idiot, and the good sensations from the best kiss I've ever had are waning

quickly. As tears fill my eyes, he starts to talk, and I can hear the command in his tone, which makes me refocus and take in his words.

“Stop. Putting. Yourself. Down,” he demands, his eyes taking on that of his wolf. “First of all, if anyone else talked about my mate the way you talk about yourself, I’d slay and maim them. Since I’m not going to harm a hair on my mate’s head, instead, I’ll have to come up with something else until you grasp the concept that you’re beautiful and you’re mine. I don’t give the first fuck if you think you’re too heavy, you’ll always be perfect in my eyes, do you understand?” He takes a calming breath before he continues berating me. “Not only that, but I was so hard the whole time I bathed you, that if you had been alert, willing, and not in a healing stasis, you’d have been shown how I feel. I’ve never been into extremely skinny women, Nicole. That’s unattractive to me. As a big man, I need someone who can handle what I dish out, if you know what I mean?”

At this point, I’m speechless, so all I can do is nod at him. I’m a bit in shock, too, because what he’s said multiple times, in different ways, is finally sinking into my stubborn head. “You... okay, I don’t want you to get angry at me, alright? But... you’re being serious when you say you’re attracted to me in that way. Is it the mate bond or what? I need to know, Stealth, for my own peace of mind.”

“Doesn’t matter to me, sweetheart. I was attracted when I caught the first glimpse of you, but when I recognized that you were my mate, that was the end of that. You’re mine, I’m yours, and it’ll be that way until we draw our last breaths.”

“Wow. So, what happens now?”

He starts chuckling, so I lightly smack his arm, then I end up stroking it instead. “Is that why I smell peppermint when you’re near?” I ask.

“Since when?” he questions.

“Ever since I woke up this morning. It’s one of my favorite things in the world to smell.”

“That’s how it works, I guess. Nonna would know for sure, and if you really want to know, we can ask her, but right now, I need to feed you because I’m sure you’re starved.”

“Yeah, I could eat,” I tease, giggling. “Wait, I can’t go downstairs just wearing a shirt, Stealth!”

“Don’t worry, we sent the prospects back with the box truck and they got all of y’all’s stuff, including the suitcases you packed. They dropped them off a few hours ago, so you’ve got your wardrobe available, sweetheart.”

“Sweet! I... I know we have more to talk about and stuff, but I’m pretty sure Tressa is beyond freaked out. Can I see her really quick?” I ask.

Part of me wants to stay in bed, wrapped in his arms forever, but if I don’t check on my best friend, she won’t allow me to rest, or do anything else... like finalizing our mating. It’s kind of a self-preservation thing.

“Yeah, we’ve got a lot of things to do, sweetheart,” he replies, his dark gaze making me squirm in place. “But first, you’ll need your strength for those things, so let’s get dressed and head downstairs to eat. I’ll let Chaos know if Tressa wants to see you or talk to you, she should come on down because after that, you’re all mine.”

“Okay.”



WHEN WE WALK INTO THE KITCHEN, TRESSA JUMPS UP AND rushes toward me, throwing her arms around me and nearly knocking me flat on my ass. If Stealth hadn’t been behind me with his hand on my low back, I’d have fallen over. “Oh, my God, Nini! I was so worried when I saw you yesterday, but look at you! You look like nothing happened. In fact, you seem like you’re even better than you’ve ever been!”

I stop and think about her words and realize that I have an energy level I’ve never experienced in my life. I feel like I

could climb Mt. Everest, or swim the English Channel without losing steam. I wonder how much has to do with Stealth claiming me yesterday while I was dying, or if it was the healing, blood transfusion that Fox gave me. Maybe it's a combination of the two, who knows? I'm still learning about everything wolf-ish.

"I feel pretty good," I admit. "In fact, I'm starving." I notice she's staring at my claiming bite, her eyes knowing, which makes me blush like a virgin, something I'm most definitely not.

"Come on, Nonna put on a spread this morning. You should get some food before the rest of the brothers get in here, because otherwise, you might not end up with much."

"She'll have what she needs," Stealth advises, glaring around the room.

Grinning, I allow Tressa to take my hand and pull me away from Stealth over to where there's a buffet set up with every imaginable breakfast food. "I see there's a lot of meat," I muse, picking up a plate.

"You'll figure it out for yourself, but your wolf's metabolism is high, so you want to make sure you get plenty of protein. Otherwise, you'll feel it," she warns, taking another plate and filling it up.

Once we've got what we want, we sit down at the table where various conversations swirl around us. I'm focusing on eating, since I never got the chance to eat yesterday, until I hear Jeremy's name mentioned, which sours my appetite.

"Nini, you need to eat," Stealth says when he notices I'm just pushing my food around and not actually eating any longer.

"I've lost my appetite," I reply.

"Well, eat up, darlin', because you get to tell that piece of shit how you really feel," Fox states, shocking the hell out of me. I honestly presumed, even though I haven't heard it directly, that anything to do with him would fall under the heading of 'club business', something Tressa has groused about a few times.

“Really?” I ask.

“Yes, really. You won’t be exposed to him for very long, but we think you deserve the right to speak your mind,” Stealth tells me. Leaning in close, he whispers, “Then, after I’ve said my piece to him, it’s just you and me, mate.”

Delicious shivers course through me at his words, which has him chuckling as he picks his fork up and continues eating. Now that I know I’ll be able to scream out my rage and frustration over what Jeremy did to me, I find myself wanting to finish my breakfast.

“I’ll be ready when y’all are,” I say.



Chapter 12

STEALTH

AS WE HEAD DOWNSTAIRS TO WHERE JEREMY IS TRUSSED UP like a Thanksgiving turkey, I keep a close eye on my mate. I'm so fucking proud of how she seems to be taking everything in stride, yet I know once she fully processes everything she's been told, I'll likely have her spicy side.

My wolf howls in jubilation; he likes her spirited, feisty side. Hell, he likes all of her, just like I do, but with my position in the club, having someone like her by my side is absolutely perfect as far as we're both concerned.

"Do y'all get many people down here?" she asks, looking around.

The room itself is nondescript; thick cinder block walls with a concrete floor that's been sealed to aid in clean up, with a drain right in the middle to help the prospects wash away any fluids that are expelled during our "interrogation" sessions. There's a long table lined up against one wall with every imaginable device neatly hung on the wall and laid out on the surface that we use to encourage our enemies to freely speak. Typically, Chaos leads our talks, but today, I'll be in charge with him acting as my backup.

"Club business, sweetheart. Like Fox said, normally you wouldn't get this chance, but you've earned that right," I reply.

I watch her take in a few deep breaths before she approaches Jeremy, who's glaring at her. The menacing hate that is rolling off him has me taking a step forward so he sees me, but otherwise, I don't say a thing. This is Nicole's show right now; we're just here to make sure he doesn't try anything to hurt

her. Of course, the way he's tied up, it would be a fucking miracle for him to mysteriously have access to her, but we don't take any chances.

"So, funny thing, Jeremy, but apparently, the flash drive *is* here," she taunts. "But that's actually not what I wanted to say. Do you remember the stuff you said to me when you left?" she asks. When he negatively shakes his head, she states, "Let me remind you, then. *'I no longer want to be with you. Plain and simple. You're not my type. You never were and you never will be.'* Ring any bells?"

"God, you're such a whiny bitch," Jeremy sneers, rolling his eyes.

Before I can blink, Nicole rears back and punches him in the face. "That's for slapping me yesterday, you bastard." Then, as he starts to right himself, she hauls off and hits him again, causing him to yell out in pain. "That's for not letting that other driver merge in front of you, you selfish prick." As blood trickles down his face from his split lip she gave him, she spins around and delivers a perfect roundhouse kick to his crotch, which has him doubling up while screaming in a much-higher octave than he did a few seconds ago. "And that's for being lousy in bed. I just did the world a favor, you pompous, conceited, douche canoe!"

She then turns toward me and practically crawls into my arms. I can feel her body shaking, her wolf trying to come out to say her piece, but she's not crying, so I suspect it's the adrenaline coursing through her right now.

"Well, fuck, what's left for us to do?" Ogre whines, earning a glare from Fox as he draws his index finger across his throat in the age-old symbol to shut up.

Tilting her head up so I can look at her, I lean in and softly say, "I'm so fucking proud of you, sweetheart. Anything else you want to tell him?"

"No, I think I covered it all. I mean, I forgot about the whole using my home as his warehouse for stolen goods, of course, but I'm sure y'all will handle that, won't you?" she asks, mischievously grinning at me.

“I got you, babe.” Then, because my wolf was practically prancing when she told him that he was lousy in bed, I kiss her, pouring everything I feel into it, until we’re both panting and breathless. “Go upstairs, relax, talk to your girl. We’ve got some more business to take care of, but remember what I said, when I come find you, you’re mine.”

She shivers again as her face pinkens, causing me to chuckle. “Okay,” she whispers, keeping her eyes on me instead of my brothers who are unabashedly eavesdropping, the fuckers.

“Let me take you back upstairs, think I’m gonna grab some popcorn for the next act,” Fox states, smirking at me.

Giving her one more kiss, I turn her over to my president as I mentally prepare for what’s to follow.



“So, YOU WANT TO TELL ME WHY YOU THOUGHT HIDING YOUR shit at Nicole’s place was a good idea?” I ask, walking around him with a small claw hammer in my hand. He’s watching me, but doesn’t utter a sound, so I slam it into the meat of his thigh, causing him to scream.

“He gets off on this kind of thing,” Chaos advises Jeremy. “Best you tell him because we both know ways to prolong your agony, and trust me, after what you did to his mate?” He tsks. “He’s going to pull all of them out.”

Jeremy stubbornly doesn’t say anything, so I do it again; this time, to the other leg, causing the same reaction. I honestly have no fucking clue why he won’t talk, especially since we did the bare minimum for him yesterday. He’s got several broken bones, as well as cuts and gashes similar to what Nicole suffered, although *he* had his seatbelt on, and she didn’t.

“You’re a dumb fuck, man. Who are you protecting? Because in all honesty, we’re a far bigger threat to you right now than

anything anyone else has over you,” Ogre states. “Stealth, you should use that mini torch thingy y’all got.”

I smirk, because that’s more Chaos’ thing than mine, but Jeremy’s reaction to what Ogre just said has me walking over to the table and putting the claw hammer aside so I can pick up the torch. It’s actually used by bakers for crystalizing sugar or some shit, but when we saw Nonna using one, then heard her curse when she accidentally burned herself, we decided to buy one. Raising my brow at Chaos, he grins at me then waves toward Jeremy.

“Let’s see, how does this work again?” I muse as I turn the knob and see a small flame erupt. “Ah yes, now, do you have anything to say before I start?”

Jeremy remains mute, so in order to entice him to speak, I wave the flame near his bare arms, singeing the hair, and causing the skin to begin blistering. “Motherfucker, that hurts!” Jeremy yells.

“We’re just getting this party started, asshole. You ain’t seen nothing yet,” Ogre singsongs, causing us all to laugh. He tends to bring humor to most situations; sometimes it’s appreciated, sometimes it’s not, but this time, it’s absolutely perfect.

“Get his shoes off,” Fox instructs, having returned downstairs. He looks at me and says, “Your mate’s with Tressa up in the kitchen. They’re helping Nonna bake or some shit. I think Nonna came up with it so she could take your mate’s pulse and see how she’s handling everything.”

Sly removes Jeremy’s shoes and socks, then glares at the man and spits out, “Jesus, man, don’t you know you’re supposed to use soap on your fucking feet? These are disgusting.”

I glance down, and my lip curls in disgust when I see how crusty and dirty he is. What a fucking pig! Yet the world would call *us* animals if they knew about us? Hell, even as a kid, I don’t remember ever being as filthy as this fuckwad is right now.

“What were you thinking, Fox?” I ask.

“Hmm, well, heat rises, so why not see how that thing will feel on his feet?” he retorts.

“Oh, hell yeah,” Chaos cheers. “Do it, Brother.”

Shrugging, I crouch in front of Jeremy, grateful that my brothers had the foresight to tie his legs down so he can't kick me, then wave the torch across the arches of his feet. I'm pretty sure based on the string of curse words he's screaming, it hurts, and I know for myself, that's one of the most tender areas on my body. The skin bubbles up and blisters on the second pass, and on the third one, I smell the unmistakable odor of urine and realize good ol' Jeremy has pissed his pants.

“Because no one would ever suspect her of anything!” Jeremy screams. “Her place was perfect since my house was always being watched by the feds. I would just run by there, and if I didn't see her or Tressa home, I'd use my key, take whatever I had to hide inside, and tuck it somewhere, usually in a false bottom I created underneath the kitchen sink! Stop, please, for the love of God, stop!”

“So, who did the gems and flash drive belong to?” Fox questions.

“The Bastians! They took a job on for someone else for the gems, and I was to hide them until they asked me for them. But they disappeared, so I was going to fence them myself, and relocate. The flash drive is mine.”

“What's the flash drive for?” Sly asks.

“I did the books for the Bastians but noticed some discrepancies on several accounts, so I made copies in case I needed it for insurance.”

“Wouldn't have had to do that kind of thing if you had worked for a legit business,” Fox snarks, making all of us burst into laughter. “As far as the Bastians go, you won't find any of those fuckers, except in Hell where they belong. Wait, yeah, you'll see them again after all.”

“Let me go! You got the answers you wanted, I don't have any more information,” Jeremy pleads, tears and snot now mixing

with the blood that's been steadily dripping down his face from Nicole's earlier punches.

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen. You made the mistake of hurting my mate and that simply won't stand," I advise, walking toward him as I allow my claws to distend from my fingers.

"What the fuck are you? Some kind of freak?" Jeremy rages as I get closer.

I run my hands down his body until the rest of his clothes are in shreds at his feet. Once he's naked, the damage from the auto accident is more apparent, as is what we've done with him so far. My next pass slices open the skin on his arms, chest, and back. By now he's crying incoherently, but at this point, my wolf's in charge.

"Not a freak, just your worse fucking nightmare," I assert, running both hands across the top of his thighs which were already damaged from the claw hammer.

"Please, just kill me now, I can't take any more. You can have the gems, just stop this," Jeremy begs.

"I wish Stealth and Chaos were up here, Tressa needs help, and I don't know what to say."

Hearing Nini's thoughts in my head stops me in my tracks, and I look at Chaos. "Something's going on upstairs involving our mates."

"Go, we'll finish this up," Fox commands.

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I turn from the almost comatose asshole and after quickly washing my face and hands, I follow Chaos upstairs, where we walk into... well, chaos, of course.



Chapter 13

NICOLE

“I’M HAPPY FOR YOU TWO,” NONNA SAYS AS SHE PUTS ingredients into the mixer for cookies. “Nini, do you have any questions I can help you with? Anything you don’t understand?”

“I don’t think so, I mean, we haven’t, you know, had sex yet, but he said he gave me my claiming mark after the wreck.”

“Can you talk to him in your head?” Tressa questions. At my confused look, she says, “All you have to do is think what you want to say, and he should hear it. It’ll get better once you’ve had sex, of course, but you should be able to do it now.”

“I don’t know, I haven’t even tried,” I admit. “But I will because that sounds kind of cool, actually.”

“It is when you live with a bunch of shifters who have supersonic hearing,” Tressa teases.

Nonna must see my face because she starts laughing then says, “Honey, don’t worry. Fox made sure all the *bedrooms* are soundproof.” Tressa joins in with Nonna, and soon, I’m giggling as well.

Because that thought *did* cross my mind. I mean, I don’t know that I’m vocal while having sex, since Jeremy didn’t bring it out in me, but I suspect that Stealth has that ability, and just thinking about everyone in the clubhouse hearing me was a bit disturbing.

“I know Stealth forced your first shift, but once you’ve done it yourself, we’ll have to go for a run. You’ll enjoy the wolf side once you get used to her, Nini,” Nonna states while deftly

scooping out the cookie dough and placing it onto baking sheets.

“I wish he had taken a picture so I could see how I looked,” I admit. I grab a spoon and help get the cookies ready to go into the oven, grinning when Nonna smacks Tressa’s hand when she tries to eat a raw one.

“We’ll be sure to get one the next time,” Tressa says.



THE COOKIES ARE DONE AND COOLING, AND WE’RE NOW sitting in the common room since the men still haven’t come back upstairs, with sandwiches and drinks that Nonna prepared while the cookies were baking.

“I wonder how much longer they’re going to be,” I muse. I’m equal parts excited and nervous about my upcoming time alone with Stealth. Of course, he’s already seen me naked, but I was unconscious, so in my mind, that doesn’t count.

“Who knows? I just hope they hurry because I want to know what they found out,” Tressa adds. Then she starts giggling and looks at me and through her laughter, she says, “I’ll probably never know because they’ll say, ‘club business’ and shut me down.”

What has me snickering is the fact she lowered her voice so that it’s husky and she sounded like a man when she said ‘club business’, because she’s correct. I heard it several times when I was here before, and I suspect I’ll want to shove those two words down Stealth’s throat at some point. Even Nonna smiles while nodding.

“I guess you could always show me where my suite of rooms is located,” I state once we’ve all calmed down.

Both Nonna and Tressa begin to speak simultaneously, until Tressa waves to the older woman to continue. “Child, you slept in your room last night. With Stealth’s mark on you now, you’ll be by his side, not in your own space.”

I wrinkle my nose a little bit, then shrug because it's like that in the shifter books I read as well. Once the couple claims each other, they're by one another's side. Wait a minute... do I get to bite him too? Grinning, I look at Nonna and ask, "Do I give him a mark as well?"

"Of course. You've probably already noticed you can occasionally hear him if his emotions are elevated, but when you give him your claiming mark, the bond will completely seal, and you'll be able to hear him and his thoughts without trying."

"He can hear my thoughts?" I shriek. Some of the things that filter through my brain are *not* for public consumption, for heaven's sake!

"Right now, he would hear you loud and clear, because your emotions are high. You'll learn how to throw up a shield, so your innermost thoughts are still private, child," Nonna calmly states.

I'm about to ask another question when the front doors to the clubhouse open and Tressa's father walks in, a prospect running behind him, shouting, "Sir, sir, you can't just walk in!"

"Of course, I can. My daughter's here and I want to speak to her," Mr. Powers retorts. Spotting us, he moves closer while I watch my best friend carefully. She never told him why she moved out, nor why she wouldn't come over for family dinners. So, if she doesn't speak up now, I plan to because he deserves to know his wife is a big old steaming pile of dog shit as far as I'm concerned for how she treated Tressa as a child.

"Daddy? What are you doing here?" Tressa asks.

"I got tired of your excuses as to why we couldn't get together, pumpkin. You weren't easy to find, that's for sure," he replies. "Did you really think I'd be upset that you found someone who loves you because he's a biker?"

Tressa shrugs, and I instinctively know it wasn't her dad she was concerned about, it was the evil witch. I wish she were

here so I could yank out her perfect hair, then wonder where my bloodthirsty attitude has suddenly come from.

“I don’t know, Daddy,” Tressa says. “I just... I just couldn’t take it if your wife criticized him, so I stayed away. Especially now that I’m pregnant.”

Mr. Powers stills, and he looks closely at his daughter. “What do you mean, sweetheart? Nancy would be happy for you, I’m sure.”

I can’t help the snorting noise I make at his statement because it’s so ludicrous it’s not even funny. “Nancy wouldn’t be happy for her, Mr. Powers. She’s *never* been happy for her.”

Confusion now mars his face as Tressa wrings her hands together, a sure sign she’s becoming anxious. However, this has been a long time coming, and since I know how much Tressa misses her father, I decide to be her mouthpiece.

“Explain,” he demands, staring at me.

“Every and any time you were out of town, your wife treated Tressa like shit. Didn’t you ever wonder why she moved out at eighteen? Or why, when you had guests for dinner, Tressa wasn’t present? It was because of your wife,” I hiss out between clenched teeth. “She used to belittle her, *hit* her, and generally make her feel like she was less than.”

His mouth is now gaped open, and a look of horror has his eyes wide as he stares at his daughter while I continue with a litany of some of the things Nancy did to Tressa while growing up. “Oh, Tressa, I had no idea,” he whispers, dropping down to his haunches next to her and taking her hands in his. “Please, forgive an old man who ignored the signs. Your mother would be appalled at how her best friend treated her baby girl.”

“Best friend? Nancy was Mom’s *best friend*?” Tressa asks, her voice rising higher with each word spoken. “Let me say this much, Daddy, I don’t think Nancy knows how to be a friend. Do you want to know why I know this? Because Nicole has been my best friend ever since Nancy told me I had to leave since I had turned eighteen. Even though all I had at the time

was a little part-time job that made slightly over minimum wage. I moved in with her and rented a room in what was her grandmother's house until it got sold, then we moved into an apartment together. She's been by my side when I was sick as a dog with the flu, has cheered me on in my business accomplishments, and helped me understand that Nancy's issues were and are her issues, not mine."

"Why didn't you ever say anything to me?" he questions. "You were my priority, Tressa."

"Daddy, we had already lost Mom, and I figured if I said anything, you'd be sad all the time again," she admits.

"I was happy because my little girl had someone who cared about her, who could take care of her while I was out of town for business. If I had known, we might not have had as much, but I wouldn't have allowed it, Tressa."

"What do you mean by 'not had as much'?" I inquire, curious because from how Tressa explained things, she had to 'make do' with what she was given.

"Well, all the things Tressa was involved in might have had to be cut off, but as long as my little girl was happy, it wouldn't have mattered," he stresses. "Things are just that, things, and knowing your heart was hurt like that is killing me."

"I wasn't involved in anything, Daddy. Nancy said we didn't have the money, so I got books from the library," Tressa replies.

"No horseback riding lessons or dance classes?" he slowly asks, rising to his feet. "No art camp, Girl Scouts, or soccer?" Didn't he ever wonder why she never had any games or practices while he was home? Men can be so ignorant and clueless sometimes.

"No, sir," Tressa replies. "Daddy? Are you okay?"

"I'll be right back," he states as he turns on his heel and heads out the front door.

I have a sinking suspicion as to where he's going and who he's getting, and my stomach sinks. We ran into her one time when we were out shopping; she didn't say a word to Tressa or me.

In fact, when Tressa did the proper thing and said hello, Nancy turned away as if she didn't know her! This is going to be bad, I just know it.

"I wish Stealth and Chaos were up here, Tressa needs help, and I don't know what to say."



"EXPLAIN YOURSELF, NANCY. MY DAUGHTER SAYS SHE WAS never involved in any of the things you claimed she was in," Mr. Powers demands.

I can feel Tressa's leg nervously shaking under the table, and reach over to take one of her hands in mine, while Nonna, who has remained remarkably silent so far, takes the other one.

"She's obviously forgotten is all," Nancy airily retorts, waving her hand. "Must be the drugs or something she's now doing thanks to the animal she's seeing. Nothing more than a common criminal."

"You watch too much television," Nonna advises. "Because if I had my choice of who to have in my life, I'd pick one of these men over someone like you."

"Nancy, I entrusted you with the best possible thing I had, my precious little girl, and from what I've heard, and I'm sure it's only the tip of the iceberg, you abused that trust. She might have been 'cared' for, but it sounds like it was just the minimum. What I don't understand is why," Mr. Powers says.

"Because the only reason you married me was to take care of *her*," Nancy shouts. "You never loved me, only her and her mother!"

"So, you treated my daughter like shit and alienated her from me because you were jealous? You're a grown ass woman, Nancy! She was a little girl who'd lost her mother, for Christ's sake. Where's your compassion and understanding? Well, I've lost enough time with my child due to your machinations, but I won't lose any more, especially not with a grandchild on the

way,” Mr. Powers says. “I’ll have my attorney send the divorce papers, but here’s your verbal notice as well. You have two weeks to pack your shit and get out of my house.”

“You can’t do that!” Nancy shrieks, completely losing her composure. “Marital property!” She goes for the one thing she believes is her power play.

I snicker, because one way or another, she’ll be vacating that home. I hope she tries to be a ballbuster, because the guys will react in kind, and she won’t stand a chance against them.

“Sounds to me like she just did,” Chaos says. “You’ve overworn your welcome, ma’am, so I suggest you leave.”

I feel heat behind me and glance back to see Stealth there, looking intimidating as hell as he glares at Nancy.

“Don’t forget, you signed a prenup,” Mr. Powers adds, which makes Nancy nearly apoplectic as she turns on her heel and practically runs from the room. Looks like she’ll be huffing her way home in those heels.

I watch as Chaos kneels next to Tressa and takes her in his arms, whispering, “Are you okay? And what’s this I hear about a baby?”

She turns tear-filled eyes to him and nods. “I just found out this morning,” she says. “I was going to tell you but y’all had to, you know.”

I see both men nod at her reference to taking care of Jeremy. While I want to know how they knew we needed him, I realize now is not the time to discuss it with Mr. Powers still standing there. Is it true? Did he hear my voice and act? So many questions, yet I’ll have to wait to ask them.

“Tressa? I’m going to leave, but I hope you’re willing to consider rebuilding a relationship with me,” Mr. Powers quietly states. “Things will be a lot different moving forward.” Guess he wants to go home and make sure the she-devil doesn’t destroy his stuff in a fit of anger.

She does what I expect her to do, she launches herself into her father’s arms, crying and telling him she loves him. I knew she never stopped, she just had to protect herself from Nancy, so

while I hated her having to revisit her past, at least she's resolved it and it's not hanging over her head any longer. Because every child needs as many people as possible to love them; this world is hard enough as it is.

"C'mon, my little spitfire, let's leave them to their reunion," Stealth says before scooping me up and walking toward the rooms.



Chapter 14

STEALTH

ONCE WE'RE INSIDE MY ROOM WITH THE DOOR SECURELY SHUT and locked, I gently set her on her feet then kiss her as though my life depends on it. Because at this point, it does. I need her more than I need air to breathe. I don't pull away until we're both breathless, her face is flushed with desire, and her lips are swollen.

"How did you know we needed y'all?" she asks.

"I heard you, Nini. Through our bond," I explain when she looks confused.

"Oh, so that's what Nonna was talking about," she murmurs.

"You can explain that later, sweetheart. Right now, it's time for us."

"Can I ask one more thing before you ravage me?" she questions, grinning up at me.

I can't help the chuckle that bursts from my lips. "Ravage you? Hopefully, it's mutually beneficial," I tease. "Where do you come up with these words?"

"Uh, book nerd here, Stealth, remember?" she sasses, her hands now on her hips. "I can't change who I am and I'm not even going to try."

"Wouldn't have you any other way, beautiful."

Picking her up, I carry her over to the bed and stand her in front of it. Reaching down, my gaze never leaving hers, I grab the bottom of her shirt and slowly pull it up and off her body, tossing it to the side. Seeing her luscious tits encased in a light,

buttercup yellow lacy bra has my dick hardening even more. I reach out with my index finger and lightly stroke across the top swell of her breasts until I see her nipples distended.

“What color are your pretty little nips going to be, I wonder?” I muse. “Strawberry pink? Dusty rose? Light brown? It doesn’t matter, I’ll love the hell out of them.”

Reaching around her back, I quickly undo the clasp then slide the straps down her arms, and once I have it in my hand, throw it in the direction of her shirt. As I cup her tits in my hands, I lean in and pull a nipple between my lips, causing her breath to hitch while she tries to move closer, her hands resting on my waist. I alternate between sides until both nipples are reddened from my efforts. Her little moans of pleasure have me worried about my control which feels like it’s about to snap.

“Stealth,” she moans as goosebumps cover her arms. “I want... I want you,” she admits.

“Getting there, sweetheart. Patience,” I murmur.

I slide her pants and underwear down her legs, my mouth watering as the scent of her arousal hits my nose. Now I groan as I lift one of her legs over my shoulder to expose her glistening pussy. When I swipe my tongue through her folds, I feel her hands grab onto me, although I’ll never let her fall. I’m soon feasting on her as though it’s my last meal, licking, sucking, and lightly biting as I work one digit into her tight, wet sheath.

“Oh, my God,” she says, her core tightening around my finger. When I add another digit and begin thrusting in time to what my tongue is doing to her clit, I feel her claws embed themselves and grin against her pussy. I’ll gladly wear any marks she gives me, knowing they were caused by her pleasure over what I’m doing to her.

“You gonna come on my tongue and fingers, sweetheart?” I ask. “Want to taste your release, baby.”

I increase my thrusts, adding a third finger since I’m trying to make sure I won’t hurt her when I finally get inside, and feel

her pussy start fluttering. “That a girl, Nini,” I whisper against her lips. “Give me all your sweet cream.”

She explodes in my mouth, and I watch as she throws her head back in utter ecstasy. Holding her tightly as wave after wave courses through her, I continue my ministrations until she tries to pull away. Slowly I stand, grinding my hard dick against her core, causing her to blush, which makes me chuckle considering what I was just doing to her.

When I pick her up and her legs lift and go around my waist, pressing her hot, wet pussy against my lower abdomen, I growl and practically toss her onto the bed while quickly stripping off my own clothes. The sight that greets me has me thanking Mother Earth for bringing this woman into my life as my fated mate.

Luscious doesn't begin to describe her; full, heaving breasts, voluptuous curves, wide, inviting hips waiting to cradle me, and thighs that make me want to nibble them.

“I'm a lucky man,” I say as I climb onto the bed until I'm hovering over her.

“I think I'm the lucky one,” she rebuts, smiling up at me. “You've already given me more than I've ever had.”

Thankfully, she doesn't say *his* name; my wolf and I are barely holding onto our control at this point. I want to plunge into her, fuck her into the mattress until she's hoarse from screaming out my name, and then after a short break, do it all again.

Instead, I notch the head of my dick against her entrance and slowly begin entering her, using shallow thrusts until I'm fully seated. Because even though she just had an orgasm, and I had three fingers deep in her sheath at the time, she's still tight as fuck and I'd cut my own arm off before I'd hurt her. By the time I'm fully seated, I'm covered in a light sheen of sweat.

“You good, Nini?” I ask as I lean forward to kiss her. “If there's anything I do that you don't like, or if it hurts, just stop me.”

“I’m good, Stealth. Do you... do you think you could start moving? My wolf, at least I think it’s her, is about to jump out of my skin.”

“Tell her to back off, our wolves will have their time, this is *ours*,” I state as I begin moving.

I watch her eyes glaze over in passion as I set a steady, but punishing pace, pulling almost completely out before plunging back in so my pubic bone hits her clit. Her breath hitches slightly as she runs her hands up and down my arms. She’s also moving her hips in a swivel pattern, making my eyes cross, her grip on my shaft has me close to coming.

“I... I didn’t... I didn’t expect it to feel like this,” she stammers, her movements becoming almost desperate as she chases another orgasm.

“Need you to get there, Nini, tell me what you need to get there,” I demand.

“I don’t know,” she wails, so I take the decision out of her hands and reach between us to start stroking her clit in time with my thrusts. Soon, all that can be heard in our den is the sound of skin slapping against skin, as well as the moans we’re both emitting. When her pussy clamps down hard on my dick, she throws her head back as her back arches and screams out my name, triggering my own release, which I pump into her while yelling her name.

The slight sting on my neck brings me back to reality as it dawns on me that my mate gave me her claiming mark. As the final piece of the mate bond clicks into place, I’m assaulted with a barrage of images of my mate in various stages of her life. Some memories are happy, a lot are sad, and in that moment, I vow the only time she’ll experience sadness is when she’s missing me when I’m gone on a run.

I roll so I’m now on my back with her nestled against my side. Swiping her hair off her face, I ask, “You okay, sweetheart?”

“Never been better, Stealth,” she murmurs sleepily.

“You can rest for a little bit, but we’re not done, Nicole. Not by a long shot.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” she replies, causing me to chuckle.



AFTER A LONG, HOT SHOWER WHERE I INTRODUCED NICOLE TO shower sex, I threw some clothes on and went down to find some food while she rested. Finding Nonna and Fox in the kitchen, I laughed when I saw the tray she had put together.

“Nonna, you’re a godsend,” I say, grinning down at her.

“You look like a man who is well-satisfied with his mate. Much more relaxed, too,” she replies.

“That I am, Nonna. That I am.” Turning to Fox, I ask, “What happened with Jeremy after we came upstairs?”

Fox snorts in disgust as he glares at me. “The fucking pussy had a damn heart attack and died!”

“How? He wasn’t that old!” I don’t mention that I believe he was sampling some drugs. Fuck knows he stank, and I could’ve sworn I smelt the slight odor of drugs in his system.

“Might have something to do with the fact that Fox decided to be an asshole and he shifted in front of the fucker,” Ogre says, walking into the kitchen. He looks disgustedly at Fox as he continues. “Didn’t give none of us enough of a notice to grab a defibrillator or get a chance to express our feelings on how he treated your mate.”

“I got pissed, okay? The asshole kept saying we were nothing but a bunch of monsters, for fuck’s sake!”

“So, you decided you’d show him how much of a monster you really were?” I humorously ask.

He nods then starts to laugh. “There he was, slowly bleeding out from everything you’d already done, he’d pissed himself afuckingain then when I shifted, he shrieked like a woman in a haunted house and slumped over dead.”

I can't help it; he and Ogre look so disappointed at that fact that I burst into laughter. "That's fucking perfect and at least he's no longer around to hurt my mate," I finally manage to say between my wheezing.

"We've got Popeye going over that flash drive to see if we can figure out who the gems actually belong to. Figured if we can do that, we'd anonymously return them since that's not our kind of thing, y'know?" Fox states.

"Well, if anyone can do it, he can," I assert, grabbing the tray. "Now, unless the fucking building is burning to the ground, don't bother us."



Chapter 15

NICOLE

“YOU WANT ME TO WHAT?” I ASK, STARING IN HORROR AT Stealth.

“Ride me, Nini,” he says for the second time.

I think about how everything’s going to be jiggling and he’ll see it all if I’m on top and slowly shake my head. “I can’t do that,” I whisper.

A loud thwack resounds through the room as he hauls me up until I’m straddling him. “Remember what I said about what happens when you put yourself down?” he asks as his hand soothes the spot where I’m sure his handprint now resides. “Seeing you astride my dick, your breasts swaying, is a fantasy that’s played in my head on repeat ever since I realized you were my mate. As far as what you perceive as imperfections,” he says, grabbing my love handles near my hips, “I see it as more cushion for the pushing.”

The giggle that pops out as I wiggle against his length surprises me, but when he raises me up slightly and lowers me onto his hard cock, my laughter turns into a low moan. “Fuck,” I breathe out when I’m fully seated against him, my clit deliciously rubbed by the wiry pubic hair.

“Now, ride me, mate,” he demands, gripping my hips and thrusting upward.

I’m soon lost in the sensations coursing through my body as I chase my release. So much so that when he raises up slightly and sucks one of my nipples into his mouth, I shoot off like a bottle rocket, keening out his name. He continues to power up

into me until I feel him still then the unmistakable warmth of his release hitting my womb. As I slump forward, now spent, he wraps his arms around me and rubs his hands up and down my back, peppering kisses on my face. The onslaught of emotions has my eyes filling with tears.

“Why are you crying?” he suddenly asks.

“I don’t know, I think it’s an emotional overload or something,” I admit as I snuffle.

“Do you know how happy you’ve made me?” he questions, rolling so we’re now face-to-face. “I didn’t have an easy life growing up, then I found the Zephyr Hills Phantoms and made a new family, but it wasn’t complete until you came along.”

I cry harder at his words; it’s as though we were two lost, lonely souls until the fates decided I was his mate. Now we’re two parts of a whole and I honestly can’t wait to see what happens next.

“Shhh, Nini, I’ve got you.”

“Are...are you going to want children at some point?” I ask, thinking about Tressa being pregnant. That was something we always dreamed of; having babies who were close in age.

“As many as you’ll give me, sweetheart,” he admits.

“Then we should probably get started because I’m not getting any younger,” I tease, reaching between us to stroke his dick.

“Sounds like a plan to me.”



“A CLUB RUN? WHAT’S THAT?” I ASK AS WE HEAD downstairs to eat with everyone else. We’ve been holed up for over a week now, which should embarrass me, but strangely, I’m content. During one of our many talks, he explained that newly mated wolves sequestered themselves away and reinforced their bond, so it was unbreakable. At this point, I

think only death will sever ours, and I'm perfectly okay with that fact.

"We'll all shift then run the property," he says, taking my hand as we enter the kitchen.

"Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in," Ogre teases.

"Shut it, fucker. If you embarrass my mate, I'll take your ass out," Stealth threatens.

He throws his hands up in the air in a placating gesture and replies, "I was only kidding. Being mated looks good on you, Brother. You don't look so... tense. Yeah, that's the word." Stealth steps toward him and he smirks while moving to the other side of the room.

"Let's eat so you can explain how you think I'm going to strip down in front of your brothers, then shift," I state, causing him to growl.

"You'll shift in here. Nonna will open the door so you can come out onto the deck afterward," Stealth advises, dropping my hand so he can grab a plate and start filling it. When I attempt to get one as well, he shakes his head. "No, this one is yours. I'm taking care of my mate first."



AS I RUN AFTER STEALTH, I BRIEFLY WONDER IF I CAN JUST stay in wolf form. While we're all larger than an average, normal wolf, I feel very free and attractive right now. I'm not worried about whether my thighs and ass are jiggling everywhere. No, I'm concerned about the scent of prey I just picked up as I veer off the path and begin tracking.

"That's one," Stealth says in my head. "For thinking you're less than beautiful in your human form," he adds. "Your wolf is stunning, but I'm partial to the brown-haired beauty who sleeps in my arms every night."

"You say the sweetest things to me," I reply.

“And I mean every one of them,” he asserts. “Now, let’s see how you do at taking out this rabbit.”



“WASN’T IT A TOTAL BLAST?” TRESSA ASKS WHEN WE’RE back at the clubhouse.

Stealth and I went upstairs and took a shower together, which led to another awesome round of sex, but now we’re all in the common room. The guys are shooting pool and darts, while Tressa and I are sitting at a table, talking.

“It really was,” I admit. “Who knew that the books we’ve loved for so long were based on truth?”

“Right? Oh, I hope you get pregnant soon. I want our kids to be best friends like we are!” she exclaims.

“We’re working on it,” I reply, grinning at her when she lets out a shriek of excitement that’s so loud, Chaos turns to look in our direction.

“Sweet! Well, hurry it up, Nini! We can do motherhood together then!”

I giggle because I suspect during one of our marathon sessions, something took so to speak. It’s too early to tell for sure, but I felt different afterwards, as if the fates were telling me something.

“I’ll do my best, okay?”

“Knowing you, it’s probably already a done deal,” she teases.

Shrugging, I reply, “Who knows? Only time will tell.”



DRIFTING OFF TO SLEEP THAT NIGHT, I MURMUR, “I LOVE YOU, Stealth. Thank you for giving me a life I’ve only ever dreamed

could happen.”

He kisses my temple and replies, “I love you more, Nicole. The best is yet to come.”

THE END...FOR NOW



Epilogue

Fox

APPROXIMATELY THREE MONTHS LATER

“WHAT ON EARTH ARE GINGER CHEWS?” I MUTTER AS I LOOK over the list that Tressa gave me. “And why the fuck am I running to get these things when both women have mates?”

Sighing, I rub my hands across my face as I read the rest of the list. Since Popeye managed to find out who the gems belonged to, Stealth and Chaos went on a run to hand deliver them. I would’ve been perfectly fine with mailing them, but the two of them thought it would be better to meet with the owner and let them know that they needed to find another town to run their shit through, Zephyr Hills was closed to those activities.

“Guess I’m heading into town. Hopefully this shit will fit in my saddlebags. It’s too fucking nice outside to be caught in a cage. Of course, if it ends up being too much, I’ll just call a prospect.”

Happy with my plan of action, I head out to my bike, strap on my helmet, then sling my leg over until I’m sitting comfortably on my seat. Hitting the start button, I grin as the unmistakable rumble starts then increases when I twist the throttle.



“WELL, THIS ISN’T TOO BAD,” I MUTTER WHILE WALKING down the sidewalk toward an apothecary store. Don’t even

know what the fuck that is, but when I asked the waitress about some of the items on the list, she told me I could find them at Vivi's. Apparently, the owner is an herbalist, and she carries the shit Tressa and Nini swear they have to have to survive their pregnancies.

When I find the shop, I open the door and step inside, only to be hit with the most delicious smell to ever cross my nose.

Calla lilies and mint.

I'm barely inside when I hear a female ask, "Can I help you find something?"

Turning, I see a tall, striking woman standing there and realize the scent is coming from her, especially since it grows stronger the closer I get.

"Hi, my name is Fox and I'm looking for a few things. The waitress at the diner says you carry them," I reply, handing her the list.

"Vivienne Lafontaine. If you'll follow me, I have them over here."

"Mate, I'll follow you anywhere," I think to myself.

FOX AND VIVI'S STORY WILL BE IN "THE PRESIDENT" WHICH
WILL RELEASE SOME TIME IN 2024!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a transplanted Yankee, moving from upstate New York when I was a teenager. I'm a mom of four and grandma of nine who has found a love of traveling that I never knew existed! I live with the brat-cat pack (all rescues) as well as my dog, Bosco, 'deep in the heart of Texas', as I plot and plan who will get to "talk" next!

Find me on Facebook!

<https://www.facebook.com/darlenetallmanauthor>

Darlene's Dolls (my reader's group):

<https://shorturl.at/fhpES>

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