

ALBANY WALKER



*Becoming  
His*

# BECOMING HIS



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Albany Walker

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*I'd like to give a huge thank you to my mom and dad for giving me the courage to write this book, and the feedback they gave me all along the way. Even when my dad told me I was a good storyteller, but a terrible writer. Totally true by the way my editing needs editing!*

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*To you, my readers.*

*Thanks for being part of my journey.*



# PROLOGUE



Five years earlier

I smile, looking up to my mom as she playfully bats my dad's hands away from her so she can finish making my birthday cake. I'm fourteen today. Big deal, right? If I'd only known then that it would be my last birthday with them I wouldn't have whined that my dad had a surprise for me, that did not include my friends and a party.

"I know you want to hang out with your friends, sweetheart, but tonight give an old man a break. Let me keep the two most beautiful women all to myself," my dad said while giving me puppy dog eyes.

I rolled my eyes. "Old man, yeah right," I scoffed. My dad is so handsome that after age twelve every one of my friends got tongue-tied if he even walked in the room. "Whatever, Dad."

"Cake's almost ready, Sophie. Go on and get ready. We have a reservation at eight o'clock," my mom interrupts, looking as beautiful as my dad is handsome.

"Okay, Mom. Where are we going? Do I need to change?" I look down at my jeans and Scooby-Doo t-shirt.

"No, sweetheart, you look pretty." I run upstairs to check my long, wavy hair for frizz and grab my phone. I have a couple text messages from friends wishing me a happy birthday and asking if I was coming out later. I ignore the messages, intending to respond when I get home.

Twenty minutes later, we pull up to my favorite restaurant. The downtown area of our upper-middle-class neighborhood is quaint. Black streetlights fashioned after antique gas lamps line the relatively busy sidewalk.

There's even an old-fashioned movie theater that still plays black and white movies that my parents like to watch on date nights and a few trendy boutiques lining the road.

As soon as I step out of the car, I feel funny, butterflies making my tummy feel sour. When we pass a small pub, the feeling intensifies. My dad notices me holding my hand over my belly and asks if I'm okay.

"Yeah, I guess I shouldn't have had that spoonful of icing. My tummy is just a little off," I reply, grimacing to myself about how I found my mom and dad sharing a kiss in the kitchen, so I stole the wooden spoon Mom was using to decorate my cake.

Mates! I think with an eye roll. My parents were lucky enough to find each other not all shifters do. The few that do find their mates live out their lives with the other half, content that they have the other piece of their soul beside them. Unfortunately, the rest make do, hoping that one day it will be their turn.

At dinner, my belly seems to calm. We eat, laugh, and eat some more while the men at the grill sing happy birthday to me. My cheeks light like lamps as every head turns to stare at our table. Looking down, I finish my meal quickly, embarrassed by the attention.

After dinner, we decide to walk up the street and get ice cream. I leave my parents, lost in each other, sitting on a bench sharing a cone and go grab my sweatshirt from the car.

"Hurry back, sweetheart," Dad says while pulling Mom closer.

Back at the car, my tummy churns again. Agh. "What is wrong with me?"

The door to the pub opens, and the butterflies explode in my stomach, causing me to suck in a gasp. The scent of forest,

frost, and leather hits me first. Holy biscuits, that smells good. I won't shift for two more years, but my body knows what the smell affecting me so profoundly means. Mate. A man rounds the door and stops dead in his tracks.

My eyes rise and rise to meet his. The shadows keep the details hidden, but his strong jaw and large frame tell me he is much older than me. After what seems like years passing, he takes one step closer and clenches his fists. Dark hair falling just past his ears blows back from his rugged face showing me his scruffy jaw tensing repeatedly. Fear lashes at me, not from this man but from not knowing what's next. I've never heard of mates meeting so young. It happens after the first shift, not before.

"Mate," he utters so deep and quietly that I almost miss it, but his voice soothes my nerves.

The door opens again as a group of boisterous men and women stumble out. Only seconds have passed when a gorgeous blonde grabs his arm and slides her hand into his, looking at him with love clearly written on her face. He doesn't push her away, nor does he look away from me. We stand frozen as the world moves around us.

One of the men slaps him on the back and says, "Mase, you missed it, man. Roxanne just slapped that girl that kept staring at you all night."

He turns to the man that was just speaking, and the spell is broken. I look down, rubbing my hands across my belly, not sure what's happening when the same man speaks again, "Who's the little lady?" Head cocked to the side like he's trying to figure me out. By this time, I have everyone in the group's attention. Stepping back from the weight of their stares, I fumble with the sweatshirt I retrieved from the car.

The blonde woman slits her eyes at me and asks, "Mase?"

"No one," he growls. The ache in my stomach instantly moves to my chest, hollowing it out.

*No one*, I repeat in my head.

“I almost ran into her when I came out just making sure she’s okay,” he grates.

“She looks great to me,” the other man says as his eyes run up and down my body making me squirm. A low rumble sounds and everyone freezes turning to him.

“Don’t,” my mate says. To me, to them? I’m not sure. Everyone in the group is still frozen staring at him, except for her. She looks at me. I would run if my feet would let me, to him or away from her, I don’t know that either.

“What’s your name, little girl,” she spits like a viper.

I open my mouth to reply when I hear my father call, “Sophia.” I turn to his voice and hear from behind me, “let’s go. Now!” Spoken like a curse from my would-be mate.

My mom and dad reach me seconds later, asking if I was okay and why I never came back.

“I’m not feeling well, Dad,” I say, and it’s no lie. The hollow ache in my chest intensifies as I rub just above my heart.

“Okay, sweetheart, let’s get you home,” he says, looking to my mom questioningly. We turn toward the car when I see him holding the woman’s hand. Roxanne, I’m guessing. They’re almost around the corner. He doesn’t look back once before walking out of my life.

Two weeks later my parents are dead, and I’m alone.

## CHAPTER 1



“*P*iss off,” I mumble acerbically as I drag my bags up to my new front door. The condo I just purchased is right on Main Street. When I look out my front windows, I see Torch Lake with its crystal clear water and beautiful, sandy beach. My kindle and I dream about that beach.

About a half mile down, I see small tourist shops and a few smaller restaurants. In the opposite direction is the Hair of the Dog Bar, crazy name, right? The four men leaving the bar are just as crazy, shouting at me about the beauty of my ass while I lug my stuff up the walk. Throwing my bags through the open front door, I turn and give them a two-finger salute. They laugh and coo like it’s foreplay. “Jackasses!” Slamming the door, I put my back to it and slide down.

I’m home. I haven’t had a home in five years, not one that felt like home anyway. “Not now, Sophie,” I say out loud. I’ve already had all my new furnishings delivered. After a few adjustments to the kitchen, I have just my personal stuff to unpack. An hour later, I’m done and drinking a big cup of coffee to celebrate. Today is Wednesday, my nineteenth birthday is Saturday, and my first day as a college student is Monday. I can’t believe I’ve finally made it to this point.

Michigan is new to me. I’ve always lived in some random Kentucky city. One of the first things I noticed about my new home, at least for the next few years, were all the lakes with beautiful beaches. I came for the small, private college located just a few blocks from my new condo. Why did I pick this college, you ask? Well, it all started with the name, Hope.

Hope College in Point Pleasant, Michigan, cool right? That's something I need, hope. So here I am.

The death of my parents orphaned me. With no family to speak of and being too young to be on my own, I, an underage shifter, ended up in foster care with humans. The first home I went to wasn't so bad; I think they knew I had money and thought they could get it. I wasn't there for very long before they figured out there was no pot of gold with this rainbow. My second *home* was horrible; the third night the woman, Beth, backhanded me for speaking at the table. I'd never even been spanked by my parents. Things escalated quickly. I think the worst was listening to the other kids get hit. I hadn't shifted yet, but was still stronger than your average fourteen-year-old. More often than not, I would get myself into trouble to distract the Check Cashers from the other kids. Some hated me for it, but for the most part, they didn't understand why I'd do it. I don't always understand it myself.

After I shifted for the first time, things became easier and harder all at once. I healed even quicker and was able to fight back better, but I needed much more privacy. There were times I only shifted once a month, just barely enough to let my wolf run. I had to learn to control her alone and quickly.

I don't remember how many nights I wished my parents lived in a pack so I would have been taken in, cared for by my own people, but they lived off the grid as they called it. I never knew why they never hid things from me; they just didn't live long enough to tell me everything.

I did know it wasn't safe to seek a pack alone as an underage or un-shifted wolf. I could easily become someone's property. Dealing with the humans was bad enough.

I never did tell my parents I met my mate that night all those years ago. Maybe if I had things would have been different, they could have explained to me why he left, helped me understand what to do with the rest of my life. We assume there will be time to tell the people we love the secrets we keep, whether from embarrassment or just thinking there will be time tomorrow. Hindsight is twenty-twenty and all that.

When they first died, I was sure my mate would come for me. Every night, I would dream of him saving me. I even held out hope that after my first shift he would find me. Those thoughts evaporated when one of my *dad's* tried to rape me not long after I turned seventeen. I walked away that night with the hope of a Prince Charming coming to save me gone. My foster dad didn't walk away that night. In fact, I don't think he'll ever walk again.

As soon as I turned eighteen and could get to the money my parents left me, I was gone. I lived in a small apartment and finished high school. I took every self-defense and martial arts class available, making sure I'd never be a victim again.

Hello, pity party, table for one. I need a distraction, stat. Grocery store, here I come. Hours later, I'm loading the back of my white, vintage Jeep Wrangler with everything from a broom, vacuum, and cleaning supplies to all the groceries I could fit into the second cart. I love to cook, and it shows. Since I've been on my own over the past year, my hips, butt, and boobs thank me for not starving. I'm still short, just not as wiry as I used to be. My long, dark hair catches on the roll cage as I shove everything in. The broom and mop handle stick straight up out the top.

As I pull from the parking lot, I catch the scent of another shifter; it's the first shifter I've smelled since my parents passed. I'm so taken aback I gun the engine before anyone can scent me.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I slam my hands on the wheel as I pull into my parking space. I don't know how to deal with other shifters. I knew I might run into one eventually, just not this soon. I don't know why my parents kept us away from others; I just know that a rogue shifter can be considered a threat. Am I a rogue? I don't even know.

I quickly bring my supplies in and put everything away, unsuccessfully trying to forget about my almost meet and greet.

Thursday and Friday pass with little fanfare. On Saturday, I make myself a pineapple upside-down cake and buy a few

new books for my birthday. Exciting, I know.

Then I hit the beach. There are a few families with small children. It's not very busy considering it's the last week before school. Most of the tourist fugees, the town people's name for tourists, are gone.

My blanket is warm from the sand and sun, and I can feel the cool breeze blowing in from the lake. I keep my cut-off shorts and tank top on while I read. Completely relaxed, I roll on my belly before turning on some music.

I must have started to doze. Before I'm fully awake, I feel someone near me. I can hear them breathing. My heart speeds and my fight or flight response kicks in. Before I move, I feel him inhale at my neck and I freeze.

"She smells so fucking good, man. Do you smell that?"

I open my eyes before whoever he's talking to can get near me and roll out from under him. His arm flies out when I move and caught off guard, he falls to my blanket where I was just lying. I'm on my feet and ready to run before he can blink.

"Shit, she's fast. How the hell do you do that?" another voice asks from my right.

Keeping both of them in sight while I look for more of them, I raise my hands and back away in the universal "I don't want any trouble" gesture. Sniffer is now getting up and looking at me like I'm a wild animal.

"It's okay, love. I'm not going to hurt you. Are you okay? Don't run, okay. I'm Casper, and this here is Michael. Are you new here?" He tilts his head. "I haven't seen you before. Are you here for vacation or school?"

My brain is going a million miles a minute. They're both shifters. I can smell them. Will they report me to the local pack? Is there a local pack? What do I do? They're both just staring at me. Neither of them are acting like I'm in trouble. Should I just go with it?

"I'm sorry I scared you. What's your name, love?"



Love, why the hell does he keep calling me Love? “Sophia,” I say, still far enough away that I can run if I need to. I answer him a little breathlessly, “Yeah, sorry... I was sleeping? I guess you startled me.”

Relaxing his stance, he says again, “Yeah sorry about that,” rubbing the back of his neck like he might be embarrassed. His friend is still looking at me funny, so I relax and try to play it off as if I was just caught off guard. Smiling, I chuckle, hoping they can’t tell how fake it is.

“So, Sophia, are you on vacation?” His eyes sparkle as he ogles me from top to toe.

“Yeah... ahh, I mean no. I’m starting classes at Hope on Monday. You guys on vacation?” I question, pointing between the two of them. Michael still hasn’t looked away from my face. His brow is drawn like he’s thinking very hard.

Sniffer or Casper responds, “No, we’re local boys,” with a smirk that I’m sure he’s seen lots of action from. He’s not hard to look at, but I haven’t found one man appealing in five years. Tough break, my mate rejected me, and I’m still stuck on stupid, anyway.

Michael finally speaks. “How’d you move so fast?”

I shrug my shoulders and answer honestly, “No idea. Fear, I guess.”

“Have I seen you before? Something about you seems familiar,” Michael asks.

“I don’t think so. To be honest, I haven’t met many of our kind.” The last part of the sentence comes out barely a whisper.

Both men look at me with shocked expressions. Sniffer can’t seem to form a word. His mouth just keeps opening and closing. Finally he inquires, “What? You mean as in our kind from our pack?” He points to himself and his friend.

Darn, I should have kept my mouth closed. Well shit, no use in lying now. “No, I mean... I guess other than my parents, I really haven’t met many other shifters.”

Crickets, that's what I get, not a sound from either of them. "Wow Sophia, how is that even possible?" Casper, who I will forever call Sniffer, finally asks, shaking his head.

"It just is," I reply. Not wanting this awkward encounter to continue, I start to clean up my stuff quickly. "Look guys, I'm real sorry. I don't really know the rules. Do I need to go? Find another school?" *Please say no*, I silently plead.

"What? Of course not. Normally, you just have to petition the Alpha when you enter a new territory. He's within his rights to deny you if he so chooses, but no worries, the Alpha happens to be my brother." He smiles smugly. "I can help you through the whole thing," he adds sweetly while biting his bottom lip.

"Where are your parents, Sophia? What are you, like seventeen?" Michael asks.

I quickly run through my options but settle on the truth. "No, I'm nineteen, today actually, and they're dead," I say, looking at him right in the eyes. This feels important. I can't let them see how broken and alone I am.

He sucks a breath through his teeth while a soft growl comes from Sniffer. Stepping back, I look for my escape routes. Why is that bad? Can I not be here without them? If I run will they come after me?

"Shit, no. No, it's fine. We won't hurt you. You're okay, calm down." Sniffer lowers his hands slowly.

With wide eyes, I point and say, "Why'd you do that? Growl at me. Are you going to try and take me? I didn't hurt them."

"God no! Where would that even come from? We won't take you anywhere you don't want to go. Okay, Sophia, I promise we won't hurt you," Michael says, looking at me sadly.

I need to get out of here. I need space. They keep coming closer, especially Sniffer. "Okay, well, I need to get going now so... how do I petition your Alpha? Is there an office I can go

to or paperwork I can send in?" I ask while gathering the rest of my stuff to make my escape.

"An office." Sniffer chuckles. "Not so much. A Den or Pack hall, yeah. We don't need to be so formal though. I'll take you there. You'll meet him, and it'll be all good. When did you want to go? Now?"

No, no, not now. "Erm, I've got stuff ya know today, and... school Monday, so can I just set up a meeting like on Tuesday or something?"

"Yeah, sure, no problem. I've school Monday, too. Let's exchange numbers, and I'll text you with the details. Sound good?"

Pulling my phone from the back pocket of my shorts to add his number, I hear. "Lucky phone." I can't help the snort that comes out.

My long hair is full of sand and tangles when I look down to add his info. "Ready," I say after typing his name.

"Here, just let me. I'll put the address so you can find it Tuesday." He grabs my phone before I realize what's happened. "Sniffer?" He scoffs. "Who the hell is Sniffer?"

My face is as red as a stop sign when I point to him. "You were sniffing me."

Michael finally breaks his silence with a loud laugh. "Did you say Sniffer? Oh God, wait until I tell everybody that. Priceless. Sniffer." He laughs out.

I watch as Sniffer rubs the back of his neck, mumbling. "Yeah, okay funny guy, we heard you. Shut it." To me he says, "So, I put in my number and the pack address, then sent a text from your phone to mine so I'd have your number. I'll text you later with a time, okay?"

Grabbing my phone back, I nod my head. "Thank you both so much. Sorry to hold up your afternoon. I'll see you soon." In my haste to flee, I didn't even pick up my blanket.

Getting into bed that night, I wonder if Sniffer will help me learn more about our kind, if he could be my first real

friend?

## CHAPTER 2



Masen

FUCK ME! Can this day get any longer? It's only one o'clock on Saturday. I have at least four more hours of this bullshit before I can get out of here. I can't even remember the name of the mutt in front of me begging to be let into my pack. Being the Alpha of one of the largest packs in North America has perks, don't get me wrong, but right now, I'd like nothing more than to kick the simpering animal in the face. Yeah, I'm an asshole. You don't become Alpha of the Northern Territories being sweet and cuddly.

Tuning into what he's saying, I hear, "Would be so grateful for the chance to serve y—"

Interrupting loudly before he can finish, I question, "Why did you leave your last pack? Did they *make* you leave?" My questions throws him off. He still has his word formed on his lips while staring at me. "*Well?*" I ask again in my Alpha tone that no one can ignore.

"I left after they suggested I do so... they thought I was too cl... close to the younger pups," he stammers while lowering his head.

"Leave! You have thirty minutes to be out of my territory before I send one of the newly shifted to find you and return with your pelt." I sneer, knowing the weakest of my pack could rip his head off without a problem. I also know it will take at least an hour to reach the edges of my land. Maybe

he'll make it, maybe, he won't. I smile the smile that makes even the people who know me shudder.

He's gone before another word is spoken. "How did he even make it here to waste my time? Aren't you supposed to screen these hearings?"

I look to Roxanne who just bats her eyelashes at me and pouts. "I'm sorry, Mase. I won't let Star screen again." I know damn well Star didn't let this slip through. Roxanne is just trying to place the blame elsewhere.

She licks her lips and whispers loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, "I didn't have time to go through the files this morning after you left my bed, I was running late."

Therein lies the problem. She thinks because I fuck her she has some pull over me or my pack, also implying I was with her all night, which was not the case. I knew I should have stopped this years ago, but I've become lazy. She is always near and always ready. I used to care for her, but I haven't cared for a woman in almost five years. Fuck me, has it really been that long since I've seen her?

The day progresses slowly with pack disputes, petitions, and blessing requests. I'm glad this is only once a month. I think I'd crop my own ears if I had to deal with this shit more often. My Luna should be here, she would make this bearable. Lost In thought, which seems to be happening more and more often, I return to that night.

*I was on my way home from an Alpha challenge out of town with Michael, my Beta, Sid, and Travis. Both are close friends and enforcers in my pack. We'd all brought a piece of ass to help pass the time. Roxanne was it for me back then. I'd stopped in Kentucky to get a drink and hotel for the night. We were having a good time laughing and drinking when I started to feel unsettled. I kept looking for more shifters to come in or a fight to break out among the humans, but nothing happened. I knew something was off, I just didn't know what. Roxanne was having a fit about a woman at the bar staring, but I couldn't deal with her shit. Usually, I like to watch her dominate a room, but even then, it just felt wrong.*

*I walked out before the rest, hoping to find a fight outside that would help me rid myself of the tension riding my back. I wasn't prepared for what I found.*

*My Mate stood less than six feet from me, smelling like warm vanilla and fresh water. I took one step forward before my mind processed that there was a problem. She was a child, a tiny thing no more than thirteen years old. Her large amber eyes seemed too big for her beautiful face, her lips were parted on an inhale. I wasn't sure if she knew me for what I was, but I knew what she was to me. My Mate, my Luna.*

*The door to the pub opened behind me as my pack mates walked out. They could feel the tension rolling off of me, but none understood why I stood frozen on the sidewalk.*

*She recoiled when Roxanne attached herself to me. I didn't move to push her away. I couldn't. If I did, I didn't think I'd be able to stop myself from picking my Mate up and dragging her back to Michigan.*

*Someone asks who she is. When I respond, she moved the hand that was over her lower belly to rub right above her heart. I heard Roxanne ask her name. As she opens up to answer, I smell a male and female shifter approaching and hear him call out, "Sophia." She turns to the sound, and I do the only thing possible, I turn and leave.*

*If I stayed, I would take her whole family. She's just a child, I can't do it. We round the corner, and I stop, tell my friends to go on. No one questioned me, they know I'm in no mood to explain.*

*I can hear as her mother asks, "Sophie, why didn't you come back? Are you okay, sweetheart?" I know I'll be able to track her now that I've scented her, so I wait. I wait until they leave and get home before I follow.*

*I learn everything there is to know about Sophia Brair and her parents before leaving and meeting up with Michael. He's the only one who knows I've met my Mate and neither of us understands how or why I knew it's her before her first shift.*

*I have him checking our history to see if this has ever happened before. I learned that the Brairs have lived in the same house for the past thirteen years. Her father was a local doctor, and her mother works at his small practice while Sophia is in school. They seem like a close family. I had no reason to make them come with me.*

*When I returned to Michigan, I had to make myself not go back for her. Three years, I would give her and her family three years before I returned for her.*

*But I was a fool because when the time was up and I went to find my Luna, she's gone. Gone for so long not a trace of her beautiful scent remains.*

*I've been searching every pack in the northern continent for her for the past two years. She seems to have vanished along with her parents. When I visited the only pack in Kentucky, they denied knowledge of the Brair family. Did she tell her parents of me? Why run? What are they hiding? I would find her, and no one would stop me from claiming her!*

CASPER STRUTS into my house like he owns it with Michael, my Beta, behind him. Casper is so excited I can feel it rolling off of him. "Mase, I can't wait for you to meet her. Ahh God. I think I'm already in love. Wait until you see her. No forget that, wait until you scent her. I have never smelled anything like her."

Looking at my crazy, lovesick brother, who this happens to at least once a month, I state dryly, "Didn't you just fall in love with Vanessa last week?"

"No, no, this is different, way different. Ask Michael, he was there."

I raise my eyebrow at Michael questioningly. He shrugs his wide shoulders. "She is beautiful. There's no doubt about that. Something about her seems familiar though, I just don't know what." Michael walks over to the bar and makes himself a drink. He's shaking his head. "You should have seen this guy," gesturing to Casper, "he wouldn't stop smelling her. She



even called him Sniffer when she put his info into her phone.” He chuckles.

“Thanks, *Mikey*, I don’t think everyone knows the story yet. You want me to have Mase call a pack meeting?” Cass snaps.

“Wait, Casper, do you think she’s your Mate? That could be why she smelled so good to you,” I question.

“I don’t know, man, but I hope so, damn I hope so.”

“What did your wolf say?”

Casper shakes his head. “Nothing, man, just sat there. I could feel him smile, but that’s it.”

“You would know. Your wolf would make sure you knew. So, I don’t think she’s the one, sorry brother,” I say, truly sorry for him. Michael still seems deep in thought when I ask, “What’s up?”

“Just thinking. She said she never met any other shifters. I can’t figure out how that’s even possible. She was asleep when Casper here woke her up. She moved so fast I could barely track her, and she was terrified, I mean terrified.”

Tilting my head, I ask, “Where’d she come from?”

“That’s even weirder. Her parents are gone. By gone, I mean dead, and this asshole growls at her. She thought we would hurt her, take her, like abduct her. She’s a little strange, Mase, beautiful but strange,” he says, while putting his feet on my table to watch the game.

“I told her she could come by Tuesday to petition to stay in the territory. She starts school on Monday. That okay, man? I tried to get her to come with us today, but she was just so scared. I know meetings are only once a month, but I didn’t want to wait that long to get her here and hopefully in my bed,” he says with the same smirk that has gotten him in trouble more times than I can count.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine. Bring her by the house Tuesday.”

Casper looks down at his phone with a smile. “Maybe, she’ll come over tomorrow and stay until Tuesday. I’m gonna

ask her to lunch.” He laughs.

## CHAPTER 3



Sunday morning, I wake to bright sunshine coming through my curtains. When I picked up my phone to check the time, I have two surprises, the first being the time, I'd slept in much later than usual since it is almost noon, and the second, I have a message waiting for me. Opening the screen, I read the text that came through at ten forty-five am.

**Sniffer: any plans today**

Wondering if I should respond, I place my phone back on my nightstand and go shower. After going over my options while showering, I decide why not. Maybe he can help me understand some of the things my parents never got around to telling me.

**Me: no plans today, you?**

The response comes fast, like he was waiting for it.

**Sniffer: want to grab lunch?**

**Me: sure, I was hoping I could ask you some questions?  
So is my place okay?**

Even faster than the last time, the text dings.

**Sniffer: address time**

I send my address and tell him two o'clock works for me.

My dark, wavy hair is almost dry, so I add a little mascara and lip gloss and call it good. Skinny jeans and t-shirt round out my attire, and I'm ready to make lunch.

I make a quick salad and a steak on the grill of my range. While letting the meat rest, I grill some sourdough bread and grab some condiments to place at the island bar so he can build his own sandwich. I slice the meat thinly, and as I'm washing up and making sweet tea, the doorbell rings.

"Here goes nothing," I say as I make my way to the door, praying that I'm not making a mistake.

Sniffer holds true to the name I've given him as soon as he walks through the door he says, "It smells so good in here, did you cook?" Doubt clear in his voice.

"Yes..." I say slowly. "Should I not have?"

"No no, I mean yes you should have... can. If you want to," he says with a small smile while rubbing the back of his neck. I think it's a nervous habit, but what does he have to be nervous about?

"Okay well, I was just making some sweet tea. The kitchen's through here." He follows me through the hall and living room, his eyes sparkle as he takes in my home like he likes what he sees.

While he's busy looking around, I take a few moments to really look at him. He's tall, maybe six feet, lean with full shoulders. His navy blue tee is tight enough that his biceps strain the sleeves. I can tell his chest and stomach are firm with muscle. His eyes match the dark blue of his shirt. But the most notable feature has to be his white-blond hair that falls like fine silk to just above his shoulders. He's quite handsome. *Not ours*, says my wolf with a sneer.

"Can I get you anything to drink? I have soda, milk, water, or the sweet tea?"

His eyes lift to me from the counter where I've laid the food out, and he says, "YUM!" It's said so lowly while looking right into my eyes that I can't help but think he's not only talking about the food. My cheeks heat with a blush so red my ears might smoke. I quickly turn to the fridge hoping he didn't see my reaction. "Sweet tea is good." He chuckles letting me know he has seen and finds it funny.

He makes two sandwiches so large I'm not sure how he plans on biting into them. After I make a small salad, he finishes the rest right from the bowl I prepared it in. He's done by the time I start my sandwich. "Mmm so good, I think I ate too much, but you can invite me over anytime, Sophia," he says while rubbing his hand over his flat stomach and smiling. If I ate like that, my butt wouldn't fit through the door.

"I guess you don't want any cake then, huh?" I pick up our plates and take them to the sink.

"Hey, I didn't say that; let's not be hasty. There's always room for dessert." He's smiling so big I can see all his teeth. "How about you ask me some of those questions, yeah? Then we'll have cake."

Now or never, I guess. "Errr, okay, so umm, how does it all work? Are there packs all over? What are the rules? What happens if you don't have a pack, do you have to leave? Will they let me leave?" My tone gets higher as I speak and at the end of my word vomit, I'm almost breathless.

"Whoa, whoa, slow down Sophia," he says while grabbing my hand from the table and brushing his thick thumb across my knuckles. It's... nice. I haven't been touched with kindness since my parents passed. "It'll be fine, I promise. Where did you get these ideas? Packs are there to help you not hurt you or rule over you like tyrants. I'm not sure what you mean by how does it all work, but I'll answer the other questions and go from there, yeah?"

I just nod my head while he continues to look at me like I'm about to run from the room. To be honest, I kind of want to. The only thing keeping me grounded is his hand over mine, still rubbing in soothing circles.

He starts again. "There are packs all over. Some are small, some aren't. We are divided into territories. Some territories have several small packs, some have one large pack. We" —he gestures to himself— "are one of the largest packs in North America."

My eyes widen with this information. How do I not know this? Why weren't my parents in a pack? I never felt like we

were hiding. My parents talked to me about being a shifter. I don't understand. My thoughts cloud as he continues.

“As far as rules go, all packs are different, but one rule we all share is keeping our identity a secret from humans. There's always an exception, but as a whole, they're too volatile. It could cause panic.” He's watching my every reaction. “The rest is easy. I already told my brother you'd be by in a couple days. No one will make you leave, but more importantly, no one will make you stay if you don't want to.”

I can't detect any deception from him. Is it really that easy? Why was I led to believe otherwise? My God, all those years I could have been safe, cared for? I shake my head to dislodge the useless thoughts. There must have been a reason for my parents to tell me that I needed to wait until I was much older before living in a pack. That I would be used or enslaved. But what is it?

Sniffer's face softens. “Do you have any other questions? Can I ask you a few?”

I had to know this was coming. “I'll try. There are things I am not ready to talk about, but I will try,” I answer.

“When did you lose your parents?” he whispers.

“I was fourteen.” I'm proud my voice doesn't crack.

“What! Where have you been all this time?”

I pull my hand from beneath his and say, “Foster care.” It comes flatly. My guard is up, he'll get no more about that from me.

He jumps from his seat and starts pacing. “With humans? Your first shift, you were alone?”

“Yes,” I answer simply.

“How is that even possible?”

With a shrug of my shoulders, I reply, “I knew my first shift was coming. I tried to prepare as best I could. I just did it. I didn't have any other options.”

I'm pulled from my chair and folded into his arms with his hand on the back of my head holding me to his chest. A soft noise comes from his throat—I can only describe as a whine—before he says, “You sweet girl, poor sweet girl.” His chin rubs the top of my head, and I soak in the embrace, taking a few moments of comfort.

Too quickly, I'm leaning back and saying, “Hey Sniffer, enough with the heavy. Let's go eat cake.”

His nose scrunches in distaste at the name I've given him, but he smiles and tuts. “What? You're my first friend. Nicknames are cool. Right?” Just like that, his playful demeanor is back, and we're both pretending. Me that I'm okay and him that he believes it.

I grab us each a glass of milk and give him a piece of cake that takes up the whole plate. Holding my much smaller piece, I say, “Ya want to watch some TV?”

He's shoveling cake in and moaning while we walk to the living room.

Sniffer tells me about growing up in his pack, how everyone knows each other's most embarrassing moments and how much he looks up to his brother, who he thinks is the best Alpha there is.

The love he has for his family is clear on his face when he speaks of them. I laugh when he tells me the big, bad Alpha slept with a small wolf stuffed animal in his bed until he was twelve. He's been the Alpha for eight years but seems sad lately.

We've both been quiet for awhile watching television. I know it's late, and he's getting ready to go, so I muster up the courage to ask the one question I think I'll get the most answers from. “Hey, Sniffer, can I ask you another question?”

“You just did.” Cheeky boy. He rolls his hand with the *get on with it* gesture.

“Mates, my parents were Mates, but I don't know much more. Why would a Mate not claim his? What happens to...”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “That doesn’t happen. Ever!”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“I hate to break it to you, but it does happen. I know it happens. It happened to me.”

He eyes me like I’m crazy. “You must be mistaken. How do you know he was your Mate?”

“It was years ago, but believe me, there is no mistaking it. You know.”

“That just doesn’t happen. Mates are considered a blessing. I don’t know why he didn’t claim you. Was he human?”

“Definitely not,” I say with certainty.

“Will you tell me what happened? Maybe you misunderstood.”

I didn’t. I know I didn’t, but I’ll tell him. “It’s simple, really. He walked out of a pub and time stopped. I knew he was mine. We just stared at each other for what felt like years, but I’m sure it was just seconds. His friends and girlfriend, I’m assuming by the way she acted, asked who I was. He said, ‘no one.’ He turned around and walked away, never once looking back.”

His mouth is hanging open when I finish. Shock written all over his face. “He said that,” comes out more like a growl.

I nod my head and whisper, “Yes. I always thought he’d come back for me. He didn’t.” My worst fear slips out without my permission. “Do you think there’s something wrong with me?” My eyes are glossy, but I will not cry. I have cried enough for two lifetimes.

He shakes his head slowly. “No love, I know there is nothing wrong with you,” he says gently.



## CHAPTER 4



My new friend and I make plans to meet for lunch the following day. I have a break in my schedule from noon until two, and his lunch break is at one. So we plan to meet up at the student union.

I'm up early so I spend a little extra time getting ready. My hair is a little frizzy from the humidity, but I manage to tame it. I'll bring a hair tie in case it poofs later. A little bronzer so my freckles don't stand out too much, mascara, lip gloss, and I'm done. It's still pretty warm so I grab a white tank top to wear with my favorite faded jeans.

Coffee in hand, I grab a soft gray sweater to shove in my bag in case the classrooms are chilly. I leave at seven-thirty to make sure I can find a parking space not too far from my first class.

I grab an outside seat around the middle of the bowl-shaped room. Seats fill quickly, and I'm thankful I met Sniffer and Michael Saturday on the beach because almost half of the class are shifters.

None approach me though. I feel every one of them eye me with curiosity. Moments later, the professor, who is also a shifter, comes in. I'm on edge through the whole class. Professor Daniels talks about his love of literature. I think I can hear the female students swooning. With his light brown hair and the thick black frames of his glasses, he's nerd chic. You can tell by the way he moves that the blazer he wears hides a great body. After he assigns our work, he excuses us fifteen minutes early.

Keeping my head down, I take my time putting my notes and supplies away so most of the room is empty before I stand to leave. When I turn to the door, I find the professor talking to a young girl with long blonde hair. As I pass, he looks up and asks, “A moment of your time, Miss Brair?”

The blonde doesn't seem happy to have been interrupted.

I stand and wait while he finishes telling the girl that the TA will be handling arrangements for a study group. She seems disappointed when he turns to me, dismissing her. I, on the other hand, would love to be leaving.

When he finally speaks, the room is empty. He comes closer to me and says, “I haven't seen you at any meetings. Have you been in town long?” He doesn't seem angry, just curious.

I know he's referring to pack meetings so I answer him honestly “I wasn't aware I needed to petition the Alpha before moving here, sir. Sn-Casper is helping me take care of that soon.”

Smiling and shaking his head, he chuckles. “Oh, I'm sure he's being very helpful. I'm Tate Daniels, Professor Daniels here.” He gestures to the room. “No need to call me sir though. It's only my second year teaching, and it's strange being on this side of things.” Opening the door for me, he says, “I won't keep you. I just thought I'd introduce myself. I'll see you Wednesday then.” I give him a small smile and thank him before heading to my next class.

I walk over to the science building. I'm early enough that the class before is just letting out. I stand near the wall and wait for the group to pass. I'm one of the first to enter. There are about ten large tables with two chairs at each. I find a seat and bring out my phone to keep busy.

The seat at my table gets pulled back, and I know it's a shifter. When I look, he's smiling at me with his hand out. “I'm Sam, and you must be Sophia.”

I take his hand. “You know that how?” I ask.

His smile gets even bigger. “Casper hasn’t stopped talking about that damn sandwich and cake all day.” He laughs. “Not to mention you, beautiful girl, are the talk of the campus. Everyone, and I mean, everyone, wants to know who the new mystery girl is.” He gives me jazz hands. “Casper is having a fit, telling them all to back off, you’re his,” he says and bumps my shoulder with his.

I scoff. “His, hardly. I just met him and Michael on Saturday. He is, however, helping me. He’s very kind.”

He lets out a full belly laugh. I find myself laughing along with him; it’s that infectious. When he calms down, he says, “You’re just like he described. You’re going to drive him crazy, and I can’t wait to watch it.”

Not really sure what he means, I just shake my head at him. Seeing my confusion, he leans close to me and whispers, “All the ladies fall at his feet, almost as many as his brothers, but you, you’re not. And, I can’t wait to watch my best friend eat a big ole piece of humble pie.” He cackles. Sam has warm, brown eyes, light brown hair, and a very friendly face. I already like him.

The professor walks in and tells us these will be our seats for the rest of the semester and passes out a diagram of the room for us to write our name on where we are sitting. Any group work will be with the person seated next to us, and I’m grateful my table mate chose me.

Sam keeps a running dialog about anything and everything, every second the professor’s not talking. I find him fascinating. He is so full of life.

When class is over, I tell him I’m heading to the union to meet Sniffer, which has him doubled over with laughter when I tell him that Sniffer is Casper, and ask if he’d like to join us.

“Good God, yes. Even if I had to skip class, I wouldn’t miss it.” We walk slowly to the union, and he fills me in on the gossip of every person we pass. By the time we’re there, my whole face is red, and I know more than I ever wanted to about my classmates. I think he’s making half of it up just to see me squirm.

## MASEN

There's a knock on my door, and I'm hoping it's not Roxanne. Fuck, I need to stop sleeping with her. Then, she'd stop acting like my girlfriend. I've told her I don't feel that way for her anymore, but I keep having sex with her. She knows I sleep with other women, but she doesn't seem to mind. I can't blame her for assuming. Other than not sleeping over or coming to my house, I still treat her the same. Old habits are hard to break.

Opening the door, I find a pensive-looking Casper. His hands are deep in his pockets, and his shoulders slump forward. "What's up, Cass? You need a drink?" I ask when he comes in and sits down.

"Yeah man, that'd be good." I make us each a drink and wait for him to talk. I know he will when he's ready.

"Remember the girl I was talking about yesterday, the one me and Mikey met at the beach?"

"Sure, you said you were in love, right?"

Nodding, he says, "Yeah, that's her. She invited me over for lunch today. She said she had some questions. I told you how she said she hasn't been around many shifters?"

"Okay, and that bothers you?"

"Nah man, not at all. I didn't understand how it was possible just thought her family was a little over the top, ya know?" I can tell whatever he found out is not good.

"Shit, man, she's had it rough. She never had a pack. Just her mom and dad." Then, he looks me right in the eyes. "They died when she was fourteen with no pack and no family. She went into foster care, human foster care."

Holy shit. Cass is shaking his head, staring into the scotch I just poured him. "Her first shift, she was alone, said she prepared best she could and just did it. Like it's no biggie. My first shift it felt like I was dipped in acid for four hours!" His eyes are unfocused like he's remembering, shuddering as he continues. "She didn't talk about her time in foster care, but I got the feeling it was no walk in the park. All that's bad

enough, right? That's not even the worst of it!" His face tells me how absolutely livid he is. "A few years ago, she met her Mate."

I know there's more and I'm almost afraid to ask, but I do. "And?"

"He left her, never claimed her, just walked away from this beautiful creature, probably the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. He just turned and walked away. Do you know what she asked me?" He seethes. "She asked me If I thought there was something wrong with her... with her!" He explodes from the chair, throwing his glass against the fireplace. His chest is lifting with heavy breaths. "It about ripped my fucking heart out, she was so quiet, so so quiet. I don't think she even meant to say it out loud. It was just there, and she couldn't take it back."

None of this makes any sense. "Is she sure it was her Mate?" I ask calmly. Trying to soothe him.

"I asked the same thing, couldn't believe it. Told her that doesn't happen, right? She said she's sure it's not something you can doubt."

I drop my hands between my spread knees. She's right, there's no doubting it. "Shit, man, I don't know I've never heard anything like that. Who passes up their Mate?" I'm just as confused as he was when he came here. I can tell he's thinking about everything she said, going over it in his head.

"She said he had a woman with him, a girlfriend by the way they acted." He's sitting again and tells me, "She cooked for me, big ass steak sandwiches, salad, and a cake, a fucking pineapple cake. All the shit she's been through, and she's still so sweet. I think if that shit would have happened to me I'd kill somebody." We're both quiet for a while just thinking.

"I gotta go, man, I gotta run. This shit's too much." He's right, it is.

## CHAPTER 5



Sam and I walk to the small coffee stand and each get a drink. His is so confusing I don't know how the barista gets it right. I order a frozen French vanilla and follow him to the centermost table. I feel like a zoo animal. I can tell he's no stranger to attention and seems to love my obvious discomfort.

"So, tell me the story about how you came to call Cass, Sniffer?"

Trying to ignore everyone around us I shrug and answer, "When I was on the beach, where we met, I had fallen asleep and woke to him hovering above me sniffing my neck. Freaked me out." I give a mock shudder.

His coffee cup hides most of his smile. "I'm not surprised, you do smell really good."

My face heats with a blush. "Ah, thanks? I guess. I'm not really used to all this," I say while I motion to the whole area. "I've been kinda separated from packs. So, I didn't know I should have gone to the Alpha before I moved here. Sniffer is going to take me to him tomorrow so hopefully, everyone will stop staring at me."

"I'm not so sure that's the only reason they're watching you."

I'm enjoying my coffee and Sam's company when three girls walk up to the table. "So who's your new friend here, Sammy?" The middle girl, she must be the ringleader, asks while running her fingers over his broad shoulder. I can

already tell by the way heads follow them they must be pretty important around here.

Sam never looks up at her but rolls his eyes to me. “Brittany, meet Sophia. Sophia, this is Brittany and her evil minions.” She huffs like a toddler.

I raise my hand in a small wave. “Hi.”

She’s not impressed, and now that I take a closer look, the blonde that was talking to Professor Daniels is one of the girls with her. Great first day, and the drama divas are staking claim. I haven’t known Sam for very long, but I’m pretty sure he bats for the other team. So what’s got her panties in a twist, if she’s wearing them? Her shorts are so tight and short. I don’t think anything else would fit. By the way she’s stroking his arm, I’m not sure she gets it though.

Her dark blonde hair is almost as long as mine, but hers has large barrel curls near the bottom. Her brown eyes are large. She is very pretty. Maybe her friend has a thing for the professor? She’s got nothing to worry about there. Sure he’s good looking, but I’m not on the market, especially for a teacher.

Looking down her nose at me she says, “You’re new around here, huh?” Not waiting for me to answer she finishes, “If you need any help with how things work, just ask me. I can fill you in on all the ins and outs.” I’m pretty sure she’s letting me know she runs the show here.

I give her my brightest smile and straighten my back. I may be short, but I’ve been dealing with bitches like her for years. Shifter or not, she won’t be walking all over me. “Oh yeah, I get the hang of things pretty quick. I like to figure things out for myself, but thanks for the offer.” I keep eye contact the entire time I’m speaking to her so she knows, I know the game she’s playing. No one has said a word, and we’re both still staring at each other when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

I turn to look and see Sniffer staring at Brittany. “Ladies, what’s going on?” The hand on my shoulder squeezes gently, but it doesn’t match the tension in his voice. Without waiting

for a response, he sits with his hand still on my shoulder. He puts a fist up to Sam in greeting.

Finally dropping his hand from my arm, he says, “Sophia, how’s your first day been? I see you found this loser. How’d he convince you to let him join us?”

Ignoring the girl’s presence at the table, I answer, “It’s been great so far. Sam’s my table mate in Bio. Once I found out he’s your BFF.” I knock shoulders with him. “I told him he had to come,” I say, smiling at them both. “Brittany and her friends were just offering to show me the ropes.”

Sniffer’s eyes thin. “That’s nice of you, Brit, but I think me and Sam can take care of Sophia.” The way he says it leaves no room for doubt. It’s a warning.

I think she’s about to stomp her foot when one of her friends says, “We all had such a good time on Friday, Cass. Brit hasn’t stopped talking about your hot tub all weekend.” Brittany’s now smirking at me like she just won something.

“I’m glad everybody had a good time. We’re going out to lunch. See you guys later.” He dismisses them. They’re reluctant to leave but do. Heads close together, looking back repeatedly.

Sniffer rubs his hands together. “Now that the terrible trio are gone, let’s get lunch. I’m starving.”

We end up at a pizza place in the cafe. Sam hasn’t stopped teasing Cass about his new nickname since the girls walked away. They bicker like a married couple, it’s pretty entertaining. After our pizza is gone, I let them know I have to head toward my next class. They offer to walk me. Sniffer tells me I can come to the pack land tomorrow around two, and after, we can grab some dinner or just hang out. He can introduce me to some friends. I let him know either is fine by me. They both walk me all the way to my photography class. “I’ll see ya tomorrow. Text me if you need anything or have a problem finding the place.”

“Thanks guys.” I smile and wave. They wait until I’m in the classroom before leaving.



This room is also set up more like a lab. My table mate is a human girl. She has a pretty smile and kind eyes. We don't talk much, but she seems nice. The teacher gives us a supply list and talks about a few projects we'll have throughout the semester. He dismisses us and my classes are done for the day. I head home, glad my first day went so well.

## CHAPTER 6



On Tuesday, I'm up early again so I decide to make some oatmeal bars and white chocolate chip cookies to take with me. I'll give some to Sniffer and use the rest as a peace offering for my ignorance to the Alpha. My GPS tells me it's about a twenty-minute ride, so I leave my house at one-thirty.

Even though this is a college town, it's relatively small, so it's not long before all I see are green rolling hills and too many trees to count. The leaves are just about every shade of red, yellow, orange, and green you can imagine. It's beautiful.

When my GPS tells me my destination is in one mile, I slow. I get my first look at a large black gate bracketed by a lower black fence. I've been following this same fence for the past five miles. The property must be huge. I see someone standing just inside the gate, and as I get closer, I notice it's Sniffer. I must be getting nervous because the closer I get, my belly tumbles.

"Relax Sophie." The gate opens and Sniffer walks to the passenger side. Hopping in, he says, "I love your Jeep. How long have you had it?"

"Yeah, it's great. I got it the day I turned eighteen, but it was nowhere near the shape it's in now." I tell him about all of the work I've had done and what else I'd like to do before I'm through. "I've been thinking about getting something else to drive through the winter. I hear it's brutal up here."

He agrees. "That's probably a good idea, even with the top, it'd still be cold. Maybe an SUV or something?"

He tells me to just follow the road about a mile. "I'll take you through the pack houses before we head to my brothers."

"Oh, he doesn't live with the pack?" I ask, curious about their life.

"Yes and no. He has a separate entrance about two miles past the gate we came in, and he has a little over a mile between his house and the pack houses. He needs his space. People forget he's just a regular person, someone always wants something. This way he has time with the pack and time away."

"What kind of things do people want from him?"

When I look over at him he's shoving a whole cookie into his mouth, he smiles. "What? It's good." Brushing the crumbs from his hands, he closes the lid and says, "His time mostly, once a month he holds hearings for any disputes or petitions, even blessings for marriages. Sometimes, people just want to suck up to him. They think they'll get better positions, better jobs, anything really. When you get to know my brother, you'll see that he values hard work and loyalty. Suck ups just pisses him off." He laughs. "I don't have to share my sweets, do I?"

My lips turn up in a smile. "No, you big baby, those are all yours. I brought him the bigger batch." I point to the container in the back.

His mouth falls open in outrage. "Nah-uh." He pouts while looking at the other container to see if it is indeed bigger. I just laugh. It feels wonderful to laugh so much.

I start to see homes dotted here and there, each with enough space so they don't seem crowded. They're all a little different, all well kept. It looks like a subdivision, just much more spread out.

"Does everyone in the pack live here?" I question.

"No, just those who want to. Anyone in the pack can build here, they just have to supply their own materials and build it. Then, they have to contribute to the pack somehow, like run patrols, help watch children for those that work, or even clean the meeting lodge. Everybody helps each other." I'm

pleasantly surprised, it seems wonderful. I make sure and tell him so. “Not all packs have it this good, my brother’s a very good man.”

“He must be,” I say.

I see what looks like a small grocery store with a gas pump out front, a church-like building, and the largest building looks like a giant A-frame lodge with all windows and wood. As we pass, he tells me it’s their meeting place. They also have a large fire pit in the clearing behind the building, for festivals or ceremonies.

As we pass the last of the houses, I can feel my tummy getting worse. I hope I don’t get sick. Sniffer notices my discomfort. He grabs my hand that’s rubbing my stomach. “Hey listen, it’ll be fine, he’s great. I don’t think anyone else will be there. Well maybe Roxanne, she always wants to be around him.”

“Is she his Mate?”

He quickly shakes his head. “No, thank the moon. He hasn’t found his Mate yet. I hope he does soon. I’m just glad it’s not her.”

By the time we see the house, I think I might throw up. I’m shaking so bad I have to white knuckle the wheel. Please don’t let me puke on the Alphas shoes... or house... or girlfriend.

The house is stunning. It looks like a giant log cabin with wrought-iron balconies on the second floor and a wrap-around porch across the entire bottom. The roof is green metal that looks a little worn, like it’s been there forever. The large windows don’t seem to be covered. If it was night, I bet I could see right in. We drive up the slight hill the house sits on, and I see a woman in what looks like a ruby red silk robe come out to the porch. I suppose to greet us?

Soon as I stop my Jeep, I double over clutching my stomach. “Ahhh no, no, no, no,” I chant. Not here, not now. But I know what this is. My Mate is somewhere near. I want to scream and rip my hair out, and I want to run as fast as I can to find him. Sniffer is looking at me like I’ve lost my mind so I

settle for a whisper, “Please Casper, please get me out of here.” I’m in tears, and I don’t even know when that happened. “I can’t do this again. It was so hard last time. I don’t think I’ll survive it again. Please,” I beg.

“What’s wrong, Sophia? You’re scaring me. What’s wrong?” I just shake my head, I’m beyond words. A soft keening can be heard, and I realize it’s me, me making that awful noise. “Okay, okay, can you move over? We’ll leave, just crawl over here sweet girl.”

But I can’t move, I’m frozen. I think I’ll shatter if I move. He must know because he pulls me to his side of the Jeep. I end up on his lap, and he can’t get out from under me. He’s too big and my Jeep’s too small.

My Mate’s scent is all around me. I’m lost, so lost I don’t hear the angry growl until the door is ripped open. Two strong arms wrap around my body. I cling to Sniffer, but it’s no use. I scream as I’m yanked from him. His handsome face is twisted with rage, eyes no longer blue but black as he leaps from his seat. My back meets a chest that’s heaving for breath.

“If you try and take her from me, I will kill you.” His voice shatters the ice, and I’m burning up, on fire so hot there’ll be nothing left of me, just ash and smoke.

Sniffer stops dead, horror replaces rage. “You! Why?” he spits.

The arms that hold me, turn me. My breasts smash to his hard chest. My feet hang uselessly, and my arms are locked to my sides. I have just enough time to see her, the same woman from that night so many years ago. She’s still standing there, her robe loose now, showing a red garter belt, a barely-there panty and nothing else.

My face is shoved into his neck. Where I can’t help but inhale his scent. Why? When he throws me away again, how will I make it? My wolf is purring while my head is spinning.

“Mate.” His voice is just as I remember low, raspy, and it soothes me like no sound I’ve ever heard. My mind is shutting down, and I wouldn’t stop it if I could. I need away, away

from my heart trying to stitch itself together only to be shredded again. Silence consumes me, and I'm glad.

## CHAPTER 7



Masen

THE KNOCK at my door has me looking to the clock on my desk. It's a quarter to two, Cass must be early. I'm not surprised he wants to spend his day with...? I don't even know her name.

I make my way from my office to open the front door. Roxanne stands on my porch in a short robe, barely tied at her waist. I never should have told her my plans today.

She's here because she knows Cass is bringing a new female to join the pack. Trying to stake a claim, she knows there is nothing she can do when I take someone else to my bed. We aren't together, haven't been other than sexually in years, but she likes to make the other females think we are. She rubs her thighs together like just the sight of me has her ready. I'm sure it does, we've been together countless times over the years, her body knows what mine can do to hers.

"Roxanne, I told you when you called I have business today. Why are you here?" Ignoring the edge in my voice, I'm sure she hears.

A shiver of excitement runs down her spine, like I just told her I'm going to bend her over the front porch railing. Maybe she's not ignoring it after all. I think she is mistaking my anger for passion. Her lips part, eyes dilate as she walks close to me. Her hands go to the white t-shirt stretched over my chest, her nails lightly tracing up and down. She watches her hands and

pouts. “Mase, I haven’t seen you since Saturday. I miss you, don’t you miss me?”

Honestly, no, I haven’t. Before I can answer her, my phone I’d left in the office rings. Grabbing her hands, I push them away. “I’m busy. I told you I was busy. Yet you show up here like this.” I point to her state of undress. “I know exactly what you’re up to Roxanne. I told you years ago there is no future for us. I don’t want to hurt you.” That part’s true, I don’t want to hurt her. “At one time, I cared very deeply for you. I can’t give you that anymore. If you still have feelings for me, I’m sorry, sorry if you thought it would ever lead to more. I’ve let you get away with this charade for far too long. Stop telling people we are close to a commitment, that someday we will marry. You will never be my Luna. I am truly sorry, but it stops now.” The last words are spoken softly to try and soften the blow, but she hears the finality in my tone.

Her eyes are glossy, and her face is pink. No tears fall. I think she’s more angry than sad. I know she cares for me, she just cares more for what the status of being Luna to one of the largest packs would give her. “What happened to you? You loved me, I know it. You could again if you let yourself.” She is still trying, her voice is soft and sweet, trying to mask the anger I see in her eyes.

My phone starts ringing again. Before I turn to go get it, I answer the only question she asked that matters. “I can’t, and I won’t.”

“Sid,” I say when I pick up.

“Yeah, whoever Cass is bringing today has a few of the guys in a stew. Not sure why, but even a few of the unMated married fellas are sniffing around.” I hear the worry in his voice “They headed your way?”

Just what I need. “Fuck me, is she close to being in heat?” I ask. No wonder Cass can’t stop talking about her.

“I’m not sure, Mase. She smells different somehow, even to me.”



I'm taken back by his response. Sid's been Mated for a little over a year. He's barely out of the honeymoon stage. "Shit. Okay, yeah, they're headed here. I'll see what I can find out and let you know." I hang up as I hear a car coming up the hill. When I walk up to the door, it hangs open, and Roxanne's on the front porch like some naughty housewife come to greet them. Looks like she's still trying to run her game.

The white Jeep stops and so does my heart. It's her. Dear God, it's her, my Mate after all the years I've spent looking for her. She's sitting in my driveway with my lovesick fucking brother, but how? Everything Cass said to me hits me like a bullet. The pain in my chest nearly drops me to my knees. Losing her parents, foster care, alone. Abandoned by her Mate... what have I done!

Her cries break through the fog, and I see her on my brother's lap. All rational thought is gone. "*MINE*," roars my wolf.

Leaping over the porch rail, I rip the door open and grab her from my enraged brother. He jumps from the car and closes in on me. "If you try to take her from me, I will kill you," I growl.

Realization dawns, and he knows I'm the bastard that ruined this poor girl's life. He's rightfully horrified. He doesn't understand how I could do it. "Mate," I say aloud.

Her tiny body falls limp in my arms, and I want to rip my own throat out. She'll never forgive me. My wolf doesn't care she passed out. He wants what's his. *Mark now, can't leave us*, he says. I almost do it. I'm so close my face is buried behind her ear. Her scent is intoxicating. The only thing that stops me is the look on Casper's face. Like he knows what I'm about to do, and he's disgusted with me.

"I didn't know. I'll fix it," I implore him to believe me. "I didn't know little one, please forgive me." A few tears leak out before I can stop them.

Cass finally speaks. "Why?" is all he says.

“I’ll explain everything I can, Cass, I promise,” I say defeated.

I turn to carry her to our home when I see Roxanne still as a statue staring at me holding her. The tears she held before now fall freely from her lashes. Now it’s real. She knows I’ll never again be hers. So much has happened I can’t even feel bad for her.

“You were here, with her.” Cass sneers at Roxanne. “While she was alone?”

“Casper, please let me get her comfortable. I’ll explain. It’s not what you think.” I’m exhausted. I’d like to lock us both in my room and make her understand why I left her, but my brother knows her. My wolf doesn’t like the sound of that.

“Roxanne you need to leave. Don’t come back without permission again.” I see the hurt in her eyes.

She tries to recover. “Mase, what’s going on? I can help.”

“If you think your fuck buddy is still gonna be coming around, then hand her over now, and we’ll leave. You won’t ever have to see either of us again,” Casper says angrily.

That’s all it takes for my tenuous hold to break. I pull her soft body even closer to mine. “She is MY MATE! MINE! You will not be taking her anywhere. I’m trying very hard not to break your arms and legs for touching her, let alone having her on your lap. If you say another word about her, I don’t know if I will stop myself from doing it... do you get me?” I’ve used my Alpha tone, so I hope he knows how serious I am. He drops his head submissively. “I know she’s your friend. I know you care... for her. I will tell you how this happened, but please don’t test me again brother,” I add a little gentler.

I want to put her in my bed, but I know that’s not the right move, yet. So, I take her to the living room and lay her on the sofa. She’s so tiny, she can’t be much more than five feet tall, her long chestnut hair hangs almost to the floor. I pick it up and smooth it down her side. I felt her curves against me when I held her, wide hips, small waist, soft belly, and full breasts.

Her face is flawless with tiny, light brown freckles dotting her high cheeks and small pert nose. Her lips are a full dusky pink, slightly parted as she breathes. I know when she opens her eyes they'll be a honeyed amber framed by long dark lashes. She's breathtaking. It kills me that I could have lost her. God, I hope I haven't.

I sit next to her hip on the couch. I need to touch her, to make sure she's real, she's here. I don't want to explain myself to Cass, but she knows him, possibly trusts him. Maybe he'll help me explain it to her.

Stroking her lovely face, I tell him, "This might be hard for you to believe, but everything I'm going to tell you is true. Michael is the only other person that knows. I met my Mate five years ago, almost exactly five years ago."

Cass's brow is drawn in confusion, head tilted to the side, he utters, "I don't understand. You met Sophia... five years ago?"

"Yes, I did. Has she told you how old she is, Cass?"

He takes a few seconds to think. "Yeah, she said Saturday was her birthday, she turned nineteen."

"Do you understand what that means, Casper? She was only fourteen when we found each other, fourteen, still a child. She hadn't even shifted yet. I don't understand how I knew she was my mate. I'd never heard, shit, I still haven't heard of a Mate being found before their first shift. Michael and I have scrubbed every text we can find and nothing, no mention of underage Mates...ever."

He shakes his head in disbelief. "Holy shit man, that's crazy."

I run my fingers through my hair. "Believe me, I know! I followed her and her parents' home that night. Found out everything I could about them. Her dad was a local doctor, her mom stayed at home with her or worked with her husband at his practice. They had lived in the same town, same house for thirteen years. She was loved and well taken care of. So I did what I thought was right. I came home and waited. I waited

three years before going back. I know now that was wrong. At the time, I just wanted her to grow up, have time with her parents. I was afraid if I saw her again I'd make her parents bring her here, where she would constantly wait to shift so I could claim her. That would probably scare a child. I wanted her to be old enough to understand. I thought I was doing the right thing giving her time."

I drop my head to my hands. "When I went back, she was gone, along with any trace of her or her parents, just gone. I've visited every pack in the United States and most in Canada trying to find her. I knew she felt something for me, but I didn't know if she recognized me as her Mate. She was so small. I thought she was maybe twelve, thirteen at most. I mean, how would she even know, right?"

Still holding my head in my hands, pulling my hair. "I never found out what pack she belonged to. I didn't want to raise the question, have some rogue or wannabe Alpha take her and use her to get to me. I thought I was doing the right thing."

God my chest hurts, I don't think I've cried since I was a pup. Now, I want to cry for the second time today. "Casper, she's gonna hate me. All the stuff you told me she's been through and some of it, fuck, most of it, was my fault."

"What about you calling her? No one? Who was with you that she thought you chose your girlfriend over her?" Cass asks kindly.

"I don't know what I said that night, brother. I was out of my head. Michael and Sid were there, a few others. It took everything I had to walk away, not to take her with me. As for the girlfriend, that would have been Roxanne back then. I loved her or thought I did, anyway. That's why shit's been different with her and me for so long. I knew my Mate was out there somewhere. I just thought she ran from me."

Cass looks at me with pity. "She ain't gonna like it, man. You leave her and go with Roxanne five years ago. We pull up today, and she is standing on your front porch practically announcing you guys just had a nooner."

I know he's right. What was I thinking, being with anyone else? I still feel the need to defend myself about today. "We didn't have a nooner. She showed up here right before you guys, playing innocent. You know what she's like, she wanted whoever the new female was to see her here with me and assume I was taken."

Cass rubs the back of his neck and asks, "What now? How are we going to handle this?"

I look down at my beautiful Mate and answer truthfully, "I'll tell her the truth, hope over time she understands I never meant to hurt her. Then spend my life trying to make up for my mistakes."

## CHAPTER 8



Sophia

I start to wake slowly. My body is sluggish, content to sleep. My mind, however, is playing catch up with the events that led to me fainting, in the front yard... of my Mate's home with his girlfriend and brother watching the whole thing. Lovely.

I lift my lids and see a pair of eyes staring right at me from about six inches away from my face. I scream and launch myself back into the corner of what must be a sofa. "Good God, what is wrong with you people? Do any of you know what personal space is?" My chest heaves as I try to catch my breath. Hand over my heart, I will it to slow down. "Between you and Sniffer, I'm owed about ten years of my life back. Thank you very much!" I need to calm down. I'm just distracting myself from the real issue. My Mate, who I now know is the Alpha, is sitting three feet away from me, and even after five years, I want to crawl into his lap and hum with satisfaction.

He's stock-still and he hasn't moved a muscle since my backward jump to the other end of the sofa. It's freaking me out. His eyes are still staring right into mine. I start to squirm. I'm wringing my hands together. Oh shit, is he mad? How the hell do I get out of this room?

"Ugh, where's Sn... Casper? I'm sure he'll show me out. I'll just be going, and you can finish... whatever it is you do.

You know the Alpha stuff and the being busy stuff. I don't even need him to show me out. Really, I can just... you know walk out, to my Jeep that is, and then drive out so you can get to all that stuff..." I ramble. Yeah, and I should probably grab a mop for all that word vomit I just spewed onto his lovely hardwood floor. I mentally slap myself in the face. Shut up, I think, just stop talking.

Oh God, he's still motionless. I finally take a good long look at him. Dark brows arch over his eyes that are such a transparent blue they almost look clear, and right now, they're giving nothing away. His black hair is short on the sides and longer on top. He runs his hands through it, pushing the mass back, leaving him looking like a dark James Dean, holy shitballs. I'm in trouble. Shit, shit, I'm in trouble. One side of his full lips starts to turn up, his eyes soften like he knows I think he's devastating.

He finally speaks. "We have much to discuss, little one. I'm sorry I frightened you. I promise I won't hurt you." His eyes look pained for a brief moment. "Please relax. Can I get you a drink? You've been out for almost an hour." His voice rolls over me, and I do exactly what he said and relax. My shoulders fall, and I take a deep breath.

"Yes, please, water would be good," I softly reply, only now noticing my dry throat. He unfolds himself from the sofa, slowly. Oh baby Jesus, he's huge, like mammoth size. His white t-shirt looks like it wants to hulk out, barely holding at the seams of his biceps and wide shoulders. It just reaches the top of his dark wash jeans. A thick black belt holds them low, oh so low on his narrow hips. As he moves toward me, his heavy black boots make no sound. Now, I'm the one frozen. He bends close to my ear and breathes out, "I'll be right back little one, don't leave this room." His warm breath on my neck almost makes me whimper, but I'm able to lock my throat down. However, the tingle that makes its way down my spine and the resulting shudder can't seem to be stopped. When he walks away, I let out the breath I didn't even realize I was holding.

I can't let him see how he affects me. I'm embarrassed enough by how I reacted to him earlier. Will he make me leave school? Town? Where is that devil woman? Is she still here? In his room? Maybe she's with him in the kitchen.

Stop this, Sophie. You will be fine. We've been through this before, we'll get through it again.

Deciding I need to loosen up, I get up to walk around the room. One whole wall is windows. It must face the back of his property because I see a large pond with a wooden raft dock planted in the middle, a small silver ladder leading up to the top. The multicolored trees of the forest far beyond the edge of the pond makes a beautiful backdrop. It's just about perfect, I muse sadly.

Turning to look at the rest of the room, I see a massive stone fireplace that I could probably walk into with a gigantic chair pulled close. There's a small round table with a beautiful crystal lamp next to it, creating a cozy nook. Is that Roxanne's chair? Does she sit by the fire and read while he works or watches TV? "Stop it," I grate. The room is large and holds three sofas all matching the one I woke on. It's masculine with dark woods and deep colors, the only touch of softness is the squishy looking behemoth of a chair and the reading lamp.

I notice a bar running along the opposite wall of windows. There are stools in front and liquor lined up behind it. Getting closer, I see a small fridge with a clear door filled with bottled water, juice, and small gray tubs. Glasses line the underside behind the bar. There is even an ice chest and sink. "Why did he leave to get water?"

I walk closer to the door and hear raised voices. I can't make out what's being said, but they sound angry. I round the door slowly looking left and right trying to decide where the shouting is coming from. Once out of the room, the voices are clearer, and I easily hear it's coming from the left. Tiptoeing, I make my way slowly toward the noise.

Soon, it becomes clear that it's three people arguing. One is definitely Sniffer. One is... I'm not sure what his name is, I



can't recall what his friend called him outside the pub. The last voice is a woman's, and I'm sure it's her, Roxanne.

"Why are you still here? I told you to leave half an hour ago when I found you standing at the door trying to listen to us. Now, I find you sulking around the kitchen. Just waiting for a chance to pounce," Sniffer yells.

"What is it I've done to you, Casper?" she simpers.

"What have you done? You use any..." Sniffer starts.

"Cass, stop." His smooth voice falls over both of theirs. He sounds exhausted. In the silence, I can now hear her sniffles. I imagine he's holding her, consoling her. Whispering that I'll be gone soon, and everything will go back to how it was.

My chest aches. God, I thought I was over this, this rejection. It still hurts. I think it's worse now that I've shifted and feel the full pull of him. I want to walk in there and rip her arms off. *Yes, good*, growls my wolf. I shake my head to clear it. I won't make a fool of myself any more than I already have. If he doesn't want me, I'll deal with it. I won't, however, stick around here and watch or hear him make her feel better.

I can still hear them talking, much calmer and quieter now as I walk away trying to find a way out of this house. I've had enough for today. I'll text Sniffer later and let him know I'm fine. At least, he still seems to care.

This is so humiliating. How do I go back to school? I'm sure everyone will know by this time tomorrow that my Mate, the Alpha no less, doesn't want me. At least, the sting of embarrassment helps mask the acid-like burn radiating through my chest.

I find a door that I think leads outside. When I open it, I find myself in the middle of an atrium. The walls are made of a light blue glass while the ceiling looks like one giant retractable skylight. There aren't any plants, but there is a platform about the size of a king-size bed with a cushioned back and sides like a sofa that hangs from the ceiling hovering a few feet from the ground. Like a giant swinging bed? There are pillows and a few throws strewn about. It's all ivory and

the palest of blue, the exact shade of his eyes. This must be another place he's made for her. Did she pick the color to remind her of his eyes? Shit, I need a bathroom. I'm gonna be sick.

I run from the room hoping like hell I find a way out or at least a place to unload the fire ants churning in my belly. The first door I try opens to a game room. Shutting it quickly, I move on to the next. It's dark, but I manage to see rows of seating, a media room? "Ugh." Next is a set of double doors with a deadbolt lock. Sweet Jesus, this must be it. Pulling the door open, I find a huge four-poster bed, sitting in the exact center of the room. My heart drops. This must be his room, his scent is everywhere in this house, but in this room, it's the strongest.

I see an open door to the left, with no time to think I throw myself through and fall on my knees vomiting everything I've eaten the past, oh I don't know, year, maybe. When the dry heaves stop and my liver is lodged in my esophagus, I fall to the floor and thank all that is Holy it's clean. It could be worse, right? At least, I'm not lying in sticky pee and pubes. I shudder.

I give myself a few moments before standing to rinse my mouth out. When I look in the mirror, I see myself all those years ago, young, scared, lonely. And lost.

"Piss off!" I'm not the same girl anymore. If I've learned anything, it's I can survive. I wipe the small smudges of mascara that have smeared under my eyes, thankful I don't wear much makeup. Unlike the devil woman, she looks like a spokesperson for Sephora. Jealous much, Sophie, I scold. I straighten my back and walk back through the room that I didn't have much time to study. I don't need nor want to see evidence of them both in here.

I make it one step out the door when I slam into a wall. What the hell? Where did that come from? I bounce back, and two hands that span shoulder to elbow grab me and hold me steady. I reach up and rub my nose. "Ouch, you should warn people they're about to collide with an immovable object," I

accuse. Deflect, deflect, deflect. Nothing to see here, just keep moving along.

Again with the silence. “So ahhh, you think you could point me in the direction of my Jeep, big guy?”

“What were you doing in my room, little one? Didn’t I tell you to stay put?” He growls. Now that he’s close to me again, I want to climb up his big body and nuzzle my face into his straining neck. Did I say straining? Yeah, he looks like he might explode if I move, or blink, or breathe, or say the wrong thing. No nuzzle for you, Sophie.

Backing away slowly, I say, “I thought I’d just try and find my way out, save you the trouble.” I’m pretty fast. Will I make it if I run? Run where? I have no idea where Sniffer is or how to get out of this house.

“Don’t run, little one. I can see you thinking about it. Don’t. I will chase you, and neither of us is ready for what will happen when I catch you.” His hands are fisted, eyes low, jaw twitching. He looks the same as he did five years ago. No fear, Sophie, show no fear. I straighten my back for what must be my tenth attempt today and look him dead in the eyes.

More calmly this time, he says, “Why were you in my room?”

Still retreating. “I told you. I was leaving. I was just looking for a door out,” I explain again with a shrug of my shoulder.

“You,” he says, “are not going anywhere!”

## CHAPTER 9



Well shit! I guess we do this now. Might as well get it over with. I hope she's not going to witness this. I look down to the ground but steel my resolve. "You want to do this right in the hallway? Maybe, maybe, we could go out on your porch? I could use some air." He doesn't need to know I want a quick escape, or that being surrounded with his scent is making me dizzy.

"Sure, we'll stop by the living room and grab your water. When I found you gone, I must have left it there." God, his voice is sexy. What? Where did that come from?

He motions for me to walk ahead of him. I start walking and feel his large palm on my lower back. His thumb grazes my bra strap, and his pinky finger is dangerously low. I speed up a bit then quickly stop. The pressure from his hand carries me forward a step before he stops and looks down to me. "I don't know where I'm going. I've been lost in here for the past five minutes, maybe, you can lead?" I lift my hand in a forward motion.

He reaches down and twines his finger with mine and pulls me forward. My hand is tiny in his, my fingers spread wide around his. It's not comfortable, not just because he's touching me, but because his hand is that freaking huge. I pull away, but he grasps my left hand with his left hand and wraps it under his right bicep while holding it in place with his left hand. I guess he thinks I need an escort. "I wasn't snooping around. I just opened a couple doors looking for a way outside. When I

found what I now know is your bedroom, I just needed the bathroom. I really am sorry.”

No response. He finds the living room easy enough. His left hand drops mine from holding his arm so I let my hand fall back to my side. He bends and grabs a bottle of water laying on the floor, walks over to the bar, and drops it into the trash. Then, he picks a fresh one from the small fridge. “That one was fine, you know. I would have drunk it.” He scoffs. I’m beginning to think the only thing I can do right is piss this man off.

He opens the water and gives me the open container and waits. He looks down at the bottle and then up to me, arches one like he’s saying drink it. Damn, I wish I could do that eyebrow thing. I bring the bottle to my lips, and he sighs with relief like I’ve just made his day. “I’m sorry I took so long, I wanted to check on a few things and something came up I had to deal with.” Oh yeah, I know exactly what came up.

When I reach out to take the cap from him, he grabs the bottle, tightens the lid and hands it back to me. Picking up my left hand once again, he wraps it around his arm and holds it there. It’s a short trip to the front door, which he opens, and we step out. This time when I take my hand from his elbow, I step back. I could use the space.

“Can we sit?” he asks and pulls a chair out from the table. “It is your house, you know.” He’s still standing behind the chair looking at me like he’s waiting for something. I look down to grab the chair across from him so I can sit down when I feel a hand at the nape of my neck pressing me forward into the chair he had pulled out. I resist, a very low, menacing growl comes from me. My wolf does not like this, she hasn’t accepted him as her Alpha, he will not dominate us! “Take your hand from my neck, now!” I speak very slowly through my fangs which have descended.

His hand stays for just a moment before slowly unwrapping each finger. His body is so close to mine I can feel his heat, yet he takes another step forward and presses his chest flush to my back. He’s breathing hard, his head dips to the back of my ear, and he inhales. “I’d like you to sit in the

chair I was holding for you. It's a sign of respect for me to seat you." He exhales, his nose is tracing down from my ear to the crest of my shoulder. This my wolf likes, the hussy. My head tilts to give him better access. "I understand many of these things are new to you. Next time, I'll explain myself better."

His nose follows the same path back up, but this time, I feel the tip of his soft, wet tongue trace my pulse point. My knees give, but his hands slam to my hips. "You are distracting me, little one. We need to talk, but I'm finding it very hard to do." The word hard is punctuated with a slow roll of his hips. Effectively showing me exactly what's hard. I gasp and try to move forward, but his hands are still at my hips locking me in place. My body stiffens. I'm not prepared for these feelings. I've never been in a sexual situation willingly. Sensing my anxiety, he steps back away from me.

"That wasn't my intention. I'm sorry. If it's still okay, I'd like you to sit in this chair" —he holds out the original chair— "so we can talk, please."

How the hell can he be licking my neck like a damn lollipop thirty seconds ago, and now he's utterly calm? With weak knees, I manage to sit in the chair as he pushes it under the table. Laying my hands on the table, I wait for him to explain what's happening.

Taking a deep breath, he starts. "Cass has told me a lot about you the past few days. I'd like you to tell me what you told him so it's all clear. Then I'll tell you about me. Does that sound good?"

"I suppose. If you won't be happy with just the stuff Sniffer told you, I can." I don't want to go over this shit again.

"Start with why you call him that," he demands.

"You don't need to be so growly, Big Guy, I'm fixin' to answer you," I smart back. He quirks his eyebrow. "I fell asleep on the beach," I shrug my shoulders, "when I woke up, he was laying over my back, sniffing my neck, the creeper." I point at him. "You two need boundaries."

Now he's full-on mumbling. I can only hear a few words. "Rip... won't... hands... fucker!"

"You done yet? I'd like to get this over with. What else do you want to talk about?"

Clearing his throat, "Tell me about your parents. When did they die?" he asks gently.

I motion to him. "I lost them about two weeks after that night." I laugh a sad laugh. "I keep referring to it as that night. I can't even call it the night we met, because we didn't meet. I still don't know your name. For five years, you've been him or he. On bad nights when I prayed you'd come back for me, it was my Mate but never a name."

He looks miserable. "Masen Black, my name is Masen Black."

I snap my finger. "Mase, that's what he called you. I knew I'd heard your name. I just didn't remember what it was until you just said it. Well, Masen Black, I'm Sophia Brair."

"I know your name little one, I've always known your name. I could never forget it."

Ouch, why does that hurt so much? Is it the confirmation that he could've at any time looked me up, did he ever? Does he know how I lived house to house, hoping the next wouldn't be worse than the last. Does he know? I have to ask. "Did you know I had no one, that I was lost? Alone?"

He rolls both his lips in, eyes closed, shaking his head. "No baby, I had no idea!" Oh God, I think that's worse, now I know he never even bothered to look. My hand rubs small circles over my heart. I need this done, I can't take much more.

"Yeah okay, it was a long time ago, so is there anything else you need? I should really be getting home."

He reaches over and grabs my hand, holding it between both of his. I'm so confused. I don't want him to touch me, but I don't want him to not touch me either.

“Please, let me explain. If you need some time after that, then... we’ll see. I don’t know if I can leave you alone, but we’ll figure something out.”

When I blink, tears fall. “If you can leave me alone? Does that mean I have to leave, find a new school, and new house? Will I be allowed into another pack? Will they know why you made me leave?” My voice cracks. Shit, when did I start to ramble so bad? I’m so busy wondering about the what-ifs I don’t realize he’s moved. I’m scooped up in his arms, and he walks to the side of his porch carrying me. I’m so shocked I let him. It feels nice to be held. He sits on a large swing and rocks us. His forehead rests on the top of my head, rolling it back and forth.

“Please, don’t cry, baby. I’ll fix this, but please don’t cry.” He pulls me closer and begins talking. “That night, as you call it, my life changed. I had been Alpha for a few years. I thought I was in love with Roxa—”

“Please,” I beg. “I don’t want to hear this, please.” I’m tempted to cover my ears like a child.

“Shhh, it’s not what you think, listen. We had gone to another territory. I can’t even remember why, probably to accept a challenge, but my Beta and a few friends tagged along. When we drove through Kentucky, I decided to stop for the night, go to a pub, relax before finishing the drive home. As soon as we made it to the pub, I was anxious, just felt off. When we were leaving, I ran into you.” He squeezes me closer. “I’d never seen anything more beautiful until today when I look at you now.” He strokes my cheek. “When I realized you were my Mate, I didn’t know what to do. I knew you were young and hadn’t even shifted yet. I’ve never to this day heard of finding a Mate before their first shift. I didn’t know if you knew who or what I was to you.” He stops for a moment like he’s gathering strength.

“I left you there on the sidewalk. It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. When we were out of sight, I stayed and watched you with your parents. I followed you home. I watched your family for days, trying to find an excuse to make you come with me. I learned everything I could about you and



your parents, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't take your childhood away. I didn't want you to have the pressure of being my Luna when you hadn't even shifted yet. I was afraid I'd scare you. You were so tiny, just a child. I thought you might be twelve or thirteen."

He's rubbing his chin on my head, his whiskers snag in my hair. "I thought I was doing what was best for you. I know, now, how wrong I was. I'm so very sorry. I can't express how sorry I am for letting you go."

The regret in his voice is clear, but I still don't understand what he regrets? That I lost my parents? That I was alone, or the fact that he never looked for me? Would he ever have looked if I hadn't ended up here? There are so many questions. "Would you have ever looked for me if I hadn't shown up here?" Sadness clear in my tone.

"I've been looking for you for two years, little one." He sounds just as sad as me.

"How is that possible? I never lived more than fifty miles from my childhood home? If that's true, how did you not find me?"

His arms still hold me, but his hands brush over my arms, legs, back and even my face. His touch is gentle and reverent. "I never knew what pack your family belonged to. I didn't want to bring you to anyone's attention. I get challenged as Alpha a few times a year now, but back then, it felt like I was challenged a few times a month. I thought it would put a target on you, have people trying to use you to get to me. The only person who knew I'd found you and the entire situation was Michael, my Beta. So, I waited three years to the day. Then, I left to go get you and your family if they wanted to come." His hands have stopped moving, and his body grows tense. "When I got out of the car, I knew you were gone, I was sick with worry. I started contacting every pack within five hundred miles, searching. No one knew who you guys were. No pack claimed your family so I made it my mission to check each pack, in case they were hiding you from me. It's been two years. There hasn't been one day that's passed without me thinking of you, wondering where you were."

We are both quiet for a while. I still have questions, but I know he didn't walk away and forget me like I assumed. The sky's darkening, stars twinkling in the twilight. When the silence is finally broken, he whispers, "Will you stay here tonight? We still have a lot to talk about. I could make us some dinner?"

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea. Where's your girlfriend?" I start to stand. "I mean I don't think she'd be very happy with this." Standing now, I point to the lap I was just in.

"You still don't understand." He shakes his head. "Come on, I need to feed you." He tucks my hand under his arm and leads me back inside.

## CHAPTER 10



*M*asen

CASPER RELUCTANTLY LEAVES THE ROOM. “HEY!” I hear him shout but don’t care anymore. I’m too worried about why she hasn’t woken up yet. I watch her breasts rise and fall as she slowly breathes. Her dark lashes fan her cheeks. She seems peaceful, relaxed.

Eventually her eyes flutter open, and she screams, pulls herself back away from me so fast it’s a blur. I see what Michael meant, she is really fast. I’m just stuck staring at her when she starts talking a mile a minute. She is so beautiful, her long hair wild around her, cheeks flushed from exertion. Her amber eyes are large and alert. Her slight drawl makes me yearn to hear my name fall from her lips or maybe scream it while I’m buried deep inside her. I’m watching her lips when I realize she asked me where Casper is. He’s not going to be anywhere you are, little one, I think to myself. All I hear her saying is she’s trying to leave. I’m running through all the ways of keeping her here over and over. When she finally stops, she looks at me for the first time, I mean really looks at me. Her eyes dilate and her breathing changes. She breathes in deep, pulling my scent. Her back arches slightly, then she licks her full bottom lip. It’s obvious she likes what she sees. It feels like a small victory, I want to celebrate. I settle for a brief inhale of her neck and whisper I’ll get her some water.

When I stand to go to the bar, I hear Cass and Roxanne yelling. What the fuck is she still doing here? I leave the room to find out what's going on. When I find them both in the kitchen, the conversation is heated. Cass is telling her to get out, and Roxanne keeps saying I need her. That she wants to be here for me. I stand there debating on just leaving them both and going back to Sophia. When I hear Cass say he found her lurking in the hall listening to us talk, I have my answer. Jesus, has she always been this bad?

“Casper, stop.” He's quiet while Roxanne starts crying softly. She sniffles and starts to walk toward me looking for comfort. She thinks because I told Cass to stop, I've taken her side. I'll let her think that long enough to find out how much she heard. I don't want people knowing about how I met Sophia before she shifted. I'm starting to suspect there's something different about her. I need to know what that is so I can protect her if need be.

Before she reaches me, I ask in a disappointed tone, “Roxy, were you listening at the door while I was talking to Cass?” I use the nickname I haven't called her in a very long time to soften her. I want answers.

Her head drops in a submissive manner. “Yes Mase, I was. I just needed to make sure you were okay. I've never seen you threaten Cass. I don't know who that girl is. Is she trying to come between you and your family? That's not right, Mase. I just needed... need. I need you, Mase. I love you so much. I've been waiting for you to settle down for years. Please tell me you still want me, tell me it's not over?” she begs.

“Roxanne, listen. I need you not to repeat anything you heard here today. It's very important. Michael and Casper are the only two people who know the full story, so if I hear a word about how Sophia and I met I'll know it was you.” There's a threat there whether she hears it or not. I'm not sure.

She still has hope that I'd choose her. I can see the wheels turning, analyzing everything I'm saying. I'll let her think whatever she wants as long as she keeps her mouth closed. I look directly into her eyes so she knows what I'm about to say

is serious. “No one Roxanne, not your sister, not your friends, not a stranger. No one, do you understand?”

She nods her head eagerly. “Yes, Mase. I understand.”

“I need you to go, now. I have a lot of things to figure out.”

She runs her long nails over my lower stomach almost dipping under my waistband before she adds, “If you need me, just call or come over, okay? I can help you with anything.”

Lucky for me, my brother kept his mouth shut the whole time. He must have realized what I was doing. I hope he knows. I don’t want him running to Sophia to tell her I’m keeping Roxanne on the side. I don’t think that’s even possible once you’re Mated, but she might not know that.

“Casper, you know I only handled her that way because I don’t want people knowing how different Sophia is right?” Before he can answer, I say, “I need to make sure she’s safe. If everybody knew she was different, it might be a problem. Sid called me when you guys drove through the pack property, said quite a few of the fellas were all worked up by her scent even unmated, married men.”

“I get it, man. I don’t like it, but I get it. I don’t know what you ever saw in her anyway but a lay. She and her sister are power-hungry bitches!”

I grab a water and head back to my little Mate. “She’s awake. I heard you guys and wanted to make sure she left for good this time. I’m going to tell her everything. I hope she gives me a chance to make it up to her.”

Cass starts rubbing the back of his neck, and I know I’m not going to like what he’s about to say, “Listen if she needs me, fuck man stop growling at me, I’m just saying if this is all too much at one time, and she needs a *friend*. I can be that, only that. Okay? I know it must be hard having her unmarked and around me, well any man really, but I know my boundaries. I would never, never try anything. You’re my brother, I love you,” he says seriously. “It helps to know you wouldn’t hesitate to kill me either.” He chuckles.

“Thank you, Casper, but I would hesitate for like half a second.” I laugh darkly.

When I walk into the living room, it’s empty, and I panic. I drop the water and find her scent. I follow it back to the kitchen. I was gone so long she probably came to look for me. Fuck, I’m so distracted. How did I miss her standing in the hall? Oh no, did she hear me with Roxanne? I need to find her. Why the hell do I have such a big fucking house? Oh yeah, you built it for her, dumbass. I follow her scent to the game room, but I pass it. She’s not there. Further down, the home theater, not there either. The last place she could be in this wing is my room. *Yes, good*, pants my wolf, the greedy bastard. My body follows my wolf’s lead, and I’m hard and aching.

Her little body hits my chest as she comes flying out my bedroom door. I reach out to grab her arms before she has a chance to fall backward.

“Ouch, you should warn people they’re about to collide with an immovable object.” My hands are on her. I want very badly to pull her to me and kiss her sassy mouth. Watching her lips, she says “Point me to my Jeep, Big Guy?”

Damn, she’s trying to leave again. I ask with a growl why she was in my room. I’m about to snap. I want her! She’s retreating, looking behind her. She’s thinking about running. Oh fuck, if she runs, I won’t be able to stop my wolf. He’ll take her when he catches her, I know he will. “Don’t run, little one. I can tell you want to. Neither of us is ready for what will happen when I catch you.” Calm, I need to calm myself. She’s still looking to flee. “You,” I state, “aren’t going anywhere!”

I splay my hand across her lower back. She speeds up and then stops, forcing my hand harder against her back. She asks me to lead so I reach down for her hand, but it’s so tiny in mine I’m afraid I’ll mash it. When she pulls away, I grab her hand and tuck it into my elbow. I like touching her. My wolf is content, for now.

I pull a chair for her to sit. She’s looking at me standing there, then goes to pull out another. I move behind her, placing

my hand on her neck, not even realizing the dominance it shows.

“Take your hand from my neck, now!” She growls. I’ve never had a female question my authority, but this tiny little creature does. I’m rock hard again, my Wolf wants to show her what an Alpha is.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I remove my fingers. I can’t help my body’s reaction to her. I move in closer. Touching her is the best kind of pain. I want so much more than she’s ready to give. When she gasps and stiffens, I know I’ve gone too far. Moving away, I apologize.

Finally, she lets me seat her. I ask her to tell me about her family, when it all happened. When she mentions the name she’s given Cass, I rethink letting him live, and when I hear the story behind the name, I maim him about a hundred different ways in my head for getting so close to her.

I’m shocked when I find out how soon she lost her parents after I found her, but when she tells me she waited for me to come for her, my heart breaks. I’m reminded how selfish I’ve been when she tells me she still doesn’t know my name.

Everything I say either comes out wrong or sounds horrible. With every word I utter, the hurt in her eyes compounds. When a few tears escape her eyes, I can no longer just sit here. I have to make it better. I pick her up and take her to my swing where I can hold her and explain how we got in this fucked up situation.

Hours later I think she finally understands, but when I ask her to stay, she asks where my girlfriend is. I realize she still doesn’t get it. We both need a break from shredding our souls. So we head inside to hopefully get comfortable and eat.

## CHAPTER 11



The kitchen is huge, like run a small restaurant huge. The cabinets are rustic looking ivory with touches of black showing through here and there. The stove is twice the size of a normal range. It has two ovens next to each other, six burners on top, and a raised flat griddle. Yowzers, now that's a stove. I'm sitting at a large island in the middle of the kitchen. Masen brought a high-backed stool over from the breakfast bar ten feet away. "Like you close" is all he says when I ask why I don't just sit over there. So here I am, while he rummages through the fridge looking for food.

"I have some leftovers in here. I'm not really the greatest cook. Usually, Molly makes dinner a few nights a week," he says sheepishly.

Molly, who the hell is Molly? How many women does he have? Are they on rotation? "Ahh no, I don't want your Molly's food!" I scoff.

He turns to face me. "She's not my Molly, she's William's Molly. She is however a trusted friend. She cleans and cooks for me a few days a week. Her Mate was injured by a rogue seven years ago. He's scarred, so he doesn't leave pack land much. I pay her enough working a few hours a week to send her children to college." He shrugs his shoulders like it's no big deal.

"Sorry. That wasn't very nice of me. Why don't I have a look? I enjoy cooking." Letting my brain have a break from all this is just a bonus.



Masen's fridge is full, I just need to decide what to make. He's standing two feet to my left and has been since I stood up. I tested it by walking to the pantry. He stays the same distance anytime I move. I'm thinking about breaking out into a dance to see if he'd follow that. A small laugh leaks out when I get a visual.

"What are you laughing at, Little One?"

Now, I really laugh because there's no way I'm telling him. "Just thinking, Masen. Don't worry, I'm not going to poison you," I tease. "Any requests?"

He quickly answers, "I want you to make what you made Cass so I can tell him to shut up about how good it was and about how you cooked for him. Oh, and I need dessert. Cass got cake."

Is he serious? By the self-satisfied smile he's wearing, I think he is. "Who knew the Alpha was such a baby?" I coo to him.

His smile falls. Oh I was just joking. He looks so cute and full of himself. "Hey Big Guy, I'm just teasing. Guess what?" I raise my brows, waiting for him to respond.

"What?" He sulks. My goodness.

"I may have made you cookies this morning. If Sniffer didn't steal yours out of my Jeep, they should still be in the back seat."

He smiles back full force. "You made cookies this morning? Wait. Did you say if Cass didn't steal mine? He got some to?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, he did. Yours are bigger. I was trying to butter you up so I'd get into your pack," I laugh.

"If he took them, I'm going over there to beat his ass right now. Then, I'll take all the damn cookies."

Shaking my head. "Masen, if he took your cookies, there won't be any left. He's kind of a piggy."

"I really like it when you say my name, baby." His voice is deeper than just a few moments ago.

He moves closer, abandoning his two-foot rule. I think I need the two feet because the way he just said that has me wanting to say his name again and again. I take a step back regaining the space but smile up at him. “How tall are you anyway?” I can tell by his face he knows how he affects me.

He leaves the space between us but bends so his face is near mine. “Six foot five.” His breath fans my cheek. Still close, his nose brushes mine. “I’m going to get my cookies,” is what he says, but it feels like he’s saying something altogether different. I just nod and swallow, not sure what I’m agreeing to.

He’s out the door in a flash, and I lean against the counter to keep myself standing. I’m way out of my element. I’m playing t-ball, and he’s in the major leagues.

I heat the oven and griddle. Then, I start to gather some ingredients to make a steak sandwich again. I cut up some potatoes and toss them with olive oil and seasoning to throw in the oven. Instead of sourdough, I find a large oval loaf of cheese bread that smells yummy. I melt some butter to brush the bread with after I slice it so I can grill it. I season the steak and wait until the potatoes are closer to being done before grilling it. Thirty minutes later, dinner’s ready, and I officially love this kitchen.

I heard Masen return while I was cooking. He seemed content to just watch me and shovel cookies and oatmeal bars in his face. I did tell him if he ate the whole container, he’d be too full for dinner which got me a loud snort.

Eating with Masen is very intimate. He seats me at the table then sits so close to me that if I don’t squeeze my thick thighs together my knee rests against his leg. That’s just too much hard work, so I eventually just relax. He’s more refined than Sniffer, but he still moans in appreciation. He also takes every opportunity to touch me, He squeezes my hand and tells me how delicious it is. Brushes my hair back, when it falls forward from looking down at my plate, but the most intense situation came when he wiped a little sauce from my bottom lip with his thumb right as I was trying to lick it off. When my tongue touches the pad of his thumb, he sucks in air through

his clenched teeth and his other hand goes white from fisting it. He hasn't moved but seems to be struggling for control. I slowly move my head back, and he lets out a long exhale. I'm not really sure how to deal with this. I find him immensely attractive, and I feel the same pull to him because he's my Mate.

Trying to ease the tension I ask, "What did you mean earlier when you said I still don't understand?"

His light eyes stare into mine. "It means, Little One, I've been waiting for you for five years. I don't have, nor have I had, a girlfriend since the night we met." He can read the doubt clear on my face. He adds, "I'm not saying I haven't been with women" —shame is written all over his face— "but what I am saying is that it's you, it has always been you, I was just waiting for you."

Now I'm pissed. "Oh, is that supposed to make me feel good? You've been waiting for me, but while you waited, you've been with not one woman, but probably many?" I haven't even addressed the fact that he still wants me. I'm not ready for that.

Masen stops eating and gives me his full attention. "Yes, I have had sex, just sex, with a few. I was a twenty-four-year-old shifter when we met. Had you been old enough to shift, I wouldn't have been with anyone else. I broke off my relationship with Roxanne immediately."

My mouth falls open in outrage. "Broke it off? You were just with her today." My voice is getting louder.

He shakes his head. "No, I wasn't. I have had sex with her, but not today."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did we interrupt you?" Now I'm yelling.

"If you'd let me finish, I didn't do anything with her today. She showed up here today dressed like that because she knew Cass was bringing a new female" —he points to me— "to join the pack. She wanted to make sure whoever it was saw her here and assumed I was taken, and I'm sure she would have

been doubly happy if I would have had sex with her.” He’s not yelling, but his voice is definitely louder than before.

I know I’m the one that brought her up but boy does it hurt when I hear about him having been with anyone, let alone the devil woman. His face softens. “Shit. I’m sorry, baby. You have every right to be mad. If I’d seen a man at your house half naked, I probably would have killed him... slowly. So I get it, I do. I’m not saying what I did was okay or make excuses, but I can’t change what happened. What I can promise you is that I will never look at another woman that way for the rest of my life!”

His oath makes me feel a little better, but I’m still hurt from the betrayal. “This is all a little overwhelming. I thought you chose her over me back then. I did know it was unusual to meet your Mate at such a young age. I never told my parents what happened. I was too embarrassed because I thought you rejected me,” I say ruefully. “I gave up hope for us a long time ago. Then, we pull up to this house, and I knew you were close. I also knew it would be harder to get past the loss this time. When I realized who it was standing on the porch, it just... it’s just hard, ya know?” Not really expecting an answer, I continue, “I kept thinking you were trying to tell me I needed to leave, that you still choose her.” I blow out a long breath. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around what you told me. Logically everything makes sense, that you didn’t know, that you did look for me, but I still have five years of doubt.”

He grabs my hand and says simply, “It’s all my fault. I should have been there. I’m sorry.”

“Not everything is your fault. I’m not blaming you. My parents died, but you didn’t kill them. A lot of the crap I’ve had to deal with sucks, but stop acting like you did it to me.”

His face is tense. “I should have protected you.” His fist hits his chest. “That’s my job to make sure you’re safe and happy.” He growls, angry at himself.

I roll my eyes. “I’m fine now. Simmer down.”

He gapes at me, the left side of his lips starts to curl up in a deadly smirk. “Do you know? No one talks to me like that,

especially when I'm upset. Yet, you, Little One, are so sassy. I never knew how much I'd like it." He reaches over and snags me onto his lap then picks up his sandwich to finish eating, like it's perfectly normal.

I stay for a few minutes then get up to rinse my plate. I don't see a dishwasher, but I couldn't tell where the fridge was either, it just looks like cabinets. "Is there a dishwasher?" Still chewing, he motions to my left. Sure enough, it blends right in. I clean the mess from dinner, and when he's done eating, he helps with the dishes.

"Thank you for dinner, it was delicious. Will you stay over? No pressure, for anything. I'd just like to be near you."

I like being with him here too. Is it too soon to stay the night? I know he's not asking for a romp, but it's still strange. "I have class in the morning. I didn't bring anything to sleep in or clothes for tomorrow." Which actually sucks. I think I kinda wanted to stay.

"I have something you could sleep in. I can take you home in the morning, or we could wash what you have on."

He's looking at my rolled up skinny jeans and black tank covered by a white cropped cardigan with a tiny black skull and crossbones like he's seeing it for the first time. He stares the longest at my wooden, clog bottomed, light purple Mary-Janes. I'd stare at them too, they're fabulous and comfy. He widens his legs. "We can just go to your place in the morning so you can change."

Is there something wrong with how I look? I'm not skinny like the devil woman, but I always try to dress for my body. I love my curves. "Is there a problem with what I have on?" I demand.

His eyes slowly rise to mine, and he rasps, "I like what you're wearing very much. I don't want anyone else to like it quite as much, Little One."

Before making our way to his media room to relax, Masen gives me a t-shirt that hangs to my knees. We decide on watching reruns of *BlindSpot* when he finds out it's one of my

favorite shows and he's never seen it. We're sitting on a loveseat. He's brought what's left of the cookies and some drinks. I make it through the first episode, but I fall asleep soon after. I wake up to Masen carrying me into a darkened room. He places me on a soft bed, covers me, and kisses my forehead. "Good night, Little One." I'm falling back asleep before he leaves the room.

When I start to wake up, I'm on fire. I can't move, and I'm on fire. Holy hot batman, I try to push away from the heat, and my hands smack into a warm, rock-hard chest. "It's too early, go back to sleep, baby." His voice is slow and sleepy.

I almost scream, but he mashes my face into his neck with a palm to the back of my head, effectively silencing me. My heart is racing when I feel his other hand stroke my back lazily. "Shh, Little One, it's okay."

My brain comes back online. I realize it's Masen. He never did leave the room, I just fell asleep before he got into bed. I contemplate how he managed to cocoon me without me waking. I became a light sleeper out of necessity, but I still haven't broken the habit. I must have been really tired. Keep lying to yourself, Sophie. I'm sure it has nothing to do with the living blanket you're snuggled up to. Too much, too early.

"Masen," I whisper. "Masen." I try to wiggle. "I'm so hot, and I need to pee."

He flips over so I'm under him, his arms cage my head, his lower body just brushing mine. "Mornin', baby." His hooded eyes take in my face then move lower when he sees the shirt he gave me rode up my hip so my panties are barely visible. "I need to get up, need to get up." Somehow, I know he's talking to himself, not me.

When he stands, I see the black sweatpants he's wearing do nothing to hide the impressive erection he has. My cheeks heat with a blush, and I look away but not before he sees me looking. "No need to look away, baby. You're the reason it's there," he chuckles.

I pull the cover over my head. "Masen, are you serious? You big freak!" I say, embarrassed.

I feel the bed bounce as he jumps on my legs. “Oh, I’m a freak. Huh?” he questions while he prowls up my body. Once his knees hit my waist, he lowers himself to sit on my thighs. The blanket covering me slowly inches down revealing a playful Masen right in my face.

I cover my mouth and say, “I’ve got yuck mouth, backup... freak.”

He moves my hand and runs his nose up my neck, across my jaw, over my cheek, then brushes it against my nose. His mouth is so close to the corner of my lips I can almost feel the swell of his bottom lip on my top. He’s teasing me. As he moves up to feather his lips on my eyelids, I feel the soft scruff of his chin tickle my lips. My lips are so sensitive I gasp. When it happens again, I know it’s on purpose, and a small moan escapes.

“I was just trying to tease you, Little One, but I can’t ever seem to get the upper hand.” His lips graze mine as he speaks.

I’m so tempted to lick my lips so I can taste his. Instead, I say, “I need to get home and change for school.”

He nods, letting his nose caress mine again. “I know baby, just one second,” he answers. His eyes close, and he slowly backs away. When his face is near the apex of my thighs, he inhales deeply and shudders. “I want you to move up the bed, Little One. Move backward to the headboard.” I do as I’m told. His voice brokers no argument. “Good girl. Now, go to the bathroom. I’ll wait for you.” He’s still crouched on the bed, his eyes track my every move. When I close the door, I lean against it trying to regain my balance. That was... scorching. I may not be experienced, but I know I feel like strutting back out there just to see what would happen. Oh, I’m in big, big trouble.

## CHAPTER 12



*R*edressed in yesterday's clothes, I find my way back to the kitchen. Masen is dressed similar to yesterday, only his jeans are a little looser, and his belt and boots are a caramel brown. His wide shoulders are bent over the counter messing with the coffee pot. When he stands and turns, I'm again taken aback by his size.

"Are all Alphas as big as you?" I ask.

His smile is pure mischief. "No, baby, I'm the biggest," he states proudly.

"Psshs, you" —I point— "are trouble." But I love how playful he can be. His strong jaw is clean shaven, and his dark hair is damp. His light eyes make his handsome face so striking it's hard to look away. I wouldn't have guessed he's almost thirty. He looks closer to early twenties, but shifters live a long life so we age much slower.

He offers me coffee, but he doesn't have any creamer so I decline. "I'm kinda picky about my coffee. I'll grab some at home." He drinks a cup of black coffee and lets me know he's ready when I am. "It's okay as long as you point me out of the pack land. I can make it from there." I still have plenty of time before my first class to make it home and change.

"I want to come. Please?" he adds as an afterthought. I don't think he uses that word often.

"Sure, are you going to follow me, then?"

He runs his hand through his beautifully messy hair. "I was kinda hoping I could drive you home and then to school. I



won't try to go to class with you or anything," he says, like that's even an option, "but I thought maybe we could hang out again tonight?" At least, he phrases it like a question.

"What about my Jeep though? If you drive, it'll be here, and I wouldn't have anything to drive."

"I'll make sure you have your truck when you need it."

My purse and keys are on the island where he left them after bringing them in last night with the cookies. Grabbing my things, I announce, "I'm all set."

He tucks my hand into his arm in the way I'm becoming familiar with and leads me to his garage. There are a few cars, and a large SUV, but he approaches a motorcycle. "No way, Masen. I'm not riding to school on that! Everybody already stares at me. I can just imagine what they'd say if I pulled up on the back of their Alpha's motorcycle," I scoff.

"First, who stares at you?" he asks darkly.

"Only every shifter at school" —I throw my hands in the air— "Thank god for Sniffer and Sam, or they may have kicked me out for being a rogue or something," I add. "Even my English Professor held me after class."

His eyes narrow. "Did he now? I'll take care of it," he says, brushing my concern off. "Now, secondly, of course you can ride up on the Alphas bike, you're the Alpha's Mate," he smirks, "And I plan on Marking you as soon as you let me," he growls.

"Freak," I say.

My purse is wrapped around my body, and my hair is in a loose braid tucked under the helmet. Masen sits astride the motorcycle, waiting for me to get on. "If you plan on making it to school, we need to get going." I reluctantly lift my leg and slide behind him. My breasts touch his back when I lean forward to put my arms around his waist as instructed. Masen grabs me behind my knees and yanks me forward. My breath leaves my lungs in a huff as every part of my body molds to his. "I like this, we may never ride in a car again," he muses.

Minutes later, we're flying down the road headed to my house. It's still early so there's not much traffic, we make it in fifteen minutes. My legs are wiggly when I step off, but man, was it fun. "I liked that very much, Masen. Thank you," I say sincerely.

"No need to thank me, baby. I'll give you a ride anytime." He winks.

I show him around my house and tell him to have a seat while I get changed. I already washed my face last night when I changed into Masen's shirt, so I put on what little makeup I wear and re-braid my hair. I throw on a new pair of jeans over clean panties and a sheer gray sleeveless shirt the black bra I just put on is barely visible. Lastly, I grab my favorite, old gringo cowboy boots.

When I walk out, Masen is in the kitchen trying to figure out how to work my Keurig. "I know you want coffee. I was trying to help, but I can't find where the coffee goes." I laugh and show him the K-cups and how to load it up.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

I can tell it's serious. "Yeah?"

He clears his throat. "Other than Cass, I'd rather you didn't tell anyone we met five years ago. Like I was telling you yesterday, Mates have never been identified before their first shift. I'm not sure if it means anything, but I'd like to be sure before anyone else knows."

"Okay, I can do that." No problem. I don't want people to know that either.

"One more thing, Little One." He points to my chest. "Are you trying to kill me, or have me kill someone else?" He says seriously.

I smack his arm and make my coffee to go. "How am I going to bring my coffee?"

"You can just hold it. School's only a couple blocks, and I'll drive slow." I grab my book bag and lock up.

Holding the cup wasn't too bad. I'll just have to start getting it at campus. Calm down, Sophia, he's not offering to drive you to school every day.

When we pull up, it's seven-fifty. The parking lot is a lot fuller than Monday. Every head turns with the sound of the loud engine. Ugh, I knew this would happen. When I get off, he turns the engine off, takes the helmet I had on, and places it on the seat. He looks around. Gone is the playful Masen. His face is hard as he puts my hand on his elbow. "Where's your first class, Little One?" His voice is at odds with his face, so gentle.

"It's English, that building right over there." I point. Everyone we pass, shifter or human, watches us. Masen commands attention, not one male shifter dares look at us for longer than a moment. If the death glares aren't enough warning, the low growls do the trick. Even the humans keep their distance.

The women are a different story. Their eyes linger on Masen. His menacing stare does little to deter them from ogling him. We make it to class, and I turn to ask, "Do you know if Sniffer and Sam have the same schedule today as Monday?"

His head tilts. "I think so. Why?"

"I was just hoping to hang out with them during break, maybe grab lunch again. I don't want to roam the campus alone for two hours," I answer.

"I'll be here for lunch. They can join us, but I'll be here," he says like I should already know this. "Let's find you a seat," he says while pulling me into the room.

"Masen," I whisper. "Masen," I try again, this time pulling his arm so he'll look down at me. "You said you wouldn't follow me into class."

He pulls me to an area that has tables and chairs instead of desks. "That was before," he says while he sits and tries to put me on his lap.

“Before what?” I slap his hands away. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“If I knew you wouldn’t sit with me, I would have pulled your chair.” He pouts, really?

“You can’t be here. We’re going to get in trouble,” I whisper.

“I know Tate, it’s fine.” He sees my confusion. “Your teacher, Tate Daniels.” Oh that makes sense he’s a shifter.

I’m a little nervous with him in class next to me. The Professor walks in and notices him almost immediately. How can you not? His presence fills the room. The Professor dips his head to Masen and starts the lecture.

When class ends, Masen helps me from my chair and tucks my hand in the crook of his arm, but he doesn’t move to leave. He just stands there waiting. A few students approach Professor Daniels’ desk, but he dismisses them quickly making his way to us. When he’s right next to us, he dips his head even lower this time and says, “Alpha,” so low no one else would be able to hear. Masen turns, taking me with him and leaves the room without even acknowledging him.

What was that? “Oh no, oh Masen, that was so mean. I’m so embarrassed for him. Why’d you do that?” My face is beet red.

When we’re outside, he stops, leans in close, and brings his large palms to my cheeks. His thumb brushes my lips. “Your cheeks are on fire.” He laughs. “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble.”

“I’m not worried about being in trouble,” I say softly. “He must be so embarrassed.”

He shakes his head. “He’s not. I had a point to make, that’s all. No hard feelings, he’s fine.” He kisses my nose and asks, “What class do you have next?”

I point toward the science building. “Bio with Sam,” I sigh.

Masen leaves me at the door with a pat on the butt. “Freak,” I mutter.

“I heard that,” he yells while walking away.

I take the same seat from Monday and wait for Sam. I ignore the whispers of my name and bring out my book.

Sam struts in with a frozen French vanilla coffee and a smile. “Thought you could use this.”

I take the offering. “I could kiss you,” I say jokingly.

“Ahh please don’t! I like living,” he laughs.

I shake my head. “He’s picking me up after class. You guys want to have lunch again?” I ask hopeful.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he smiles.

When class ends, I see Masen leaning against the wall outside the door. He makes his way to us. The students part as he nears them. He grabs my hand and greets Sam. Walking out of the building, Sam says he and Sniffer are meeting in the union again at one o’clock. It’s only a little after twelve so they decide to sit in the quad for a little bit. I’m not sure how I feel about waiting here or eating in the cafe with all the attention we seem to receive. I’m tucked in between Masen’s legs, his arms resting on his bent knees talking with Sam. No one approaches us while we sit under a tree, so I start to relax. Maybe I’m overthinking things; maybe, I’m just being self-conscious.

We find a seat in the union, thankfully, not in the middle this time. Within two minutes, I see Michael coming through the doors. He spots us and heads over. After saying hello, all three men began laughing and joking. I can tell they’re very comfortable with each other.

Soon, Sniffer joins us, and we head over to the cafe to get lunch. Masen and I head to a Mongolian grill, and the others head off in different directions. We all meet back at a large table we sat our bags on when we first arrived. Moments after sitting, I see the terrible trio heading our way. “Great, here comes my welcoming committee,” I utter. Masen’s turns and follows my line of sight to see Brittany and her crew standing

at our table. Her fingers are tangled in her hair like a toddler twirling away. I roll my eyes.

“Hi Mase, hey guys.” She waves. “Can we sit with you? There aren’t any empty tables left,” she asks sweetly.

Michael looks around the room confirming there are indeed no empty tables. “You guys planning on eating?” Michael asks while noting their empty hands.

“Oh yeah, we just wanted to find a seat first,” she replies smoothly.

Michael looks at Masen, there seems to be a silent commutation that passes between them. “Yeah that’s fine. We’re almost done anyway,” Michael answers. Masen hasn’t spoken at all, just watches. Huh, that’s strange.

When they return, each carrying a yogurt and small salad, I laugh to myself. Looking down at my stir-fry, I think they could all three use a few good meals. Shaking my head, I keep eating. The conversation has been easy and light. All the men make sure to include me, often asking for my opinion or input.

Now all conversation falls silent as they take their seats. Brittany takes a seat next to Michael who’s directly across from Masen. The blonde from English whose name I just learned is Lisa, sits next to Sam who’s straight in front of me, putting her across from Sniffer on my side. The last girl, Becca, takes the seat next to Lisa. Brittany unsuccessfully tries to start several conversations with Masen. He doesn’t ignore her but gives one or two word replies and never looks in her direction. His behavior is so different from only moments ago when he was relaxed and playful.

Finally, she says something that gets his full attention. “Roxanne has your watch Mase. She said you must have forgotten it Saturday morning when you left.” Her smile is innocent, too innocent; she knows exactly what she just did.

Masen’s fist slams on the table so hard me and almost everyone in the cafe jump. “Leave,” he barks. She scurries away. Her friends follow, not even stopping to pick up their trash.

It doesn't matter though, the damage is done. I'm successfully reminded he was with her less than a week ago. How I feel about it surprises me though. On one hand, I want to claw all three of their eyes out, but on the other hand, I want to mount him in front of every woman he's ever been with and show them he's mine. *Yes*, snarls my wolf. She likes both ideas. She is not just a hussy, she's a violent one.

Truthfully, I know it was before me, but it still hurts. There's nothing to be done for it now, and I won't let her win by pushing Masen away. That's exactly what they want.

I settle for rubbing my hand over Masen's tense shoulder. "Calm down, Big Guy. I know what she was trying to do. The reminder sucks, but it's not like I didn't know about you and Roxanne."

Masen's body immediately relaxes, and he snatches me up from my seat and sits me in his lap. He shoves my face into his chest and drops his head to my ear. "Thank you," he whispers.

Sniffer is staring at me with an open mouth. I reach over and lift his chin with my fingers. "Nobody wants to see your burrito Sniffer," I admonish.

Masen lets out a full-blown belly laugh. His head is thrown back as he roars. Now, it's my turn to stare along with everyone else in the room. A few chuckle with him. Most just watch, seeming to realize the rarity that they're witnessing. He squeezes me tight and still laughing says, "I'm a lucky fucker!"

Sniffer is still shocked. "What have you done with my brother? Do you have any sisters?" That earns him a swat to the back of the head from Masen. Lifting his hands defensively, he comments, "Hey, I was just asking." I finish my lunch sitting in Masen's lap, and I don't even care if anyone watches.

He drops me at my photography class. When I turn to leave, he wraps me in his arms picking my feet up from the floor. "I'll see you soon," he promises, then he sets me down.

Class seems to drag on as I wait to be dismissed. Knowing he'll be waiting has me excited. I'm one of the first from my seat when the teacher tells us she'll see us next week. I rush out the door with a smile plastered to my face, but it falls when I don't see him. Looking at my phone, I see it's five minutes earlier than I told him we'd get out.

I make my way to the front of the building when I see him under a tree talking on his phone. I walk up behind him and hear "know it's hard. It's hard for me too." He's running his hands through his hair. "Well, I'm not sure. I have something to do tonight. Maybe I can come by when I'm done or tomorrow." There's a stretch of silence. "I can't answer that, just give me some time, Roxy."

Piss off, are you kidding me? Here I was thinking all this bullshit with her is over, and now he's on the phone consoling her. "I can't. Not yet. She's fragile." *Fragile*, is he talking about me?

I've heard enough. I turn to walk away, but before I can, Michael walks up. "Hey Luna, class get out early?" Masen turns around slowly when he hears Michael address me as the Luna. The guilty look on his face says it all. Michael realizing there's something wrong stands next to me.

Masen's face is hard when he says, "I'll talk to you later." The placating softness in his voice is replaced with anger. I wonder who he's mad at, me for catching him, or himself for not paying better attention and getting caught.

Masen reaches out like he is going to touch me, yeah, that's not happening. I take one step back, Michael follows me. "I don't think so, buddy." I sneer. His face falls. "I'll tell you this once and only once. You get your shit sorted before you ever come near me again. But know this, if you touch her or anyone else, I will never be your Mate. I survived losing you before. You better believe I could do it again." I turn to Michael. "I would like for you to give me a ride home and arrange for my Jeep to be returned to me immediately. Please," I add as an afterthought.



Michael looks to Masen for an answer. Masen again tries to close the distance between us, his mouth opens to speak. I hold my hand out. “I will not listen to any excuses you have. Nothing about what you were just doing is okay. No matter the reason! If you’re not willing to do it in front of me, then you should never do it behind my back. Sort your shit or walk. There is no other option!”

“Now Michael are you going to give me a ride or ask permission from your Alpha?”

Michael nods his head. “Yes Luna. I’ll drive you home, and your Jeep will be there within the hour.”

## CHAPTER 13



Michael is quiet the short drive to my house. When we reach the lot in front of my condo, I mutter, “Thank you for bringing me home, Michael. Drive carefully.”

I take my keys from my bag and exit his black truck. After unlocking my door, I lock the deadbolt, then throw my bags on the couch. I head to my master bath. A long, hot soak is just what I need. I start the water, add a little bubble bath, grab my Bluetooth speaker, and set my Sunday morning playlist from my iPad.

My skin is pink, and my face is a little sweaty from the heat. But I’m finally relaxed. My wrinkled fingers tell me it’s time to rinse off and wash my hair. I pull the plug and wait for some of the water to drain before standing and turning on the shower.

I’m singing along with Bruno’s “When I Was Your Man,” when the door crashes open. I screech, loud and long. I’m not proud of the girly wail that leaves my lips. I can just make out a large shape through my white, ruffled shower curtain. I can hear deep breathing, and I instantly know it is Masen.

“What are you doing in here? How the hell did you even get in here?” I yell.

“You wouldn’t answer the door. I knew you were here,” he pants. “I panicked, I’ll... fix your door.” He’s still breathing heavily.

“Fix my door? My door... GET OUT! GET OUT! JUST GET OUT!” I scream.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly before the door clicks closed gently.

I close my eyes and blow out a breath. Tony Bennett croons to “Smile”, while I try to calm myself. I finish my shower, taking my time moisturizing and brushing my hair. I find a pair of yoga capris and my softest thinnest t-shirt. I want to be comfy, I’m exhausted. This day, that started out so wonderful, has quickly sapped my strength and left me hungry and tired.

He’s still here, though. I know he hasn’t left. I don’t know how to deal with him right now. I still feel conflicted. I want to forgive him for talking to her, and I want to punish him. There isn’t any point in punishing him, because unless he knows he’s wrong, none of it matters. He would just do it again.

When I walk out of my room, I see him trying to prop my cracked front door over the broken door frame, good Lord. He turns when he hears my soft footfalls. Remorse clear on his face.

“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.” He pushes his inky hair back from his now scruffy, handsome face. “I came here to explain, no excuses, no made up stories. Just the truth, and to apologize. When you didn’t answer the door, I freaked out.” His hands are at his narrow hips while his head hangs down. “My heads so fucked up right now. If I would have just paid attention, I would have heard you singing in the shower, I would have been able to smell your bath. Shit, I can tell you shaved your legs. But, everything keeps going offline. You’re all I see, you’re all I feel. I’m having a hard time dealing with you being so close but still so far away.” He looks up and meets my eyes. “I want to Mark you! I don’t want any man near you. My wolf is making me crazy. I’m afraid if I shift he’ll mark you whether you’re ready or not.” He pulls a hand full of his hair. “I’m not telling you this to rush you, I would never rush you. If you need a month, six months, you can have it. It’ll be a struggle, but I want you to want me. I want you to want us,” he implores. I can hear the honesty in his worn-out voice. He’s just as screwed up as I am. It’s kind of a relief.

I walk over and tuck my arm into his elbow the way he likes and lead him to the kitchen to sit while I make us some dinner. “I’m gonna make us dinner, and we can talk, alright?” He sits and lets out a long sigh. “I need an explanation for earlier Masen. I know there’s a lot happening for both of us, but above all, I need honesty.” I start gathering ingredients for dinner, and he starts talking.

“I guess it started yesterday when I got up to get you water. I heard Cass yelling at Roxanne so I went to find out why she was still at the house.” He stands and moves closer to me as I start making dough for biscuits. “I found out she had been standing in the hallway, listening to me explain our situation to Cass. How you were only fourteen when we met.” He’s running his fingers through the spare flour on the board. “I didn’t, don’t want her telling anyone, and I’ll tell you why in a bit.”

Oh so there’s more to it than he led me to believe this morning. He continues, “So to placate her, I let her believe she still had a chance, that I might still choose her. I’ve never heard of one Mate rejecting the other. She is just too self-absorbed to see that.” He tilts my chin with his fingers so I’m looking right at him. “I let her believe that, I encouraged her to believe that. I’m sorry, Little One. I should have told you from the beginning I was trying to keep her quiet. I won’t keep things from you in the future.” He leans down and presses a lingering kiss to my temple. I sigh.

“I get you feel like you had good reasons for letting her believe that.” I shake my head. “But it stops now.”

He agrees with a simple, “I know.” Then moves on quickly. “Now, let’s talk about why I wanted to keep her quiet. I think there’s something different about you. I wasn’t lying this morning when I said I need to know a few things first.” Masen watches my hands while I knead the dough, seemingly engrossed. “I still don’t know what it all means, but there are too many things to ignore like us knowing that we’re Mates before your first shift, the way unmated males respond to you.”

I hold up my hand that's completely covered in biscuit dough. "What do you mean by that?" I ask.

He takes the towel and wipes my chin where he must have left flour from touching me. "When you drove through the pack houses, every unmated male came out to see who you were. People don't stare at you at school because they think you're a rogue, they stare at you because you smell really, really good." He proves his point by sticking his nose behind my ear, drawing in a long breath, and opening his mouth to let it out slowly. When his hot breath hits my ear and fans my neck, I shiver, and my neck automatically arches back. His hand falls to the outside flare of my hip, squeezing as he brings his chest flush to my shoulder. His other hand travels up to my arched neck. Fingers threading into the hair at the nape of my neck while his thumb caresses my cheek. Mouth still at my ear, he says, "Like warm vanilla and sex, baby."

His teeth nip the bottom of my earlobe, and I whimper. His body pushing mine against the counter is the only thing holding me up. Masen kisses his way down my throat and across my exposed collarbone. He turns me slightly and pulls me so my breasts push into his lower chest. He moans at the contact. "So soft for me, baby." My body molds to his.

He leans down with his forearm under my butt and his hand clenching my outer thigh and lifts me until my mouth is inches above his. I wrap my legs around his torso. My hands still covered in sticky dough bracket his head. I look down at him, and the tip of his tongue traces my bottom lip, my thighs squeeze him as my mouth falls open. The air in my lungs leaves in a long, hot pant. Watching him with his eyes hooded as he teases my mouth has me so worked up I start rolling my hips against his hard stomach to soothe the ache. "You need something, baby?" he asks, his voice so low it's almost a growl.

I don't know how to answer or what I need but, "Please," falls from my mouth.

"Oh yes, that sounded so nice, Little One. Say it again." His hand is still wrapped around the hair at my nape, tugging. The tiny pricks of pain make me rock against him harder.

“Please, Masen,” I whisper.

“Good girl.” His tongue slips under my top lip, and he runs it from right to left. Pulling back, he plants an open mouth kiss on my top lip, fitting it between his and sucking lightly. He gives my bottom lip the same attention only sucking just a little harder. When he lets go, I open my eyes to look down at him and lick my lips. I can still taste him.

This time, I lean forward. I place a small kiss on the middle of his bottom lip, then I slip my tongue under his top lip to repeat what he’s shown me. When my tongue touches his gums, he groans and pulls me tighter.

He walks to the island and sets my bottom down. Bringing his mouth back to mine, he bites my bottom lip. Slowly he kisses my top lip again. Tired of waiting, I rub my tongue along the underside of his. He grabs my hips and slams me forward into him, lining our bodies up. His mouth seals to mine, and he’s kissing me, really kissing me. It’s my first real kiss, and I can’t seem to get enough. He tastes so good. My thin yoga pants offer little barrier so when I rock against his erection I can feel his heat.

“Oh!” My head falls back, and he kisses my throat. He rolls his hips up, and I purr. Masen pushes me down on the counter with his palm just below my breast. He grabs both of my hips and jerks me even closer. My back arches. “Please,” I beg again. He rolls his hips up again, hitting just the right spot. I lock my ankles around his back and lift my butt from the counter. His palm cups the side of my breast, and his thumb rubs my nipple. “Yes, ah yes.” My head tossing back and forth. He lifts my shirt with his nose, then he pulls my bra down. When his fingers pinch my bare nipple, I almost scream.

Leaning forward, he rasps against my breast, “You want more, baby? You want me to make you come?” His mouth closes over my hard nipple and sucks.

“Masen, please, please,” I whine. I feel a sharp sting on my nipple, then he slams forward and grinds into me. I shatter, making noises that should embarrass me but don’t.

Opening my eyes, I see Masen staring down at me with the biggest smile on his face. I start to fidget, getting self-conscious. He reaches down and purposely brushes my nipple as he fixes my bra. I'm still so sensitive my back arches again. He pulls my shirt down and lifts me to sit up. Wrapping his arms around me, he says, "You are exquisite, baby. I can't wait to feel you come undone around me." Whoa, why does that sound so good?

Most of the dough on my hands has fallen off from me clenching my fists. What's left has dried into clumps. "Masen, I need to wash my hands, please."

When he pulls back and looks at my hands, he starts chuckling. "I can't believe how easily you make me forget everything," he says while pointing to my hands. "I just wanted a little taste, and you have me laying you out on the kitchen counter. What would have happened if my men showed up to fix your door while you were begging for more," he says in mock outrage.

My shock, however, is real. "Masen, are you kidding me? Someone is coming here, and you were doing that... to me."

His smirk is huge. "I just wish they would have shown up when you were screaming my name."

He helps me down, and I walk to the sink to wash up. I scrap the dry dough and start again. After I put the biscuits in the oven, I fry some bacon and use the grease to make gravy. "Biscuits and gravy for dinner?" he asks with one eyebrow raised.

"I eat breakfast for dinner at least once a week. I don't usually make big breakfasts for myself, and it's one of my favorite meals." I shrug my shoulders. "So I make it for dinner," I defend.

"I'm not complaining, it smells delicious. I can't wait to eat it." He winks.

"Freak."

I make us both a plate, and we sit to eat. When most of his plate is empty, I finally get the nerve to ask, "What you were

saying earlier, about me smelling good. Maybe it's just you. I smell that too." I shrug. "You smell real yummy to me." My face heats. "Ya know, the whole Mate thing," I stammer.

"I quite like that I smell *yummy* to you." He smiles. "But no, this is different. There's something else. Your wolf has challenged me twice." He looks at me curiously, "I've never had a female, friend or enemy, question my dominance."

I furrow my brow. "I know yesterday when you put your hand on my neck and pushed me forward, she didn't like that, but was that a challenge?"

He nods his head. "If you weren't my Mate, my wolf would have made you submit to me right then." He laughs. "But it just got us both really excited. I'm sure you could tell."

Is he trying to embarrass me? Changing the subject, I ask, "When was the second time?"

He's up getting seconds. "That's a little trickier. Today, after the phone call, you wouldn't let me touch you or speak. That's unusual, but even more unusual, my wolf let you. I'm not sure how much of that is because you're my Mate, because you're not used to being around an Alpha, or how much of it is your wolf running the show."

Confused, I ask, "Do you know someone you can ask?"

He sighs. "I have, Little One. Michael has been mated for a few years. I asked him how his Mate's wolf responds to his..."

He's so quiet I don't think I'm going to like this. "And..." I prompt.

"She has always been naturally submissive to him. He's my Beta, so he's very powerful, but his wolf has never once challenged mine. It's not because he's my friend. His wolf just recognizes me as Alpha." Well damn.

"That's not all. Today when you were angry with me, Michael stood with you, like he was your Beta."

Placing my hand over my rolling tummy, I ask, "What does any of that mean, Masen?"



He grabs my hand and looks into my eyes. “What I suspect, and what I think your parents somehow knew, too, is you are a female Alpha...”

## CHAPTER 14



A female Alpha? That's not possible. "If you knew me better, you'd know that's far from true. I got my butt kicked all the time when I was younger, sometimes on purpose. So I know I can't be an Alpha," I state.

"When have you gotten your ass kicked, and more importantly, why the hell would you get it kicked on purpose?" He snarls.

I throw my hands in the air. "That's what you're worried about right now?" I'm so aggravated. "Some of the places I lived sucked, okay? I, at least, healed fast! I can't say the same for the others. I did what needed done."

He's appalled. "You got fucking beat! Those animals beat a tiny girl?" he yells.

"Masen calm down. One of my neighbors will call the police with you roaring like that," I admonish. "It's over! The only time it happened after I shifted is when I let it. No matter how small I am to you, Masen, I'm a big girl. Please calm down. I'm fine." I rub his shoulders, trying to relax him. It's definitely not working. He looks like he's ready to kill someone, and that's exactly when someone bangs on the useless door frame.

"What!" he barks.

"Just one second please," I call out. I climb onto his lap and stroke his face. His eyes soften, and I say, "Masen, I'm fine. Really, truly fine. That was a long time ago. Don't kill

whoever is at the door, okay? You have to relax, or they'll think I can't keep my Mate happy." I give him my best pout.

"Stop that right now," he says and stands, still holding me. "Wrap your legs, Little One. I'm taking you to go." He laughs at his own ridiculous joke. I roll my eyes by complying. I know it's shifters at the door, so it doesn't matter if they see him carrying me around.

Seeming to change his mind and surprising me, Masen sets me down right before reaching the door. He turns me around, back toward the kitchen. "I'll take care of this, Little One," he says and gives a pat on the butt, pushing me forward. Curious, I look back over my shoulder. He's still watching me, waiting before letting the two men at the door in.

While Masen greets his men and tells them he would like the door fixed tonight, I clean up the mess from dinner and make two plates from the leftovers. I offer the plates to the two shifters that are here to fix the door, but Masen growls before they can answer.

"Masen, these guys are probably missing dinner right now to come fix this." I gesture to the door. "There's plenty. Stop grumbling and let them eat if they want to. If you share, I'll make you dessert," I singsong with a big smile. "I know how much you like dessert."

He looks at me but speaks to the men. "Eat the food after you fix the door." He crosses his arms over his chest. "Pack a bag. I want my dessert at home," he commands.

I pack without a fight. I know things are moving fast, but I also know that had yesterday been our first meeting, without the history of him leaving me, we'd both be Marked by now. I grab enough clothes to last a few days. I also pack a small bag of toiletries, my Kindle, and my school bag to do my homework. "I think I'm good," I say when I walk back to the kitchen.

He's standing staring down the guys trying to fix the door. They seem to be working as fast as possible, not even looking up. What did I miss? Now, just his body language is saying

danger. His face is set in a hard, unreadable mask as he stands back watching them.

“Masen?” I ask, the question clear in my voice. “Everything okay?”

His body is coiled tight, I think if either shifter were to look up he would attack. Something is very wrong here. He hasn't answered yet. I reach over and stroke his inner arm, and his elbows bend automatically to hold up my hand. He seems to relax infinitesimally, but his voice comes out a low growl. “Get it done, and get out!” The men seem to cower at his tone. Turning us, he gathers my things and walks out.

Masen walks to a black SUV and opens the passenger side door waiting for me to get in. After I sit, he reaches out with his free hand to grab the seatbelt. “I can do that,” I try as he snaps it into place then closes my door without a word. Opening the rear door, he puts my bags in and slams the hatch closed. By the time he's in and has started the truck, he still hasn't spoken, his heavy hands clench the steering wheel as he pulls out.

We drive for about ten minutes when I finally ask, “Are you mad at me?”

He stares ahead, and when he does answer, I'm a little surprised. “Yes, I'm very angry. I told you I'm struggling with you being around other men when you are unmarked, and you keep feeding them. I wanted to rip out their throats because you didn't want them to miss dinner.” His voice rising with every word. He's breathing heavy, knuckles white on the wheel.

“Then, you tell me to let them eat, and I listen! If they think about it and realize how strange that is, they might talk to others. I don't want people looking too closely at you right now or me for that matter. If I'm seen as weak, even when it comes to you, it could threaten my pack. If I were to be challenged now, they could try and take everything that's mine, you included. I'm still not sure what we're dealing with as far as your differences go.” His voice is much calmer now, relaxing as he gets further from them or closer to home I'm

not sure. “When we are with others, Little One, try and remember I am the Alpha,” he adds, finally looking over at me. His strong jaw still tense, but his eyes are much softer.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think the food was a big deal. It would have just gone to waste.” I understand where he’s coming from. I don’t want his people to think I undermined him. “I think I’m just not used to being in a pack environment. I’ll try harder, Masen.”

He sighs. “You aren’t doing anything on purpose. I like that you stand up to me. We just need to figure out why you do it before someone else does.” He grabs my hand and holding tight he lays them on top of my thigh. “Now, what do I get for dessert?” He smirks while pulling up to his personal gate.

It’s almost nine o’clock by the time I’m done baking brownies for Masen. He’s been in his office working and researching. Navigating this huge house is much easier when I’m not panicking. I find his office quickly and knock on the open door. He’s on the phone while staring at his computer screen, so I quietly place the plate of brownies down I brought him and look around. The office is very masculine. The walls are a dark wood. There’s a massive desk facing the door. Large windows behind him frame the pond, now barely visible in the twilight. There are two chairs angled opposite the desk and a large leather chesterfield sofa in a deep brown shade against a side wall. I can see one door into what I assume is a bathroom or closet. Books line the same wall making a beautiful backdrop for a small bar.

When I finish studying the room, I turn to find Masen done with his phone call, watching me and taking in my reactions to what I’m sure is a very important room to him. He needn’t worry. “It’s lovely. Do you spend much time in here?”

He tilts his head. “Yes. It’s mostly my personal business I run from here, but sometimes, I will see to pack issues here.”

Curious, I ask, “What business do you run?”

He smiles sweetly. “A few. Would you like a brownie?” he asks, changing the subject. I roll my eyes, letting him know I see exactly what he’s up to.

Walking around the room, I take a seat on the sofa. It's a little stiff, but the leather is buttery soft. "No thanks. I might just go get in bed. I'm beat."

Standing, he comes to join me, picking up my feet and dropping them into his lap. I sigh, it's wonderful when he touches me. "Unfortunately, I have a few more things that need my attention tonight since I played college guide today." He smiles while rubbing my ankles and legs, my head falls back as I relax from his touch.

"You could stay here, but I'll be on the phone quite a bit. Would you like me to take you to our room, Little One?" His voice is so soft.

"I like hearing your voice. I'll stay, if that's okay? I don't want to intrude," I say sleepily.

"Let me get you a blanket and pillow. I'll be right back." My eyes are closed, but I feel him take my feet from his lap and rise from the sofa. Seconds later, he's back with a few soft throw pillows and the coziest gray blanket. He places the pillows under my head then covers me. I feel his lips at my temple then at the corner of my lips as he feathers gentle kisses there. Soon after, I hear his deep melodious voice speaking softly. I don't listen to the words just the sounds as I'm lulled to sleep.

"Let the blanket go, baby. I'm taking you to bed." I hear rumble from his chest that my ear rests against.

"Love that blanket, so soft." My hand drops the fabric to wrap around his thick neck, brushing the fine hairs along his nape. My forearms rest on his wide shoulders as he carries me to his room. Masen lays me on the mattress and starts to remove my pants. That wakes me up quickly. "What are you doing?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not going to molest you, baby. You're half asleep, but I do want to feel your skin next to mine while we sleep. That's all. I promise."

I lift my hips to assist, his hands go to the hem of my t-shirt next. Leaving me in a sleep bra and cheeky panties. I'm a

little self-conscious, this is the closest to nude I've ever been with anyone. The lights are dim, but I know he has excellent night vision. I pull the covers up quickly and turn on my side, scooting to the far side of the bed.

I hear the rustle of clothes, then the sound of a zipper. I squeeze my eyes closed, I'm nervous. Masen's body is hard and chiseled. Every inch honed beautifully, while mine is soft and rounded. Earlier when he was seeing and touching me, I was so caught up in the moment there wasn't room for doubt.

His big body slides in behind mine pulling me from the edge of the bed. "Uh-uh baby," he whispers close to my ear. "I need you close." I can feel every inch of his body pressed to mine, his arm curving around my waist, his foot slides under my ankle. "Please relax, Little One. I just want to hold you. No pressure." He rubs his nose into my neck behind my ear and places a small kiss where my shoulder meets my neck. Taking a deep breath, I let myself relax and enjoy the comfort of his embrace. Masen's breathing evens and deepens quickly, and I know he's sleeping. Slowly, my body sinks into sleep.

As I start to wake, Masen is my first thought. His scent surrounds me. I'm aroused, and I can feel his hardness pressing against me. I roll my hips slowly enjoying the feel. The room is still dark telling me either he woke me, or I woke up needing him just from having him so close. By his even breaths, I think I'm the only one awake. I roll my hips again and my back arches trying to push onto him harder, create more friction. A small whine of frustration leaves my lips.

Masen grabs my hips as if he's trying to stop the movement, but his hand clenching my flesh just makes me grind harder. I feel a low rumble at my back, then his hips push forward. My arm pushes into the mattress to keep the pressure between our bodies. I grind my behind into him, and this time, I hear his breathing accelerate. His body pushes over mine, turning me so my torso is flat to the mattress, but my hips are still sideways. His knee pushes forward making my top leg fall to the mattress and spread. He has one arm on either side of my shoulders almost like he's doing a pushup. When he rocks into me this time, I can feel his hardness grind

just where I need it. His head lowers, and he draws in a deep breath. “Ahh baby, you need me.” His voice is deep, and I shiver at the sound. My mind is fogged with lust, need is all I feel. His large body curved over me is too much and not enough all at once.

“Masen?”

“Shh, I’ve got you. Let me make you feel good.” He grinds into me.

Inching down my body, he turns me to my back and leans forward kissing me softly. I melt under his touch. My hands reach up and brush across his face, feeling the soft scruff on my palms as my fingers rub through his hair. His kiss deepens, his hand at my hip tugging me closer. When my back arches, Masen moves down, kissing my jaw and neck, stilling at my shoulder where he’ll bite me to Mark me as his. He trembles, then continues until he reaches my bra.

Sitting back on his knees, he studies my body beneath him. His eyes darken, hands gently tracing the lines of my body. He pulls me forward, lifts my arms in the air, then removes my bra from over my head. My breasts bounce free, his hands cupping me as he pushes me back down. My heart is beating so fast I’m sure he can feel it. Before I have a chance to get nervous, his mouth is on my nipple, licking and sucking. His other hand is pinching and pulling on the opposite side. It’s overwhelming. I moan and that seems to encourage him. He moves his hand down my body, just barely rubbing his finger under the elastic of my panties. My hips lift automatically, hoping his fingers land where I need them. “You wet for me, baby? I bet your little pussy is soaking for me. Should I find out with my hand, or would you like to ride my tongue?” A long, low groan sounds from me. His filthy mouth turning me up higher than I thought possible.

Masen moves down my body without a real answer. I’m sure he could tell by my response which one I’d chosen. My hands follow his shoulders down trying to touch any part of him I can reach. He licks his way past my belly button and to the top of my panties. His hands reach under me, cupping my



butt and lifting. My legs fall open farther. Dropping his face, he presses his nose right into my still covered center.

“Masen,” I moan loudly.

He lifts his hooded eyes. “Mine,” comes out in a low growl. I can just barely see the tips of his elongated fangs, and I almost come undone.

His hands claw at the fabric at my hip, one tug and my panties rend. I’m spread open for him. He leans down and lifts me up to him again, he licks up my center from bottom to top in one long sweep. “Ahhh.” Pushing forward, he uses his thumb to hold me open. When his tongue touches me I’m overwhelmed, I feel like crawling away from him, and like shoving his head into me harder at the same time. His hand reaches up to my nipple pinching, my butt rises higher from the bed, pushing onto him while my hips swivel. When his mouth isn’t busy, he whispers naughty things, encouraging me. It makes my toes curl just thinking about all the things he says. The noises I make seem to excite him even more. My legs are shaking, and I’m pulling his hair. I’m so close. He puts his mouth around my clit and sucks, long and hard, and I scream out his name as I climax.

His movement gentles as he still strokes me, riding out my orgasm. My hands cling to his shoulders, pulling him down to me. He comes, and his head drops to my neck as I hold tightly to his big body. He’s breathing deeply. Keeping his lower body off of mine, he rolls so he’s on his back, and I’m curled into his chest. His eyes are closed, and his jaw is tense. When I look down, I can see his erection tenting his snug boxer briefs. Slowly, I reach my hand down, feeling his muscles in his abdomen. Holy hell, that’s so hot. His boxers are low enough I can clearly see his vee between his narrow hips, and I’m tempted to lean down and lick the lines. My hand slides over the bulge, and he sucks in air through his teeth. “Can I touch you, Masen?”

He grunts but doesn’t open his eyes. I rub gently, stroking him with my fingers and then fitting my hand around him. His hips barely lift, pushing into my hand. I pull back and crawl down the side of his body. When I look up, his eyes are on fire

as he watches me. Leaning up, I question with my eyes as I pull his boxers down exposing him. He lifts. Still looking right in his eyes, I remove his boxers. When I look down, I gasp at the size of him. He has a small patch of short, black hair that leads in a thin line up to his belly button, the rest of his stomach is bare. His broad chest has dark hair lightly covering it. When I bring my hand back and try to circle him, my fingers don't touch. I pull up and push back down slowly feeling his velvety skin against my palm. My hand stops at his tip, squeezing gently, and a small bead of moisture escapes. Now, his hips really lift. I lean down with my tongue and lick around the tip cleaning up the drop of fluid. He groans and fists the sheet beneath him. "Oh fuck," he grates and licks his lips, watching me lick him clean.

When I take my hand and mouth away, he looks down at me as I lift to straddle his hips wanting to feel his bare skin against mine. "Is this okay?" I ask, nervous now that he's watching me. He nods his head, his neck straining and abs bunched tight. He looks like I'm hurting him. "Masen, am I hurting you? I'm sorry," I say, ashamed, backing away.

With a low growl, he shakes his head and grabs my hips, stilling my retreat. When I feel him beneath me, his head falls back, and he clenches my hips. I rock once, my clit sitting on his ridge making me sigh in relief.

Before I realize what's happened, he flips us so I'm again on my back with him between my legs. He grinds. I want to ask for more, but I'm not sure how. I'm not sure if he knows I've never done this before, I'm sure he can tell I'm inexperienced, but he needs to know he's my first. "Masen," I say, looking at his dark handsome face.

"Yeah baby," he pants.

"I've never... this, all this, is new to me. Yesterday was my first, real kiss so I just... em, I just wanted you to know you might have to guide me a little." I'm sure he can see my face glowing red in the dim morning light.

His body goes rigid as soon as I start talking. He hasn't moved or uttered a word. As possessive as he is, I thought this

would make him happy, maybe I was wrong. I close my eyes and wish he'd say something, anything. When he doesn't, I silently beg him to move so I could get up. My hands move from him to cover my breast. Oh God, I should have kept my mouth shut. He's still frozen. I feel a tear leak from the corner of my eye and run down to my ear. Everything hits me at once, all the emotions of finding him, knowing all this time he was with other women kills me. I thought him knowing there was never anyone else for me would make him happy. God knows I would love to know he was only mine. It's all too much.

Voice as steady as I can make it, "I think I need to get up, please." He starts to shift back, still silent. I grab the blanket from the bed covering myself and quickly stand. I walk to the bathroom and lock the door behind me. With my back to the door, I slide down, wrapped in the blanket that smells like him. Blinking back tears, I drop the blanket then I stand and go turn on the shower.

Masen must have brought my bags in because my shampoo and condition are in the shower. I wash my body and let the tears of disappointment fall. I can't even pretend to understand what he's thinking or feeling. I can't believe not having experience would bother him. I know I'm probably overreacting, but with everything happening so fast, I haven't had time to catch up.

I feel rejection weighing heavy on my chest as I let the water hide my embarrassment. I've been in the shower for at least thirty minutes when I finally get out. I think I was hoping he would come in and help me understand, but I'm also glad he didn't. I don't want him seeing me like this. I take my time, stalling, wanting him to be out of the room before I come out. I wrap up in the largest towel I can find and fold up the blanket I dragged into the bathroom with me.

His scent is so strong in the room I can't tell by smell alone if he's still there. I listen at the door to hear any sound indicating he was still in the room. It's quiet, no sound of sheets or clothes rustling. Finally, I unlock the door. Holding the folded blanket in front of me like a shield, I enter the

empty room. I'm relieved and want to cry at the same time. I'm a mess.

Dressing as fast as possible, I grab my book bag and leave the room. I head to the back of the house looking for a door. I know just where I want to go. I find the empty porch swing and sit. I know I'll have to face Masen soon and discuss what we can do to get past our physical issues, but for now, I think I'll hide out as long as possible. I open my bag and get busy doing homework.

## CHAPTER 15



Masen

SITTING AT MY DESK, I drop my head in my hands. I'm such a fucking asshole. After finding out my Mate hasn't let anyone touch her beautiful body, I check out. Instead of telling her that nothing could make me happier, I shut down. All I could think was how I let other women touch me the past five years. How I validated it by saying she was a child, that it would be years before I was able to claim her. That I was a man with needs, she would probably have young fumbling boyfriends as well, right?

No, the truth was I was a selfish prick that thought it was okay to punish a young woman who couldn't be what I thought I needed. If I'm being truly honest with myself, I should admit that after I looked for her and she was gone, I went a little wild. I blamed her for not being there. Thought she deserved me fucking around since she ran. I don't even know where to begin to try and fix this.

I knew she didn't have a lot of experience, but to find out she's not only a virgin but that I was her first fucking kiss, I was floored. She waited five years for a man she thought chose someone else.

I knew she was mine, and I was fucking Roxanne less than two weeks later. Before her parents died, before she was sent to live with strangers, who apparently beat her, before her first

shift all alone. I was here making excuses for myself so I could fuck around.

When that tear fell from her tightly clenched eyes, I wanted to say something, to tell her I was sorry. Instead, I let her lock herself in the bathroom to hide the tears I caused. When I heard her soft sobs, I couldn't take anymore. Knowing I made her feel bad for saving herself, if not for me than for herself for waiting for someone that was deserving, I let her think her inexperience bothered me. I was more worried about getting a good fuck than I cared about her. I know she must think I don't care about her at all, I've seen how it hurts her to think of me with other women. Still being a selfish bastard, I practically ran from the room, so here I sit four hours later, pretending to work.

When my phone rings, I want to ignore that, too, but I answer anyway. "Michael."

"Alpha, Gavin and three others have requested admittance to the property to be considered for our pack. They also say they have information on the rogue group trying to challenge you." His voice is stiff

"Let them in. Take them directly to the meeting hall. I'll meet you there in twenty minutes. Do not mention my Mate, and don't let them speak to anyone else." I hang up the phone. If Gavin can produce info on the rogue group testing my borders, I'll let him stay.

Walking through the doors, I find Michael, Sid, and four other guards surrounding Gavin, two male shifters, and one female shifter. "Beta." I nod my head formally to Michael letting him know I want to speak to him privately. I tilt my head to my pack office. He follows me into the soundproof room and closes the door. Running my hands through my hair, I lay it out. "I fucked up today, big time. She was outside. When I went to let her know I had business, she was gone. I know she's still in the area, probably went for a walk, but I need to know the property is safe. If these guys are here to cause a problem or distract us, I need to know she is safe."

Michael's face is stoic as he speaks. "I doubled patrols as soon as I got wind of these guys getting near."

I can tell something is bothering him. "What's wrong, Michael?"

His face still unreadable. He responds, "The Luna has been with Nicole for hours, Mase. As your friend, I'm asking how did you not know this? And even more important, what did you do to make her so sad?" I don't answer. "I don't know how you let her out of your sight feeling like that."

"What are you saying, Michael?"

He looks right at me. "What time was it when you upset her?"

Thinking back, I answer, "a little after eight."

He shakes his head. "When she walked past our house, we felt how sad she was. She was just walking past the house, and Nicole and I both felt compelled to find out what made our hearts ache. I've never felt anything like it. I knew the hurt was coming from her, but she smiled at us like everything was fine. She has no idea that we felt her emotions. After talking for a few, Nicole invited her in to visit. She's been there for almost three hours, Mase. You just realized she was gone twenty minutes ago?"

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" I yell, so angry at myself, at Michael, at everyone.

Michael is calm and speaks in a measured voice, "Why would you let her feel like that, Mase? Why would you not go to her and make whatever hurt her, better?" He stands up tall. "What I'm saying Mase is maybe the last five years have changed you. Maybe, you can't be what she needs. What she deserves..."

My ass drops to a chair, all the fight in me gone. I don't even know how to answer my best friend. I knew she was hurting, and I didn't do anything to fix it. I didn't know when she left the house. I knew she was outside, but I had no idea she had been gone for hours. Maybe, he's right, maybe, I'm fucked up.

My voice is defeated when I say, “She told me she is a virgin. I mean, I suspected! But to hear her say it. I had just finished eating her pussy, and she said she was a virgin and that when I kissed her yesterday it was her first kiss.” I hang my head. “She wanted me to know I was the only man to ever touch her. She was insecure about making love because she didn’t want to disappoint me.” I look at my best friend and tell him what a selfish fucker I am. “I sat there, didn’t speak, didn’t move, I sat there. Did you know she knew me as her Mate that first night? She told Cass when someone asked me who she was I called her no one. She’s lived five years believing I chose Roxanne over her. Then, when she comes to my house, she sees Roxanne standing on my front porch almost naked.” I shake my head. “I just kept thinking how I was all that time. Fucking anyone I wanted, while she never let anyone touch her. I was disgusted with myself so I just sat there, and when I didn’t respond, she got upset. I knew what she was thinking, and I let her believe it was her that disgusted me.”

Michael’s face is angry. “Fuck Mase. I don’t even know what to say to that.” My Beta does something he’s never done. He turns away from me and walks out the door.

I take a few minutes to get my shit together, before walking out. I overhear Gavin talking, “smells different, maybe my Mate is here. My boys can feel it too. You guys bring in a new bunch of females? I’d love to find which one smells so damn good,” he laughs.

Now, my anger has a new direction because I know who he’s talking about. Michael responds, “If you’re smart, you’ll keep your mouth shut!”

I have to find out what he knows about the rogues before I snap his fucking neck. Every head turns to me the moment I walk into the room. I’m so close to shifting I can feel my fangs descending, heat flows from me in waves. Michael is the only one to keep his ground, everyone else in the room has either taken a step back in retreat or dropped their heads in submission. My voice comes out as a growl, barely understandable. “Gavin, tell me what you know.”



“Alpha,” he says slowly like he’s testing my reaction, “I appreciate you letting us come today and hope you’ll let us appeal to stay for good.”

“GET ON WITH IT!” I roar. He drops his eyes. I know he doesn’t understand my behavior, we’ve been friends for years. He answers with a stammer, “I met the group close to your territory. They’re trouble. I think they are planning on challenging you, but I think there’s something more. The leader, Saul, he’s so confident, like he knows something that will help him win the challenge. They asked us to join them, said that when he takes over, he needs people he can trust. I told them we already belonged to a pack, and we’re just visiting family. I thought they would keep us from leaving, but they let us leave. There are nine males and six females that I saw. I’m sorry, Alpha, that’s all I know.”

As he finishes, the front door opens, and I know it’s her. Every head swivels in her direction. The men all straightened to their full height. The one female looks her over with envy. My beautiful Mate has no idea how striking she truly is. Her curvy figure is a rarity among shifters. Females are usually tall and slender, breasts small, hips narrow. Her long, dark hair waves behind her. Her large amber eyes find me quickly, and I can tell she is worried, that her worry for me has overridden how I made her feel this morning. When she starts to walk over, I hear Gavin and the two men he’s with take deep breaths, pulling in her scent. Michael moves between her and the men now watching her as she makes her way to me. “Masen?” The southern drawl in her voice clear. She comes close but not close enough to touch.

“She’s the one,” I hear one of the men whisper. The female with the group huffs.

I close the remaining gap between us, picking her up. She automatically wraps her legs around my waist. She’s so soft and sweet it floors me that after the way I treated her she’s still willing to let me touch her. My anger evaporates immediately and is replaced with remorse. “I’m so sorry, Little One,” I whisper close to her ear. “I was angry at myself, never you,

baby. I handled it so wrong. Please forgive me,” I beg, and I don’t care who’s witnessing this tender moment.

She runs her hands through my hair and shushes me. “Masen, I overreacted. So much has happened lately I just mashed it all up. I’m a little emotional,” she says with a shrug and a big smile, like it’s no big deal. Her voice has been quiet, just for the two of us, but now she speaks louder so everyone can hear, “What has you so mad? Which one of them should I kill to make you feel better. I hope it’s her, I don’t like the way she’s looking at you.” Her voice is serious like she would tear them to pieces right now if I just say the word. Her eyes narrow at the female watching us.

I can’t help the loud laugh that escapes. “It’s fine, Little One. If they need killing, I’ll do it.” I chuckle and set her down next to me.

### Sophia

With a hand on my lower back, Masen guides me forward toward the small group, three men and one female, surrounded by five other men and Michael. The woman stares at Masen with her back arched, pushing her small breasts out of her tiny halter top in an open invitation. Her short, leather skirt hangs low on her hips, baring most of her toned belly. She looks ridiculous. It’s not even one o’clock in the afternoon, and she looks like she’s going clubbing. I roll my eyes. Masen hasn’t glanced at her once. I can see a pout form on her lips as we get closer.

When we stop a few feet away, Masen steps behind me, holding my hip with one hand and pulling my body tight to his. He gestures to the man standing closest to us. “This is Gavin. He and his friends have come to us looking to join our pack. He also has information on a group of rogues I’ve been keeping tabs on.”

I nod my head and say, “Hello,” looking at each of them.

When the man he introduced as Gavin lifts his hand, Masen snarls, “DON’T.” My body is pulled even tighter while his body seems to curve over mine. Gavin drops his hand

slowly, taking a step back. “Introduce yourselves, but do not touch her,” Masen grates.

“I’m Scott, and this is my sister, Renee. Mase stayed with us a few times when he visited our pack.” So that’s why the skanky redhead has a knowing smirk.

“My name’s David,” the last man says quietly.

“Why are y’all looking to stay here?” I ask curiously.

Gavin, who must be considered their leader, answers, “I’ve known Mase for years. We always talked about me finding my way here. It just didn’t happen until now. I have to say though he’s usually a little more welcoming,” he tries to joke. I laugh a little lightening the tension.

“You don’t say. You mean he’s not always so growly?” This time I really laugh. Michael joins me.

I turn to face Masen. He places his palm on my cheek, stroking my bottom lip. Instinctively, I lick my lips, catching the pad of his thumb. He stills. His eyes dilate, he sucks in deeply. “Sorry,” I whisper. Louder, I say, “Unless you need me here, I’m gonna head back.”

His voice is low when he promises, “I’ll be there soon, Little One. Michael will see you home.” Then kisses my temple. “Michael, take my Luna home,” Masen orders.

I’m just about to open my mouth to tell him to be nice when Michael acknowledges him with a simple, “Alpha,” effectively reminding me not to be sassy.

Rolling my eyes so only he can see, I walk over to Michael, “Thank you, Michael. Will you tell Nicole what a wonderful time I had today? I can’t wait to visit her again.”

As we leave, he says, “I know she had a good time too, Luna.”

Before the door closes, I hear, “Luna? You got married? What about—” The voice cuts off as the door closes.

“The big guy is kinda grumpy today, huh?” I ask.

“He told me he had a rough morning. He was just mad at himself and jealous. Never thought I’d see the day that cocky bastard would be jealous. It’s pretty funny,” he chuckles. We walk in comfortable silence for a little while, but right before we reach Masen’s house, he says, “Luna?” His voice is serious. “I know he messed up today, but don’t let him off the hook too easy. He needs to learn he can’t treat you like that.” Hearing Michael say that makes my heart hurt, shouldn’t that be natural.

“Michael, should it be this hard? Did you experience anything like this with Nicole?”

He doesn’t answer right away, seeming to think about his answer. “No.”

I am surprised by his short response. “No to what, Michael?”

“I’m sorry Luna but no to both. No, it shouldn’t be hard, and no, Nicole and I didn’t have any similar issues. Honestly, I’ve never seen anyone struggle the way Mase is. I don’t know if it’s because you guys haven’t marked each other yet or if maybe the years you’ve spent apart are causing a problem.”

That’s not what I wanted to hear. “Yeah, I kinda suspected that. The only Mates I’ve known were my parents, and that’s not the way they acted. Thank you for your honesty, Michael. I’ll see you later,” I say before walking into the house.

My brain is on overload so I decide to make lunch. I need something to keep me busy. I make a veggie cheese soup. It’s an hour and a half before it’s ready. Masen comes in just as I’m about to eat. I give him my bowl and make another. “You didn’t need to do that. I can get my own, but thank you,” he says. Masen waits for me to return to the table before eating. “This is really good. Everything you make is delicious. When did you start cooking?”

I wipe my lips with a napkin. “My mom loved to cook, and my dad loved to eat.” I laugh. “I was always in the kitchen with her. She let me help even if I was just making a mess. As soon as I got my own place, I started cooking again. It reminds me of my parents. My dad was smitten with my mom. If he

wasn't at work, he'd follow her around the house just to be close to her. So, he was in the kitchen with us a lot," I say a little sadly. I miss them. "I also love to eat," I tease to lighten the mood.

"What are your parents like?" I haven't heard him or Sniffer mention them.

"My dad's the Alpha of a smaller pack in the Upper Peninsula. He's a hard man but fair. My mother" —his smile lights up his eyes— "is the sweetest woman you'll ever meet. She rounds out all my dad's edges. I had a great childhood. Where we lived is still really isolated, not a lot of people, or things to do way up there. So, we made our own fun. I left home a little after I turned eighteen. I've only gone back to visit a few times. Cass tries to go home for a weekend every couple months." He looks thoughtful. "I guess you'll meet them at our ceremony. We can always go visit them too. I know my dad is gonna love you for your cookies alone," he chuckles.

Hearing him talk about a ceremony makes butterflies in my belly, but I'm a little nervous to. "Masen," I say seriously, "I think we have a few things to talk about." I'm embarrassed. I'd rather not have a repeat of this morning.

He looks at me, all traces of humor gone. "You're right. We do." He pushes his empty bowl away and grabs my hand. "Will you sit with me, please?" he asks quietly. I think he wants me close which makes me kinda nervous. Is he going to tell me something bad? I nod my head. He stands and leads me through the kitchen. "I built this house about a year after we met. I knew we'd need a bigger place, so I started planning right away. I didn't want to start building too soon because I didn't want people to question why I was in a hurry to move. When I did start to build, I just said I needed a little space."

My hand is tucked into his bent elbow. I look up at him as we walk, and he talks. "To tell you the truth, I planned everything around us. It took almost a year to finish, but when it was done, I had the hardest time moving in." We are standing in front of the door to the atrium. "I built almost

every room with you in mind. Some rooms, I made entirely for you.” He points to the door.

My heart is pounding. “Wait, you made this room for me? This specific room, for me?”

His head tilts, and his brow wrinkles in curiosity. “Yes, this is one of the rooms. You’ve been in here?”

I hold up my hand to stall his question. “Did you take anyone else in this room?” My voice is eager.

Now, he’s really confused. “No.” He shakes his head in denial. “I’ve barely been in this room.”

“Oh my God, oh my God, really?” In my excitement, I jump up onto him, wrapping my legs around his waist, kissing all over his gorgeous face. “Yes, yes, I’ve been in this room. When I was trying to leave. I was hoping it led outside. This is the most beautiful room I’ve ever seen. I love the swing. Did you make it? Or have it made? Where’d you get the idea? Ooh I love it, I love it.” When he doesn’t answer, I look at and see a small kinda sad smile on his face. “Ah sorry,” I say while unwrapping my legs, not sure how to take his quiet.

“No, you don’t,” he says while squeezing my butt. “I like you mounting me.” He winks as he opens the door and walks in. The bright afternoon sunlight filters through the light blue glass giving the room a sunny glow. The white-washed wooden floors add an airy feel of the room. I unlock my arms from around his neck to turn and take in the rest of the room.

“I love this room,” I whisper. “I was so jealous when I saw this space. So jealous, I couldn’t see straight. I thought you made it for her, or she made it for the both of you. I got sick thinking about her being here,” I admit.

He shakes his head. “Is that why you threw up in my bathroom?” he asks, concern in his voice. “I didn’t know you were sick until I put you to bed.”

Embarrassment coloring my cheeks, I answer, “Yeah, it was all a little much. I’m sorry. I thought I cleaned up my mess.”

He gives my butt a spank. “You did, but I still smelled it. I’m the one that’s sorry. I’ve handled this all wrong. Let’s go sit, and I’ll try and fix things properly and not mess them up again.” He sits me down on the open end. “Crawl up. I’m right behind you.” I kick off my shoes and go all the way to the headboard. Fluffing the pillows, I sit back. I don’t think the grin on my face could get any bigger. He sits and unites his boots, then climbs up to me. His whole face lights up when he sees me grinning from ear to ear. “You really like it?” He asks almost shyly.

“No, I don’t like it.” His face falls. “I LOVE IT!” I shout, laughing.

“You,” he says and snags me by the waist and pulls me to his chest.

We’re both quiet for a few minutes. He breaks the silence, saying, “This morning, I was an asshole. I suspected you were inexperienced, but you told me you were a virgin, that I was your first kiss. I felt horrible for not knowing, but more for the way, I’ve behaved the past five years. I’m mad at myself for being weak, for not valuing what we would have more. When I saw you upset at my response, I just kept making it worse. Then, I ran. I was so caught up in my shit I didn’t even realize you had left the house.”

My head is lying on his chest, and he’s rubbing my back and neck. I can tell he’s being honest. I sigh. “I can’t tell you any of it’s okay, because honestly, it’s not. I don’t know how you could be with anyone else. I was a child, and I knew you were it for me. You understood even more than I did what we would have, and you gave it to someone else. That’s hard to deal with” —I blow out a big breath— “and this morning, this morning was humiliating.” He squeezes me, and I can feel his head nod. “I was so nervous I wouldn’t be good enough.” I pull away and look straight ahead out the windows, feeling the same disappointment and humiliation from earlier. “And then the way you acted... well, it made me feel bad. That’s all you need to know.”

Masen grabs my hand and rubs the inside of my wrist with his thumb. “I know I was an idiot, a selfish idiot. I have no

excuses. I'm sorry I made you feel like shit, especially for something that makes me so happy, I'm honored that I'm the only one that will touch you. I'm sorry I didn't apologize sooner. I shouldn't have ever let you go into the bathroom," he says sincerely.

It's still not okay, but at least he admits he was wrong. "Alright. Thanks for talking to me about it." Slowly, he reaches for me and pulls me back to his chest. Feeling a little better about this morning, I close my eyes and relax.



## CHAPTER 16



Masen's hands running through my hair wakes me. "Are you going to sleep all day, baby?"

I'm curled around him warm and comfy. "I'm so sleepy," comes out just above a whisper.

He chuckles. "I have a few things to do in the office. Then, I thought we could go for a swim. My wolf is getting restless, the exercise will do us good. Did you want to come with me or stay here and snooze sleepyhead?" he asks playfully.

"I don't know about a swim. It's only in the seventies, seems kinda cold, but my wolf would like to run," I say liking the idea.

He hesitates. "I can't run with you, Little One," he states ruefully. "Not until I Mark you. It's just too dangerous. Okay, baby?"

Confused, I ask, "Why's it dangerous?"

He runs his hands through his hair, grabbing and pulling. "He would Mark you, not wait until you're ready."

Sometimes, I'm so clueless. "Yeah, okay, I wasn't thinking sorry," I say sheepishly.

Masen works for a few hours while I explore the house a little more. Knowing he built this house for us makes me look at every detail differently. I haven't even made it upstairs yet by the time he comes looking for me, wearing long, board shorts and the same black t-shirt he had on earlier. He's carrying a couple towels. "You ready to swim?"

I can't help but smile at his hopeful tone. "We'll see," is all I say. It's still warm when we make it outside. The sun blankets the pond, the water is a clear, dark blue with a sandy bottom and beach area. "I thought I had it good living across from torch lake, but this is like your own mini lake without all the tourists. It's beautiful, Masen." I smile up to him.

"I'm glad you like it."

My stomach drops, when looking right at me, he reaches behind his back and pulls his shirt over his head then off his arms revealing his bare chest. My throat goes dry. The sun highlights his wide chest and every ripple on his abdomen. His shorts hang low enough I can just see where his pubic hair starts. Who knew that would be so sexy? The deep vee inside his hips bunches as he turns to drop his shirt. I look up to see his blue eyes watching me. Biting the corner of my lip, I watch as his big hand runs down his chiseled chest, and bumps along his abdominal muscles stopping right before he reaches his shorts. Holy hell, that was hot. I don't know what I want more, him to take the shorts off or for his hand to continue under them. When one finger glides under the tie, my eyes jerk up to meet his. The left side of his mouth is lifted, he's playing with me. The bastard.

We'll see how he likes to be toyed with. I don't have a suit, but I do happen to have on one of my favorite bras. It's deep purple satin with an ivory lace overlay. Just like he did, I maintain eye contact as I reach for the bottom hem with both of my arms crossed. Slowly, I lift my arms revealing my tummy then my bra. When the material covers my face, I tug it off quickly dropping it as I watch his reaction.

He doesn't disappoint when he reaches down over his shorts to grab himself, it's from need, not to tease me. His eyes watch every move. I run my fingers over the swell of my breast then down between, traveling to the top of my shorts. His head drops slightly, he's looking at me from under his brow. A low growl comes from his chest. Encouraging me to unbutton my shorts, I just pull down one side exposing my hip when I hear a man's voice say, "Hey Mase, wher— oh shit!"

I launch myself behind Masen, clawing at his big body trying to hide. The front of my body slams to his back. I pull my arms up to cover as much of my sides as I can. Rocking my forehead back and forth, I utter, “Ahh no, no, no, please tell me he didn’t see what we were doing?”

He hasn’t moved, but an angry growl comes from him before he snaps, “What the fuck are you doing here?” His torso leans forward. I know me being behind him is the only thing stopping him from pummeling whoever he’s speaking to.

“I’m sorry, Alpha. I thought you asked to see me,” his voice is apologetic.

“Who told you I wanted to see you?” Masen snarls.

“Roxanne, Alpha. She said you wanted to discuss unMated marriage.” My heart gives a deep throb when I hear her name. Will she ever give up? “She lied! Now, fuck off before I lose what little control I have left,” he grates.

Moments pass before he turns so we’re facing each other. He wraps his big arms around me pulling me as close as possible. “You alright, Little One?” he asks kindly.

“Ugh, that was so embarrassing.” I laugh a little.

“I wasn’t embarrassed, baby. I was very mad though. He’s lucky I let him leave. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. She’s acting crazy. She knew right after I met you our romantic relationship was over, that there would never be a future for us.”

Our playful moment lost. I tell him, “I think I’ll just sit out here this time. You go ahead and swim.” What I really want to say is you should have broken it off completely, not kept sleeping with her. I hold my tongue, kiss his chest right over his heart, then move out of his arms. I find my shirt on the ground, trampled by my own feet. I pick it up to shake it out, but Masen leans down, picking up his shirt from the towels.

“Here, Little One, mine’s not covered in sand. Arms up.” He drops the fabric over me and kisses my lips softly. The small gesture gives me butterflies. When he turns and walks into the water, I bring the collar up to my nose inhaling, loving

that it carries his scent. Looking up, I find him watching me. His expression satisfied.

He swims back and forth, effectively doing laps. I enjoy watching his large shoulders crest the water and the brief views of his stunning face. None of it compares to watching Masen step from the water's edge, still breathing hard from the exertion while dripping with water. He shoves his wet, black hair back with one hand then wipes his face down with his other. When his eyes open and he sees me staring, probably with my mouth hanging open, he stops.

His hard muscles seem to grow under my eyes as he pulls a deep breath into his lungs. His bright eyes darken. "Up" is all he says, and I know he means for me to stand. I do quickly. "IN," is growled. I jump at the command but don't move to listen. "Now," comes out just above a whisper, but the threat isn't lost in the volume.

I stand my ground. "Only if you ask nicely," I answer while looking to his almost black eyes. I'm playing a dangerous game, but I can't seem to stop myself.

His wet body collides with mine, arms sliding under mine and lifting me. My mouth opens on a gasp, and he's there. Nothing is testing or gentle about this kiss, it's a brand. His hand holds the back of my head to control my movements. He pulls back, and his filthy mouth starts working in a different manner.

"I can smell you, baby." His lips travel my neck, "know you need me. I gotta make it better." His warm soft tongue slides over where he'll mark me, I groan. "Then, you don't listen," he rasps and shakes his head then lightly bites. "You want me to make you scream out here? I'll make sure everyone can hear you come for me."

My first thought is yes please, but I quickly regain my sanity. "Can we go inside? Please," I murmur. "I can ask nicely." I breathe into his ear. His body jolts, a heavy pant leaves his lips. His shorts are still dripping wet, my clothes and roving hands have absorbed most of the water above his waist. He takes long strides, still holding me, and we're back at the

house in seconds. Masen takes us to his bathroom and sets me on the vanity. I watch as he turns on the shower and strips out of his wet shorts. His nudity not bothering him in the least.

He turns to me and pulls me to the ground and lifts my arms, removing the shirt he let me wear. He pulls my shorts down my hips that I never buttoned back up. Masen turns my shoulders so I'm facing the mirror with him behind me. He's large hand runs over the top of my breast then between. It's not lost on me that his fingers followed the same path as mine did earlier. Without looking down, he unclasps my bra. The material falls down my arms, and he removes it. He watches from behind as my nipples tighten, he cups both of my breasts, lifting slightly. His chest rumbles in approval.

Masen makes me feel beautiful. I thought I would be nervous, but I like the way his breathing stops for moments then picks up faster when he looks at me. Watching him through the mirror, I put my thumbs under the waist of my black, lace, cheeky panties. He looks down, watching my behind as I tug them down. When I bend to push them past my thighs, my bare bottom hits the top of his thighs. He hisses, squeezing my breasts a little harder. I whimper, and he releases his hold, massaging gently.

He takes my hand and leads me to the shower. As we step in, I twist my hair into a bun tucking the ends in to hold it up. Masen takes his time washing me, his gaze follows his hands as he slowly worships my body. When he's done, he starts washing quickly. I take the cloth and give his body the same slow caresses he gave mine. I guide him to sit on the built-in bench. His knees are turned toward the water, and I step around his back to wash his hair, gently massaging his scalp with my fingers. Masen's wide shoulders fall, and I hear a single grunt as he relaxes into my touch. Removing the showerhead, I rinse his hair and the leftover soap from his body. He stands, hangs the showerhead back up, and turns the water off. Grabbing a towel, he wraps me up. He's still dripping wet when he uses a second towel to dry my arms. Bending, he gently pats my legs. Finally satisfied, he uses the second towel to rub his hair dry, then quickly dries his body.

Neither of us has spoken since we were outside. It's a comfortable silence, but the sexual tension is building.

Masen leaves the bathroom while I brush my teeth. I'm putting lotion on my legs when he returns wearing a pair of black boxer briefs. He watches my hands as I rub the lotion into my skin. I can feel the lust from earlier rekindling. When I've finished, he plucks the towel and tosses it on a hook, leaving me naked. Ushering me out the door, he leads me to the bed. He's at my back. The silence is finally broken when he says, "In you get, Little One." I climb under the covers, and he goes to turn out the lights.

My eyes are adjusting to the dimness when he gets in bed next to me. We're both on our sides facing each other when he pulls me close. His arm snakes out, curling over my waist and his big palm goes right to my butt, jerking me as close as I can get. I feel his erection along my belly through his boxers. I want them off, I want to feel his skin rubbing against mine. Masen claims my lips in a searing kiss swallowing every sound I make like it fuels his desire. His hands start down my body stopping at my breasts; his fingers rub and pinch my nipples. His lips leave my mouth and kiss across my jaw. He takes the bottom of my ear into his mouth and bites at the same time he delivers a hard pinch to my nipple. My hips roll forward on instinct as I cry out. Masen rolls me onto my back, as he kneels between my thighs. His bare chest rubs against mine when he leans in to kiss me. My legs open farther, letting his hips fall to mine.

Moving down, his mouth continues teasing both my breasts. My back arches. My hands travel his shoulders and his back. My short nails digging in occasionally when his hips push into mine. His mouth finds mine, again kissing. Little bites on my lips excite me even more. When my hand meets the material of his boxers, I try pushing them off, but I just can't reach because he's too tall. I lift my leg up to use my toes to push them down. The new angle makes us both groan. "Off," comes my breathless command.

His answering chuckle warms my belly. Masen pushes forward in a slow rocking motion with his hips. "Tell me what

you need, baby.” he speaks in my ear. His hot breath hits my neck, and I shiver on contact.

“You, Masen. I need you, please.” The please comes out as a beg that he must approve of because his shorts are gone in an instant. When I feel his cock on my bare skin, I whine in frustration. I need more.

Pulling back and sitting on his heels, he takes his cock in his hand sliding all the way down and back up squeezing a bit at the tip. “You sure you’re ready, Little One?” he asks.

I know this will hurt, by the size of him it’ll hurt a lot, but I’m so ready. I don’t even care. I nod my head and bite my bottom lip. “Yes,” I utter.

Leaning back down, he’s still holding himself as he pushes the head near my opening. “So wet for me, baby,” he mutters as he drags his tip up to my clit, slowly stroking up and down over my most sensitive area. The head is so wide and firm but velvety soft. I only last about two minutes before I’m twisting the bed sheets crying out through my climax. Masen enters me while I’m still orgasming. There’s a burning pressure that steals my breath. He whispers sweet words while slowly pushing into me. Telling me how beautiful I am, that I was made for him, how good I feel around him. The burn intensifies as he pushes deeper. I bury my face into his neck, and he sinks all the way into me. A few tears escape that he kisses away. Masen’s body stills, only his hands and mouth working. He kisses me deeply. His fingers run through my hair, then down my body, brushing across my still sensitive nipples. My body starts to heat again remembering how he made me feel minutes ago. The pain no longer sharp, I’m able to relax. The tension in my muscles melts, easing the burn and leaving me feeling something I can only describe as full.

Masen continues playing with my breast with one hand but moves his other to where we are joined. His fingers stroking me, my hips lift toward him. He groans loudly, and I love the sound. The hand at my breast moves to the outside of my shoulder holding him up. He pulls back slowly and re-enters on a hiss. His filthy mouth starts again as he begins making love to me.

“So tight, so wet for me. Love that only I will ever fuck you. You love taking my cock, baby? You need more?” He thrusts all the way into me much deeper than before. Every word he whispers fuels the need starting to build in my belly. “Never felt anything like you around me, baby,” he swears. His face is dotted with sweat, his ultra-light eyes seeming black in the darkness look right into mine. His massive shoulders fill my vision, he lifts higher his chest barely brushing my nipples, but it changes the angle. I can feel him so deep it hurts and feels good.

“Oh Masen,” my back and neck arch, “Ah don’t stop, please.” When I say please, he does something with his fingers that makes me scream as I convulse around him. I can feel my muscles squeezing him. The things he promises to do to me while I climax should sound scary. He tells me all the ways he’ll make love to me. How he can’t wait to lick me again. I love Masen’s filthy mouth, so I tell him how much I like it. His pace speeds up. He goes a little deeper with each thrust. My name falls from his lips as he empties himself into me.

My body feels like jelly, my legs shake, and I shiver a bit as he slowly pulls out. That is the strangest feeling. He rolls onto his back and pulls me onto his still heaving chest.

Masen’s hands caress every inch of my body they can reach while our heartbeats slow. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me knowing I’m the only man that will ever touch you, taste you. I’m the only one that gets to hear every sound you make when I’m touching you, feel the way your body responds to mine when I’m inside you,” he nuzzles my hair, “I have never experienced anything close to what it feels like to make love to you, baby. Thank you for being mine and only mine.”

I’m a little emotional right now. My heart soars with every word he says, but I still cry a few tears. I swat his chest. “That was the sweetest thing ever.” My voice cracks. “I’m so happy I found you, Masen. I didn’t even realize how sad I was before. Even arguing with you is better than always being alone,” I say honestly. “That doesn’t mean you can keep getting



yourself in trouble, but for the first time, I'm truly excited for the future. So, thank you, Big Guy, for being you."

Masen hauls me up so my face is even with his and kisses me gently, reverently. When he pulls away, I open my eyes to find a sweet smile plastered on his face. "I need to clean you up, Little One," he says then gives me a big squeeze before going into the bathroom.

When he returns, he has a warm washcloth. He uncovers me and starts cleaning between my legs. As he gets higher, I close my thighs around his hand. "Masen," I admonish. "What are you doing?" My face is lit like a fire engine. After what we just shared, I'm still embarrassed.

His hand stills and his eyes meet mine. "I like you smelling like me, baby, but this time, I need to clean you up a bit, yeah?"

Oh goodness, now I understand. I'm still embarrassed. "I can do that. Please."

"Uh-uh... MINE," he says, his voice is low and deep, telling me he's very serious about his task. "Open." I look away for a moment and do what he asks. As his gentle fingers clean me, I look back and watch him. He's fully engrossed, watching the cloth on my body. The way he's sitting, I can see him grow hard again. He bites his bottom lip then slowly licks his top. Bringing his hand without the towel up to his mouth, he licks the underside of his thumb then circles it around my clit. Holy hell, watching his reaction to me is so arousing. It's like he can't help himself. He throws the soiled cloth on the floor.

"It's never gonna be enough," he says. I think he's talking to himself more than me. "Gotta wait, my baby's sore." Now, I know he's talking to himself. Does he even realize he's talking out loud? He grunts when my hips roll forward. He looks up at me, his eyes hooded, need clear on his face.

"It's okay, Masen, I'm okay. I want you to love me."

His eyes close, and he shakes his head no. "I'm sorry, Little One. I don't think I'll ever get enough, but you need to

rest and relax. I'll run you a bath in a bit." His hands still and fall away as he talks. He lays down on his back and cuddles me close, inhaling my hair.

I feel the loss of his hands immediately as I cling to him. Truthfully, I am a little sore, but we heal fast. I'm not in any pain. I take matters into my own hands, literally. His breathing falters when I wrap my hand around him, squeezing gently. "What if I still need you, Masen?"

His chest rumbles, almost like a purr as I work my hand up and down. "Yeah?" he questions. His response to me touching him excites me. I rub my legs together and squeeze. I'm still so sensitive it sends a wave of pleasure through me, and I moan in response. Squeezing him a little more, as he sucks in a breath through his teeth.

I crawl over him, straddling his thighs while I lower to my knees. I can feel his long cock all along my slit. My head falls back, and I rock against him. Masen grabs my hips, squeezing so hard I might bruise before releasing to a gentler hold. "Careful, Little One, I don't want to hurt you," he grates.

Not paying attention to his warning at all, I lift up and grab his cock trying to fit him inside me. I can't. He's too long, there's not enough space between us. I huff in frustration. His hands still clenched at my hips. With my hand still around him, I lean forward pressing his cock up between our bodies. I whisper in his ear, "Lift me up, Masen. I need to feel you filling me."

His neck arches back and my tongue follows the line, feeling his short soft stubble on my lips as I lick and kiss his jaw. His head shakes, but his hands lift me up, giving me what I asked for. I line the tip of his cock up to my opening and slowly sink down. He goes much deeper this way, but I can control that being in this position. He groans, "so tight, ah God, so tight." He hisses as I sink down as far as I can go then raise up. His hands move up to my nipples, and I relax onto him even more.

Moving slowly, I clench around him, squeezing my muscles when I rise. His hips lift, rocking deeper. He reaches

down in between our bodies and pinches my clit. He sits forward, bringing our chests together, and his hand cups my butt, pulling me against him harder. With him controlling my movements now, I just grind on him. My clit hits the base of him with every thrust up he makes. "So close, Masen. You feel so good," I pant. He speeds up and thrusts harder as I start to come. My head falls to his shoulder, and I bite him through a scream Marking him as mine while he makes love to me.

Masen throws his head back and roars as my fangs pierce his shoulder. He pushes forward, rolling me onto my back. He slams into me hard and fast, my teeth still locked on his shoulder. I climax again when he bites my shoulder, Marking me while he spills into me. I pull away from his shoulder and scream as he sinks his teeth and cock into me. "Oh God, oh Masen," I moan.

"MINE!" He growls as he licks my shoulder stopping what little blood would have escaped.

If I thought I was Jell-O before, now, I'm water, completely liquid. As he rolls to his back bringing me with him, I sigh and close my eyes. I'm spent, falling asleep before Masen's breathing slows. Just when I'm about out, I hear, "I love you, Sophia. I know it's soon, but I can't imagine living without you. I love you," he whispers sincerely.

"Masen, I've loved you for five years," I mumble then fall asleep immediately.

## CHAPTER 17



I wake before Masen. The sun starting to rise lights the dim room, displaying his ruggedly handsome face. I stretch and feel muscles I didn't know I had complain of overuse. I smile when I remember just how those muscles got sore. My finger traces his dark eyebrow before running along his soft lips. Not wanting to wake him, I slide off his chest and head to the bathroom.

I'm a little tender between my legs when I wipe so I decide the bath Masen mentioned last night sounds good. I run the water as hot as I can stand and sink in before the massive tub is even half full. Knowing I'll shower and wash my hair when I get out, I just soak, floating my toes and arms to the top above the water and relax. When my fingers prune, I drain the water and brush out my long hair that's tangled into knots. Before I turn on the shower, Masen is behind me looking down at me.

"Mornin', baby. You already had a bath?" His voice deep and thick from sleep.

"Yes, I'm just about to shower," I answer, looking over my shoulder.

He walks around me, coming to my front, and folds me in his arms. "You're so warm. Your skin's all pink and damp. I think you need to get a little dirty before that shower?" He cups my butt, rubbing me against him.

I squint my eyes closed even though he can't see my face. "I'm a little tender, you know. So, maybe later," I eke out,

embarrassed.

“You’re so cute. Last night, you were demanding to ride my cock, and this morning, you’re embarrassed to talk about being sore.” His low chuckle heats my belly. I love that sound.

“Shut up, you big meanie. Quit making fun of me.” I pinch his side.

“I’m not making fun of you, baby. I think you’re adorable. You can beg, demand, ask, or hell just look at me, and I’ll give it to you.” He winks.

I tut and roll my eyes. “You are impossible.” I push back and turn on the shower. Masen’s palm smacks my backside making me jump. “Ouch,” I say, looking back at him.

“Your ass looks nice pink. I was jealous I didn’t cause it,” he states with a shrug, proud of himself. I huff and get in the shower.

Masen gets in after shaving when I’m just about to get out. I touch his smooth cheeks thinking about how tonight he’ll be scruffy and loving him both ways. I give him a small kiss above his heart and tell him I need to get ready for school.

I just have two classes today, so after Bio, I’m going to head to the mall in Marshall to get some camera equipment. I do my hair in a loose, messy, fishtail braid that falls over my shoulder. I’m wearing my favorite skinny jeans and a lavender off the shoulder sweater. My black bra strap is barely visible under my braid. The Mark Masen left on me is fully covered. I gather my things knowing I’ll grab coffee at school.

Masen walks in the kitchen looking gorgeous in black slacks and a white button-up shirt. He’s looking down, rolling his sleeves up his forearms. I think I might be drooling on my shirt. He went from rugged, bad boy in jeans and t-shirts to naughty CEO in dress clothes.

He looks up at me. “You know I can feel you right?” he asks darkly. “Because we are marked, I can feel your emotions, feel that you want me right now no matter that you’re sore.”

Oh my God. “Em, no.” I shake my head. “I mean I knew something was up yesterday at the meeting hall, but I just felt like I needed to be near you. I kinda just went with and didn’t think about it.” I smile sweetly. “Sorry, you look very handsome. This is embarrassing.” I laugh at myself.

He finishes up with his sleeves and walks over to me. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I want you just as much. I’ve just had a little practice controlling my emotions. Sometimes as an Alpha if I feel things strongly enough others will too, so I’ve always had to control my emotions.” He tugs my braid and tells me, “You look beautiful, baby. I have some things I need to take care of today, so I’ll drop you at school and have Cass bring you your Jeep when he goes to class in a little bit. That okay?”

I nod my head. “Yeah, that sounds good. I have some errands to run after class.”

He kisses my lips briefly before pulling back to grab his keys. “Let’s go, Little One, or we won’t be leaving the house.”

A few minutes before we reach school, I ask, “Masen, are there any other things I should know about Marking and Mating? Like the whole emotions thing?”

He hums. “We should probably go over just about everything there is to know. I’m not sure what you know, or what you don’t. I can’t think of anything specific right now that you should know, but we’ll talk tonight. We can decide when you’d like to do the Mating ceremony.” He pulls in the lot right in front of the English building. “Cass or Sam will bring you your keys.” He curls his finger motioning for me to come closer. I lean over the center console, thinking he wants a kiss, but instead, he hauls me on his lap, my back to the steering wheel. His nose pushes aside my sweater, revealing his Mark on my shoulder. He kisses and nuzzles his spot, his hands grip my hips pulling me forward enough that I feel him growing hard beneath me. Knowing I’m the one causing his arousal is a powerful feeling. When he finally lifts his head, his eyes meet mine, and I’m struck with emotion. I don’t think it’s just mine.

I suck in a breath. “Masen?” His mesmerizing eyes close, I breathe out the air I was holding. Trying to sort through what just happened, I realize I felt his need for me, but what overwhelmed me was his fear, fear of losing me, fear that I would disappear when I’m not with him. Cupping his jaw, I say firmly, “Masen, I’m here. I’m not leaving. I want you to share those feelings with me. I just got overwhelmed. I’m scared, too.” I kiss his lips and whisper the last parts in his ear, “I’m so scared I’m not enough, could never be enough. Scared you could walk away from me. But, that’s just our past making us feel that. I want to be here, with you. So don’t hide that from me, okay? I love you, Masen.” His arms wrap around my back, and we comfort each other.

“I love you, too, baby. I would never, could never walk away, again,” he promises. “Now get on to class before I murder these fuckers who see you on my lap and think about you on theirs,” he growls.

“Huh, you are the one who put me here, Mr. Growly Pants.” I kiss him quickly and open his door to scoot out.

He hands over my book bag and purse. “I’ll see you in a bit. Little One. Be good.” He smirks.

I’m a little nervous going into English. The last time I was here Masen walked out on Professor Daniels, but he doesn’t say a word about it the entire class. Things seem to be settling down, no whispers or stares following me through campus.

Sam is already in his seat when I enter bio. His smile lighting up his dark brown eyes when I sit next to him. “Don’t you look handsome today. You got a hot date?” I ask playfully while I bump my shoulder into his. He’s wearing dark wash jeans and a snug red t-shirt. His smirk tells me I’m right. “So, who is it? Do I know them? Em well, I probably don’t. I don’t really know anyone but tell me who it is anyway.” I smile.

“It’s nothing really. There’s just a new guy named David that just came in yesterday,” he says shyly. “I asked if I could show him around, and he said yes.”

Just looking at Sam, I can tell how excited he is. “That’s great, Sam. I actually met him briefly, yesterday. Where do

you think you'll take him?"

He blows out a long breath. "I'm not sure. I just wanted to spend time with him. Maybe, I'll show him some touristy stuff and have a Bonfire on the beach. That way I can save the falls and the caves for next time." He smiles sweetly.

"I didn't know there are falls around here. How do I find them?"

Sam waves a hand, dismissing me. "Have Masen show you. Before I forget, I've got your keys," he says, searching through his messenger bag. "Here ya go." He smiles. "You're coming to lunch, right?"

Tossing my keys in my purse, I answer, "No, I'm done for the day after this class. I'm gonna head over to the mall. I need some camera equipment."

Sam nods his head. "They have a nice photography store not too far from the mall. You should check it out," he says as the teacher begins talking. When class is over, I wish Sam good luck on his date and tell him maybe I'll see him over the weekend.

Marshall, the next town over, has more of a city feel with big box stores and a mall. This is my first trip here so I drive around for a bit before finding the small camera shop. The awning over the door looks like a giant camera lens, it's kinda creepy. The woman behind the counter is very helpful. Thirty minutes later, I'm out twenty-five hundred bucks, but have a beautiful camera with a couple extra lenses to play with.

I drive over to the mall to grab some lunch and do some more shopping. The restaurant I choose makes pita-like bread right in the window. There's a lot of Greek influence on the menu. Before I can order, two male shifters sit down at my table. I've gotten more comfortable around shifters, but I think it's a little unusual for them to just sit down without an invite. "Hello," I say, "Something I can help you with?"

Both men eye me like I'm on the menu. "We were just passing through and had to know what smelled so good," he says, trying to sound sexy.



“Yeah, the food smells great. Would you like me to have the waitress get a table set up for you?” I’m using my syrupy sweet drawl now, knowing what they’re up to.

The talker shakes his head, no. “I think we should just join you. I wouldn’t want you to eat alone. That would be so rude of us.”

Does he seriously think he is sitting at my table? Not today, buddy. “Well, that’s a kind offer, gentlemen,” I say sarcastically, “but I’ll be dining alone. Please find another table to occupy.”

They both have the nerve to look offended. “You don’t want to eat with us? Why not, sweetheart? I’m a real good eater. I like to lick everything nice and clean,” he says while licking his lips.

Ehhh yuck, he did not just do that. “Ahhh, no, I’m gonna pretend that didn’t just happen.” I shudder in revulsion. “I was trying to be nice, but that’s obviously not going to work so here goes. I am not interested in anything y’all have to offer. Get away from me, now,” I say, looking right in the mouthy one’s muddy brown eyes.

His smile drops and replaces it with a sneer. He opens his mouth to speak right as the waitress asks, “Should I bring a couple more menus?”

Still looking right at him, I answer, “No, thank you. They were just leaving.”

I hear him mutter, “Bitch,” under his breath, but they do leave.

My lunch was fantastic. The bread was soft and a little sweet, wrapped around hot turkey and bacon. With a full belly, I decide to walk through the mall to see what stores they have before looking for what I need. The DSW is calling my name, so like a girl with a weakness for shoes, I head in to feed my addiction. Being good, I only buy two pair and head out to find a swimsuit. It’s almost September, so my choices are limited. I end up finding a really cute vintage inspired two-piece. The top is similar to a long line bra. There’s a built-in

underwire bra to hold my girls up. It's white and navy blue striped with a cute red anchor decal, the bottom is a super short navy skirt.

Done shopping for the day, I head out to my Jeep so I can go to my condo. If I'm going to be staying at Masen's, there're a few more things I'll need until we talk about what to do with my house. I just bought it so I'm not sure if selling it right away is a good idea.

Nearing my Jeep, I see the mouthy guy from the restaurant leaning against my door. Seriously, can't this guy take a hint? I'm wondering how easy it will be to get this guy to back off and let me leave. I think I should just head back in the mall and call Masen. I'm a tough girl, but I'm far from stupid. Before I can turn around, the quiet one walks up behind me and grabs my arm holding my purse. Trying to push me toward my truck. "Hey asshole! Let go of me now!" I snap. He's pulling me harder. There's no way I'm letting him get me to the Jeep where the other guy is. Dropping my bags, I yell, "NO, HELP!" as I strike out with my fingers held flat at his throat. The tips of my fingers hit his neck, and he gags. Choking, he let's go of my arm and reaches both of his hands up to his throat. Leaving everything on the ground, I turn and run back in the mall. Thank God, I was able to get away. There was no one around to hear me yelling.

I'm breathing hard from the adrenaline and fear. They haven't followed me. I realize when I dropped my bags I lost my phone. Going to the closest shop, a clothing store, I tell the woman I need the phone, someone in the parking lot stole my bags. I don't want to go into details with her.

She takes me in the back and lets me use the phone. "You're calling the police, right? Are you okay? Did they hurt you?" she asks with concern.

"They didn't hurt me, but I lost my bag. I don't have any numbers mesmerized. Do you mind just giving me a minute? I just need to calm down for a second." I'm not lying. I am shaken up, but I need to call the directory and see if I can get a number for Masen. I don't think he'll want to involve the police. I think he'll handle it himself.

“Sure, no problem, honey. My name’s Tami. I’ll be right outside the door. I can’t leave you back here alone. You understand?”

I nod my head. “Yeah, of course, I won’t touch anything but the phone. I promise,” I tell her truthfully.

Once she’s out the door, I pick the phone and dial information. “City and state please.”

“Point Pleasant, Michigan.”

“Business name.”

“It’s a person, Masen Black. Any number you have listed under him, please.”

“I have two listings. Would you like both?”

“Yes, please.” I find a blank sheet of paper and a pen.

“Residential number is 586-555-9911. Black Industries is 586-555-0000. Would you like to be connected?”

“Yes, please, to the residential number. Thank you.” Seconds later, it starts ringing. After six rings, I hang up and try the other number. If this doesn’t work, I’ll find security to walk me to my Jeep. Damn, I just realized I don’t have my keys. I’m sure if they didn’t take them from where I dropped them by now someone else has. Shit, I should have held onto my purse. A smooth female voice answers the line. “Black Industries. How can I direct your call?”

“I need to speak with Masen Black, please.”

“I’m sorry, Miss. He can’t be reached from this line.”

Shit! “Can you give me his cell number or send my call to him?”

“I’m sorry, Miss. I can’t do that. Would you like to speak with his assistant?”

Oh, thank God. “Yes, please.” I blow out a deep breath waiting for the call to pick up. I know he’ll have a shifter for an assistant. I can explain who I am, and they’ll let me talk to Masen.

“Roxanne speaking. How can I help you?”

Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me. “I need to talk with Masen, please,” I say as polite as I can muster.

“He’s indisposed at the moment. Can I take a message?” She giggles in the background. “Stop that,” comes through the line weakly like she’s covering the receiver.

“Give me his cell number, or send my call to him, now,” I sneer all pretense of politeness gone.

“I’m sorry. I can’t do that. It’s company policy. If it’s of a personal nature, Mr. Black gives his number to the people he wants to have it.” The last part comes out sugary sweet.

“I know you know who I am. Give me his fucking number, NOW!” I’m so frustrated why the hell is the devil woman his assistant?

“Do you have a message I can leave for Mr. Black?” She sounds so very professional I know Masen is in the room with her. He better not be playing games again, I will skin him. Before I can answer, “Sorry I couldn’t be more help. Thanks for calling Black Industries. Have a wonderful day,” comes through the line. Then, it goes dead. I’m tempted to slam the receiver on the desk repeatedly.

Instead, I steady my breathing and redial the directory. “City and state.”

“I need a cell number for Casper Black in Point Pleasant, Michigan,” I grate.

“I’ll connect you. Have a wonderful day.” After hearing the same words, the devil woman used I want to beat my head against the desk this time.

Sniffer answers on the second ring. “Who’s this?” he asks suspiciously.

“Sniffer, it’s me, Sophie. God, I’m so glad you answered,” I sigh, “I could really use some help.” I explain what happened. He’s driving before I can even finish telling him.

“Stay right where you are. I’ll be there in ten minutes. I had Sam call Mase. I don’t want you to hang up until I get

there, okay?" I finally relax.

There's a short tap on the door. The woman from earlier, Tami, pokes her head in. "You okay in here, honey?" she asks kindly.

"Just a second, Sniffer. I'm fine. Thank you. My Mat... my..."

Sniffer provides me with the right words. "Your brother-in-law, Sophie."

"My brother-in-law is on the way. He'll help me handle everything. Is it okay if I stay on the phone with him until he gets here?"

Her face is kind and a little sad. "Sure honey. I'll be right out here."

He arrives in seven minutes. He must have broken every traffic law there is. I'm so relieved when I hear him say he's here. I hang up and rush from the back of the store. "Sophie?" I hear his raised voice ask.

"I'm right here." I wave my arm so he can spot me.

He speeds over and picks me up in a bear hug. "Ugh, I can't breathe."

He sets me down but doesn't release me fully. "Sorry," he says sheepishly. "He just found you. I think he'd lose it if something happened. Masen knew something was wrong, and when he couldn't get a hold of you, he kinda freaked. He was almost here when Sam got ahold of him so it won't be long." He smiles down at me.

"That's such a relief. I was so worried I wouldn't be able to get a hold of anyone. Did you see anyone outside or my purse and bags?"

He shakes his head. "No, I didn't look too hard though. I was more concerned about getting in here to you."

Tami and two other female employees stare at Sniffer. "I think you have a fan club," I say, tipping my head in their direction.

She notices me look over and comes closer. Her hips have a little extra sway that I can't help but smile at. "You must be the brother-in-law. How kind of you to come rescue her," she bats her eyelashes, "I'm so nervous about the whole thing. She must have been terrified. Lucky for her, she has you to make sure she's safe," she pouts. "I'm Tami, by the way."

What the hell is wrong with this woman. Five minutes ago, she was normal and sweet. Now, she's like a flirting machine with hair tosses, biting her lips, touching his arm more times than I can count in the thirty second, one-sided conversation. I can't help the bubble of laughter that escapes. They both turn to me like I'm the crazy one. I cover my mouth and start to cough. I clear my throat. "Sorry, nerves." I shrug.

Masen chooses that second to storm through the door. He looks like he's ready to kill someone. "Hot damn!" I hear one of the women utter.

His eyes find mine. I'm away from Sniffer and in his arms in seconds. He lifts me gently, and I wrap around him on instinct. "What happened?" he barks.

I sigh. He's going to scare the pants off of these women, probably literally. "Mase, let's go outside. These beautiful women have helped enough today. No need to bother them any further."

Sniffer delivers a sweet as honey smile to the trio. I think they all sigh in unison. They've all moved closer, openly ogling Masen even with me in his arms. Tami, my helper, says, "Oh, it's no bother. If either of you need anything, anything at all, I can be very helpful." She's definitely not talking to me. She looks right up at Masen through her lashes.

Now, she is starting to piss me off. "Hey, knock that off. Thank you for your help. I really appreciate it, I do. You can even throw yourself at my brother-in-law, but do not look at him like that. He's mine!" I threaten.

Her eyes go wide. I don't think she's ever been called out before. Hooker probably flirts with taken men all the time.

Masen's sexy chuckle warms my belly like always. I turn my head back around. Our faces are close. "Ah, baby. If I didn't have to find the fuckers that messed with you, I'd take you in the back and make you scream so they'd know who I belong to." His voice is low, but when I hear "hot damn" again in the same voice as before, I know they heard him.

Sniffer clears his throat. My eyes haven't left Masen's. "Yeah, on that note, we need to be going. Come on, Mase. You can make her scream at home." He pats his back.

"Masen, you gotta put me down, now. We can't walk out there like this," I say, squirming, trying to get down. He heaves a sigh like I'm being unreasonable but sets me down. He insists I go over every detail again starting when they sat down at my table in the restaurant. I tell him everything, where I ate, where I walked, what stores I went into, what happened in the parking lot. I haven't finished yet when we walk out to my truck.

They're gone, but Masen catches both of their scents. "I'm not familiar with either scent, but that doesn't mean much. I don't know everyone by scent. We have a few hundred in the pack. I'm going to call Sid and have him see if he can track them."

Sniffer and I check my Jeep while Masen makes some phone calls. My purse and bags are laying on the front seat. "Masen, they left my stuff!" I shout. When I open my purse and check my wallet, I see what they've taken, my Kentucky driver's license, all my cash, my credit cards, phone, and keys. "Shit," I curse. "They took all my stuff. They know my address and have my keys. I had a change of address on the back of my license when I moved. We need to get to my house before they take everything I own," I'm almost in tears, "I should have kept my purse." My voice cracks. Masen hugs me close.

"I'll take care of it, baby. Don't cry. Cass, wait here for Sid and whoever else he brings. Tell him what you know and make sure he gets back to me as soon as he knows something. I'm gonna have Michael meet us at her place."

Leaving my Jeep, he ushers me to the same SUV he drove me to school in this morning. “Wait, Sniffer, can you see if there’s still a small footlocker in the back?”

He looks in the back. “Yeah, I see it.”

“My new camera is in there if they didn’t take it. If you guys leave my Jeep, will you break the lock and bring my stuff home with you please?”

He runs over to where Masen is about to load me in the car. “I’ll get your stuff, Sophie. Don’t worry. Masen will take care of the rest, okay?” I nod my head and smile so he feels better if nothing else.

On the way to my house, I finish telling Masen the rest of the story. When I tell him how I got away, he looks at me in awe. “You punched him in the throat?” pride clear in his tone.

“No, I didn’t throat punch him. I jabbed him like this.” I show him the move in the throat.

His head kicks back, and he belly laughs so hard I see tears in his eyes. When he settles down, he says, “It’s not funny that you had to deal with those fuckers, but only you could jab someone in the throat to get away.” He starts laughing all over again.

“Masen, I was really scared, and they have all my stuff. They could be in my house right now waiting for me. If I hadn’t met you and Sniffer, what would happen to me?”

That sobers him up immediately. He grabs my hand. “You’re right, Sophia. I’m sorry.” He squeezes my hand. I still need to talk to him about Roxanne, but it’ll wait until later.

When we get to my condo, Michael is already there waiting. Unfortunately, the shifters have already come and gone. I know they were here because my driver’s license sits on the kitchen counter, effectively telling me they don’t need it anymore. They know where I live and can come back anytime they want. I don’t take the time to see if anything is missing. I grab what I can’t live without, and I get back in the SUV and wait for Masen and Michael to finish up. I don’t think I ever want to come back here. Everything feels tainted. I don’t know



what they touched, where they went, or why they even came to my house. What's the big deal? So, I didn't fall for their come-ons. What would they be willing to do to me because I rejected them? In one afternoon, they have taken the only real home I had in five years before I found Masen. I won't even think about what I'd do if I didn't have him.

## CHAPTER 18



*B*ack at Masen's, I'm in his huge walk-in closet that's the size of my whole living room. There's a washer and dryer, a large island like counter full of drawers, even a few chairs. The walls are covered with built-in closet organizers, almost one whole wall is made to not only hold shoes but display them. It is like the holy grail of closets.

I'm sitting in a leather chair holding a small box of what's left of my parents looking around fighting back tears when Masen finds me. He kneels in front of me as I set the box on the floor. Dropping his head on my lap, he wraps his arms around me. "I'll find them, Little One. Please don't be so sad."

I am having a bit of a pity party. "I'm fine, Masen. I know it could have been much worse. That what happened wasn't even that big of a deal. I think what bothers me most is knowing they were in my house touching my things, and that they could go back anytime and let themselves right in the front door. They could take my Jeep. It's just a yucky feeling, ya know? And I can't stop thinking why they made such a big deal about being rejected. What were they planning to do?" I stroke my finger through his soft dark hair.

I'm ready for a subject change, so I tell him, "I really love this closet. It's so smart to put the washer and dryer in here."

He runs his hands up and down my back. "I thought you'd like it. That way when you wash all my clothes, you can iron fold and hang all in one room. I'll find you a closet in one of the upstairs rooms."

I lightly smack his back. “Oh shut up, if anything, you’ll have to move your stuff. You think I’m giving up that shoe rack? It’s a thing of beauty.”

He laughs softly. “Like that, do ya?”

“Why don’t you get comfy, and I’ll go make us some dinner.”

He sits up and brings his face close to mine. “I’m not really hungry for dinner yet.” He runs his nose along mine, igniting my need for him.

My hands reach up to his white dress shirt. The first button is open so I start on the second and continue my way down. He places an opened-mouth kiss on his mark then kisses his way up to my ear. He nips in places and uses his tongue in others, always leaving me guessing what’s coming next. After unbuttoning the fourth button, I reach my hands in and feel the dark hair lightly covering his chest. Pushing the shirt off his shoulders, I continue unbuttoning his shirt, and my mouth goes to my mark on his shoulder. I lick and tease him just like he’s done to me. His hand holds my neck, showing me how much he likes what I’m doing. “Love the way your mouth feels on me, baby.” When I use my teeth, he groans. He stands and tugs me up from the chair backing me up to the counter and lifts me. “I had this island built special. You want to know why it’s special?” he asks playfully. Masen pulls my butt so I’m just barely sitting on the ledge and grinds into me. “Ahh,” I moan. He moves back and takes off his shirt. When he moves down to the closure of his slacks, I remove my shirt. When his pants hit the floor, I slide down and take my jeans off.

Watching Masen undress is heady. Every move is almost graceful. His body is honed to perfection. Thick neck and wide shoulders make his stature intimidating. His broad chest gives way to his clearly defined abdomen, the vee leading down to his groin highlighting his narrow hips. His arms and legs display his powerful physique. He’s devastatingly attractive. My wolf knows we’ve marked the apex predator as ours, and she is as ecstatic as I am.

I look up to his ruggedly beautiful face and know he's enjoying my appraisal. His white blue eyes hood with desire, his full lips are barely parted to pull in deeper breaths. Nostrils flare as he scents my arousal. The low growl coming from his chest should be a warning, but it sounds like a sweet promise to me.

I'm still wearing my bra and panties when he steps back to me. His warm body just grazes mine. Long fingers encircle my upper arms as he turns me so my back isn't to the island. He walks around to me and unclasps my bra, letting it slide down my arms. He runs the tip of his finger all the way around the inside of my panties, starting with his left arm crossed in front of my body. Slowly, he drags his finger around, lowering them just a tiny bit. He stops close to where he started. I'm almost shaking with need when he places both hands at my hips, using one foot he nudges my ankle out, widening my legs. Masen pulls my panties down inch by inch until they are just below my butt. "Bend over," he orders. I do, and he squats down behind me, removing my panties the rest of the way.

I should be embarrassed, my butt is right in his face, but he drags his nose up from my knee to my inner thigh inhaling. I nearly fall over when he makes a growl like noise in the back of his throat. I'm so wet, if I squeezed my legs together, it would coat my inner thighs. He delivers one slow lick from my opening up to my clit before standing up behind me. "Ah, you look so beautiful, baby, so wet and swollen for me." He runs one finger along my slit, starting at my clit. When he reaches my opening, he dips in slowly. Pulling back out, he continues all the way back to my bottom, spreading the moisture he collected. "I can't wait to fuck you here, baby." I writhe against him, nervous and excited. "Look at you, already eager. You'll love how it feels when my cock is buried deep in your ass." He turns me back around, and I look down at his jutting cock, wondering if he'll let me taste him. "I know what you're thinking, baby. Later, yeah. I need to show you what's so special about this."

He rubs the countertop. Grabbing my waist, he lifts me again so I'm perched on the ledge, spreading my legs to step up between them. He pulls out two drawers, but they're not

drawers at all. I wonder what other surprises this thing holds? He places one foot on each platform. When my foot hits the soft material, it drops down an inch, locking the platform in place so it can no longer slide in or out. He widens my legs out as far as they can go. My heels are close to my butt, and they sink a little deeper into the fabric, letting my legs butterfly out.

“It’s even better than I imagined,” he muses.

He drops down on his knees, and his face is level with my pussy. He smirks up at me then licks me once again from bottom to top. “You like your closet, baby?” he asks smugly while looking right at me.

“Yes Masen, I love my closet,” I rasp.

Masen does things with his mouth that should be illegal. First, he shoves his tongue inside me and hums, in and out, shallow thrusts all the while making noises that make his tongue almost vibrate. When I come, he moves up to my clit, licking, sucking, and eventually biting. Coming again, I plead for him to stop, then beg him for more. When he shoves his finger inside me and says “again,” he fucks me with his fingers and licks me. Masen stops his movements and tells me, “Watch, watch me give you what no one else has gotten from me since the night I meet you,” he purrs. “I couldn’t wait to taste you. Now watch me make you come.” I do. It’s only seconds after he’s done talking I scream out his name.

Masen stands and looks down at me puddled on the counter and smiles, he’s so satisfied with himself. As he should be, that was unbelievable. When he enters me in one long, slow thrust, my back arches.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “Can’t be too gentle, baby. Need you too bad,” he growls.

His next thrust is hard and deep. I try to sit up, but he holds my shoulder down not letting me gain an inch. It was like a warning strike. His hips slam into me making his tip nudge my womb. “Ah, my baby can take me full,” he croons, which is at odds with his hard shoves into me. The hair around his temples is damp from sweat, his cheekbones stand out in hard contrast as he clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth. Masen’s

pace becomes erratic, his neck tenses as he throws his head back and roars through his release. My muscles tighten around him, taking me to another orgasm. He shivers once and looks back down at me. His cock still inside me. He says, "You really were made just for me." There's awe in his tone as he studies my face.

Leaning down to kiss me, he slips out, and I hiss. Masen's face softens. "Oh shit. Was I too rough, Little One? I'm sorry. I got so carried away," he says sweetly.

I turn my head slightly. It's about all I can manage. "No Masen. I love it, love you," I croak, my voice just as weak as my body from use.

He kisses my lips gently to make up for the indelicate treatment of my body. Masen lifts me up, and I curl around him, laying my head on his shoulder and sigh. I could sleep for a week. "I'm so glad it's Friday. It's been a long week."

"You want to go grab dinner, or I could get a pizza?" Masen asks.

"Pizza sounds good. Do they deliver?" I ask, hopeful.

"I'd just have to meet them at the gate, so it's a waste." He shrugs his shoulders.

"I'm just being lazy. We can go out. You have to pick though."

He sets me down and pats my butt. "Get dressed, Little One," he bosses.

"Aren't you going to shower or wash up?" I say, pointing to his face.

He chuckles. "No."

"No?"

"No, Little One. I don't care who knows I had my face buried in your pussy."

I roll my eyes. "Freak."

He smirks.

Masen pulls on a pair of jeans, just jeans, no boxers. Why is that so hot? He leaves the top button undone and slowly walks over to me. He lifts my chin with his fingers and says, "If you keep looking at me like that, we won't be going anywhere."

Still looking in his eyes, I reach my hand in his pants and grasp him. "I really love that you're not wearing boxers, Masen. It's so sexy." I lick my lips and fall to my knees. I've never done this before. I want him to enjoy it. I look up at him. "You'll tell what you like, Masen," I command.

He swallows and nods his head once.

I open the three remaining buttons and pull his pants down. I use my right hand to circle him as much as I can and my left to cup his balls. Being an avid reader helped me get the basics. I plant an open mouth kiss right over his slit, he shudders. I lap at his opening, and he curses. I tease his tip, licking and kissing until he grates, "More, baby. Take more of my cock in your sweet mouth."

I comply, taking him as deep as I can, but he's so large it's not much past his tip. I flatten my tongue, and he hits the back of my throat. When he's as far as he can go, I hum loud and long, pulling back and pushing forward, covering my teeth with my lips.

"Ah, baby, so good. Now suck and swallow for me." I suck, hollowing out my cheeks. I try to swallow, but I'm having a hard time. Finally, I relax my throat enough to do it. He rewards me with a sound I'd do just about anything to hear again. So when I take him deep again, I swallow. "Yes, just like that, baby." His hips pump, but he doesn't push any farther. I pull back, licking his tip and just under it, sucking harder. Masen slams his hands on the wall behind me, leaning forward. I look up at him and squeeze his balls a tiny bit harder. "Ahhh yeah, baby, look at me while you suck my cock." I open my jaw and take him even deeper, still looking up at him. I swallow three times quickly. His hips rock forward and his head falls forward even more. He looks back down and groans out his release. Masen's so deep that I barely taste his cum, just feel it sliding down my throat. His head is

against the wall between his hands. I kiss his tip once more before pulling his pants back up his thighs. “I almost fell over.” His voice is hoarse and deep.

I’m high off the power of pleasing Masen. I strut over to my bag, grab a clean bra and panties and a white summer dress. I make a show of dressing, knowing he enjoys watching. He buttons his pants up and grabs a white t-shirt.

“Masen?” I ask sweetly.

“Yeah, baby.” He looks over at me.

“I was just wondering, do you think everyone will know you had your cock buried in my mouth?” Right before I run out of the closet cackling.

“Sophia!” he shouts.

I laugh all the way to the kitchen. Seconds later, there’s a knock at the door. Opening it, I find Sniffer and two men I’ve never met before. “Hey Sniffer, what’s up?” I ask, stepping back so they can enter.

“Hey Sophie. I got your camera, and Sid wants to talk to Mase,” he says, smiling.

“He should be right ou—” Before I finish, Masen is stomping down the hallway.

“I should spank your ass red then fuck you till you beg me to stop for your naughty mouth!”

I clear my throat and smile as demurely as possible. Masen is still rambling, not even realizing three people stand in the entryway. “Masen. Masen. MASEN!” He finally stops when I yell.

“Cass, Sid, James.” He nods to each like it’s no big deal he was just threatening to spank and fuck me moments ago. They all try not to smile. Sniffer gives up the soonest and just starts laughing. “Oh, just shut up you.” Which only makes him laugh harder. I push him and go to the living room. All four men follow.

“Would y’all like something to drink?” I ask. My ingrained southern hospitality at work.



“You got any sweet tea, Sophie? You make the best sweet tea,” Sniffer asks hopefully.

“Let me see what I can do. How about you two? I’m Sophia, by the way. I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself earlier.” I give Masen the stink eye.

One of the men says, “Tea sounds good, Sophia. Thank you.”

Masen moves to stand in front of me blocking the others from seeing me. “Stop taking care of them. I want tea,” he pouts. I lean around him and look at Sniffer making a big deal of rolling my eyes.

I pat Masen’s back. “Okay, Big Guy, you get the first glass,” I offer. I just know he has a smug smile on his face.

After I make tea and Masen introduces the men to me, they start discussing what happened at the mall. Sid tells Masen that neither of the scents were familiar to him either, and they were only able to track them through the mall to the other side where they must have parked. Masen fills them in on what we found at my house. “It’s a little strange. We’ve never had a report of such behavior. Do you think it’s someone from our pack?” Sid asks. “Gavin reported that the rogues were closer than we last suspected. Maybe, they breached the territory lines, and Sophia was the first to spot them. She probably wouldn’t know if they were rogues or not. No offense, Sophia,” Sid adds kindly.

I wave him off. “None taken. You’re right. I wouldn’t know. Is there some way to tell the difference?”

Masen’s hands haven’t left my body, finding some way to touch me. He rubs my back and answers, “Well, apart from having to meet each of them a time or two, so their names or even faces become familiar, there’s a feeling like being connected when you’re both part of the pack. I know you sense it with me, maybe even Cass, but you, Little One, are kind of a hard sell.” He squeezes me. “You are quite guarded. Not many have felt you. Only the few you’ve met that you like.” He laughs a little.

Oh shit, have I been giving the magical cold shoulder and not even knowing it? “Yeah okay, so that’s not weird or creepy or anything,” I say being sarcastic.

“Ah, Little One, I think it’s fantastic. It’s like you have to let them become part of your own little pack.” He smiles, proud of my craziness.

I shake my head. “Whatever you say, Big Guy.”

His smile turns mischievous. “Oh, I know, baby. That’s what you were screaming earlier.”

My mouth falls open in horror.

He leans in close to my ear. “Close your mouth, baby. I know how well you use it. I might be tempted to fill it.”

My face heats red from a blush and a little bit of anger. Even though he’s embarrassing me, I’m still turned on by his filthy mouth. Snapping my mouth closed, I say through clenched teeth, “Masen Black, you better stop announcing what I’ve done or what you plan on doing right, this minute.”

He has the nerve to look incredulous. “Why?”

I huff. “You realize yesterday I was a virgin, and today, you’re telling...”

I get no further because I’m interrupted by two voices. “Holy fucking shit,” comes in an awed tone.

While Masen yells, “DON’T,” angrily.

“Are you kidding me? That’s what you care about. That someone knows that?” I’m shocked. This is going downhill fast.

I hear Sniffer say, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone lasting a week after their first shift.” I can hear the wonder in his voice.

Masen jumps to his feet leaning over me he says, “Don’t even think about it.” It comes out in deadly sneer. “She is MINE!” he barks.

Astonished by the way he’s speaking to him and not wanting to set him off more, I slowly lift my hand to his chest

right over his rapidly beating heart and rub. “Hey, Big Guy, it’s okay. He didn’t mean anything. Right, Sniffer?”

The reminder of the nickname makes Masen snarl. “Right, nothing Mase, I meant nothing, I think nothing,” Sniffer says quickly, his voice is a little high.

“I didn’t realize it was a big deal. That’s on me.” I announce pleadingly. “Sit down here, Masen. This couch is kinda lumpy. I need a comfier place to sit.” I tug his shirt, and he slowly sits, his breathing still choppy. I scoot on his lap as ladylike as possible without standing or taking my hands off him. “That’s much better,” I coo once I’m seated in his lap to comfort him or hold him down at least whichever works better. I place my hands on his cheeks directing his face to mine. He’s still pissed.

The silence behind me is grim. “Hey Masen, you want me to make you some cookies? How about some of those white chocolate ones you like so much? I could even put some raspberries in. How does that sound?” His hard body relaxes as I speak to him. His eyes slowly return to his beautiful white-blue color. “How about I make us a quick dinner? Then, you can help me make the cookies. We could even go for a run tonight. My wolf’s excited to meet her Mate.”

His chest rumbles in agreement. Finally, Masen’s breathing is back to normal. His face drops to my neck, his nose pushes aside the cropped cardigan I put on over my dress finding his mark. He nuzzles me. When he finally lifts his face and really looks at me, I know everything is fine. I smile sweetly at him and say, “You, your brother, and friends can finish your chat. I’ll go start dinner.” I kiss his lips and stand. When I turn around, all three of the other men are staring at the floor.

No one speaks until I’m out of the room. I hear Masen’s deep, commanding voice, but I don’t stay and listen to what he’s saying. In the kitchen, I brown up some Italian sausage and hamburger for a quick marinara. I’m not sure who will be eating so I boil two pounds of pasta and grill some garlic bread while I wait for everything to finish.

Walking back into the living room, I can tell the tension has eased. That is until the room falls silent when I enter. I inwardly roll my eyes. “Why don’t y’all come on in here and eat,” I prompt, then go back in the kitchen.

Masen is first to follow. He kisses my temple tenderly and reaches to grab a bowl. I swat his hand away. “Uh uh, I’ll fix it. Go sit down. Guys grab a bowl and help yourselves. I’ll put the bread on the table.” I can feel Masen’s joy that I’m serving his but making the others get their own. It’s amazing to immediately feel his gratitude for something so simple. It makes me feel appreciated.

Placing his full bowl in front of him with a plate of bread, I kiss him a little deeper than is probably polite in front of company. He doesn’t complain. I make my own bowl and join them at the table. There isn’t much conversation, everyone’s busy stuffing their face.

When every morsel is polished off, I get a chorus of thank yous. “Sophie, that was so good, thank you. I’m gonna have to send Red over here for lessons. I love her, I do, but that woman can’t cook to save her life,” he laughs kindly.

“I’ll just come over every night for dinner. I’d probably waste away otherwise,” Sniffers says in mock serious tone.

James just utters a quiet, sincere, “Thank you.” I think he was most affected by Masen’s earlier outburst.

Masen’s face is proud. “I’m gonna get fat! My baby can cook,” he says it like it’s the best thing that could ever happen.

I tut. “Like you could ever get fat!” I roll my eyes. “Y’all are welcome, come back anytime. I do love to cook. Sid, I’d love to meet your Red. I’ve just met Nicole, Michael’s Mate. I visited with her the other day. She is just beautiful. I can’t wait to meet more people from the pack.”

They all say goodnight and leave for their homes while Masen and I clean up the dishes. He works quietly beside me, always finding a reason to touch me. I don’t mind, it’s comforting. Being able to sense his feelings behind each gesture is astounding.

I make his cookies while he mostly watches. He eats a few right off the baking sheet. The rest I leave out to cool while the last batch bakes.

Getting ready for bed, I brush my teeth, wash my face, then lotion my body. I'm wearing just my panties when Masen comes in to brush his teeth. His gaze heats as he watches me through the mirror, but he seems content to just look. I finish up and climb into bed while he's still in the bathroom. He comes in the room, turns out the lights, and gets in bed next to me. His big body behind mine, he pulls me tight to him. "I love you, Sophia," he says in the darkness.

"I love you, too, Masen."

## CHAPTER 19



Waking up, I feel the solid wall that is Masen behind me. He's on his back, my head pillowed on his shoulder. His arm curls up and around me, his fingers barely touch my short triangle of pubic hair. I slowly move on to my back and stretch. My pointed toes reach just below his knees. Distantly, I hear a phone ringing. Is that what woke me? I know it's not mine, anyone who has my number knows I'm here. A few moments later, it rings again. Thinking it must be important for them to have called right back, I slide out of bed trying desperately not to wake Masen.

I grab the white t-shirt he wore last night and rush from the room while struggling to get the shirt over my head. I follow the ringing to the kitchen. Masen must have set his phone down last night before we went to bed. The screen goes dark just as I reach to answer it. Only to start ringing again, immediately. The name displayed is Roxanne. What the hell! I pick up the phone and swipe the green icon. "Hello," I say incredulously.

"Mase, oh Mase," she howls. She doesn't even realize I've picked up the phone.

"No, this isn't Masen. He's indisposed," I say, smug to use her words against her.

"You!" She sneers. "Put him on the phone. I know what you're trying to do. I know Mase practically attacked Cass last night because you're still fucking him."

First, who the hell told her about Masen getting mad, and second, why the hell does she think I'm having sex with Sniffer? "Um no! Are you crazy? Who told you that junk? Why are you even calling anyway?"

"Masen needs me. You're trying to ruin him, turning him against his family, his pack," she screeches.

"Not even close! But you know what? I'm not doing this with you. You want to talk to Masen? I'll have him call you as soon as he wakes up. He can tell you for the third time it's over between you two, has been for years. Don't call back unless there is some sort of real emergency."

"Over between us?" She cackles. "He's never said it's over between us. It never will be. He loves me. He just told me so, yesterday. He's just trying to find a way to get rid of you. You think you can satisfy him, little girl? He's a man, an Alpha. You will never be enough for him! He'll be begging me to fuck him like a woman. He already has," she spits.

She's talking crazy. She has to be, right? Pain still lashes my heart from her words. "He seemed quite happy eating my pussy last night, repeatedly. Just couldn't get enough of this little girl." I flaunt.

"Now, I know that's a lie. Mase doesn't..."

Before she can spew more venom, I hang up. I stare at the now black screen of the phone still in my hand. She was lying, she's just trying to hurt me. My belly hollows. I can check his phone. I shouldn't need to, or even want to, but her words burn like acid in my veins, making me doubt him.

My mind starts working on overdrive, analyzing our interactions. Masen seems genuine when we're together. I was the one who Marked him first though. Maybe he reacted on instinct when I bit him, and he bit me back. We haven't talked about a Mating ceremony to complete our union. He did say we would, but last night, we got distracted. Still, the insidious thoughts invade. Maybe he wants to keep her; hell, maybe he wants us both. I know he's not faking the desire he feels for me. Will his phone tell me anything? I can check his texts, voicemail, I can even check his call logs. Do I want to do this?

I push the button on the bottom, activating the screen. I tap the text message icon first and see the last open chat is with Michael from yesterday around noon. I don't read very far, just enough to see it's nothing involving me or Roxanne. Hitting the back key to see all his text conversations, I see a few names I don't recognize and a few I do know: Sniffer, Sid, Nicole. I'm hoping that's Michael's Nicole. Right under Michael's name, I see Roxanne.

I'm terrified to open it, but I do. The last message is from yesterday. It's from Masen to her.

**can't talk now**

Running my finger up the screen to see the previous message, I see what she sent.

**I miss you, can I see you later <3**

I don't read any more. I think I might throw up. What the hell is going on? Does he know I was trying to reach him yesterday, and she wouldn't let me through? Why the hell does she still work as his assistant if there is nothing going on with them. He has to know how much I despise her. She's still in love with him.

I hear Masen call my name. His voice is thick from sleep. I hear his footsteps as he nears the kitchen. His hand covers his bare washboard stomach when he walks through the entryway. The sweatpants he wears hang low on his hips. His face is pinched, lips in a thin line as he approaches me. "Are you feeling okay?" he asks, concern clear in his voice.

Schooling my features, I pull my emotions in. He must be sensing my troubling thoughts, feeling the hollow ache radiating from my belly to my chest. I give him a small smile and nod my head. "I'm fine, just a little nervous from yesterday." Why Am I lying? Why not confront him right now? I'm a coward, sure that's part of it, but I also want the truth once and for all. I've trusted him twice without all the answers. That ends now. I just need a few minutes to fortify my resolve and decide how to handle this like an adult without killing both of them.



He is still looking at me funny. I don't think I'm doing a very good job masking my emotions. "Where'd you go, Little One? Didn't you hear me calling you?" My heart melts at his term of endearment. Could he really still be seeing her or leading her on? "What's wrong, baby?"

He's right next to me. I want him to hold me. I want everything she said to be a lie. My hands tremble. My bottom lip quivers, but I smile to hide it. "Just feeling a little off, I guess." I shrug and look at his chest then up to his shadowed jaw. The distress coming from his white blue eyes makes me question why I would let her make me feel like this. It's exactly what she wants.

I wrap my arms around his bare chest. "I'm lying," I confess. I blow out a deep breath.

Masen picks me up like a baby and carries me back to the bedroom. "I know you're lying, Little One. I just don't know what about or why." His voice is soft. Would he be so sweet if he knew I just went through his phone violating his privacy? I contemplate how to get through this without tears or hysterics. "Please tell me what's wrong?" He sits down but keeps me in his lap.

My fingers toy with the hem of my borrowed shirt. "Your phone was ringing this morning. I'm not sure if it woke me, or I woke then heard it. It just kept ringing and ringing so I assumed it was important. I wanted you to be able to sleep so I went to answer it." He hasn't spoken a word. He doesn't seem nervous; he does seem worried for me. He strokes my arms and back as I continue speaking, "It was Roxanne." There's no change in his body; no tensing, no sudden intakes of breath. He doesn't seem guilty.

"Did she say why she was calling? Is there a problem?" he asks, seeming confused.

"Did you know I talked to her yesterday? That when I lost my phone, I had no way to get ahold of anyone so I called information. They gave me your residence and Black industries. When I got the receptionist, she wouldn't give me your cell or patch me through to you, only your assistant." He

stills. Now his large hand frozen over my wrist where he was soothingly stroking my pulse point. “She said you couldn’t come to the phone, that you were indisposed. She was giggling and playing grab-ass with someone in the background,” I shake my head in disbelief, “She knew who I was and wouldn’t let me talk to you, wouldn’t give me your direct numbers. I was so upset, still scared from that jerk grabbing me, and she just kept talking all professional, pretending to be nice when she was really being nasty. She said if this call is of a personal nature Mr. Black gives his number to those he wants to have it.” I sneer, copying her words and tone.

“What did she say this morning, Little One?” he asks, his voice calm, but he sounds angry.

I huff. He just expects me to answer him. “She was frantic, repeating your name. I told her you were indisposed,” I admit sheepishly. Rushing on, I say, “she yelled at me for you fighting with Sniffer last night. She accused me of a few things. She was angry.”

He interrupts me, asking grimly, “What things?”

My fingers pick at my peeling nail polish. “She said I was ruining you, that I was turning you against your family, your pack and... and,” I stammer.

“And?” he prompts. My head is tucked under Masen’s chin. I listen to the strong steady beat of his heart. His body wrapped around mine feels comforting. I feel protected which is ridiculous considering he has the power to hurt me the most.

No matter what, I know it will bother him to hear what she said about me and Sniffer, but that’s not the only reason I fumble. I don’t want to hear he still loves her or still wants her. You never realize how much you need something until it’s threatened. I lost Masen once before I even knew him. I’m terrified to lose him now. I crave Masen with unparalleled zeal. Though losing him would be my only option, I can’t share him.

“Sophia!” I jump from the harshness in his tone. My head slams into his chin causing his teeth to crack together.

“Ouch Masen, I’m sorry,” I apologize instinctually.

I hear his hand run across the stubble on his chin. “I’m the one who startled you. I’m sorry, Little One. Tell me what she said.” His fingers caress my head where I knocked into him, massaging my scalp.

I blow a deep breath and tell him. “She said you almost attacked Sniffer because I was still having sex with him. Well, she said I was fucking him. I mean how did she even know you were mad last night?” I ask, incredulous. Masen stops breathing. His hand on my arm clenches. I can feel his anger through our bond. “Masen?” I question. “Masen obviously you know that’s not true, right?”

He lets out a guttural breath and pushes me back while he leans away from me. “Of course, I know it’s not true. I had your blood all over my cock and my sheets, but it doesn’t mean I want to hear that shit,” he snaps.

I don’t like the way he’s talking to me. I’m not the one with past loves still calling. I’m pissed. “You don’t want to hear that shit!” I shout and jump from his lap. He opens his mouth. “Uh uh, you think you can sit there all mad about something, that clearly considering the way you talk about my virginity so vulgarly, didn’t even happen, while I had to listen to her tell me you still love her. That you told her so, yesterday. That you are just biding your time until you find a way to get rid of me. That I wouldn’t please you sexually, that I would never be enough. That you’ll be begging to have sex with her, that you already have.” I rage at him. I’m shaking, I’m so mad. My whole body trembles. “Did I forget to mention she’s said you have never once told her it was over. That you didn’t want her anymore. I mean she’s still your damn assistant so that says enough right there. You had to know that would bother me, if only for the past you shared, but let’s be honest, a week ago really isn’t the past,” I hiss. My God, has it only been a week since he’s been with her? I can’t think about that now. “She’s still in love with you. How dare you be mad at the shit storm you created.” My voice falls. I’m losing steam. “You know what? Piss off, Masen!” I say, already walking out of the room.

He leaps from the bed and grabs my arm before I'm out the door. I turn around and jerk my arm free from his hold. "Please wait, please let me explain." Masen holds his hands out like he's asking to touch me. He's begging. His face is sad, white blue eyes clouded with worry and fear. His full lips turned down in a frown. I cross my arms over my chest smashing my breasts.

My anger is evaporating. The hurt intensifies. My voice is soft, when I say, "It's not supposed to be this hard" —I motion between our bodies— "moments of extreme high followed by hurt and confusion. I know I'm kinda in the dark about a lot of this shifter stuff, but I do know my parents were Mates. We have fought more in the last week than they fought my entire life. Maybe," my voice cracks, "maybe you're just not ready for this. Because Masen, I can't accept anything less than full measure from you. I've repeatedly given you everything. My trust, my body, my heart, but I just don't think it's enough," I say on a sob. I rein in my tears. I will not be weak.

Masen falls to his knees and lays his head on my arms that cover my breasts. His arms wrap around me. "It's enough. Please, you are enough. I don't know why I'm such a fuck up at being a Mate. The last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt you, and I know I have. I can't stand that I've caused this. I feel it, feel every emotion. The bitter anger at her and me, that's deserved. The anger at yourself, that isn't. The sadness tightening my throat. And, the hurt searing my chest." He lifts up my arms and wraps them around his shoulders like he needs me to hold him. Then, he lays his head on my breasts. "She lied, none of it's true," he says with conviction then starts shaking his head. "Shit, well almost none of it." I start to pull away. "She is still my assistant," he rushes to say, squeezing me. "I was going to tell her yesterday I found her a new position. I was in meetings all morning, then those fuckers got ahold of you at the mall. I just left. So, she is my assistant but only because I didn't get a chance to tell her she's not."

My heart rate has slowed down. The hurt lessened with his disclosure. I feel better just knowing she won't be working so closely to him. I move my hands up to his hair, running my fingers through the perfect mess. Masen's hands rove my back,

my sides, even down my legs, comforting me with his touch. “The rest, Little One, all lies. I swear. I haven’t told her I loved her in five years. Never in my life have I ever begged her for anything, least of all sex!” He growls indignantly. It still bothers me thinking about them together. I need to get past it, for his sake and mine. I need to trust him. I can’t keep letting her make me doubt him.

“Masen, I—”

He squeezes me tighter. “Shh,” he cuts in, “You are enough, will always be enough. You satisfying me sexually isn’t even a question.” His voice drops low like even thinking about it has him needy. “I love being inside you, love licking you. The way you taste makes me crazy, and the way you smell, I get hard even being in the same room. You are so beautiful, baby. The way your big, amber eyes light up when you see me or darken with need when you look at me,” he rasps as he nuzzles my breasts. His hands that were giving comforting caresses are now heated strokes. I don’t think he even realizes it. Masen’s knees bracket my feet, his big body touches mine from toe to neck. The borrowed shirt I wear and his low-hanging, gray pants are the only things separating our skin.

I reach under his arms and try to tug him to stand. “Masen, get up.” He stands, never losing contact with my body. He lifts me and drops his face to my neck inhaling my scent and finding his mark. His nose rubs back and forth a few times before I feel the tip of his tongue caress over my scarring skin. I wrap my legs around him and sigh in contentment. Masen walks us back to the bed and sits down with me now straddling him. I feel his erection between my legs, but he ignores it. Instead, he holds me. Letting us both take comfort from each other. “Masen?” He hums in answer. “Masen, I have something to tell you.”

“Yeah, baby?” he asks as he lifts his devastating eyes to mine. They’re soft and kind. No evidence of our argument muddies them.

I squeeze my eyes closed before coming clean. “I looked through your phone after I hung up. I opened your text

conversations. I saw a chat with Michael but didn't read much. When I saw her name, I opened it with the intention of reading it," I spout quickly before losing my nerve. I open my eyes slowly not wanting to see the disappointment after we've both just been through the wringer.

One brow arches while the other eye squints. "So." He shrugs. "I don't care. Were you worried I would be?" he asks, confused.

My body sags in relief. "Yes, I was worried," I answer. "There a few more things I'd like to talk about now that neither of us are angry. That okay?" He nods, looking a little skeptical. "How do you think she knew about you being upset last night?"

I can read the confusion on his face. "I'm not sure, but she must have overheard one or all three of them talking."

"But when would she have overheard them?" I ask. I'm being paranoid, I know I am, but what if she has cameras in here or some crazy shit.

"On Fridays and Saturdays, a lot of the pack goes to the meeting hall. There's usually a band at the bar in the back. That way if things get rowdy we can handle it here, no humans get hurt and no police get involved. We even have karaoke on Wednesdays." He laughs a little but sounds proud. I can tell Masen takes pride in his pack, he seems very generous. I don't know if any of the other packs have all the advantages he provides. There's so much I need to learn, but first, I want to see what he's created, see him interact with his pack.

"Can we go there tonight? I'd love to meet some of your friends, your pack. Wait, I'm only nineteen, can I get in?"

Masen throws his head back and laughs. "You are so damn adorable. It's my bar, baby. If I want to shut it down to make love to you on the stage, I could. Can you get in?" He chuckles.

"That sounds kind of nice, maybe next time." I meant it as a joke, but the way he reacts makes me want to go there now.

His hands grip my hips, and he pushes me down harder on his lap as he grinds up. One of his arms curves around my back. His hand goes to the opposite shoulder, his finger cups my mark as he seeks my lips for a kiss. He kisses me like he needs to, like he can't help but kiss me. My hands caress his back and up his sides over his massive shoulders to his thick neck. God, I love how he feels. Every inch of his body powerful. As I grow wet with desire, my fingers get bold, grabbing his hair and tugging. His resounding growl encourages me to let my body guide me. I break our kiss and move my mouth to his bottom lip, I suck it gently into my mouth. As I release, I bite a little harder than a tease but not to hurt him. His grunt and the way his hips thrust up let me know it's okay. I lick the slight pain I caused and move down to his shadowed chin. I let my tongue barely graze his thick hairs, loving the texture against me. I purr with satisfaction.

Moving down his neck, I kiss and suck my way to his ear, occasionally giving a firm bite to his tension-filled neck. I like it much more than I should. I want to mark his entire body with my teeth. I must say it out loud because I hear Masen's deep voice. "Go ahead, baby. Your teeth feel good on my skin," he grates through his clenched teeth.

At his ear, I whisper with heated breath, "I need to fuck you, Masen. Then, I want you to make love to me, slow."

He shudders beneath me, crushing me close. "Love it when you say my name, baby."

I push away from him enough to look in his hooded eyes, black with need. I nudge his shoulders back so he's laying back on the bed with his feet on the floor. I crawl down his body, tasting every inch as I go. When I make it to the top of his pants, I stand over him at the foot of the four-poster bed. His enormous body splayed out for me makes me feel so powerful. Knowing he could crush any threat with his bare hands and willingly puts himself at my mercy is heady. His head lifts to watch every move I make. The look in his eyes tells me he's indulging me. He's the predator here, always will be, but we are both enjoying my game.

Languidly, I remove my shirt, leaving me naked to his perusal. Masen's tongue slowly swipes his bottom lip. He looks hungry. I run my hands up his thighs until I reach the waist of his pants. Brushing my cheek against his covered erection, I look up and our eyes meet. "Scoot back, Masen." When he lifts to move back, I tug his pants down. He hisses out a breath when I drag my short nails down his thighs. I toss the pants on the floor and prowl up the bed. He grips the sheets. I know he's fighting not to take control. His hard cock, now free, pushes up just past his belly button.

When I'm on all fours, my lips hovering over the engorged head of his cock. I lick him from base to tip with my flat tongue. His back arches off the bed, and he curses. He smells so good, a little like me from last night, but mostly just Masen, like forest, leather and sex. I inhale deeply. "I like smelling my pussy on you, Masen."

His hips rock forward causing the muscles in his abdomen to bunch. "I only have so much restraint, Little One." His voice is guttural, dark. I'm pushing him too far, and I love it. Some part of me knows I'm doing this because of her. I smile up at him and bury my nose at his base and scent him. My eyes never leave his.

"Fucking shit, Sophia!" he yells. "I'm going to spank your ass red for this. So play, Little One, but know it'll be my turn soon." It's a dark promise. Shit, maybe I did go too far.

I push my lips to a small pout then finish crawling up until I'm straddling his hips. I lean forward, trapping his cock between our bodies. He rocks up against my soft belly. I kiss his small nipple sweetly, then move over and bite. He moans. His hands fly to my hips. "Masen?"

He swallows thickly. "Yeah," he croaks.

"Masen, I need you, now." His eyes close. I whisper in his ear, "Put your cock in me, Masen. I need to fuck you." His hands grip my hips. I move from my knees to my feet still hovering above him, so I can lift up enough for him to get inside. His left hand lets go of my hip. He looks between our



bodies and reaches down to grab his cock. I watch as he lines us up, and I lower till he's barely inside me.

He tries to thrust up slowly, but I lift farther, keeping him just inside my opening. He groans and relaxes back to the bed. I circle my hips letting my wetness coat his tip. Without warning, I drop harshly onto him, impaling myself on his shaft. I scream, and he shoots up to sitting on a roar. I'm so worked up, just him being inside me makes me convulse around him. When my muscles relax, I push him back down and take control. I swivel, rock, and circle my hips finding what makes him crazy. When I lean forward and grind, I can feel his base on my clit. When I lean back and brace myself on his thighs his tip rubs my clit on every thrust. Every movement is better than the last. I'm drunk on pleasure. I go back and forth between slow and soft to hard and fast. "Masen, watch my pussy eat you up, take you full." He looks down between our bodies, and I let him almost fall out before slamming back down.

I'm flipped on my back before I even realize what's happened. His face is above mine. Jaw tight, his face savage. "Enough," he barks, "you are MINE! You want to be fucked, Little One? Lift your hands up, now." I'm trembling from excitement and a little fear. I have pushed him too far, but I loved every minute. I comply with his demand, watching him. He's still inside me, he hasn't moved. My arms reach up to nothing, his black gaze looks above me. His smile is beautiful and terrifying. He eases out of me slowly, then he moves to his knees, his hands on either side of me. I get one gentle kiss to my lips, an apology of sorts. I know I'm about to get what I asked for. I just don't know if it'll be more than I bargained for. "Love you, baby. Need you," he says before he strikes. I yell as he slams me up the bed, oh my God. Holy shit, my hand can feel one of the posters of the bed. "Grab ahold, do not let go!" he commands.

Masen fucks me so hard, so deep he hits my cervix with each thrust, it's a perfect agony. I can't tell if I had one long orgasm or multiple. It's so much I'm almost in tears. "Masen, please," My voice not even a whisper, I beg. For more, for

less, for him to stop, for him to never stop, I have no clue my brain is a fog and he is all I know.

“You will come again when I’m ready. You understand?” I nod my head, my voice is hoarse from screaming, my arms are so tired. I don’t think I’ll be able to walk for a week. Unbelievably, his pace speeds up and becomes erratic. “Squeeze me now, come all over my cock, knowing I’m the only one who does the fucking!” I do, his harsh words fueling my climax.

Masen’s demeanor changes immediately. He lovingly caresses my body. When he pulls out, I whimper. I loved every minute, but I am not ready to toy with Masen Black. He taught me a lesson. I curl on my side and know I’ll need to shift later to heal my aching body, but right now, I need sleep. “I’m sorry, baby, so sorry. I got so carried away,” he says regrettably. “Are you okay, Little One?” he whispers.

I just nod my head. My emotions are just as out of whack as my body. He gave me exactly what I wanted. I enjoyed it more than I can say, but I want to cry. I think I was trying to prove to myself that I could be what Roxanne said I couldn’t. I thought I was in control even when I knew I really wasn’t. Now that it is over, I miss my sweet, bossy man. I want him to love me, not fuck me. I’m a mess. I give in to sleep before he feels more of my crazy emotions that I can’t seem to control.

## CHAPTER 20



Masen

FOR THE PAST THREE HOURS, I've watched her sleep. Never once closing my eyes longer than to blink, I haven't left her side. She's still curled up and away from me. I haven't touched her since she whined and rolled away from me. I don't deserve to.

I knew what she was doing. I knew what happened this morning with Roxanne fueled her need to have me. I know she wanted me. We will always want each other, it's part of being Mates.

I should have stopped it, should have never let that happen when it wasn't about just us. If I didn't stop it, I should have at least let her think she was in control. I can't believe the way I treated her. Oh God, the way she felt after I used her. Did she feel like that the whole time? Was I just too caught up in myself to realize it was way too much, way too soon? She was a virgin for fuck's sake days ago, and I fucked her like a man possessed.

What will she think of me when she wakes up? Will she ever trust me again with her body? Part of the reason I haven't left is I'm afraid, afraid she'll wake up and run from me because of the monstrous way I treated her. I can't believe I hurt her physically, her little body bears the bruising of my brutality. The hip I can see has a large purple welt surrounded by many small bruises from my fingers. Her ankle is collared

in purple from me holding her leg up. A tiny drop of blood sits on the corner of her mouth from me biting her lip. I don't want to see the evidence of what I've done, but I can't look away.

Should I call someone? We have a doctor in the pack, quite a few nurses. Why hasn't she woken up? My mind is running in circles.

Our bond is strengthening. Before she fell asleep, I not only felt her emotions, I could see them. I've never heard of anything like this happening, but I could feel her physical pain, her confusion at enjoying what I did to her even when I hurt her. I felt her sadness over what she thinks she lost. She thinks I'll forever be the beast, that she ruined what she had by pushing me. She blames herself for my inability to control myself. She thinks that's what I need to be fulfilled. I'll prove to her how wrong she is.

I saw myself through her eyes, I saw the caring but bossy lover with a dirty mouth she loves to listen to. She thinks she lost him. I also saw the beast that can do things to her body that she doesn't understand, but she doesn't feel the love from him, only his need. Even then, she was concerned for me, she didn't want me to know her heart ached with loss, that her little body throbbed with injuries that I caused.

Before she passed out, I saw a wolf, not hers because it was a white wolf and they've been gone for hundreds of years but a wolf all the same. She knows she needs help healing from my damage. "I need to heal," was her last thought. Our connection is much stronger than anything I knew possible. I can't imagine what will happen when we complete our union. Will I be able to hear all her thoughts? Will she hear mine?

Her eyelids flutter but don't open. Her body curls tighter, making a small ball in my bed. Her knees almost touching her nose. Her hands curve protectively over the top of her legs. Using one finger, I gently stroke her cheek. Her eyes pop open, and she gasps, followed by a long groan. Immediately, I feel her pain. She pulls in a breath through her teeth and prepares to move her body. Her arms feel like they weigh a thousand pounds. Overused from holding the pole to protect herself from my assault. Her legs have cramps in her thighs

and calves. The worst of her physical pain is her belly aches with a low, angry throb from my callous thrust. Her beautiful lips and the bruising not even registering. I know when she recalls every moment. She coughs on a sob she tries to hide.

Oh God, how could I do this? She pulls herself together and turns, looking for me. “Masen,” her voice grates out. She smiles then grimaces when her lip splits more. Licking the fresh blood away, she tries to sound cheerful. “Hey, Masen, my wolf needs a run. Can you go start the shower for me? I need to stretch a bit.” She lies. She doesn’t want me to see her stagger from the bed. “Did you want to run with me?” she asks then quickly adds, “It’s okay now, right? Since we’re Marked, he’ll be okay? I don’t think I’m ready for another round.” She tries to laugh.

“Sophia, stop, please.” Regret clear in my voice. She looks over my shoulder trying to figure out how to act. “I know,” I say quietly. She won’t look at me, she thinks I’m disappointed in her. I want to hold her so bad, but I’m afraid to touch her. “Look at me, Little One.” She does reluctantly after swallowing thickly. “I should have never let that happen, not when I knew it wasn’t about just us,” I say seriously, not wanting to bring Roxanne’s name into the discussion. I know she’ll understand what I mean. “I should have controlled myself. I made a mistake and went way too far. I know I hurt you in more ways than one.” Jesus, her eyes tell me everything our bond is already saying. She still thinks it’s her fault, that she should have listened to my warnings. Her body hurts, but that doesn’t concern her, she’s had worse. At that thought, I want to murder every motherfucker that ever touched her, including myself.

What bothers her most is how I treated her. I didn’t love her, that’s what she thinks anyway. She doesn’t understand that when time passes, and she comes to know her body better and trust me more she’ll love the things we’ll do to each other. She’ll know every touch I deliver to her comes from love. I wasn’t mad at her or angry, It was just too much, too soon for us to play that hard. Regardless, I was too rough. Her little body should never look like a road map of my lust.

“Listen, baby. I know what you’re thinking. I can literally hear your thoughts. None if this is your fault! That’s not what I need when we make love, things got out of hand. I took things too far, too soon. I love you and believe me, I was much more satisfied the other times we’ve made love.” At that, her face crumples, now she really thinks she is a disappointment. “No, no. Fuck, everything I say comes out wrong. That’s not what I meant. Of course, I enjoyed it, but I love it when you enjoy it. You understand? I felt how you felt afterward, and that wasn’t good.” I rub my head vigorously and clear my throat. “When you’re ready, I’ll show you I can and will still make love to you, that I love taking care of you.”

Her eyes widen, she looks appalled. She thinks I want her right now. “Good God, not right now, fuck me. I think I’ve lost the ability to speak like a normal person and convey my thoughts rationally.” I shake my head. I need her to shift. I can’t keep looking at my damage to her body. I need her to understand now that I can fix this. “I fucked up. I’m sorry. I love you. I will continue to love you. I will never hurt you physically, again. I am a fucking asshole. Everything is the same, eventually, you will see I wasn’t rough because I didn’t love you. I was so rough because I love you so much. I know that’s hard to understand because all of this is so new to you. It’s true. I promise. Now, I need you to shift. I can’t keep looking at you.” Her face pinches, she’s trying not to cry. What? Has she been listening? She seems to be understanding what I was saying. Where did I go wrong? I slam my palms to my face. “I can’t keep looking at the damage I’ve caused your body, Little One. I love looking at you!” I rush to say. I’m such a fucking idiot.

Finally, she starts looking at me. “Masen.” When she says my name, it never fails to make my whole body light up. Her sweet southern drawl rounding out the sounds like honey.

“Yeah, baby?” My voice is thick.

“I can’t let you take all the blame, so stop. I was being childish. I thought I was ready for... that, and obviously, I’m not.” She shakes her head. “Now that I’m awake and we’ve talked, I get it. And Masen, I know you weren’t trying to hurt

me. So, quit torturing yourself. I was the one trying to prove a point to someone who has no business in our lives, let alone our bedroom.” Her voice is quiet. She’s embarrassed. I’m in awe of her eloquence and her generous nature.

I’m one lucky fucker. “I love you, Sophia.” It’s all I have to offer right now, but because she is who she is, it’s more than enough. Her smile is genuine if not a little pained from her re-split lip.

“I love you, too, Masen.”

“Now, let’s get you shifted. I want to do it here. I’ll let you outside and shift when I get out. Don’t worry about the bed. I’ll take care of it.”

She looks at the bed, then at me. “What’s wrong with the bed?” she asks curiously.

“I mean when you shift, the mess.”

Her head tilts. “What mess?”

Is she serious? “Just shift, baby.”

Her eyebrows are raised, she shakes her head.

Then to my utter amazement, she shifts in seconds to a beautiful, solid white wolf. She’s twice the size of any female wolf I’ve ever seen. “Holy shit,” I mutter in astonishment. She didn’t writhe or claw. Shit, she didn’t even make a noise. One minute she is my sweet baby, the next, she’s a fierce wolf that’s been extinct for hundreds of years.

She pads over to me on the edge of the bed and nuzzles her face under my neck. She has no idea she’s different. “Little One?” I try wondering if our bond will allow me to communicate with her before I shift. She looks at me, her amber eyes soft.

*Masen* I hear in my head. My jaw must hit the floor. I can hear her like she is speaking to me. Usually, we’ll get feelings, but she’s linked to me like we are fully Mated.

“Baby, you didn’t know you’re different?” I ask but send her my emotions, showing her how wonderful and beautiful I think she is.

*No, what's different about me?*

Shit, where do I even begin? At least, things make more sense now. I don't know enough about white wolves to understand all the differences. I can tell she's picking up my thoughts.

*So, because I'm white, I'm different? That's kind of silly. What color are you?*

“Not only are you white, which is really special, you're much bigger than the usual female.”

*Not much new there,* she interrupts.

“I think this explains a lot of the things we've been questioning. Why your parents kept you separated, how we knew each other as Mates before you shifted, why you challenge me, shit why you smell so good to everyone,” I add bitterly. Yeah, I'm a selfish bastard, “How our bond is already so strong before we've had a ceremony. How you're even communicating with me right now.” I let my thoughts run free with how shifting usually works for most. The slight pain, how a wolf and person aren't able to speak to each other, with the exception of the Alpha. How only fully joined Mates can hear each other, unMated wolves only communicate with their feelings or emotions.

*Maybe it's because you're an Alpha that you can hear me. And, it did hurt the first time I shifted but only for an hour or two and not since.*

My mind reels at the possibilities, then fear hits me like a wave. We have to be fully Mated soon. Every unMated Alpha will try to challenge me for her. I growl and snarl so loudly she jumps. I've already Marked her, but there is still a chance they would try. I have to keep this between us and a few of my trusted men until I understand everything it means. My chest swells with pride that she chose me. My wolf is begging to be free. “Oh, baby, I don't think we should run without taking precautions. I don't want anyone knowing about you being a white wolf yet. The risk is too great. Do you need to run?” I ask sadly. My wolf is pissed. “I protect mine,” he growls at me.



*I don't really need to run, but I don't want to shift back yet. Can I just hang out in here for a bit? Will you shift too? My wolf wants her Mate. Plus, I want to see you. I'm not bigger than you, am I?* she asks, horrified at the thought.

I chuckle. "Not by a long shot, baby." I feel her relief. She's so damn adorable. "I guess I can shift. It's not nearly as graceful as yours, a bit more explosive, yeah." I walk to the other side of the room and let my wolf free.

## SOPHIA

Masen's wolf is majestic. He's also massive and solid black, so black his fur swallows the light. His white blue eyes remain the same creating a contrast so striking it almost looks unreal. His shift was electric. I felt his wolf burst free. If I wasn't already shifted, it would have forced me through my change. *You're so big.*

He gruffs out loud, almost like a laugh. *I know*, he answers smugly.

I roll my eyes. *Impossible*, I joke. *Can I come over there? I've never met another wolf*, I say excitedly.

*Yeah, baby, come on.* I can feel the humor directed at me.

I almost run. Not used to the hardwood when I jump from the bed, I slide a little, my claws dig in to find purchase. I grimace. *Sorry, Masen.* He doesn't care, it doesn't even register. His wolf towers over me. His muzzle drops to my shoulder, finding his Mark. He bites me gently then licks over the slight burn. He nuzzles me all over, rubbing his scent on me as I stand still while he circles me. He's a little muskier as a wolf, but still the best scent I've ever smelled.

*My turn yet?*

His answering growl tells me he's not done. I chuff but wait, allowing his perusal.

When he finally finishes, he stands back for my inspection, head held high, back legs wide. He's like a big ole show puppy. I giggle to myself. He growls low in warning not liking my comparison. I nuzzle my Mark giving him the same treatment he bestowed upon mine. Then I play, I nudge, push,

and nip him. His stance lowers. That's all the warning I get before he pounces.

Masen's gentle with me while we play. His bedroom still looks like a bomb went off when we're done. I pant hard, hungry and thirsty from our rough housing. My wolf is content to have met her Mate and expel some energy. *I need to eat*, I send to Masen.

We are lying on his floor bathed in the warm afternoon sunlight from a window. I don't know what it is about being in a cool house laying in the heat of the sun that's so appealing. I do it all the time in my other form, usually, I'm on the couch. I snicker, I've never changed indoors before, never felt safe enough to.

*Okay, Little One, let's shower and get some food.* Masen watches me change back. It's just as uneventful as before. I watch him in turn. He stretches, then in seconds, he's my Masen again. We both smile at my thought.

All my injuries are healed, my body feels better than it has in ages. Masen is attentive in the shower. Worshiping my body gently as he washes me before trying to wash my long hair. "It felt so good when you washed mine. I wanted to do that for you," he pouts.

"Masen, have you ever had long hair before?" I ask, knowing the answer.

"Not really," he huffs.

"Well, it's a little different, that's all. You'll have to watch and learn," I say sassily.

He grabs me around the waist, squeezing. "You, sassy girl, need to wash mine. That will help teach me," he states with a nod, proud of his backward logic. I roll my eyes. I'm going to develop a tic at this rate. I finish with my hair and give Masen his lesson, before washing him.

When we get out, he again takes his time drying me. "I don't know how you want to dry your hair, baby." He hands me a towel after he's wrapped me up. He dries himself

proficiently and leaves the room to dress. I finish my business then follow him out to dress myself.

Both too hungry to bother making anything, I plate up cold cuts, cheese, and some fresh strawberries. The phone rings when the first morsel of cheese melts in my mouth. We both look at the offending device like it's a loaded weapon. I'm not close enough to see who's calling. Blowing out a breath, Masen answers. With his mouth full, he mumbles, "Yeah." I can't hear the other side of the conversation, but I can tell by his demeanor it's not her. He's quiet for a few moments listening. "Let me know if anything changes," he says briskly and hangs up. "They didn't return to your old house last night. No one has reported any sightings. If we haven't found anything by Monday morning, you'll have two options," he raises one finger, "no school" I scoff. He arches one eyebrow challenging me but smiles beautifully then raises the second finger. "Or a bodyguard." This time he lifts both brows repeatedly.

"You are such a freak," I laugh out.

Masen works in his office for a bit while I do my homework then start to play with my new camera. I take a few pictures of the inside of the house but decide I need a better muse. Sneaking to his office, I can hear him on the phone speaking sternly to someone. I lower to my hands and knees, wrapping the camera's strap around my neck. I crawl through the door one-handed while I use the other hand to steady the camera. I move behind the sofa as quickly as I dare. I don't think he knows I'm in the room. He's facing the opposite wall, looking out the window.

I turn off the flash and change the shutter speed to hopefully keep the camera silent. "Just handle it! That's what you're paid to do!" he snaps as he turns and hangs up the phone. "Fucking idiot," he curses. I snap the first picture. He didn't seem to hear me, so I wait until I'm ready and continue snapping away. He's so attractive. His harsh face rugged. You would never know hours ago he was playing with me and pouting in the shower. I love that I see the sweet, kind side of him. Seconds pass before he lifts his head and scents the air.

Masen's whole face changes and I snap shot after shot as his eyes light up and the corners of his mouth lifting. God, he's gorgeous.

"You can't hide, Little One. If I wasn't so damn distracted, I would have known the moment your pretty, little ass came within twenty feet. Now come out and give me a kiss. These people piss me off," He states gruffly. I poke my head up and pout back at him.

"I was working," I say in mock chastisement.

"Kiss. Baby, I need it." He looks at me from under his brows, trying to be firm, but his lips are soft with one corner turned up. I huff like it's a pain but comply. I throw myself onto his lap dramatically.

Masen kisses me sweetly like he's afraid of anything more after this morning. I turn up the heat a bit but pull away before it gets too far. "I love you, Masen."

His eyes bore into mine. "Love you, too, Little One."

I sit with him while he works a bit more before asking, "What's Black Industries?"

"One of my businesses," he answers aloofly.

"What kind of business?"

"I have lots of little businesses. Black Industries is one of the larger ones, but it holds lots of little ones." He smiles kindly.

"Why are you being so weird? This is the second time I've asked you about your business, and you just keep being evasive. Do you not want me to know?" I ask defensively.

"No, no," he dismisses me. "It's nothing like that. I just own lots of business, but the only one I really have a hand in anymore is Black Industries. I don't mean to be weird about it," he chuckles, "Most everyone around here knows what it is. A lot of shifters come here just because I own Black." He shrugs his shoulders. "I've gotten in the habit of not talking about it."

My back is cradled by his arm, my legs hang over the armrest, and his arm curves over my thighs. He looks down and smiles at me. He didn't shave this morning, so his shadowed jaw is darker. He's back to wearing jeans with a black V-neck t-shirt that looks tailored. It hasn't been, it just fits that well, the shoulders and arms straining over his mass, stopping just below his belt. I know every time he raises his arm I'll be awarded with a glimpse of his toned, tan belly. I also happen to know he's commando beneath his button flys. His feet are bare under the desk, making one overall package so sexy it's overwhelming.

"I'm very glad you like what you see, baby." My cheeks blush. I need to remember he can read me and hear me.

"How come I can't hear your thoughts anymore?"

He looks thoughtful. "I'm not sure if you need to learn to tune in or if it's because I'm an Alpha. I can communicate with everyone in my pack one way or another. You can sense me. I think it'll be trial and error and practice, but we'll figure it out." His face is pensive. Suddenly, I want to kiss him desperately so I do. When we break, he smiles before saying, "See!"

Huh? "See what?" I ask slowly. What am I missing?

"You felt me wanting you to kiss me." He chuckles, my belly drops. "You just have to learn to listen. Your wolf will always hear me, I am the Alpha."

"Okay, but I want to hear you. Say something to me now, not as a wolf." I close my eyes and focus like it somehow might help. Masen tweaks my nose and says, "So adorable." With my eyes still closed, I bat his hand away. It's quiet. I feel his chest rising, I hear his heart beating but no words.

*Masen, can you hear me?* I think. Still, no response. I'm a little sad, but maybe when we are fully joined, I'll be able to hear him.

"I did hear you, Little One," he says kindly. "You're right. After our union, you probably will. Don't forget not to discuss this with anyone yet. You could probably talk to Nicole if you

have some questions. Michael will know so she will know. Just not yet, yeah?”

I don't know how well my next question will go over, but it's only fair. “Will you teach me to block you?”

His head swings to me. “Absolutely not!” he snaps. “Why the hell would you want to block me?” he asks disbelievingly.

“Calm down, Big Guy, I was just asking, but I don't want anybody else in your pack reading me. I don't have any experience blocking. You are the only one who can help me.” Overreact much.

“No, I'm not overreacting.” He's sullen.

“Masen, it's fine as long as everyone else can't feel or hear me. That would be mortifying.” I shudder thinking about it.

“Awe, baby, what ya thinking about?” he teases.

“Stop it, Masen. I would be so embarrassed if someone felt me thinking about us,” I spout.

He just laughs at me. “If you still want to go to the Hall tonight, we need to get ready, we can grab dinner there, too, if you want.”

It's a little after six. I am getting hungry, again. “Yeah, I still want to go. Should I wear jeans, a dress, or something in the middle?” I'm gonna need to head home again to get my clothes. Maybe he'll take me tomorrow. I don't want to go there by myself, it's too creepy.

“It's pretty casual. You look beautiful in anything so wear whatever you want,” he says, distracted.

That is not at all helpful. “Masen, can I use your phone?” I huff. I can tell he's confused.

“Ah sure, it's under here somewhere. Here ya go.”

Scrolling through to the Ns, I find only one Nicole. “This is Michael's Nicole, right?”

He looks up at the phone, then me. “Oh yeah, why are you calling her?”

Men, they have no clue. “I need to know what to wear, Masen.” I roll my eyes yet again.

Swiping her name, I select call. It rings twice before a man answers, question clear in his voice, “Mase?”

“Ah no, this is Sophia. I was hoping I could talk with Nicole. Is this Michael?”

“Yeah, sorry, Luna. She’s right here. Just one second.”

Her voice soft and kind. “Hey Sophie. How are you?”

“I’m good. Sorry to bother you.”

“Oh, it’s no bother. So what’s up?”

“Well, Masen is taking me to the hall to the bar part, and when I asked him what to wear...”

Her laugh interrupts me. “Let me guess, he said wear anything you’ll look beautiful.” She tries to imitate his deep voice, which makes me laugh.

“Yeah, that was almost perfect. So, any advice? I don’t have too much to choose from. I haven’t got all my stuff.”

“Well, during the week, it’s pretty casual. On the weekends, the girls usually go all out. So, I’d say either break the mold and go cute casual or really gussy it up. Don’t worry though. You’ll be stunning,” she says sincerely.

“Thank you, Nicole. Will you and Michael be coming?”

“Ya know. We weren’t, but now, I think we might.”

“Thanks again, Nicole. I’ll see ya there.”

“No problem. See you soon, Sophie.”

We say goodbye and hang up. I’m not much better off than I was, but at least, I’ll know someone there. While I was on the phone, I made my way back to the bedroom. I’m now in the closet going through my meager selection. Skinny jeans and a nice top with heels or my last sundress with my cowboy boots. I’m already going to stick out like a sore thumb. Being the only size fourteen in a pack full of fours or sixes makes it kind of hard to blend in. So, I might as well wear what I want.

My sundress is white with a small floral pattern. It's high waisted, but because my chest is so big, it looks empire-waisted on me. The front top resembles a corset with hook and eye closures, but the thin material isn't too tight. The bottom hem lands right above my knee. The skirting has two layers of the same thin fabric from the top creating a fuller effect. Thank goodness, I didn't wear this yesterday. I leave my hair down, long and wavy. It's not too frizzy, so I'm happy with it. I want to look nice for Masen, so I add a little eyeliner to my mascara and blush to my cheeks before smacking on some vanilla lip balm. I've already repainted my nails a deep dark purple, so I grab my boots and go find Masen.

I hear him speaking to someone before I find him. His voice is calm, relaxed. He's either on the house phone or whoever he's talking to is here because I still have his cell. I stop walking and think about him. I'm trying to use my senses to see if I can strengthen them. I close my eyes. He's in the living room; I know that much. I'm not sure how I know, but I do. The only emotion I feel is contentment. A small bubble of happy surfaces, almost like a laugh. I smile at his happy thought, whatever it was. I can still hear the low cadence of his voice but not the words.

Giving up, I head to the living room. His back is to me. The phone cradled between his ear and shoulder as he uses his hands in front of him. It sounds like he's pouring a drink. "Yeah, that sounds good. I'll see you there." He disconnects. "Hey, Little One," he says before turning. He does have a short rounded glass in his hand with a few inches of an amber liquid. When my eyes move up to his, I see desire etched in his features, hooded eyes and lips parted. His top teeth sink into his full bottom lip as his gaze goes from my face to my bare feet then back up. He widens his legs and adjusts himself. I'll be damned if it's not one of the hottest things ever to know I caused that reaction. "Love looking at you, baby, but I'm not sure you should wear the dress, yeah. You got any sweatpants? Maybe a sweatshirt? It's too warm for a coat." The end comes out more to himself. "What about that really long dress from yesterday? That one touched your toes. I like that dress and the sweater, you had a sweater," he's rambling.



It's so stinking cute. I shake my head. He's still in his jeans and t-shirt. I know he'll be the most handsome man in the room, and he's worried about someone seeing my legs? He's kinda crazy, but it makes me feel good.

“Masen, I love you. Are you ready?”

He starts to turn his head but keeps looking at me. I can hear him mumbling. “Let's go.” He sighs like it's such a burden. When we reach the front, I drop my boots and grab his arm to slide them on. He stops when I touch his arm and looks down. “Are you kidding me with the boots?”

No, he didn't. “Masen, these are my favorite boots. You better watch it,” I say seriously.

He shakes his head. “Baby, you have no idea how sexy you look, and then, you add those damn boots. All I'm going to be thinking about is fucking you with them on. Just pray no one else opens their fucking mouth.” He keeps mumbling under his breath as he grabs my hand and tucks it into his elbow.

## CHAPTER 21



Masen and I walk to the hall. The weather is perfect, warm with a cool breeze, the humidity has dropped finally. It takes us less than twenty minutes to arrive. I'm a little nervous. All these people have known Masen for years. I want them to like me. Plus, I still don't have much experience with other shifters, it's intimidating.

He pulls me in for an embrace before reaching forward to open the door for me. It's not the same door I used a few days ago, it's around the back of the building. There are a few people dotted around a huge fire pit. Anyone seated stands and nods or raises a hand to Masen in greeting. Before returning to their seat, many look like they're going to approach, but his surly expression keeps them at a distance.

"They're going to think you're miserable, Masen. The way you keep mean mugging everyone that looks at us. I want them to like me, not hate me because their Alpha turned into an unapproachable grump!" The corner of his lips turns up barely displaying a devilish smirk. Well shit, that's not any better, now, all these women will be fantasizing about his mouth. Goodness, I'm just as bad as he is.

I've never been in a bar, but this is pretty much what I expected, lots of tables, a couple booths, and a long bar that runs all along one wall. Stools line the high counter, most are full. I can see a beautiful redhead tending the bar with an equally redheaded male working beside her. They must be brother and sister.

There are a few empty tables. The people seem to group together; everyone looks friendly with each other. As the door closes behind us, every head turns almost in unison as we enter. “That’s not at all creepy,” I say in a hushed tone. Masen chuckles.

Again, they all stand out of respect until he motions for them to sit. With a hand on my back, he ushers me to a dark, corner booth. “Why are we sitting way over here?” I ask looking around to the empty tables surrounding us. “This is weird, Masen. Everyone is staring at us, but no one’s talking to us. This is how I felt at school. Do they always stay away like this?”

Everyone is indeed staring at us. There are more men than women, but the groups are mixed. From what I can tell, most of the men wear jeans, while the women are dressed in slinky dresses, miniskirts, and cropped tops. A few wear pants with revealing shirts. One thing they all share is the heels. Not one woman besides me is wearing less than a four-inch heel. They’ve all got me beat by four inches before the heels. I feel like I’ve been transported to the land of Amazonians.

Masen urges me into the booth and scoots in close behind me. When I try to keep scooting, he puts his heavy arm over my shoulder, stopping me before I reach the middle of the booth. The way we’re seated, I can’t even see the rest of the bar. His big body is on the outside of mine, blocking me.

I huff. “Masen, should we just leave? Obviously, you’re not comfortable here or with me here.”

His body relaxes a tiny bit, and he turns his head and looks down at me guiltily. “I’m trying to adjust. I don’t really like them looking at you. This is hard for me, too. I want to hurt them,” he growls slightly and clenches his fists. I place my hand over his and bring it under the table to the top of my thigh. “So, it’s best if we stay over here for now.” I can feel his restrained violence. I stroke his hand and arm under the table reassuringly.

“Do all males get a little... ah, territorial in the beginning?”

He's still looking down at me. I see when his eyes soften. "It just depends, Little One. I'm sure it'll get better after we've Mated fully," he says unconvincingly. He runs his hands through his hair. "It's actually gotten worse since those fuckers at the mall!" he spits angrily. "I'll deal with it, baby. Don't worry." He smiles.

Masen's head turns to the bar, and he nods once. Moments later, the pretty, redheaded barmaid nears our table with a big smile and two menus. "Hi, I'm Lizzy. Everyone calls me Red. I've been so excited to meet you!" She gushes, I can't help but smile back.

"Are you Sid's Red?" I ask tentatively.

Her eyes light up, and her smile gets a little bigger. "Oh yes. I'm his," she states proudly. She places the menus down and looks at Masen for the first time. She goes a little pale. "Alpha," she clears her throat, "what can I get you to drink?" She looks right at Masen.

In his deep, low timbre, he asks, "What would you like, Little One?" I've never had alcohol. I'm not sure what to get. He realizes quickly and says, "We'll have a white and red wine, and I'll have my usual. Thanks, Red."

She exhales when he speaks. Her bubbly demeanor back, she chirps, "I'll get those right out," and dashes to the bar.

"Why did she get so freaked out?"

His hand under the table squeezes my thigh. "Sometimes, I forget you've never been in a pack. She didn't address me first. I'm her Alpha. If I address her, which I did by nodding for her to come over, she should always show respect. It's not a big deal. I've never cared too much. It's just the way packs work. Tradition, I guess." He shrugs.

We look over the menu, and Red returns with our drinks. "I brought a water, too, sweetie," she says, talking to me.

"Thank you."

She places a bottle and a glass similar to the one Masen was drinking from at home in front of him before putting the

two glasses of wine and water near me. “You guys gonna have dinner?”

Masen answers, “A few others are coming, so we’ll wait until they get here.”

Red nods her head. “Let me know if you need anything. I’ll check on you in a bit.”

I lean around Masen to watch her walk back to the bar. “Is that her brother? Do they run this place? They have such beautiful hair,” I muse.

“Yes, that’s her brother, Rick. She and Sid are part owners, so she works usually one night on the weekends and Wednesday. She loves it, keeps her busy.”

Most everybody has gone back to socializing, so I sneak peeks around him, watching everyone. We’ve been here about fifteen minutes when I see Sniffer and Sam walk in. They both wear smiles as they near the table. “Could you hide her any better man? I think I could see her arm once I got within ten feet of the table,” Sniffer jokes. Masen’s hand reaches up from under the table and pulls my hand that was toying with one of the wine glasses under the table. Sniffer’s face falls. “Mase, I was just kidding. Are you alright?” he asks seriously.

“I’m fine,” Masen snaps defensively.

Sniffer looks at me before scooting in the booth from the opposite side. Masen’s chest rumbles before Sniffer makes it in enough for Sam to sit. He freezes and looks at Masen incredulously. “Nicole will be here with Michael any minute. She will sit there,” Masen grates.

I can feel his distress at his brother being near me. I reach up and place both hands on his cheeks, looking into his eyes. “Masen, he’s not here to hurt me or you.” I send him soothing thoughts, conveying with my eyes everything’s fine. “Let’s not have them stand there looking silly. Let him sit. He’ll move when Nicole gets here. That sound good, big guy?” His head nods in my hands, but he doesn’t look away. “I love you,” I whisper softly and bring his face to mine for a small kiss.

When I pull back, Sniffer and Sam are seated close together, keeping as much space between us as possible.

Everyone at the table is tense. “Sam, how did your date go?” I try, hoping to lighten the mood. He smirks at me then tells me every detail of their date. He finishes with telling me their next date is tomorrow at the falls. It sounds like they had a wonderful time.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it so much,” I say honestly. “How about you, Sniffer? Any hot prospects?” I urge.

“Not just, yet.” He winks. “But the night is young.” I laugh at his cheeky answer.

Masen finally loosens up enough to talk. Red comes back and takes Sam’s and Sniffer’s drink orders, dropping off a few more menus. “Any others joining you, Alpha?”

“Michael and Nicole should be here soon,” he answers with a smile. I don’t know if it’s the drinks he’s nursing or what, but he’s much more relaxed. Laughing and joking with the guys. Much more like the lunch we shared at school.

Nicole and Michael finally make it about a half hour later. Her cheeks are flushed, and Michael seems more relaxed than I’ve ever seen. Sniffer and Sam stand, letting her scooch in next to me. She hugs me when she’s situated. I’m a little surprised, but I hug her back. “You look lovely, Nicole,” I say truthfully. Her long dark hair is pen straight and glossy. She looks sexy but not overdone in a maxi dress.

“Thank you, Doll. Michael likes it, too. That’s why we’re late,” she huffs. I laugh at her candor, she joins me. When I realize how quiet it is, I look around. Everyone at the tables watches us with varying degrees of smiles. Masen’s and Michael’s being the biggest.

We all order dinner. Our booth was too crowded to eat at, so we moved three tables together. The table gets louder and louder as the night progresses. I like the white wine, so Masen orders me another. Sid eventually joins us, and Red sits as often as she can.

Around ten, the music gets louder, and people start dancing. I'm having such a good time. I hadn't noticed how packed the bar is until I need to use the restroom. I lean over to Masen who is in an animated conversation with Sniffer and Michael. "Masen." I rub his thigh to get his attention.

He stops mid-sentence and asks, "Yeah, baby?" Blushing because everyone at the table turned to look over when he answers me.

I clear my throat. "Where's the restroom?"

Nicole, who's had quite a few drinks, giggles and stands on shaky legs. "I'll take you," she slurs. I'm not even sure she can find it at this point.

Masen stands before I can answer and tucks my hand into his elbow. "I got her, Nick. Thanks though," he says kindly. To Michael who's pulled her onto his lap, he says, "You've got your hands full tonight, Buddy." He just looks down at his Mate curled up in his arms and smiles.

Masen leads me to the restroom and tries to walk in. "What are you doing? That's the ladies' room." His face looks torn. He wants to follow me in the bathroom? "Uh uh, I can go pee all by myself, Masen," I snap.

"Fine, fine. I'll wait right here," he concedes on a huff. He leans against the wall as close as the door will allow. I tut and close the door behind me. He's a bit ridiculous but cute. What the hell does he think is gonna happen in a bathroom?

I finish my business, wash my hands, and wipe under my eyes to catch any stray mascara. I'm slathering on some lip balm when I hear low murmurs coming from the other side of the door. Opening it slowly, I see Masen talking to Red. She walks away before I hear what they were talking about. "Everything okay?"

His eyes shift down to me. "Yeah, she was letting me know Michael and Nicole left..."

I can tell there's more. "And?" I question.

"And, Roxanne and her friends just got here," he answers, sounding tired.

“Did you want to leave?”

He shakes his head. “No, Little One, I don’t want to be cruel to her, but she needs to stop. I just don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

I wish Nicole was still here, I think ruefully. “Alright, let’s go on back.” I’m not looking forward to this. Masen tucks me close and kisses me briefly before he walks us back to our seats. Knowing she’s here, my eyes can’t help but search for her.

I don’t need to look long. Her large group has taken the tables closest to ours. Neither group acknowledges the other until we move past them to sit, that is. Roxanne’s head snaps up, and she looks at me from head to toe before leaning to the woman on her right and giggling. I know she’s talking about me. Masen’s body is between their table and me as we pass. None dare say anything now that we’re so near.

Now that Nicole and Michael are gone, the table is much more subdued. I plaster a smile on my face and ask jokingly, “So was she able to walk, or did he have to carry her?”

Sniffer’s the quickest to understand. “Ah, it was a bit of both actually. She wanted to wait for you, but she was falling asleep in his lap.” He laughs quietly.

A voice from behind me says, “I didn’t know he’d tell her about carrying me home.” Next, in a mock whisper, she adds, “Do you think he told her everything he’d do to me once we got home, too?” She fakes outrage. “Maybe he’s had to teach her a few things. He always loved it when I would...”

Masen’s fist slams the table so hard it cracks, wood splintering all over as chunks rain to the floor. Other than the music playing in the background, the bar is silent. Every man at the table looks pissed, but Masen looks murderous. His eyes are black. I can see the tips of his canines. Her table is behind us, so I can’t see her reaction. I won’t turn to look, I’m not giving her the satisfaction. I will whoop her ass for all this snide bullshit.



I place my hand on Masen's face and turn it to me. "I'm done with this. It needs to be taken care of. You just watch, no involvement." To Sniffer, I say, "In here or outside?"

They all look confused before he responds, "How much damage we talking?"

I love that he doesn't doubt me. "Not as wolves, just an old-fashioned ass whoopin'."

His smile is electric. "IN!" He chuckles. Masen is conflicted. I can feel his worry, but I know if the roles were reversed, we'd be dealing with a dead body.

I stand slowly, wishing I went with jeans instead of my favorite dress. Well, there's nothing I can do, now. I'm sure with how quiet it is she heard most of what I said, but she hasn't responded. When I do turn to see her, she actually looks a little smug.

Before I can speak, Masen does. "Roxanne, you've brought this on yourself. For you disrespecting my Luna, my Mate, you are challenged to fight as humans. If you shift, I will end it." His deadly tone leaves no question as to how he will end it.

Her face falls. "Mase? You're going to let her challenge me?" She sneers like I'm beneath her, but I can still hear the pain in her voice. This isn't what she expected. She thought I turn tail and run, or that Masen would protect her. Boy, was she wrong.

Masen obviously doesn't like her tone any more than I do. He shakes his head and says brutally, "If she kills you, your family may not seek revenge. When this is over, if it happens again, she will kill you, and your family will be expelled from my pack."

Complete and utter astonishment covers her face before it hardens to fury. "And, if I kill her?"

I laugh darkly, and she looks at me for the first time since this started. Something she sees must scare her because she recoils. No one answers her question.

“I think I will take this outside,” I say, smiling, looking directly at her. She looks down and swallows. The women she is with have all shifted away from her ever so slightly.

“Masen,” I say.

“Yeah, baby,” comes quickly.

“A kiss. I need it. This bitch has pissed me off.”

He chuckles, and my belly drops before he leans down to oblige. “I love you, Little One. Don’t let her hurt you,” he whispers. I know by the way he says it he’s not talking physically. She’s going to use words in her arsenal. “None of it matters. Just you and me, yeah?”

“Come on, blondie. You’re due an ass kickin’!”

## CHAPTER 22



I walk outside and Masen follows. The entire bar empties out behind him. I'm not worried about her coming out. If she didn't, the entire pack would know she's a coward and she'll be out.

I feel a little silly, since I'm about to throw down in a dress. I don't think she'll make it more than one minute without a wardrobe malfunction, her dress looks like it's barely held up. I will not let all these people see me in my panties. I'll just have to drop her quick. I have a lot of experience fighting to defend, but I've never been the aggressor. Good thing I'll get more and more pissed off every time I look at her or she looks at Masen.

There is no way I'm risking my boots and dress, not to mention leather-soled cowboy boots won't do me much good on the grass and soil out here. I hand my boots to Sam. "I love these boots, Sam. Take care of them." He nods and salutes.

She finally emerges looking like she's ready for a photo shoot. I swear she put on more makeup. Quickly, I throw my long hair in a thick braid and wait. It's not long before she saunters over in her five-inch spiked heels, giving her a huge height advantage. Oh well, with one good body shot, she'll be bent over anyway. She purposely brushes past Masen, letting her body linger as she passes and looking up at him. I yell an, "Uh uh," before shit gets real. I grab her by the back of her head and snatch her back enough she almost falls. My intention isn't to pull her hair, it's to get her moving. I let her recover before sneering, "Come get some." That's all it takes.

She flies at me with her arms outstretched. I think she is trying to claw my face up. She's fast, I'll give her that, but she has no fighting experience. Standing still, I lift my arm and bring it down hard on the top of hers. Her momentum carries her forward, almost falling into me when she teeters on her heels. She's going to break her ankle.

Now she's pissed. She screeches loud enough I think a dog two counties over bays. She runs at me again, and I strike out with my out turned palm hard slamming in the middle of her chest just below her breast. Her arms are longer, so I get a slap or punch. I'm not sure, it might even be her nails to my cheek.

She pulls back, gasping like a fish out of water. A solid hit to the solar plexus will take the wind out of a grown man let alone a hundred and twenty-pound amazon. I stand ready and wait. I can hear people talking, no one person stands out, jeers and cheers surround us.

Smartening up, she goes on the defensive, this time waiting for me to attack. Her height advantage really limits my offensive tactics. She starts running her mouth trying to fluster me. "Did Masen ever tell you about the week he took me to aspen? He fucked me so much I couldn't walk for a day. We never left the room, seven days of him fucking me," she sneers. "How about when he tells you to swallow? That's one of his favorites." That one hits close to home. Deciding to end this quickly and knowing she'll be able to shift to heal, I know my plan.

Lowering my center mass, I move closer, always looking at her face and letting her assume that's where my attack will fall. When I'm close enough, I turn slightly and snap the side of my foot out and down on her knee. She howls and falls immediately, grabbing ahold of her now broken knee. I stand back and watch as a few shifters move to aide her. When her eyes find mine, I know she'll never give up. I haven't seen the last of Roxanne. I nod, acknowledging her threat.

Masen's hot breath is at my neck as he bends and scents just behind my ear, letting his mouth graze my throat with small kisses. "You may shift to heal," he orders Roxanne. His voice gruff. With him still behind me, he reaches up to the

cheek she damaged and palms it. His hand pulls back, and I see small traces of blood. She must have used her nails. His face leans next to mine; he runs his nose along my cheek then licks. It's primal, and it ignites me. My wolf approves. She wasn't happy she didn't get to play but Masen tending us eases her. A soft noise rumbles from my chest. My head falls back, and he latches on to his Mark. I hear someone saying something repeatedly. It doesn't register. The burn on my cheek is gone, the adrenaline and anger have turned to heated desire.

I feel Masen hard and thick behind me. His hands grip my hips and rove my soft belly inching up toward my breasts. My back arches, and a small groan sounds. His answering growl excites me more. I can hear his heavy pants and feel his heart speeding.

The persistent noise breaks through again, and Masen roars, "WHAT!"

My eyes snap open, and every shifter is staring at us, some touching themselves or others sexually. "Oh my, God," I say horrified at what I was just doing with a captive audience. When I look down, Roxanne is gone, only her shoes remain. "Ding dong, bitch," flies from my mouth before I slap my hand over it, mortified I spoke that out loud. Holy shit, I need to get out of here. Masen moves in front of me and snarls at the group in front of us. I grab his shirt and hide my face.

Oh my, God, oh my, God. I chant over and over in my head. They will always think of me as an exhibitionist slut puppy. Hysterical laughter tries to escape my closed mouth, but that would be better than the sobs threatening to follow. "I want to go now," I say quietly to anyone that will listen.

Masen turns and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around him, and he reaches down with one hand to make sure I'm covered. His sweet gesture makes me love him even more. "Love you, too, baby," he coos softly. My head is on his shoulder, my arms wrapped around him, and my legs cling to his waist. He leaves the clearing and walks us to an SUV. Sniffer, Sam, Red, and Sid follow.

Sniffer gets in the driver's seat while Masen tries to get in the passenger seat. Together we are too big. I kiss his lips tenderly and slide into the back seat. He comes in behind me, barely fitting. We need a tank or a full-size hummer. Sam gets in the passenger seat. Sniffer starts the car then slams his hand on the wheel.

I jump at the sudden sound. "Goddamn! You were like a little ninja. Where the hell did you learn that shit? You didn't even move. One second, she was coming at you, then the next, she was getting her ass kicked. Holy shit, that was awesome," he pants excitedly. Sam's shoulders shake as he tries to hide his laughter. The doors are still open, so I hear Red when she starts to giggle.

Sid's next to speak. "How'd you make her stop breathing? I was watching the whole thing from five feet away, and I couldn't tell what the hell happened." I can handle these questions. It's what happened after that freaks me out.

"I struck her solar plexus, knocked the wind out of her. And, I'm not a ninja, goofball. I've just learned to take care of myself."

The humor evaporates instantly. "Take us home, Cass," Masen snaps.

I climb in bed after my shower, wearing Masen's t-shirt from earlier. I'm so tired I don't bother shutting the lights off. Masen crawls in behind me and hugs me close. "You okay, baby?" Concern colors his voice.

I blow out a breath. "I'm embarrassed that we were... ya know, and everybody was watching and doing stuff."

"It's my fault, little one. I tend to get carried away when I'm with you. I should have known to wait until we were alone to touch you. I'm glad Cass was able to stop us."

I shudder thinking about what would have happened. "Is that normal? For them to react that way?"

"That was both of us, baby. Neither of us were masking our emotions, and we were both pretty amped up." He chuckles.

“Great! Now, they’ll think I’m a violent tramp,” I huff. What the hell was I thinking?

“Nah, they’ll respect you for handling her. You’ve never been in a pack, but this kind of thing isn’t even all that unusual. I mean fighting anyway, not the reason behind it. There’s always an understanding that if someone finds their Mate, the other backs off. I’m not sure why she hasn’t.” His voice is lowering, and I’m so close to sleep, being a hussy must not bother me as much as I think it should.

“The lust, baby, that’s not unusual either. That’s the way some Alphas run their packs.”

That gets a reaction from me. “Uh uh, Masen. I’m not ever doing that!”

He squeezes me close. “Baby, I wouldn’t share your pleasure with anyone, it’s all mine. Today, I just got carried away. Like I said, I knew I should have waited, but I scented blood on your cheek and had to take care of you.”

Talking about it reminds him and he uses his nose to caress my now healed cheek. His tender touch reminds me of his earlier animalistic behavior. That’s all it takes, and I’m no longer tired. I don’t care his pack almost watched us make love. The only thing that matters is us. Masen, who’s always needy, senses my mood, and rolls me over on my back and positioning himself between my legs. Dropping his body to mine, I feel him everywhere, and I love it. I smell our combined arousal, and it delights me. My hands rub his wide back as he begins kissing me reverently. “Loved watching you take care of yourself, baby. Don’t want to have to see it again, but you made me so hard. I need you so bad,” he mutters in a low voice as he moves to kissing my neck. I arch into his kisses and touches. My hands meet no resistance as they run down to his tight rounded butt. I push him deeper into me. Unsatisfied with just my hands, I wrap my legs around him.

He chuckles. My body responds, and wetness seeps as I moan. “Ah, my baby’s greedy. I love how much you need me. How wet you get for me. I love when I can feel your belly dip, and your insides clench like they do when I’m inside you.” His

words ratchet me up further. He leans back on his heels, pulls me forward, then removes his shirt I stole.

When I'm naked, his eyes devour my body. He bites his bottom lip before licking it. "Need to taste you, baby." He pushes me back down and does what he said, tasting every inch of me. With his face buried between my legs, I moan around my second orgasm. He sits back on his heels, looking down at me like a man proud of his work. His hand reaches down, and he strokes himself from root to tip. My inner muscles convulse, Watching Masen touch his cock is so erotic I don't think I'd need him to even touch me, and I'd explode from the sight. "On your belly," he demands. I roll over, and he spreads my legs. I can feel him behind me, but he's not touching me. I look over my shoulder and see him running his hand up and down his cock slowly, while looking at me. I lift up on my elbows and turn a little to get a better view. When my shoulders rise, he looks up to my face.

"I like watching you touch yourself, Masen."

When his name leaves my lips, his eyes close, and he groans. I can see a small drop of liquid escape when he squeezes. He reaches forward with the hand not on his cock and wraps it around the front of my thigh. I'm jerked back quickly. The leg he tugged going straight back while the other spreads even further with my knee bent. His impressive erection is nestled above my butt and I can feel his balls when he grinds forward. His tip rubs the small of my back. I arch my bottom, rising higher. "This is how much I fill you up. My baby takes me so deep. She loves my big cock." He pulls back enough to rub his tip through my wetness then down to my clit. With my legs spread so far, I can't do much but squirm. He holds my one leg firmly, keeping me trapped at his mercy. He rubs his tip against my clit. Holy shit, I think I see stars. Applying more pressure he grinds against me, and I buck up against him.

"Ah, next time you're going to come. You understand, Little One?" he says darkly, not giving me an option. He pulls back a little taking that delicious pressures before pumping forward and caressing my clit again, his fingers fill me at the



same time. I scream his name and push back against him hard, making his fingers go deeper. He strokes his cock over my clit gently as my orgasm rolls over me. "Love it when you come undone for me." He enters me slowly, then lifts my body. My legs are on the outside of his kneeling ones, my back to his front. He caresses my breasts and stomach. He thrusts gently, making love to me slowly. He let's go of my body, lowering my chest down while my butt is still lifted.

"Oh Masen, so deep," I cry as he continues his slow assault.

"One more, baby. I need one more, yeah?" He reaches forward and pinches my clit while his movement becomes feverish. "Now, baby, squeeze me."

At his command, I come again as he grunts and keeps rocking into me leisurely. Masen rolls us over on to our sides. "I love you, Masen," I say as I fall asleep with him still buried inside me and the lights still on.

## CHAPTER 23



Sunday morning, Masen wakes me with strawberries and cream in bed. “We have lots to do today, Little One. We need to get anything from your old place you want to keep and decide what you want to do with the property. I have a few rentals that do well in that area.” I’m about to lick the cream off my thumb when he grabs my hand and sticks my thumb in his mouth, sucking the cream off before I can. When I look up, he smiles sweetly.

I clear my throat. “There’s just a few more things I need. My clothes, shoes, and a few smaller items. I bought most of that stuff to move in so nothing really means too much to me there. I actually like the idea of renting it. I could even rent it furnished, well after we figure out what those guys are up to and change the locks.” He’s nodding his head and snatches a berry from my plate.

“You also need to figure out what you want for our Mating ceremony. There’s a full moon next Sunday, that works perfectly. We need to have someone pick up your assignments when we’re gone. Unless you feel like just scrapping this semester. I still haven’t heard any news about those shifters, so school might be a no go anyway.”

What? Our ceremony next Sunday? When we’re gone? Where are we going?

“Oh, and shopping for anything you might need. Groceries are getting a little low. Do you want to start making a list for Molly? She usually does the shopping on Mondays. I think that’s about it. If I remember anything else, I’ll let you know.”

“Wha... what?” He’s gotta be joking.

“Did you want me to make the list? That’s fine, anything special you need?” he coos innocently, glossing over the whole Mating ceremony.

“Wait, wait. I will do the shopping and list making. I don’t need her to shop for us,” I scoff.

“Baby, she needs the job. She won’t take the money for nothing.”

“I didn’t think of it that way. There’s some stuff I need to do on my own though, Masen. I enjoy grocery shopping and cooking. I would like to do those things for us. She can keep cleaning, I hate cleaning anyway. Except your room, I’d rather take care of the room,” I add quickly. I don’t want her changing our sheets. Just the thought skeeves me out.

He chuckles, sensing where my thoughts are headed. “Good then, it’s all settled,” he says, rushing from the room after shoving a strawberry in my mouth.

“Masen!” I shout, annoyance clear in my tone. “He thinks he can walk in here and tell me we’re having a ceremony in a week and run out the door,” I say out loud as I dress in my last pair of clean jeans and a t-shirt I steal from Masen’s closet. After some quick alterations to the shirt, I’m ready to go and in serious need of coffee.

“Did you cut up my shirt?” His voice is laced with humor.

“Yes, I wanted to be comfy, and this” —I pluck the shirt from my tummy— “is comfy.”

He grins and shakes his head. “We need to get going. You are not off the hook for running out on me when you knew we had more to talk about. I just need coffee too badly to argue with you now.” His grin turns to a smile, and he dangles keys in front of me. I snatch them and rush out to the garage. When I hit the fob, the lights flash on one of his many vehicles. My Jeep is parked next to his motorcycles farther down. “Masen, why do you have so many cars?”

“Some out of necessity, but most just because I liked them. My bikes are my favorite, but I like speed in any form. So,

most are just for fun. Anything in particular you want to take?" He waves his arm, motioning to his impressive collection.

"There are a few I would like to drive, but I think we need something with some space today for groceries and the things from my place but next time," I say, hopeful. He leads me to the passenger side of the same SUV we've driven a couple times and opens the door for me. When we get on the road, he asks where I'd like to get coffee.

We don't talk about anything important until I've finished half my large coffee. "I've had someone at your place since we were there last. They haven't come back, but I still don't want you there longer than needed. I'd actually rather just buy whatever you need than take anything from here. Do we even need to go in?"

"Yeah, I want my clothes, shoes, and my coffee maker, but that's about it. We'll be in and out. I don't like being there anymore either."

When we get close, Masen takes my keys and unlocks the door. "I'll go first, just in case, Little One. Wait until I come back out for you." He leans down and kisses me warmly before opening the door.

Masen's been inside for about two minutes when I hear him shouting, "Motherfucker!"

My heart rate triples. I call his name three times before he walks out looking ready to kill someone. "Are you okay? I was just going to come in and check. What's wrong?"

He looks to the parking lot without answering me. "HERE, NOW!" he bellows, still staring at the parking lot. "That would have just pissed me off more. When I tell you to stay put, you stay put." He's so angry.

Two male shifters run up from a late model sedan. "Can you tell me how the fuck they were here, and I didn't know about it? What the fuck have you been doing?" Masen's voice is deadly, the two men cower.

“We’ve been here since six a.m., Alpha. I walked the perimeter at least once an hour. I haven’t seen anything unusual. I’m sorry, Alpha.” The poor guy sounds like he’s about to piss his pants, and Masen looks like he is about to kill them both with his bare hands. His torso strains forward, hands fisted at his sides. His massive body is frightening enough, but it’s his face locked in a sneer that truly shows how angry he really is. Masen’s breathing is harsh as he tries to calm down.

“Masen,” I try. He doesn’t respond to my voice in the least. I give him a few moments and try again, “Masen, what’s happened?” I try using my calmest voice.

We stand there for at least five minutes before he finally answers, “You aren’t taking anything from here, Little One. Anything you wanted has been ruined anyway. I need you to go sit in the car and wait for me. I won’t be long.” He pulls his phone from his pocket. “Michael, I need a full investigation, bring as many as you need. I’ll have a security team here within the hour.” When he realizes I’m still standing there, he barks, “GO!” I jump from his abrasive tone. I know he’s not angry with me, but it still stings. I turn and walk back to the car before I let my hurt feelings make matters worse.

The SUV is hot from sitting in the sun. The windows are rolled up, and Masen has the keys. I leave my door open, hoping to catch a breeze from the lake. I hear bits and pieces of orders issued from Masen as his men arrive. Sid and Michael arrive and are the only people to have gone inside, Masen is with them.

When they return to the door, Masen wears a look of disgust as he walks to a black truck. Two male shifters exit. One could compete with Masen for mass but is much shorter. His head is shaved almost bald, and his face is set in a firm line, giving him a brutal appearance. He nods his head to Masen in respect before they grab hands. The other man is average height, average build, average everything. He’s the kind of man that you probably wouldn’t look at twice. He gives Masen the same nod before looking directly at me. His

dark eyes are keen and intelligent, and I know he's not one who should be overlooked.

They talk for ten more minutes before disappearing into my condo. My bladder is screaming five minutes after that. I'll give him two more minutes, then I have to pee. I exit the SUV after ten minutes and walk briskly to the door. Six to eight males all look at me, but no one stops me from entering.

The smell is overwhelming, and I gag the second I cross the threshold. I can hear deep tones, but no words break through until I'm near my bedroom.

"At least two but possibly as many as four. I'll have to run some tests before I can be sure. What I can tell you, which I'm sure you already know, it's all male. I can't, however, tell you why. I've never seen anything like this. Just speculating, but I'd guess they're rogues. The same she had a run-in with. From what I see here, thank God she fought them." The revulsion in his voice makes it harsh.

"How could they have gotten in and done this without anyone knowing?" Michael asks.

"The bedroom door was closed when I entered, so the smell was off but not this. I knew something was wrong immediately. They had lined the bottom of the door with towels, so the room held the stench back. They must have left through the window. It's not visible from the parking lot. They might have watched the patrols to figure out when was the best time to come in, or maybe they're just crazy lucky fuckers. I don't care. I just want them found and brought to me," Masen seethes.

I still have no idea what's causing the reek coming from my bedroom. He's not going to be happy I came in, but I had to pee. Now, I need to know what's happening. I try to clear my throat and end up gagging again. I think I might throw up. "Oh God," I moan. "Masen?"

He rushes out of the bedroom. Seeing my distress, his face softens. "You can't be in here, baby. I told you to wait in the car for me, yeah?" he says gently.

“I had to go to the bathroom. What is that smell? I think I’m gonna be sick.” I place one hand over my belly and the other over my mouth. My stomach starts to revolt, threatening to bring up my coffee. Masen races me out the front door, where I heave into the bushes. He rubs my back and holds my hair as my tummy plays e-vac. When I finally stop, he wipes my face with a cool cloth that someone must have given him. I shudder through another round of nausea, then rinse my mouth before speaking.

“What the hell was that?” I ask and see Masen and the four other men watching me with sympathy.

“You okay, Little One?” he asks me kindly.

“No, I’m not okay! What the hell is going on in there?”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about. Are you ready to go shopping? We still have a lot to get done today.”

“Are you kidding me? Are you really going to try and act like nothing’s happening, Masen? That’s my house! I want to know what the hell is going on here.”

He shakes his head. “NO!”

“No?” I’m incredulous.

“No! I told you not to worry about this shit.” He’s getting pissed.

“How could I not be worried? I don’t even understand what’s happening,” I cry out.

Masen grabs my chin and looks right in my face. “You want to know what they did?” He chafes and squeezes harder. “They marked your whole room up. They fucking jacked off in your room and left their seed everywhere!” He explodes right in my face. I whine from the pressure of his fingers and the severe way he’s speaking to me. I close my eyes close to tears. He releases my chin, and I instantly turn my back to him and walk away.

“Michael, I’m really not feeling well. Would you please take me hom— to, could I maybe visit with Nicole? If she’s not busy or Sniffer.”

“Beta.” The demand for obedience rings clear. “You may take my Mate, your Luna, to our home. Do not leave until I arrive. If she wishes to have guests, they will come to her! Do you understand?” My head falls. How can he treat me like I’ve done something wrong?

“Yes... Alpha,” Michael grates. I wait for him to lead. I don’t see the truck from the other day, so I’m not sure where he’s parked.

Michael opens my door, and I get in without a word or backward glance at Masen. I know he’s upset but was that really necessary.

Regret beats at me. I know it’s his. Feeling it lessens the hurt, but he still lashed out at me out of anger. *I’m sorry, baby.* I hear in my head, making me gasp right before we pull out of the lot. It’s not okay. I won’t pretend it is, but I do get a small thrill, knowing I heard his thoughts for the first time.

When we return to the house, Michael asks if I’d like to call Nicole to come for a visit. I decline. She doesn’t need to run here because I’ve had a bad morning. “I think I’ll just hang out, maybe read a bit. I’ve got some laundry to do. Why don’t you go on home? I’m sorry we pulled you away this morning.”

“I need to stay, Luna.”

I nod my head. “You’re right, sorry. Can I get you anything?” He shakes his head no. I go to Masen’s room, tempted to look for another laundry room in the giant house. I don’t really feel like hanging out in that closet right now.

I hadn’t let myself think about what was done to my house, but now, I can’t seem to stop. I don’t understand why they would do something like that, especially in a group. A trickle of fear runs down my spine when I think about not getting away. Have they done this to others? I know I won’t be returning to school until they are caught. This seems so trivial considering I don’t know if they hurt somebody else.

I’ve finished two loads of laundry and distracted myself with a book when I decide I need some food and to make a list of what I’ll need. When I enter the kitchen, I don’t see Michael



so I scan the fridge and freezer and grab a piece of paper to start a grocery list.

I'm pulling a pan of homemade mac and cheese out of the oven when I hear a door close. "Hey Michael, I made some lunch if you're hungry. Do you think I could run to the grocery store in a little bit?" When I turn, I see Masen standing in the doorway. I straighten my back, and my guard goes up. I'm not sure if I'll be seeing my kind, bossy man or the Alpha.

When moments pass and he doesn't speak, I turn and continue writing my list. I know he hasn't left the kitchen yet. I blank my mind and slowly erect a wall there. I have no idea if it'll work. I hear him turn to leave, and my heart falls. I'm not sure what I was expecting from Masen, but his total indifference was not it.

I leave my list and lunch and head outside to the front porch. I distract myself thinking about what I need. Clothes seem the most important. I only have a few bras and panties left. I know I need to use Masen's computer or ask him to have someone take me shopping. Online will probably be my best bet. I'm just not eager to face him. When I think about everything I have to replace, I experience a loss I wasn't expecting. I know it's just mostly clothes and shoes, but I had to live a long time in hand-me-downs or resale shop finds. It wasn't until I was on my own I started to buy things for myself. I only splurged on a few things. Hell, I still hit the resale shops, sometimes, but it's because I want to, not because it's my only option.

Everything just keeps piling up. I feel like I'm in crisis or recovery mode, constantly. I just can't seem to find my compass. I can't understand how one minute I feel so protected, then the next, he's who I need protection from. I need to stand back and look at things without my emotions clouding my judgment. The problem is I don't know how.

I've been outside for about fifteen minutes when Masen comes out. He must have showered. His hair is damp, and he wears only a pair of dark gray sweats low on his hips. My heart rate triples as he takes the seat across from me. I add another layer to my wall. He eyes me warily as he sits.

“I was way out of line today. I’m sorry.”

I hope I can do this without tears or yelling. “Masen, can you tell me exactly what you’re sorry for?”

“Ah, erm...” I’ve surprised him. “I should have never put my hands on you in anger,” he says quietly. He’s ashamed. “I never should have yelled at you or spoken to you that way.”

I sigh. “See, Masen, I think if you could have just answered my question all of that could have been avoided. Had you said we’ll talk about it later, I would have waited. Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I was handling it.”

“Masen, it’s my house. It involves me. Don’t you think I have the right to know?”

“I know it’s your old house. What difference does you knowing make? I was trying to protect you.” He’s getting agitated.

“You’re right me knowing doesn’t make a difference, but I still wanted to know. I’m not a baby, and that’s exactly how you treated me. Do you know how embarrassing it was to have you yell at me like an errant child in front of your men. Even when I thought you rejected me, I didn’t scream at you. When you were a jerk about my virginity, I was still worried about how you felt, but you belittle me in front of all those people over something I couldn’t control or because I asked a question. Not to mention, how much it hurts me that you can even treat me like that.” My voice cracks, but I keep my composure.

“How are you blocking me?” There’s an accusation along with that question.

“My thoughts are my own,” I state firmly. At least, I know it works. What I really want to say is you don’t deserve my thoughts right now. I would rather he think I’m angry than know how hurt I really am.

His elbows fall to his knees, and he drops his head into his hands, raking through his hair in frustration. “Look, I know I

was a dick. I'm sorry, but whatever you're doing, please stop it!"

"Masen, we both have a lot to learn about each other. But, I'll tell you now, I'm not an agree to disagree person. Everything I've said to you is a valid point to me. Yet, you think your generalized apology and ignoring everything I said is enough? I may not always agree with you, but I promise to always not only listen to you but hear you. Then, we may agree to disagree but not when I know you haven't heard a word I've said. I don't think I can handle much more of this conversation without getting upset. If it's okay with you, I'd like to be alone for a bit." I want to cry and rip my own hair out.

Masen's fist slams onto the table. "No, it's not okay. I feel hollow. I can't even think clearly. Fix it!" His eyes plead with me.

"Masen, I am not doing it to punish you. I'm doing it to protect myself!" I shout.

His face crumples, white-blue eyes sad. "From me," he whispers.

I'm breathing heavy. I close my eyes and take a few moments to calm myself. "Yes, from you. I don't know how one wrong look, one wrong word from you, and I'm a wreck. This is not me. I feel weak. I just can't seem to find my north."

His frown deepens. "Baby, I wanna be your north."

I shake my head sadly. "You can't be my north when I never know what direction you're headed."

He stands, rushes around the table, and snatches me from my chair. His big palm goes to the back of my head and holds me to his neck. My arms wrap over his shoulders and drape down his back while my legs dangle in front of his. "I'm sorry I reacted so badly, but I'm sorrier about how I've handled this. When I came home and you blocked me right away, I freaked."

It's so hard not to comfort him, tell him everything is okay. I hate feeling like I'm disappointing him.

He rounds the corner and takes us to his swing. “You don’t have anything to be embarrassed about, Little One. It’s me that is and should be embarrassed. After the way I’ve continually treated you, I don’t think Michael will ever respect me as your Mate.” I can hear the regret and shame clear in his voice.

My resolve is crumbling as he cradles me to his chest. I lower my walls enough to send him reassuring thoughts but keep my emotion in. *I’m here. We’ll be fine.* His big body sags the tiniest bit when he hears me. “Masen, I know I’m overly sensitive when it comes to you. I’ll work on that, and I’d like it if you could talk to me more.” It comes out muffled from my face being mashed as he crushes me to him.

He understands fine because he nods his head. “I will, baby. I’m not used to being questioned. It’s not an excuse, it just is. But I will do better.”

I can feel his distress over everything that’s happened today. We are both exhausted, and it’s barely two o’clock. “Let’s go eat. You can tell me if you’re any closer to finding those creeps. Then, we can talk about fun stuff like shopping.” I say the last part dramatically, hoping to lighten the mood.

The corner of his lip lifts. He stands still holding me and goes back inside to the kitchen. “I can walk, you know.”

He grunts in acknowledgment. “Need you close.” He finally puts me down when we enter the kitchen. I make us each a plate while he gets us drinks.

## CHAPTER 24



While we eat, Masen tells me they still have some testing to do, but he doesn't think the rogues left any clues that will help us find them. He also says as of now, I probably shouldn't go to school. In all honesty, it isn't even that big of a deal for me anyway. Considering how much has happened in the past week taking a semester off of school is probably for the best.

We've just finished lunch when I ask, "Masen, could I use your computer? I need to do some shopping online, and since I don't have my iPad anymore, I don't want to use my phone."

He looks at me skeptically. "You want to shop online?"

"Some things I need to get online, but I would like to go to a couple stores if you're up for it, or I can ask Nicole if she'd like to go."

"If you'd like to invite Nicole, that's fine, but I need to be with you if you're going out, Little One," he says warmly.

I'm actually kind of excited, I hope she can come. "Okay, well, can we go now, and then maybe tonight, I could use your computer?"

He smiles kindly. "Whatever you want."

Using Masen's phone, I quickly call Nicole, but unfortunately, she and Michael are out for the day. I let Masen know that they're busy and grab my purse to head out. He leads us over to a low sleek car in gunmetal gray. Before opening the driver's side door for me, he asks, "You feel like driving?" I don't know what kind of car it is, and I don't

bother looking. I know by the way it looks it's fast, and as soon as I sit, I know it's expensive. The black leather is soft and buttery. The interior resembles a cockpit. I'm not sure how Masen will fit, but surprisingly enough, he looks comfortable, not at all squished like I expected.

Masen starts the car with a push of a button, and a low purr fills the garage. Using the controls, I move my seat closer to reach the pedals. I look over the instrument panel before shifting into reverse, the garage doors are already open as I slowly back out.

I'm smiling so big my cheeks hurt. I'm flying down the two-lane highway that will take us back to the mall in Marshall. I'm pleasantly surprised when Masen never tells me to slow down and seems confident in my abilities to handle his car. When I enter the town, I slow considerably. I'm lucky I didn't get a ticket, but damn that was fun.

Entering the mall parking lot, I get a tiny bit nervous, I'm glad Masen is with me. I park on the opposite side of my previous trip, hoping to avoid the encounter entirely. Masen doesn't remark one way or the other but exits the car so quickly that he's opening my door for me before I retrieve my purse and his keys. He extends his hand and helps me from the car. Not letting my hand go, he tucks it into his elbow the way I've become very familiar with. I can tell he slows his stride so my short legs have a chance to keep up.

“Where to?”

When I look up to answer, I see him scanning the surrounding area. “Are you sure it's okay we're here?”

He looks down to me with a small smile. “It's fine, baby. I don't know if I'll ever let you out of my sight again, but I can take you anywhere you need to go. I'll always have a good excuse to be stuck to your side.” He places his free hand over mine and squeezes.

“You don't ever need an excuse. I love being near you.”

Masen stops walking and embraces me fiercely. “I don't know how I got so fucking lucky, but I'm so glad you found

me. I'll spend the rest of our lives making up for all my stupid shit behavior." He kisses my neck where his mark lays, before dropping a sweet kiss to my lips. I marvel at the fact that this gorgeous protective man is all mine and hope that we can finally begin putting a life together.

We enter the mall and a few people stare. Masen commands attention wherever he goes, but seeing him walking through a mall seems so surreal. It's like watching a tiger prowl through the city. He doesn't belong there, but it's no less beautiful to see.

I quite enjoy Masen's attentive behavior. He steals kisses often and only let's go of me when I try something on. Even then, he stands within touching range the entire time. Never once does he complain that I've dragged him through half the stores. I also love watching his reaction to what I try on. Indulgent smiles and heated stares tell me exactly what he's thinking. I pick up a few stray thoughts here and there. He's perfectly content, not faking that he's happy to be here with me.

The last store I visit is a lingerie shop. I know being a size fourteen I won't have much luck finding panties let alone bras in my size, but I was hoping to get a few until my online purchases arrive. The store attendants watch Masen as he enters with me. They don't notice or care about the hand he has on my lower back grazing my bottom. I'm assessed and dismissed as a threat almost immediately.

A model thin brunette with blonde highlights sashays over. The movement is practiced, and I'm sure very effective. I wonder how many men have come here looking to buy something for someone special and have left with this shark instead. A small snarl leaves my lips before she reaches us.

She walks directly to Masen and looks up at him through her long fake lashes and purrs. "Mr. Black, how can I help you?"

Instantly, my back stiffens. She knows him? Having felt my reaction, Masen pulls me in closer and replies, "Whatever she needs."

The woman, whose name tag reads Bambi, looks over to me like she's seeing me for the first time. She tsks then leans down to me. "I'm not sure we'll have anything in your... size," she mock whispers while giving me a fake sad smile. "There's a plus-size clothing store a few shops down. Mandy would be happy to show you where while I help Mr. Black with any of his other needs." She motions for a woman who looks eerily similar to Bambi, but her hair is a bit lighter to come over.

Masen's hand fists the fabric of my shirt at my back. "Are you fucking kidding me!" He explodes. "There is nothing in this piece of shit store good enough for her anyway." He leans down closer to her shocked face. "DO NOT act like you know me. I have never had the displeasure of meeting you before, for which I'm grateful." He sneers, his eyes are black with outrage as he stares her down. His shouting has drawn attention from everyone in the store and a few that pass by outside.

"Hey, Big Guy," I say affectionately as I bring my palm up to his face, turning him to look at me. His eyes soften immediately as he searches my face. "I knew it was a long shot. I don't care." I'm much more relaxed knowing she doesn't know Masen, just of him. He reaches down with both hands and grabs my butt and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around him as he kisses my head tenderly.

"I don't like this fucking store! Let's go, baby."

I return his embrace briefly before trying to get down. "Masen, put me down. We cannot walk through the mall like this," I say, exasperated when he won't let go.

Finally, he sets me down and looks back at a silenced Bambi. "You're fired." He looks to the other woman who has kept her distance and been quiet the entire time we've been here. What the hell. He owns this store?

"I'll have someone here within the hour to close the store for remodeling. Someone will contact you about interviewing for a position in the new store as long as you don't treat



customers like she does.” He points an accusing finger at the now withered Bambi.

“Yes sir, Mr. Black. I’d like to keep my job,” comes a soft reply from the look-a-like. Are they sisters, I wonder?

Masen pulls out his phone before we have even stepped out the door. “Sid, I need someone with retail experience to shut down a store in the mall. Do you think you or Red could come here within the hour?” He’s quiet for a few seconds before saying, “Thanks, I’ll explain later. It’s the Kitty’s Kloset. Thanks again, Sid.”

He hangs up, and I tug him into an alcove for the restrooms. “Masen, she was a bitch, but that wasn’t necessary.”

His face is hard when he leans down closer to me. “Yes, it was,” he grates. “I’ll be damned if a store I own will treat you or anyone for that matter like that. She’s just a jealous bitch who wishes she could be half as beautiful as you.” His voice is gruff as he grabs me around the back of my neck and smashes his mouth to mine. All the questions I was going to ask about him owning the store evaporate as his tongue licks across my bottom lip gently. I gasp as his teeth nibble, he takes advantage and deepens the kiss. One of my hands fists the hem of his t-shirt, allowing my knuckles to brush his hard stomach. He groans into my mouth at the contact. My other hand runs up his chest and around his neck, my fingers seek his soft short dark hair pulling him down lower to me as I rise up on my toes trying to get closer. Masen wraps an arm around my lower back crushing me to him as he moves my head with his other hand angling me to control the kiss. It started sweet, but now we are both panting.

I’m so close to him that when his phone vibrates in his front pocket, I feel it. I drop my head back from his and moan lowly as he continues to pepper kisses along my throat and collarbones. When it buzzes again, I realize what’s happening. Opening my eyes, I see two men standing about fifteen feet away watching. My cheeks burn red as I clear my throat. Masen hasn’t stopped and his hand runs down my back to cup

my butt. I try backing away and whispering his name, but he's lost in his task.

"Masen, people are watching," I say a little louder. He growls but still doesn't stop. I don't think he's even listening to me. I grab what I can of his hair and tug it back, pulling him from my neck.

He hisses but not in pain as his eyes pop open. "I need you," he rumbles, turning and pushing me against the wall.

"Masen! There are people watching." I nod my head to the two men standing even closer than they were. He straightens to his full height before turning his body, seeming to have grown. His protective, possessive nature causes him to growl viciously.

Now that I'm no longer in a fog of lust, it's clear they're both shifters. His big body backs me even closer to the wall, shielding me from their curious stares. "What are you doing?" His voice is quiet and grim.

Both of the men look at Masen in obvious fear but stand their ground. "The Alpha is looking for his Mate. He's not going to be happy you have her."

Masen's head tilts. "Alpha? His Mate?" he questions like he can't understand what they're saying. "I AM THE ALPHA! She is MINE!" He booms, his voice holding an air of authority I've never heard. They step back, clearly caught off guard by his aggression. "Where is he, your alpha?" he spits.

Both men are slowly backing away. Their hands held up in a placating manner. I can feel their fear. "Don't take another step if you want to keep breathing." They freeze. "Little One, pull my phone out of my pocket and call Michael. Tell him to bring a car, we have some... guests returning with us." Both men pale and shake visibly. "I really only need one of you. I'm being very generous allowing you both to live. If you move, I will kill you where you stand. If you cooperate, I will more than likely let you live."

The violence in the air is palpable, we all know he is capable of what he says. I bring my hand around to his front

left pocket and retrieve his phone. I hit the button to dial Michael, and he answers on the second ring.

“Alpha.”

“Michael, it’s me. We are at the mall in Marshall. Masen wants you to bring a car around, we have guests returning with us.”

“Are you safe, Luna?” I can hear noise in the background as he rushes around.

“Yes Michael, I’m fine. I think you should hurry though. I think he’s trying very hard not to kill them.” A satisfied hum comes from Masen like just the thought makes him happy.

“Shit, try not to kill them, Mase. Can you hear me? We need information,” Michael says through the phone. Masen’s chest rumbles, but he doesn’t respond.

“Ah you better hurry, they look like they might try to bolt, and if they run, they will die.”

“Luna, I’m coming. No matter what happens, stay safe and near Mase.” The line clicks as he hangs up. I keep the phone in my hand and rub Masen’s wide back with my other.

I send him soothing thoughts. “It’s okay, Big Guy. I’m here. I’m safe.”

Masen’s phone vibrates in my hand. When I look down, Sid’s name pops up. I totally forgot he was on his way. I tag the green icon and answer, “Sid, it’s Sophie. Are you here?”

“Yup, is Mase busy?”

“Yes, ah no, we are right around the corner from the shop by the restrooms. Could you come over here, please?”

“I’ll be right there,” he answers darkly

Moments later, I hear Sid, “Just what I was hoping you’d found,” he says almost happily as he slams them both on the back so hard they stumble forward a few paces. Masen snarls as they near us. “Ah better not get too close to our Luna there. He’s been real jumpy lately. Luna, you want to come out he...”

“NO!” Masen barks and pushes me back further.

Now that Sid is here, I relax a little knowing he’ll probably be able to keep Masen from killing them. “Hey, we didn’t know he was lying. He told us she was his Mate.” Masen’s ugly growl cuts him off from speaking.

“Please, be quiet. He really is trying very hard,” I say quietly. I nuzzle my face into his back and bring my hands around front. I drop his phone back in his front pocket then run my hands under his shirt, touching his too hot skin. His muscles contract as I graze my fingertips over his belly and sides trying to comfort him. I continue touching him and stay as close as possible. His breathing is deep and even, but he hasn’t spoken. I know he’s trying to remain calm. I can feel his emotions warring. He wants to rip them to shreds for what they’ve said, and he knows they’re working with the rouge. He also knows this could be the chance to find them and end this so he shouldn’t hurt them. Masen also struggles with the fact that they were so near us, and he didn’t realize it. *Masen, I know you will always take care of me. I wasn’t scared; I just didn’t want them watching us.* I send my thoughts to him. “I love you,” I say out loud. His hands cover mine over his shirt, holding me to him.

Michael and three other men round the hallway, and I’m relieved that no one else needed this hallway while we were down here. “Alpha,” Michael speaks, “May I escort your guest to the hall while you finish up with your Luna?” I’m so grateful for their friendship. Michael knows exactly how to address Masen and not be confrontational.

I blow out a long breath when Masen’s head nods. “I’ll be there soon. Don’t question them without me,” he commands.

Michael nears the men who don’t know if they should be happy to be away from Masen or terrified that they will see him again soon. I don’t know why they even stood by watching. It seems they would know just by the size of him to turn the other way. I’ll have to ask Masen later. For now, I just want to get the hell out of this mall that I’m beginning to hate.

Once the men leave quietly between Michael, Sid, and the three others, Masen finally turns to me and gathers me up in a bruising hug. His hands run from the top of my head down to the backs of my thighs, assuring himself I'm okay. "It'll be over soon now, baby. I'll find the rest of those fuckers," he promises. He kisses me softly before we head to customer care to pick up my packages so we can head home.

When I see the fence surrounding his property, he says "I'm going to drop you off at the house. I'll send Cass and maybe Sam over. How does that sound?" He continues before I can answer, "I'm not sure how long I'll be, but I need to go to the hall and find out what they know."

He's not going to be happy when I say what I'm thinking. "Masen, I'd like to be with you, please."

His head snaps over to look at me. "You don't want to be there for this, trust me. If they don't talk, I'll have to make them. I don't want you seeing me like that." I feel his hesitancy. He worries I won't feel the same about him if I see him hurt one of those men. I know he's not cruel. He doesn't want to hurt them, but I also know he'll do what needs done to protect me and his pack. "I don't need to watch if this thing goes south if that makes you feel better. I know this isn't what you want to do, but I know you are strong enough to do what needs done. I trust you to handle it. Now, trust that I'm strong enough to stand by your side."

He pulls into the pack gate and stops as soon as the gate closes behind us. Masen jumps out of the driver's seat and is pulling my door open before I understand what's happening. "What's wrong?" I look around, slightly panicked at his behavior.

"No, nothing's wrong, baby." He envelops me in a tight hug. He scents behind my ear and runs his nose down my neck to gently nip his mark. "I don't know how I survived without you. I can't imagine a day without you now that I know what it feels like to have you. I'm so sorry I've been such a fuck up. Please, please, forgive me. I've been so worried about losing you, I think I was pushing you away so I wouldn't crumble if you disappeared."

My heart aches with his sincerity. I reach up and place both of my palms on his face pulling back so he looks right at me. “Masen, I promise I’m not going anywhere. Please understand, I want to be here. I want to be with you. I don’t just need it because you’re my Mate. I want it because I love you.” I search his eyes and try to listen to his thoughts while he stares at me.

*Oh God, I don’t deserve her, but I love her more than I thought possible.* I hear him think. He leans down to my lips and speaks into my mouth. “I love you. It doesn’t seem enough to say it, so I promise to show you how much I love you, every day. I promise to be the man you deserve.” When he stops talking, he presses his lips to mine so softly. His pillow soft lips caress mine with tender care. My heart melts as he loves my mouth.

After a millennia passes in a matter of seconds, he places his forehead on mine and takes a deep breath. My hands are wrapped around his thick biceps, my nails score his skin because I clench so hard. I let go slowly, and I see a small crescent of red where my thumb dug too deep. “I’m sorry,” I say quickly as I lean down and kiss the gouge. My lips are wet with the tiniest amount of blood when I pull back. I lick my lips instinctively, and Masen’s eyes follow my tongue across my lips. He dips and kisses me again, this kiss is primal and deep. I can taste him on my tongue as he licks my lip, following the same path my tongue did. His chest vibrates with a rumble when I stroke my tongue with his, letting him taste himself on me. His hands fist my hair as he pulls back, exposing my neck to him. My back meets the warm hood of the car as he leans over, examining me laid out before him. He brushes his thumb across his bottom lip as if stroking where my tongue just was. My inner muscles clench with desire for him. A soft whimper sounds and I realize it came from me.

His mouth turns up on one side, and he gives me a purely masculine grin. His voice is deep when he asks, “You need something, baby?” With me watching, he reaches down and cups himself over his pants. I know he knows this makes me crazy. My hands squeeze my breast as I watch. “Fuuuuck,” he groans, and I hear a car door close in the distance. My hands

fall away from my body. My face heats with a blush as I realize we are yet again out in the open. Thankfully, no one is around to see my wanton behavior. I sit forward, and Masen enfolds me into his arms. “Don’t feel bad, Little One. I like you needy.” He chuckles into my hair. I try and pinch his flat hard stomach but can’t find an inch to squeeze. So I end up running my hand around to his back, hugging him to me closer.

“You need to stop touching me in public. Apparently, I’m a hussy,” I say sullenly.

“Not gonna happen. I love touching you.” The last part is whispered hotly into my ear. My back arches as I bring myself closer to him. Masen’s hand strokes down my back to my bottom, pulling me closer and lining our bodies up. I can feel his thick erection on the inside of my thigh. I wiggle a bit trying to fit him where I need him.

Just as my hands reach to his shadowed jaw, his phone vibrates, causing us both to groan from the interruption. I scoot back so he can grab his phone from his pocket. His eyes bore into mine as he answers, “Yeah.” He runs his free hand through his messy hair, and his body goes stiff as he listens to whatever is being said. “We’ll be right there.”

He hangs up and kisses my temple before helping me down off the hood. His demeanor went from playful to angry in the few seconds he was on the phone. “Is there something wrong?”

He heaves a sigh. “A few of the men that witnessed us last night... after the fight seem to be in a bit of a frenzy.” He looks down at me, he seems nervous. He clears his throat. “Michael thinks you might be going into heat soon,” he says sheepishly.

“I’m too young for that. Mom always said my first would be around twenty-five.” My heart rate speeds up. I’m not sure I’m ready for a baby. I just turned nineteen. I don’t know if he’s ready or even wants children. I know I do, but what if he doesn’t?

Sensing my distress, Masen stops walking me around the car and looks into my eyes. “He could be wrong, Little One. It could be just because we are Alpha and Luna and not yet Mated fully,” Masen says tenderly. “I can’t wait to see you pregnant with my baby,” he growls, “I never really thought about children before now, but I have that big ole house. It might be fun filling it up,” he says cheekily and smacks my rear. Instantly, my nerves evaporate, I grin back at him.

When we pull up to the meeting hall, all the sweet feelings disappear as I see five male shifters shoving each other aggressively. They don’t even seem to notice our arrival. Masen’s hand clamps over mine. “They aren’t going to bother you. They just feel a need that they can’t quench. It’s making some of them seek an alternative.” He gestures to the five men now throwing punches. “They just need an outlet. They aren’t going to hurt each other too bad. Though, I don’t know why they aren’t in the gym instead of the front lot.” He pats my hand. “Come on, baby. Let’s get this done.”

When Masen steps out of the car, a few of the men standing and watching the fight turn to him and drop their heads but the fighting continues. He opens my door, and as I step out, all activity ceases. Every head turns in our direction. Two of the men that were fighting take a step closer and scent the air. Their shoulders relax as if they’re relieved. My head whips to look at Masen.

“I think it makes them feel better when you and I are close,” he says while running his hand through his hair.

“Ah okay... I guess. If it makes them stop fighting and relax, that’s a good thing, right?”

His eyes turn icy. “As long as none of them think about touching you or try to get too close,” he says loud enough that they all take one step back.

I give a small wave before saying, “Hey, I’m going in now. Why don’t y’all grab a football? That’s better than beating the snot out of each other.” A few look at each other, one man jogs to his truck and pulls out a ball.

Masen squeezes me and says, “Thank you.”



I shrug my shoulders. “Sure. I love football, and I’m always exhausted when I get done playing.”

He cocks one eyebrow. “You play football?” he questions skeptically.

“Yup,” I pop. “If you hadn’t noticed, I’m pretty quick,” I say while brushing my knuckles along my chest, bragging.

“Oh, I noticed.” He laughs as he opens the door for me, and we enter the hall. All the light banter disappears as I scent the fear and distrust in the air. Masen’s smile fades as we walk down the hall to the same large room he was in the other day. The room is empty save for two males standing on either side of a heavy door. They nod their heads as we approach.

“You sure you want to be in here, Little One?”

I can feel his worry. I clasp his arm harder. “Yes, let’s get this done.”

He nods and reaches forward to open the door.

## CHAPTER 25



The door opens soundlessly as we enter a large square room. The two shifters from the mall sit at a table in the center of the room. Michael and Sid are positioned in chairs in front of them. The floors are rough cement, and the walls are bare. There is a camera in one corner, seeming to record the entire room with its small lens. This is an interrogation room, just being in here is intimidating.

Sid's head turns to the door when it opens, but Michael never takes his eyes off the men in front of him. Masen's body seems to swell the further into the room we go. The door clicks closed behind us, and Michael says, "Alpha, Luna," in greeting.

"Hi Michael," I return.

Sid and Michael both stand from the seats. Michael holds his out for me to sit. Masen guides me forward with a hand at my back as we near the table. Michael steps back and let's Masen seat me. Masen sits next to me and pulls my chair so close that he has to lift his arm and wrap it around my shoulder. "I will give you both only one warning, any move I consider a threat to my Luna, and you die. I won't promise to make it quick, but I will promise it will hurt." His face is dead serious. One of the men swallows with an audible gulp. I rest my hand on his thigh under the table. I'm not sure if I should speak, but the tension in the room is so thick I don't think either man is willing to open their mouths in fear of reprisal.

"Hi y'all. I'm Sophia. What can I call you two?" I layer on my accent, letting the honey drip from my words.

Neither man looks up from the table. “Answer her,” comes from Masen like a deadly threat.

“I’m Jeff Harper. Honestly, I had no idea he wasn’t telling the truth,” He rushes out. He can’t be more than twenty-one, twenty-two at the most.

“My name is Rob Gillissie.” His voice is flat. He’s scared but trying to hide it.

“Well guys, this here is my Masen. He’s the Alpha of the Northern Territories and my Mate. He’s really upset about the way your friends treated me at the mall, but he’s enraged with what happened at my house. Y’all didn’t have anything to do with that, now, did you?”

They both look properly chagrined. Rob speaks up. “No, we were not involved in that, but we do know what you’re talking about.” He sounds ashamed.

“Well, that’s good to hear. Now, we would like you to tell us any and everything you think we should know, and if we have any questions, we’ll ask ‘em. That sound okay to you guys?” I’m trying to make it sound like they have an option, we all know they don’t.

“How about you start with who told you I was their Mate?” As the words leave my lips, Masen’s body leans over the table, and he growls menacingly. Both men scoot their chairs back quickly, and their eyes dart to me like I’m going to save them. I rub Masen’s back, encouraging him to calm down.

Jeff begins. “His name is William. He’s been telling everyone that will listen that his Mate was kidnapped right after he found her,” he looks up, judging Masen’s demeanor before continuing, “He didn’t tell us who had her just that anyone who finds her will get a reward. He claims to be building a pack just outside of Marshall and wants anyone looking for a better life to join him.”

“Both of you know that the Northern Territories already have a pack. Why would you believe him?” Masen questions.

Rob meets his eyes. “He said he had the Alpha’s backing, that your pack was becoming too large.” He sounds mystified at his own response. “It all seemed so convincing at the time. He’s telling everyone exactly what we want to hear. We followed him from our pack in Tennessee.” He shakes his head. “I was never once suspicious. He’s had the same story for the two months we’ve been with him. A few days ago, he started talking about his Mate. He met her in Marshall, and when he went to her house to bring her back with him, she had disappeared. He said someone took her before he made it there. It didn’t make much sense at the time, but he had every male follow him to her house and scent her so we could find her.” He looks down at the table clearly not wanting to say the next part. “I only know about what happened after because I overheard his Beta and two others talking about it last night. That’s why we didn’t call him right away when we saw you two” —his face gets a little red— “She was... very willing to be near you. She didn’t seem, forced.” Masen’s hand smacks the table, and the two men and I jump at the loud noise.

Both of Masen’s hands have white knuckles from him clenching his fists. I lay my hands over his and bring them down under the table to my lap before slowly prying his fingers open. I use both of my thumbs to massage his palms while his breathing evens out. No one speaks, giving him time to relax before chancing it. “Luna, if I may?” I hear Michael say from behind me. I look up at his stern face.

Oh no, should I have not been talking? Is there a protocol in this kind of situation? “Oh, of course Michael, I’m sorry.”

“No Luna, you’re doing just fine. I just have a couple questions.” His kind voice speaks as he turns back to the men. “How many does he have in this farce of a pack?”

Jeff’s change in demeanor is obvious. “Including us, but we don’t want to be with him anymore,” Jeff floods out, “it’s thirteen males and five females. William and three of the males, including his Beta, are the ones who defiled your house.”

“What else did you overhear last night?” Masen’s voice is grim. One wrong word is all that stands between them and

leaving this room alive. He's trying to block his emotions from me, but with the overwhelming need for penance, it's impossible. He wants someone to suffer, and this William is at the top of the list.

"I'm afraid to say," Rob implores me with his eyes.

"Tell me, or I will rip your canines out with my bare hands!" Masen barks. Sensing the violence, Michael steps forward. I smell the pungent odor of urine. I move over and place myself in Masen's lap before he springs on the weakness one of these men just showed.

Cupping his jaw, I bring his head down to mine. He scents my neck, and his chest rumbles in satisfaction.

"Go on," Michael ushers.

"I don't want to die, please. He'll kill me if I repeat what was said. We left today with the intention of finding this pack. We just had to find a way without raising suspicions. I knew after last night something was wrong."

He seems honest, I hope for his sake he is. "I will try to keep him calm. He knows we need this information, so let's get this over with. Don't leave anything out. I don't want to do this again," I say, fortifying myself to hear some deplorable shit.

Rob licks his dry lips, his eyes are the size of saucers as he stares at me like I'm his lifeline. "I was out back behind the barn of the house we've been staying at."

"Where's that?" Michael interrupts.

"Just outside of Marshall. It's about thirty acres. There's one main house and four smaller cottages. The barn's not far from the main house. That's where William and his three goons stay. He keeps all the females in the closest house," he clears his throat, "I was meeting Amy for you know... ah anyway. When I left the barn, I heard Phillip, that's his Beta, laughing about spreading seed" —he cringes— "At first, I thought he was talking about farming the land. Then he said he couldn't wait to find the bitch that smells like heaven." Masen's body stiffens under me. "He said when William was

done with her he'd let them all take turns on her, just like they'd done in her bedroom."

Masen's hand snakes across the table without even jostling me from his lap and wraps it around Rob's throat. He gags and claws at Masen's hand. I turn and lift myself up so his eyes are on mine. "Masen, let go. I'm here. It's okay, but you gotta let go. There might be more he needs to tell us." I hear wheezing and gagging behind me. Then, I feel his left hand wrap from my hip up to my shoulder, crushing me to him. His right hand caresses my hair.

"Finish." Masen's voice is grave.

"I'm sorry," Rob rasps.

Keeping my face next to Masen, I breathe into his ear, "It's okay. Whatever he says, it's okay. I'm safe with you. They can't hurt me."

"He said we now just have to wait and hear from the scheming bitch that contacted him, and she'll tell us exactly where to find William's Mate."

"Do you know who they were talking about? Who the scheming bitch is?" Michael questions.

"No, I'm sorry. I don't. That's all we know. I promise. I went to Jeff last night and told him we needed to get out of there. We went to the mall today hoping to find anyone to tell what a bunch of crazy bastards they are. I don't think any of the shifters he's convinced to join him have any idea what's going on."

Masen stands still, holding me. "Sid, take these two to the holding cell, search them again. I don't want them contacting anyone. Beta, meet me in my office in ten," he orders.

"What are you going to do with us?" Jeff warbles.

"If your story checks out, you don't have anything to worry about." The threat of what will happen if they are lying goes unsaid but definitely not unheard. "You should be thanking my Mate though. Without her, you'd both be dead already!"

“I love you,” I whisper into his ear. He grunts in response. Masen strides to the door. The men outside keep their faces to the floor as we exit. He stops in front of a beautifully carved wooden door. The room is dark but smells of him. The only light is coming from the large room behind us until he kicks the door shut, plunging us into darkness. His breathing is labored but not from carrying me. No, he’s trying to calm himself. I kiss his taut, tension-filled neck and run my fingers through his short, silky hair. I can tell he’s thinking, but I don’t know about what. “Masen, what’s going on in that head of yours?”

He heaves a sigh, walks through the dark room, and drops us onto a chair. “I’m thinking how I want to go back in there and force them to take me to William so I can rip his throat out! But, I’m also wondering why their story and Gavin’s don’t match. Why lure them with false stories of making a pack but tell Gavin he plans on challenging me for my Pack? It doesn’t make sense.” We are both quiet for a few moments.

“Maybe, he knows something about Gavin that led him to believe he’d go along with it, or he knew Gavin wouldn’t be naïve enough to believe his lies so he went with a version of the truth.”

Masen’s head falls back to the chair. “Who’s been giving them information? Did he know you were Mated to me when you were at the mall?”

I think about it for a few moments. “I don’t think so. I never said anything about you, and my Mark was covered so without us being fully Mated I don’t think they would have known I had a Mate let alone that it was you.”

“So the person giving them info sought them out after your encounter at the mall.” He’s furious. There’s a soft rapping on the door. “I have to open the door, Little One. He won’t be able to hear me from in here,” he explains as he stands and deposits me back in the chair he just stood from.

The light from the opening door seems bright in the utter blackness of the room. Masen clicks on a small desk lamp before Michael shuts the door behind him. “Luna,” he greets

me. I look around, getting my first look at what must be Masen's Pack office. It's very masculine, no decorations adorn the walls, just the carved wooden door and ornately carved massive desk I sit behind as the focal point. The throne-like chair I sit in clearly belongs to the Alpha. I stand quickly, not sure why it makes me uncomfortable to be in it without him under me. Michael takes a seat in one of the chairs in front of the desk. He scrubs a hand over his handsome face, looking tired.

I feel guilty. I know all this drama is hard on everyone. Before I can voice my apology, Masen speaks, "You don't have anything to be sorry for, Little One. These animals were edging toward my borders long before your arrival. Even if that wasn't the case, none of this is your fault," he states while pushing me back into the chair. He paces the space behind Michael and tells him about his concerns about Gavin's and Rob's stories conflicting. He also shares my theories as to why. Michael agrees with my assessment that Gavin wouldn't have fallen for the idea of Masen wanting another Alpha to take over part of the Pack.

"I can't help but wonder who this female is that his Beta is referring to. Any ideas on that?" Michael asks.

"I was thinking the same thing. Gavin did bring a new female with him. Maybe we should start there?" Masen mutters.

Is no one going to state the obvious? "Ah, have you thought about Roxanne? She hates me and has the most to gain from my... disappearance," I stutter.

Michael tilts his head, assessing me. Masen stops pacing and shakes his head. "No, she wouldn't do something like that. I agree she's been a bit over the top, but I can't believe she would do something like that," he says sounding sure of himself dismissing the idea. He continues pacing.

Michael makes eye contact with me and gives a barely discernible nod, letting me know he's not so quick to believe the best of her. I relax slightly with the acknowledgment. "We need to find the exact location of his camp. I want him and his



cohorts dead by my hands before sunrise.” His voice is firm. “Gather the few men we’ve trusted this far and tell them to prepare to infiltrate as soon as the sun sets. I want everyone ready to leave in two hours. I need Cass and Sam at my house with Sophia. I’m going to send Mac over too in case this is a wild goose chase to get me away from her.” I know he needs to do this, but selfishly, I wish he could just send his men to handle it. What if it is some sort of trap? As my thoughts circle, he comes to me and leans down. “Let’s get you home, baby. I want this taken care of so I know you’re safe.” He helps me stand and turns to face Michael. “I’ll meet you back here in two hours,” he says grimly to Michael.

Again, everything seems to be happening so fast. I can’t believe it’s only been a week since this all started. Michael exits the office before us and strides quickly to another room. I’m assuming it’s his office to make the necessary calls for their plan.

Masen loads me in the passenger seat and pulls his phone from his pocket before entering the car himself. Now seated, he calls Sniffer. “Hey brother, I need you and Sam at our house in an hour and a half.” He throws the car in drive and speeds toward his home. “Yeah. I have them in the holding cells. I’m going to his camp. This ends tonight! I’m not sure how long it’ll take before I’m home, so bring what you need to stay. Mac will be there with you, too.” He listens for a moment. “See ya soon, yeah,” he says, and hangs up. The next call is to this Mac person. He explains what’s happening and tells him to be at his house to protect me if needed.

“Who’s Mac?” I ask.

He looks over at me, seeming to have forgotten I was even here. “Oh, you saw him earlier. He was one of the men at your house, bald guy.” I nod, remembering. I cringe when I think of how he saw Masen treat me. He opens the garage and pulls in, remaining seated when he turns the engine off.

“I know you’re worried.” He looks at me, his eyes understanding. “But there’s no need. I promise. I want you safe and ready to be Mated to me in a few days.” His face lights with a genuine smile. I sigh at his devastating looks. He

chuckles at my reaction, and it triggers butterflies in my belly like always. His face grows serious. “I love the way you respond to me, love that I can feel you,” he closes his eyes and inhales, “Love that your scent now holds mine mixed with it,” he rumbles.

“I’ve picked up a few of your thoughts today,” I tell him.

His eyes shine with wonder. “You have? When?” he asks, excited.

“Once this morning, I heard you say sorry, and later, I picked up a few things. It’s pretty wonderful. I was worried it would feel weird, but it’s kind of comforting.” I shrug. “It doesn’t bother you?”

He grabs my hand and kisses my knuckles. “Not at all. Now that I’ve experienced it, I can’t imagine being without it. I can’t hear every thought, just some, but I cherish every one.”

I smile back at his enthusiasm and send him my thoughts, *who would have thought the big, bad Alpha is a big, ole softy.*

He laughs at me and jumps out of the car. “I’ll show you a softy,” he purrs into my ear when he grabs me around the waist from behind and grinds his very obviously, hard erection into me. Until the doorbell rings, he shows me exactly how wrong I was.

## CHAPTER 26



I rush to the door after the third bell ring and find Sniffer banging loudly. “Hey, you two gonna come up for air soon?” He laughs as I snatch the door open and huff. My cheeks are red from his comments and because he was right about what we were doing.

“Stop trying to embarrass her,” Masen insists, coming down the stairs in tight black fatigues and a black t-shirt that looks molded to his body. Holy shit, we just got done making love, and my mouth still waters seeing him. His head snaps around to me, and he winks wickedly. I’m all gooey with love, as I sigh.

When he passes close to me, I scent him. He smells like us. Oh well, I know he doesn’t mind. It dawns on me I smell the same. Looking down at my yoga pants and t-shirt I threw on, I realize I don’t care either, which makes me smile. “Glad to hear it,” is whispered in my ear from behind. His hand clenches my hip, my back arches pushing my rear to make contact with his front. He hisses and smacks my butt with his free hand. The sting makes me suck in a breath through my teeth, but I push back even closer on instinct. His hand fists my long hair and tugs so my neck arches. “I have work to do, and you’re making me hard. Unless you want me to send my brother and Sam outside so I can fuck you on the table, you better stop.” He dips his hand into the front of my pants and tests my wetness. “Always so ready for me. No panties?” he questions as he widens my legs with his foot and pushes one finger inside me. My inner muscles spasm. “I love how greedy you are for me. I bet you wish this was my cock inside you,”

he says confidently as his finger rims my opening before he plunges back in.

“Yes,” I whimper, barely audible.

“Fuck me,” he grates darkly. He picks me up and walks into the closest room which happens to be a bathroom. He’s still behind me, but I hear his zipper go down. He yanks my pants off one leg. “Brace your arms on the wall.”

I do as he says knowing this won’t be the tender lovemaking we just shared but fast and hard. He lifts my foot and places it on top of the closed toilet lid. The cool air hits my overheated skin, and I shiver. I can feel him line himself up to my opening, rubbing the head of his cock through my moisture before he surges forward and slams into me. His hand at my neck pushes me down more. When he pulls out slowly, I feel every inch leave me until he’s barely touching me.

“Masen,” I cry, afraid he’s going to stop. He smacks my bare ass even harder than before then rubs the burn. “Oh God,” I whine. I’m so crazy with need I know I’m going to come undone in seconds. When he pushes in slowly, I can tell the angle is much different, it feels like he’s hitting my bladder. I squeeze tight feeling like I might pee, but he hums and pulls out giving me some relief. He pushes back in fast at the exact same angle, bringing back the same sensation. “Masen,” I say breathlessly. “Wait, wait,” I groan when he strikes the same spot three times in a row. He holds my back down but grabs my hair in the other fist pulling my head back arching me more.

“Yes,” he hisses. I tighten all my muscles, afraid now. “I can’t wait to feel you come around me, baby. You come when I tell you to, got it?” He pumps repeatedly, hitting the same spot. I’m so hot, and the air is so humid from our combined breath I can’t think straight. His hand leaves my hair and centers over my pubic bone pushing in.

“Oh shit,” I yell.

“Now,” he urges, and my body obeys. His hands hold me up because I would have fallen after the first wave hit me. I

can't tell if my eyes are closed, or I can't see. I hear him groaning out his climax behind me as I almost scream through mine. The feeling dissipates quickly, leaving me to feel a small trickle down my leg. I'm immediately aghast. Did I just pee on him? I want to cry I'm so embarrassed and freaked out. "Shh," he coos, "of course not. It's all you, baby, you came all over my cock." He sounds so pleased with himself.

I scrunch up my face. "Nuh-uh."

"Mm-hmm," he hums and puts my legs on the floor but keeps holding me. I'm still not steady. "I'll give you the why's and how's later in a tutorial," he smarts, "but I gotta get going, you greedy girl. I'm late."

I palm my face, remembering Sniffer and Sam are in the house somewhere. "Please tell me they didn't see or hear any of that," I beg.

"Ah, I can definitely promise they didn't see anything but no can do on the hearing it, baby. You were very loud," he laughs.

The bastard. "Masen Black, this is all your fault. You've turned me into some freak," I whisper yell.

He throws his head back and howls out in laughter. "I know. It's fantastic!" He kisses me on my temple and struts from the room like a man proud of himself.

I try sneaking up the stairs to shower or hide, but when my foot hits the bottom step, I hear, "Come here and kiss me, baby. I need it." I hang my head and tromp into the kitchen. I hear snickers from the corner. My head whips around to see it's Sniffer. My eyes narrow which makes him laugh harder.

Just as I'm saying, "I'm gonna kick your ass, Sniffer," I hear the door open.

"That, I'd like to see," booms a deep voice. Good Lord, Mac is here already.

"If you keep teasing her Cass, I'm going to let her!" Masen says while both brows are raised. I stick my tongue out at him in victory before I wrap my arms around Masen's torso.

Sam pipes up from behind the open fridge door. “She could do it, too. After what the little ninja did to Roxanne, I’d be afraid.” In the next breath, he’s complaining. “Sophie, I’m hungry. You never feed me.”

I roll my eyes. “Y’all are such babies.” But I smile at him indulgently. “What do ya want?”

Masen groans. “These fuckers are always gonna be stealing my food.” He keeps grumbling under his breath, but I can’t understand what he’s saying. It’s just punctuated with a lot of curse words. He gently grabs my cheeks with his palms. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, Little One.” His serious demeanor makes me somber.

“Okay Masen, be careful, please. I love you.”

His eyes close, and he whispers back, “Love you, too, baby.” He kisses my temple and turns to leave. “If anything happens to her, you all die!” He states truthfully. The room is silent as he walks out. It feels a little awkward that he threatened them right before leaving.

I put a big smile on my face and turn back to the room. “He’s just kidding?” I try. When no one speaks, I say, “So who’s hungry?” That at least gets a reaction. Sniffer and Sam both try and tell me what to make. While they bicker, I walk over to Mac who’s standing in the doorway staring into the kitchen, volleying back and forth between me and the boys like he doesn’t know which is more interesting. “We didn’t really get an introduction earlier.” I extend my hand out to shake. “I’m Sophia. Masen tells me you’re Mac. I’m glad to meet you. Thanks for coming over on such short notice.”

He grabs my hand and gives me a short, firm shake. “It’s my pleasure, truly. I’m glad to meet the woman who’s got Mase tied in knots.” He smiles, and it makes his harsh face lovely. His twinkling hazel eyes are kind as he looks at me.

“Well, I better break up these two biddies before someone loses an eye. Then we’ll never eat.” He laughs and follows me into the kitchen where Sniffer and Sam are pointing fingers and shoving each other like a couple of toddlers.

I clap my hands loudly. “All right, children,” I say in my best kindergarten teacher voice. They stop, look at me, and speak at once so I interrupt, “Ugh, seriously. Sniffer, you go sit over there. Sam, you over here.”

“Why does he get to stay over there?” Sniffer sneers. What the hell is going on here? These two always argue, but I’ve never seen them go at each other like this.

“Sniffer, what’s going on here?” I look back and forth between the two of them.

His eyes narrow before he catches himself and tries to smile. “Nothing sweetheart, I just want something different than Sam. It’s fine. You make whatever he wants. Hell, we should probably be making you dinner.” He laughs lightly, but I’m not fooled.

When I look over at Sam, his head is down staring at the countertop. Sensing this is something they want kept private, I let them both off the hook. “Ah, okay then. Why don’t you both tell me what you were thinking, and I decide if I want to make either. Sniffer, you first.”

He looks at Sam, and I can see the hurt in his eyes. “How about burgers?”

Sam’s head snaps up. “That’s not what you wanted. You wanted spaghetti, and I wanted the burgers.”

Sniffer turns his head and looks out the window. “It’s fine, really. Burgers sound great.”

I don’t like this at all. “I’m not gonna make either! I want Swedish meatballs. I can make a big batch in case Masen’s hungry when he gets home. And you can both help me.”

Mac, who’s been quiet the entire time, says, “That sounds tasty. What can I do to help?”

“How about you start tearing up this bread so I can make some crumbs?” I hand him a loaf of white sandwich bread and a bowl. After washing my hands and instructing them all to do the same. “Sniffer, you want to help me gather some ingredients from the pantry?”

He smiles. “Sure Sophie.”

“Sam, can you grab the hamburger, eggs, and milk from the fridge, please?” He nods his head but watches Sniffer as he walks to the pantry with a sad look on his face. As soon as we’re behind the door, I reach up and lace my arms around Sniffer’s neck. “I don’t know what’s wrong. You don’t need to tell me, but are you okay?” I ask, concerned.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just being a selfish butthead,” he says glumly, hugging me back, “But thanks for worrying about me.” He pulls back and gives me a small, genuine smile.

“Always, you were my first real friend, remember?”

He ruffles my hair. “Let’s hurry up and get what we need before my brother senses you’re too close to another male and comes home and kills me.” He chuckles while grabbing the ingredients that I tell him we’ll need.

When we make it back to the kitchen, Sam watches every move Sniffer makes with a small, sad smile. As we prepare the food, I try and keep everyone engaged, and it seems to work. By the time I put the meatballs and gravy in the oven, everyone seems much more relaxed. I’ve looked at the clock every five minutes, wondering when I’ll hear from Masen.

Sam’s phone rings and he disappears when he answers. Sniffer’s sad face returns, and I know he’s jealous. I just don’t know if he’s worried about losing his best friend or something more. I keep him busy peeling potatoes, and I start the water for egg noodles for anyone who doesn’t like mashed potatoes. Mac sets the table, and Sam returns with a vibrant smile on his face just before the oven timer chimes.

Everyone looks up when we hear cars speeding up the drive. Mac’s voice is grim when he says, “Sophia, head to your bedroom, and lock the door”

“Wait. It’s okay. That’s Mase’s truck,” Sniffer says, rushing back from checking the windows.

“Are you sure, Cass? That’s more than one car. Maybe she should go just in case.”



Too late now, the door slams open. Someone groans. “Fuck, it smells good in here. Please tell me she made enough for everyone?” Sid’s pleading makes me let out a nervousness giggle which causes Mac to start chuckling.

“No, you bastards, get out of here. We’ve been cooking since you left. It’s all ours. Damn, how many people are with you? No, no, you all need to go!” Sniffer’s face looks genuinely panicked. I’m scanning the men and waiting for Masen, so I reach over and rub Sniffer’s forearm.

“It’s fine, really. I made almost ten pounds of meatballs,” I say, trying to comfort him.

Masen is the last to enter the room, and he doesn’t look happy. “I made the mistake of saying I was coming home to eat when all these assholes” —he looks at the four extra men in the room in disgust— “decide they want to come.” His eyes laser to Sniffer. “Apparently, Cass doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut, so everybody wants my food,” he gripes.

I’m so happy he’s home. I laugh at the absurdity of him worrying about food. “Well, is it over? How’d it go?” I ask eagerly.

Masen’s eyes meet mine, and he shakes his head. “No, Little One, they were gone. Which can only mean one of three things. Rob and Jeff are lying, they panicked when they didn’t return tonight, or the worst of the three, someone from my Pack warned them we were coming,” he says grimly. I can feel his distress.

“Well, let’s set five more plates, and you can tell me about what you found after you eat. Go wash up, boys.” Like a group of teenagers, they all push and shove to get to the bathroom first. I lead Masen to the kitchen sink, so he can wash his hands. “Do you want noodles or mashed potatoes with your meatballs, Masen?”

He looks at the plate. “Both,” he glowers. I pile his plate with both and lots of meatballs, and he rants under his breath when everyone lines up behind my helpers.

The table's not big enough for everyone to sit, so a few of the guys stand or sit at the bar and shovel the food in like they haven't eaten in months. Masen growls at anyone brave enough to try for seconds. Once every morsel of food is gone, they all thank me for their full bellies. "I am not buying a bigger table!" Masen spouts sullenly. I roll my eyes.

"No need, brother, we can't have all these assholes taking all our food. That would just encourage them," Sniffers says while giving the stink eye to everyone but Sam and Masen.

"Good Lord, tell me what happened," I say, throwing my hands in the air.

"Not too much more to tell. They were tipped off we were coming, so they left in a hurry, leaving behind almost everything. I have a few men watching the place, hoping they'll return for their stuff, but I'm not hopeful. We spent most of the time sorting through their shit to see if there was any clue who they're working with or where they're headed next but came up empty." The joking mood from before fades quickly.

"Was there any evidence that they've done this before? Are all the women with them willingly?" I question in a hushed tone.

"No Sophia, I don't think this is something they've done before. I don't think any of them are forced to be there, but I don't think they know what they're supposed Alpha is up to either."

The dishes are cleared and the dishwasher is loaded while Masen and Michael continue talking at the table. Sam leaves quickly after dinner saying since Masen's home he made plans with David. Sid and Sniffer pour a few drinks and join the rest of the fellas at the table. After the day I've had, I'm beat, so I give Masen a kiss and tell him I'm going to shower and go to bed. He stands and walks me to the room where he goes in the bathroom and runs the water in the tub for me instead.

"No falling asleep in here, or no more baths for you, understand?" I mumble my assertion, strip, and climb in. The water is almost too hot, just the way I like it. I sigh in

contentment then Masen leans down and kisses my brow. “I’ll be back in thirty minutes to make sure you’re out. If you need me just yell or” —he tilts his head to the side thinking— “just call my name loudly up here,” he taps my forehead and smiles. “I love you, Little One. I’m sorry I didn’t finish it tonight.”

I cup his jaw with my wet hand, leaving drops of water on his shirt as it trickles down from my arm. “It’s fine. I was so worried about you. I’m just glad you’re home. I love you, too. Now, go visit your friends.” I pat his cheek.

“I’ll be back soon,” he promises before standing and leaving. After ten minutes my face is sweating so badly I can’t stand it any longer. I drain the tub and rinse quickly in the shower. I dry and lotion up before pawing through Masen’s shirts so I’ll have something to wear to bed. I’m asleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow.

## CHAPTER 27



I jolt awake suddenly from a dream I can't remember. My heart is racing, and my cheeks are wet from tears. Masen stirs next to me, rumpling the sheet from his bottom half. He's sleeping on his stomach with his arms and a pillow folded under his head. I blow out a couple of deep breaths, and Masen's thick sleep voice fills the silence, "What's wrong, baby?"

I cringe. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. It was just a bad dream." I sniffle a little.

His eyes pop open, and he lifts up on his elbows. "Why are you crying?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I can't remember the dream. I just remember being really sad," I mumble.

He rolls over and sits up beside me, pulling me over to his chest. "Don't cry, Little One," he says, sounding pained. I relax into him, accepting his comfort. He lays us back down and rubs his fingers through my hair until I eventually fall back asleep.

I'm still draped across Masen when I wake up hours later to the bright morning sun filtering through the curtains. I roll over, stretch, and enjoy watching Masen sleep. His face is soft and relaxed. With his intense eyes hidden, I take in his rugged features and marvel at his masculine beauty, which seems like such a strange word to use to describe him but I find no other words that convey the truth more than those. Masen's face is turned toward me. His lips are barely parted, and his dark

lashes that are longer than mine fan his high cheekbone. His jaw is shadowed with his overnight stubble. One hand rests on his bare stomach while the other is folded behind his head. The black sheet is covering him from just below his belly button down. My hand itches to inch the fabric lower so my view would be uninterrupted.

I've been staring for a while when my bladder demands I get out of bed. Slowly, I move from the bed and leave the room, I'll use another bathroom. I don't want to wake Masen. I'm not sure what time he got to bed, but I know he was awake with me for a while through the night. I use the same bathroom we used yesterday. After washing my hands, I head to the kitchen to make some coffee in the new machine Masen bought yesterday. I still don't have my liquid creamer, but at least the coffee's good, and there's some powder crap in the cupboard. I need to go grocery shopping, today.

When I turn, Sniffer is standing two feet away from me. I jump back, slamming into the counter with my hip and scream from the shock. Luckily, I hadn't picked up my coffee yet. I have a feeling he'd be wearing the scalding hot brew. He was so silent, I didn't hear him sneak up behind me. "What are you doing?" I ask breathlessly. "You scared the piss outta me!"

Masen comes flying down the hallway and skids into the kitchen, naked and pissed. He has his brother pinned to the wall within seconds.

"Wait, wait!" I shout at Masen, who clearly isn't even awake yet. I put my hand over the arm that holds Sniffer to the wall by his throat. He looks over and down to me, blinking, then he looks back to his brother's purpling face before he lets go and takes a step back, pulling me with him.

"Why'd you scream?" his rough voice asks. He's still eyeing Sniffer with distrust.

"I just got startled. I didn't even know he was still here. I was making coffee, and when I turned around, he was just there. It freaked me out for a second. I'm sorry. It's okay, really." He folds his arms over his chest and watches as Sniffer

shakes out his limbs and clears his throat, giving him a look that says he thinks it's all his fault.

Remembering he doesn't have clothes on, I grab the towel hanging from the stove and try to cover him. He scoffs and tosses the towel to the counter. My mouth hangs open at his unabashed nudity while Sniffer looks properly shamed. "I wasn't trying to scare you, Sophie. You just didn't hear me."

I smack my hands down to my bare thighs. "Well, I know that now," I cry. "I wasn't trying to get you killed!" I rant to Masen who's now looking at me like I'm the one who's naked traipsing through the house.

"Cass, go away! She's not dressed."

I motion to him, incredulous. "Are you joking?" I shake my head. "Good Lord, I need coffee to deal with you two." When I retrieve my cup, I place it in the microwave to heat it back up. Masen places a full bottle of my favorite French vanilla creamer in front of me and kisses my mark. I swoon at the sweetness. "When did you get this?" I ask, happily accepting the jug.

"Last night, I knew you'd want it this morning." His hand skims up the back of my thigh and lifts the shirt I'm wearing and squeezes my butt.

"Masen," I admonish, looking around him to see where Sniffer is. The kitchen is empty. He must have left like Masen asked.

"While I love being able to touch every inch of you" —his hand skims around my hip and cups me— "I don't want anyone else seeing what's mine." He nips my neck. "Please go put some pants on."

I'd agree to just about anything right now, so I murmur, "Mm-hmm."

He slaps my butt, his voice losing his seductive manner, "Good." I look back at him and his mischievous smirk tells me I just got played. When my eyes lower, I can see I wasn't the only one affected. I arch a brow at his predicament and fix my

coffee, swaying from the room slowly. “Fuck me, I’m never gonna have the upper hand with her,” he says to himself.

Once I’ve dressed for the day, I put on minimal make-up and return to the kitchen. Masen grabs a pair of gym shorts while I was fixing my hair. I’m surprised to find him, Sniffer, and Mac sitting at the table.

I wave a little sheepishly when they all turn and look at me when I enter. “Sorry about this morning, Sniffer.”

He nods his head and smiles. “It’s not your fault my brother almost killed me,” he adds and punches Masen in the arm.

“No, it’s yours,” Masen says with conviction. Mac watches them silently

“Masen, are you hungry?”

Before he can answer, Sniffer does, “Yes, Mase is very hungry. He was telling me he would like four whole omelets hungry.”

Masen reaches over and smacks the back of his head. “Don’t trouble yourself, Little One. We are fine,” he says while looking at his brother, who’s pouting and rubbing his head dejectedly.

“It’s no trouble, really. I love cooking when someone enjoys it,” I say truthfully. “Sniffer, you’re on toast.”

He jumps up quickly. “Got it!”

Looking through the fridge, I grab the last of the lunch meat and a block of cheese to shred. I divide the meat in three piles, making Masen’s a little bit larger, and sprinkle some cheese on them. Sniffer sets a plate of buttered toast in the middle of the table. As I pass Masen his plate, he grabs my hand and kisses my knuckles while looking at me. “Thank you.” Sniffer’s is done a few minutes later, followed by Mac’s. I make myself a bagel with butter and cream cheese and another cup of coffee.

“So, what’s up?” I ask, including myself in their conversation.

“I need to head to the office soon. I thought you could hang out with Cass and Mac today until I get home,” Masen says as I look over to Sniffer.

“What about school? And doesn’t Mac have a job he needs to get to? Can’t I just go with you?”

Mac chuckles. “This is my job, Luna. I’m one of Mase’s security experts.”

Oh well, I guess that makes sense. “School will always be there, Sophie. Don’t worry about us,” Sniffer answers. The front door opens and no one gets up to check it so whoever it is must be expected.

Masen hasn’t answered. When I look over, he looks guilty. “I ah...I have to let Roxanne go today. I think it’ll go easier if you’re not there,” he grimaces.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!” I hiss through my teeth.

“Don’t be upset. I told you I didn’t get a chance to transfer her last week. I know she’ll be there today so I want to handle it,” he pleads.

“Oh, I’m more than upset. I’m pissed!” I stand and lean over the table “I can’t understand how you even fucked that cock chasing, lint licker for five years with the cock I OWN!” I bellow and gesture down to his lap. I’m breathing hard and my chest heaves.

“Holy shit, that’s so fucking hot,” I hear someone whisper.

“OUT!” Masen commands as he stands from the table, towering over me. I never take my eyes from him, but I hear people rushing from the room.

“Do you have a death wish? I can’t believe you said that out loud. You’re lucky he’s too distracted...” The voice becomes muffled when the door closes.

“I’ve been pretty tolerant of all this bullshit with Roxanne, but it stops now! If you think for one minute I’m leaving you alone with that conniving bitch, you’re sadly mistaken.” I tut at his gall.



My eyes track him as he stalks around the table and grabs my chin forcefully. His lips are on mine seconds later, taking my mouth without apology. When he comes up for air, he rasps, “I love when you get all bossy and possessive. It makes me so hard, but I’m really going to love showing you who’s boss when I spank your ass so red you won’t be able to sit anywhere but my face, for doing it while my men are here.” He grabs my hand and cups it over his rock-hard erection. I moan at the contact, gripping and stroking him over his shorts. When his eyes close and his head falls back, I take advantage, drop to my knees, and rip the shorts down his body. His engorged cock springs free. He looks down at me, shock on his face until I suck him into my mouth greedily. He grunts and fists my hair, guiding me faster. “Ah, I love being inside you. Knowing. I’m. The. Only. One. To. Ever. Have. You.” He pumps into my mouth as he shudders at the thought, then spills down my throat. He whispers my name repeatedly. I love the way it sounds when he says it, he so rarely calls me Sophia, making it sweeter when he does while coming. He pops free with an audible click.

I look up at him, still on my knees with the most innocent look I can muster. “You were saying?”

“Ha,” he barks and gathers me up from the floor. “That you are more trouble than I ever imagined possible, and I love every minute of it.” I can feel his intense adoration from our bond, making me warm and fuzzy. *I can’t put into words how I feel about you*, I hear in my head. I almost cry at the emotions he feels, trying to convey his love. “I never knew it was feasible to want and need someone so badly. You are my everything!”

One tear escapes, but I smile and let him feel my unwavering love for him before telling him, “I love you, too, but I’m still coming with you.”

His eyes get big. “You are so fucking sassy.” He laughs and smacks my butt with a loud crack. “Yeah, well, you’re not off the hook either,” he adds with an evil glint in this eye.

While Masen is in the shower, the doorbell rings. I look over to the clock noticing it only almost nine. When I open the

door, a pretty woman with short, white-blond hair smiles at me. “Hi,” I say, not sure what she’s doing here.

“Well just look at you, aren’t you gorgeous? I couldn’t wait to meet you.” She hugs me close, taking me off guard. “Well, where’s my boy?” she asks, releasing my stiff body while walking past me into the house. I stand at the open door wondering who she is. Her eyes dart around the room.

“Masen?” I question. She finally looks over at me and sees my confusion just as a huge man with salt and pepper hair strides through the door mumbling. “Masen,” I yell loud enough for him to hear me from the bedroom. “He didn’t tell you we were coming?” Her pretty face falls. I inch closer to the hall when the man finally looks up at me, and I freeze. He has Masen’s white-blue eyes. My body relaxes instantly. “You’re his parents?” I smile and blow out a breath. “I’m sorry,” I say, rushing over to grab her hand. “He didn’t tell me y’all were coming today. Please forgive my manners. It’s been a crazy couple of days. Can I get you something to drink? Are you hungry? I can make y’all some breakfast.”

“No, we’re fine, but thank you.” She smiles, and I can see how much Sniffer takes after her now that I’m truly looking at her.

“Well, I’m hungry,” grumbles a deep voice.

She just shakes her head. “I just fed you. I’m Mickey, and this is Caleb. We couldn’t be happier to meet you. Mase and Cass have told me so much about you,” she says excitedly.

“That was hours ago,” he grouses.

“Masen should be out soon. He’s getting ready for work. Come on in here, and I’ll see what’s left.” I lead them to the kitchen. I’m a little nervous to cook for Masen’s dad. I look in the freezer and find some frozen sausage links. I put them in the sink and run cool water over them and grab a couple pans. I peel and shred a couple potatoes and get them frying before starting the sausage.

“Who the hell are you feeding now?” Masen booms down the hallway before entering the kitchen.

I roll my eyes. “He thinks everyone is out to steal his food,” I mock whisper.

“That’s because they are!” he states, finally entering the room. “Mom, Pop? What are you guys doing here?” he asks but walks over to his mother and hugs her tight. He’s casual today in dark jeans and a light blue button-up shirt rolled at the cuffs showing off his strong forearms.

“Don’t you ever check your messages? I told your machine we were coming today.” She shakes her head. Masen makes his way to his dad and does the manly shake and half hug thing.

He seems happy to have them here, and they chat while I fix their breakfast. I hear the door open, and Sniffer says, “Is it lunch already? I’m just in time. Hey Mom,” he says while giving her a loud smacking kiss on the cheek. “Pop.” He tries for the same greeting, but his dad puts him in a headlock and scruffs his head affectionately.

“You ain’t getting my breakfast, boy,” his dad grunts.

As I watch them interact, my heart aches for my parents. Masen comes over and kisses my temple. “They’re your family, now too, yeah,” he whispers.

I nod, more choked up than I thought and turn back to the stove. I make a quick pan gravy with the sausage. The potatoes are nice and crisp, so I grab the eggs to finish off the country omelets I’m making for them. After a sprinkle of cheese, it’s ready to go. I plate Masen’s dad’s and put it in the warm oven until his mother’s is done. “Would you like some coffee or anything else?” I ask when I set the plates down.

“I didn’t get gravy on my omelet. Can I have a bite, Momma?” Sniffer pouts.

“Oh shut it, you. I haven’t had a good home-cooked meal that I didn’t have to make myself in years,” his mother retorts. When he looks over at his dad, Caleb scoots his plate over a few inches and growls low and deep.

I can’t help myself, I bust out laughing. “What is it with y’all and food?” I ask, shaking my head while I watch Masen

who looks like he might just try and steal his dad's plate and make a run for it.

“Now, I'm hungry again,” he grouches. Turning his back on his parents, he looks at me and smiles proudly.

“If you're still planning on coming with me, Little One, we need to go. I've got a meeting at eleven-thirty,” he says, looking at his phone.

“Is it okay if I still come? What about your parents?”

“Cass can entertain them. It's fine.” We say our goodbyes, and Masen tells them we'll see them in a few hours and to make themselves at home. He walks me to his standard SUV and opens the door for me. When he gets in, he kisses me hungrily, leaving me breathless and wanting. He places his forehead on mine and says, “Thank you for taking such good care of me and our family.” I'm speechless from his kind words as he starts the car and drives us downtown.

## CHAPTER 28



My first thought is Black Industries is huge. The buildings are only four stories high, but what it lacks in height, it makes up for in volume. Three buildings surround an open courtyard with tons of shade offered by mature trees. Picnic tables and benches are placed throughout the parklike area.

Masen leads us to the building farthest back. The doors slick open as we approach. A pretty shifter female sits behind a large reception desk. Her smile falters just a bit when she sees Masen holding my hand on his arm. “Mr. Black, good morning, sir. Shall I have your guest escorted to your personal suite? Your eleven thirty is waiting in your office lobby.” Her tone is purely professional, only a woman would see and hear the cues of how bothered she is by me being here.

“No thanks, May.” Her face is triumphant for the briefest of moments until Masen continues, “She’ll be with me. This is Sophia, soon to be Black, my Luna.”

Her gasp is audible, I almost feel sorry for her. “I hadn’t heard you found your Mate.” She smiles, but her eyes are glassy as she says, “Congratulations Alpha.” She bows her head.

Masen has no clue he just crushed this woman. He pulls a beautiful white calla lily from a large floral arrangement to the left of her workspace and hands it to me before kissing my temple. A few others have stopped to watch us from afar. None have the visceral reaction of May, the receptionist, but I can tell many are surprised by his behavior.

“Everyone in the building is a shifter. This is where my offices are. You ready for a tour, Little One?” he asks me affectionately. I nod my head and smile at how proud he is of this place, it’s written all over his handsome face.

Forgetting the audience, I place my hand over his heart and lean up, trying to catch his lips. He dips his head so I can reach. “Yes, I’d love a tour.”

A throat clears behind us, and I look over. “Should I reschedule your eleven-thirty, sir?”

He looks at me. “Tour after my meeting, yeah?” I nod, agreeing.

I was worried that Roxanne would be in his office, but I haven’t seen her yet. His secretary is an older shifter female that greets me with genuine enthusiasm. Masen’s meeting is boring. It takes place in Masen’s office with Mr. Polenski, a stuffy old man wanting money for something. I lose interest within the first five minutes. Other than to take notes, the elderly man’s assistant hasn’t taken her eyes off Masen since we entered the room. She constantly crosses and uncrosses her long, toned legs. Her suit skirt is so short I’m sure Masen has seen her panties, if she wears them, numerous times. And to my dismay, I’ve recently discovered not only am I a brazen hussy, but I’m also a jealous cow, ugh.

He introduces me as his fiancée which gave me a huge thrill and explains my presence by telling them we marry this weekend and have lots of plans to finalize. Neither seems interested one way or the other why I’m here, both have their own agenda.

Thirty-five minutes later they leave, each disappointed for different reasons. Masen sighs when the doors close. I think he’s as relieved as I am. “Blah, that was a long time to listen to the old coot try and steal your money with your permission.”

Masen chuckles. “I’ve never thought about it that way, but I guess you have a point.” His face goes serious. “Little One, I need to let Roxanne know about her transfer. Why don’t you wait here for me? You can use my computer to order yourself a new iPad or a MacBook, whichever you want. Then do the

rest of that online shopping you need done.” He seriously just tried to bribe me with shopping.

“How about if I promise to let you do all the talking and to be on my best behavior?” I counter.

“I knew that wasn’t going to work. Offer any other female my credit card and they disappear for a week. You couldn’t care less.” He stands and offers me his arm.

“Where is she, anyway? I was sure she’d be in here when we came in.” He’s very quiet as we walk out the door. Doris, his secretary, waves as we pass.

“I only take meetings with humans over here. My personal office is the top floor” —he swallows loudly— “She works up there.” He hasn’t looked at me at all, just leads us to an elevator across the lobby. I can feel his nervous tension through our bond.

“Why are you so freaked out?”

He runs his hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up in the front. I reach up, fixing it. He leans into my palm and closes his eyes. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“What doesn’t mean anything?”

When the doors open, he guides us in. He lets the doors close but doesn’t push a button to select a floor. His white blue eyes are pained when he finally looks at me. “The whole top floor of this building is mine.”

There’s something I do not understand going on here. “I thought the whole building was yours?”

He nods his head. “It is, but the top floor of this building is my space, personal space.”

I take a step back from him. “What do you mean personal space?”

He moves forward, regaining the space I just put between us. Masen wraps his large hand around my neck and uses his other hand to pick up mine and places it over his heart. He needs me touching him right now, I just don’t know why. “I never let anyone come to our house. I built it for you.” He

drops his forehead to mine then speaks so fast and softly I have to strain to hear him. “I have an apartment here. That’s where she works, not in the apartment but in my personal office.”

I think he was hoping to soften the blow, but not saying it loud doesn’t make it any less real. Ouch, this isn’t going to be easy. Every time he comes to work I’m going to be left wondering, wondering if he still thinks about all the women he’s brought here. Oh goodness, that’s what May was thinking. That he was going to stash me away in his fuck pad while he had a meeting. My hand covers my mouth, and I cough, trying to cover the sob that wants to come out. “You didn’t think to tell me this before we got here! So maybe, I could prepare myself for not only seeing your lover but finding out you have a fuck pad at work,” I say incredulously. “That’s why she asked if you wanted me taken to your suite because it’s not only Roxanne you’ve brought here but all the others. She thought I was like all of them.” I scoff. I’m so angry at his blatant disregard of my feelings. To let me find out this way is horrible.

“I didn’t want you to know,” he pleads.

I clutch my chest, covering the ache. “You were going to lie to me? I don’t know which is worse, your willingness to deceive me or your last minute honesty.” I close my eyes and shake my head, trying to dispel the thoughts of how many women he’s brought here. What else is he lying about?

“I was going to have it remodeled. I have no need for it now... I...” he stops, realizing how crass what he just said sounded, “I thought I was protecting you by not telling you. But, I can feel how betrayed and deceived you feel, and I know I was wrong.” He crowds me with his big body inching closer. “I’d never do anything to hurt you on purpose, Sophia. Please believe that. Don’t let my mistakes make you feel like this. Nothing has changed. All this is just details, details that will never matter unless we let them. I love you so much! Please, please,” he begs. In my head, I hear, *I’ll take it. I’ll take it*, over and over like a chant. He wants to take the pain away.



I touch his frowning face. “You’re right.” The bond we share simplifies things greatly. I can feel his remorse. “Nothing has changed. I knew there were other women, but it still hurts. Thank you for understanding why I’m upset. I love you, too, so so much. I feel like I’ve never not loved you. What we have is worth more than my jealousy, but please, don’t keep something like this from me again. I deserve to deal with it privately.”

Masen lets out a deep breath and nods his head. He wraps his arms around me, lifts me up, and buries his face in my neck. I feel his wide chest expand as he drags in deep breaths, scenting me. Too soon, he sets me down and brushes his lips across mine, kissing me softly. Then, he turns and places a large key into the elevator panel. He turns the keys and removes it quickly. Lifting my hand, he opens it, placing the keys in my palm. “Only two of the elevators are capable of reaching my floor; even then these keys are required to access it.”

The ride to the next floor is short. When the doors peel open, I see a small lobby much like the one below us, but this one is lacking Doris’s smiling face. Instead, I find Roxanne wearing what I would consider closer to a nighty than business attire. The green satin material has black lace at the hem and bust line. The thin material leaves no questions as to her braless state. It’s so short I’m sure if she were to bend over in the slightest we would see her flat skinny ass. I refuse to give her the satisfaction of knowing how her being here affects me. Her face is smug. She’s happy about something, and it makes me nervous.

“Good Roxanne, you’re already here. We have a few things to discuss.” His voice is firm but not unkind.

“Alright, Mase.” She turns and struts to a closed door to the right of the lobby. Her knee injury seems perfectly fine.

“Ah, in the office.” His eyes dart to mine. When she turns back around, her smile is full force.

“Why Mase?” She tries for innocence. “We never use your office.” She bats her lashes. She’s going to make this as hard

on me as possible.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I say and pull him to follow. He’s reluctant. She opens the door and holds it for us to enter. Once I pass, she steps out further causing Masen’s body to brush against hers. I hear her hum as if he just caressed her, but I’m too riveted to the scene before me to object.

The area is open much like a loft. You can see the entire space from the door save a few walls blocking off some of the kitchen area, which from what I can tell is much smaller and more utilitarian than his kitchen at home. What bothers me more than I can express are the other similarities. A large four-poster bed that looks so close to the one we sleep in at home, it could be the exact same, takes up a large portion of the corner. It’s covered in natural light from the large windows. If that isn’t bad enough, there’s an office area closely resembling his home office. The same room I enjoyed so much because I could see and feel how much of himself he put into the room. I quickly scan the living room area, but my mind is still stuck on the bed and office. It feels like I’ve been standing in this... this space for an eternity when I feel Masen touch my lower back. I snap forward like his touch burns me but try and recover so she won’t know how bad she’s hurt me. “I need the restroom please”

“Let’s go into the office. I have a small one in there,” he urges.

“Oh Mase, don’t be silly. The bathroom in here is just to die for. I know I’ve enjoyed it for years.”

“Roxanne,” he warns.

“I’m sure she’ll love it. It’s right through that door.” She points a red-painted fingernail to the only door I can see, it’s next to the bed. I glide forward, keeping my eyes trained on the door, not wanting to see anymore. I think I could have handled it if it was different, but knowing he’s poured so much of himself into this space makes me sick. I close the door behind me before even turning on the light and try to catch my breath. I hear a raised muffled voice through the door, but I’m too upset to even try and listen. When I finally find the light

switch by feeling the wall, I'm momentarily relieved it doesn't look familiar at all, but the relief evaporates quickly when I take a better look around. There is no tub, but the shower with a built-in wooden bench could easily hold ten people. Five showerheads sprout from the walls, and three hang from the ceiling. The clear glass surrounding it does nothing to hide the six different bottles of female soaps and shampoos, telling me Roxanne either likes a variety or he keeps it well stocked for his discerning guests. The same bottles Masen uses at home in his shower sit on the opposite side, whereas mine are mixed in with his.

I'm still leaning against the door when I feel a light tapping from the other side. "Can I come in, Little One?" he asks softly.

"I'll be just a minute," I return, my voice sure even if my thoughts aren't. I'm sure he can tell I'm standing right next to the door and haven't gone any further.

"Yeah, okay," he says solemnly. I wash my hands letting the cold water run over my wrist while I stare into the mirror seeing my full reflection cast back at me from the mirrored covered wall behind me. "Nothing's changed, Little One. I'll give you an explanation, but I'm not sure it will make it any better," he says sorrowfully through the closed door.

When I know I won't cry, I open the door and find Masen sitting on the floor next to the door. He stands and grabs my hand in his. "Can we get out of here?" When I look around, I find Roxanne is gone so we're alone.

"If it makes you feel better." I shrug, knowing it won't erase my knowledge of this place. He guides me with a hand on my back to the elevator. When we leave the building, it's with just as many stares as when we entered. How many of these people watched Masen walk other women out? How many of them were the ones he walked out? I know it shouldn't matter. Who cares what these strangers think about me, but it's still hard not to let it bother me. I wish we hadn't met all those years ago. Then, I could understand him and how he was still with another woman. When my thoughts turn dark,

I wish he could feel what it feels like to know he wasn't worth waiting for.

I stop and tell him. "I'm going to need a little time to myself. I'm too upset to deal with this right now. It would just turn into a huge fight, and I just don't have the energy for it."

His eyes search my face. I'm pretty sure I've mastered blocking him. He doesn't seem to know or feel what I'm thinking. "I don't want to leave you, but I can understand you wanting a few minutes."

I start walking to a bench, and he follows behind me about ten paces. Realizing he's going to stand and watch me, I walk back to him. "I mean alone, Masen. I can't have you hovering over me right now."

His face falls. "I can't leave. I don't want to, and it's not safe."

I huff and stomp to the car. "Let's just go." He reaches my door right before me and opens it but smartly walks over to his side and gets in instead of trying to help me in like he usually does.

Once we are driving, he looks at me from the corner of his eye. I can see the slight shift in his head. Then, he does exactly what I didn't want, he starts explaining. "I wasn't thinking. It never dawned on me what it would look like to you, other than a bedroom and office," he says, squeezing the steering wheel. "I knew seeing it would bother you. I just didn't think that would be part of it. I never made the connection." He must have been listening to my thoughts, which pisses me off even more. I sit and stew, trapped in this car when what I really want to do is erase this whole morning from the time we got to his office. To think, I almost felt sorry for the receptionist. I snort, and his head whips to the side, trying to figure out what caused my reaction. "I let Roxanne put the apartment together," he says guiltily. "When she asked what I had at home, I never thought twice about it. She said she wanted to get what I like, so I told her." His shoulders shrink. "To be honest, I don't think it was her intention. I think she really did just want to get me what I liked."

“Ha,” I scoff. “You are an idiot if you actually believe the shit you’re saying,” I spit. “That woman knows exactly what she’s doing. How you don’t see it boggles my mind.”

“You make it seem like she knew about you. That she’s out to hurt you personally,” he defends.

“How do you know she didn’t? That woman watches every move you make. You think she didn’t notice the change in you and put two and two together. She hated me the moment she saw me, and I was just a kid. I’m telling you now, she knows a hell of a lot more than you’re giving her credit for. If you could just take a minute and look at all this from my point of view, I think you’d feel very different,” I turn to him and glare, “And if you defend her again, you can fucking walk home!” I turn on the radio. Pink and Nate from F.U.N. blast from the speakers, begging for just a reason. I laugh mirthlessly at the irony.

When we pull in the garage, he asks, “Should I come in?” I’d already decided what I was going to do on the drive here.

“You go on in. I’m going for a run.” When he opens his mouth, I hold up my hand stopping him. “Alone! No one will see me. I’m used to hiding and taking care of myself. Do not follow me or have me followed. I will stay on your personal property.” I exit the car before he can object. I close my eyes and call on my wolf, within seconds I’m itching to run so I do.

I race through the open yard, making sure to keep from the main areas of the house where someone might see me through a window. Once I hit the trees, I slow but still speed past trees letting my wolf roam. My nose is much keener in this form. I can scent Masen on every tree and rock, occasionally I get a whiff of Sniffer or one of the few others he considers friends.

When I get too close to the Pack property line, I circle back and let my wolf guide me. I’ve always been so careful about when and where I’ve shifted. The freedom of exploring his refuge in the daylight is exciting. I’m not sure how long I’ve been running when I find a tree with low enough branches for me to climb easily. The fallen leaves let the sun shine down through the branches, casting me in a warm glow as I rest my

muzzle on my front paws. I'm not nearly as upset now that I've had some time to settle down. I'm almost ready to go back to Masen.

I startle awake to a deep howl piercing the darkness. My claws dig into the bark, keeping me from falling from the tree limb. The tormented sound rings again, and I realize it's Masen. I give a short yip to answer him back. Before I can climb down from the tree, he crashes through the underbrush panting. His wolf is still magnificent, his size still astounds me. If I wasn't a wolf, I wouldn't be able to spot him. His black color leaves him to blend into the darkness seamlessly. His head thrashes back and forth as he scents the air. When his eyes find me up in the tree, he growls angrily. Why the hell is he mad at me?

*Because I've been looking for you for hours,* his voice sounds in my head.

*Oh,* is my only reply.

*You covered almost every inch of our property, and I never thought to look up in the trees,* he adds flabbergasted.

*Well you have to get creative when you don't have a four thousand acre refuge to play in. I couldn't let just anyone find me,* I say defensively.

*You scared me,* he says sadly.

*I didn't mean to. I was just taking a break and must have fallen asleep. I was coming back, Masen,* I reply with conviction.

*Will you come down from there, please?* I hop down to the next branch until I'm low enough to jump to the ground.

His muzzle roughly pushes my side, turning me so he can inspect me. I stand still and let him rub his scent all over me. *Are you ready to go home yet, Little One,* he asks when he's finished.

*Sure.*

The walk back is quiet. When we reach the clearing, he asks, *where'd you put your clothes?*

*Ah, I'm wearing them,* I say confused. I tell my wolf thank you and pull her back, shaking out my limbs to relive the tingle.

Masen stands from his crouched position. "Where are your clothes?" I question, looking at his naked body.

"I can't shift with my clothes they shred, no one can," he says, looking at my clothes that are perfectly intact.

"Ah well, I can." I motion down my body.

"I can see that, baby. Have you always been able to?"

I nod. "Yeah, I never knew any different. I thought everyone could."

He comes closer and wraps his hand around the back of my neck. "No, definitely not. It's just one more thing that makes you extraordinary. Can I kiss you?" he whispers. I give a slight jerk of my neck, and his soft lips cover mine. He takes his time tasting every inch of my mouth, never pushing deeper into my mouth, content to explore my lips with his teeth, lips and tongue. It's tender and consuming. His long fingers tunnel into my hair as he tilts my jaw with his thumbs, angling me for his attention. I move my body closer to him, seeking his warmth and the comfort his big body gives me. One of my hands twines through the hair at his nape while the other arm laces beneath his arm then up his back hugging him to me. The kiss slowly ends, and he just holds me. "I'm sorry for everything, Little One, all of it. None of that should have happened. I should have transferred her the day you came home to me. I should have called her or had someone else tell her, especially after this weekend." He nuzzles my head. "You deserve much better from me." He's ashamed of himself. I know none of it was done to hurt me, he thought he was handling everything well.

"I get it, Masen. You were trying to spare her feelings. You've known her for a long time. She cares for you very deeply. I still think you've let yourself be blinded by her, but I want us to stop letting her affect our lives so profoundly. She shouldn't have a place between us. It's hard to forget when your past is always in my face."

I feel him nod. “You’re right. I won’t let it happen again, no matter what.”

Masen steps into a pair of gym shorts he left in the garage before we enter. The house is dark and quiet. I pass through the rooms quickly on the hunt for a nice long shower. Masen stays behind in the kitchen when I tell him my plans.

When the water is hot, I stand under the spray, soaking my hair and muscles. Seeing my shampoo and conditioner amid his reminds me of his other shower. The hurt is too fresh to dismiss so I embrace it this time, telling myself I’ll never let the woman make me cry again. By the time I get out, my skin is bright pink from the overly hot water, and the room is filled with steam making it hard to breathe. I wrap myself in a towel and brace for the cold air I’ll feel when I open the door to his room.

Surprised, I find Masen carrying the same tray he brought me breakfast on just days ago covered with sliced cheese, crackers, a small bunch of grapes, and a large glass of wine. The sweetness of the gesture makes me swoon. After he sets the tray on the bed, he grabs a long, silky black robe from the end of the bed. He comes over and drapes it on my shoulders. It pools at my feet, and we both laugh. “This was a gift from my parents years ago, but I’ve never worn it. I thought you might like it, but I can see I’ll need to get you another.” He chuckles warmly. I tug the towel I was wearing free and pull the sash tight. It’s still much too long, but I like the feel of it against my skin.

“Thank you,” I say, meaning it.

Not willing to fill the bed with crumbs, I sit on the floor in front of his wood-burning fireplace, wishing it was cold enough to light it. Masen joins me, and we sit quietly enjoying each other’s company.



## CHAPTER 29



The next three days are filled with Masen's mom helping me prepare for the Mating ceremony. I miss my mother more than ever, but I've grown to love his family so quickly. I'm grateful for her guidance and acceptance. When I didn't come in with him Monday afternoon, he explained some of our history and what happened at his office that day to his parents. I think Mickey was more upset at him than I was. Today is the first day she's spoken more than one word to him.

His dad however retaliates by stealing Masen's food. Every time I've prepared a plate for Masen, Caleb materializes and takes the plate right from his hands. Making sure Masen knows he's gotten first dibs, an honor that always goes to him when I'm cooking. He hasn't said a word, just makes himself a new plate while staring at his dad enjoying his food. I'm not sure how much longer he'll get away with it though. Today when Caleb snatched his steak, Masen growled and didn't release the plate so easily.

We've also told them I'm a white wolf and asked if they know anything about my heritage that could help us understand our situation better. One of the things we've learned is white wolves are always females. I'm not sure if my mother was a white wolf. I'd seen her change a few times, but when I got older, my parents always shifted together, saying it was their time alone. I know she was light, but the memories seem to fade. Like when I try to remember the sound of her voice, it's in there, I just can't recall it.

Caleb also said that white wolves were rumored to have abilities that far exceed the average shifter, anything from premonitions or empathy to superior healing abilities. We've shared that we can communicate through our bond in both forms. Masen suspects I may have a type of empathy, telling me sometimes the people close to me can experience my emotions if it's something I feel deeply. I don't even want to know who told him this or when someone felt me. They also suspect that our powers will combine and be amplified when we are properly Mated.

Mickey was with me trying on dresses today. She noticed my healed Mark from Masen. She called Caleb, who was our bodyguard while we shopped, over and told him, "Your son needs his ass kicked. Look, he Marked her before they were Mated."

My hand flies up to cover the raised scar. "Oh no, is that wrong?" I ask, embarrassed.

"It's not wrong, Sophie. He just knows better. He should have waited until your Mating ceremony," Mickey says while fussing with the dress I'm trying on. "Caleb, you need to have a talk with that boy," Mickey spouts.

"I marked him," I mumble.

"What, Sweets?" Caleb asks. That's what he calls me, he says I smell like cookies. "I marked him first so don't yell at him, please," I say shyly.

I hear one loud gruff before Caleb who attracts almost as much attention as Masen busts out laughing. Every head turns in our direction. Mickey has both her lips rolled in trying to keep from laughing. "You... Marked... him... first..." He wheezes, he can barely stand, let alone speak. He's still laughing so hard when Mickey finally loses the battle and giggles. He starts roaring all over again.

"Why is that funny?" I ask when they finally calm enough to breathe.

Mickey notices my expression first. "Oh, it's nothing, really. Usually, the male is the first to Mark is all. Don't worry

about it. Caleb is just crazy,” she says dismissively, waving her hand.

I know there’s more to this. “What if someone finds out I Marked him first? I don’t want to embarrass him,” I say, mortified.

“Hey, sweets, I can guarantee he’s happy as hell you Marked him first. He’ll probably tell everybody he’d think would listen that his little Mate claimed him first. It’s just funny to think of my son, the Alpha, having a female claim him. He has his hands full with you, but I’ve never seen him happier. He loves you.” He hugs me to his large frame, patting the back of my head with his huge hand a little awkwardly. He’s not as big as Masen, and he’s not as gentle, either. But it still feels nice to be comforted by a father figure. Caleb laughs, and I feel it rumble up his chest. “You better believe I’m gonna give him hell about it.” I step back and laugh a little with him.

After two more stores, I finally find the perfect dress. It’s white which isn’t necessary for a shifter union, but I like it, nonetheless. It reaches just below my knees and has a full lace skirt with a tulle underlay, giving it a fifties vintage vibe. The top is fitted with a wide boat neck but doesn’t show too much cleavage. The cap sleeves match the lace that’s on the shirt. Lastly, I find a light blue sash that almost matches Masen’s eyes to tie around my waist making a belt. Mickey promises to make time later in the week for shoe shopping, even though I’ll be barefoot for the actual ceremony. My belly has been queasy for the past few days. I think I’m more nervous than I expected.

The only detail left to handle is the food. Before we make our vows, it’s customary to have a feast provided by the female’s family. Since I no longer have a family, Nicole and Red have volunteered to take care of the caterer. I decide I’m going to provide the dessert myself. Mickey tells me what Masen’s, Caleb’s, and Sniffer’s favorite desserts are so I can make them each something special. I’ll also make a few cakes and cookies for most of the other guests. That’s how I’ll spend Friday and most of Saturday.

True to his word, Caleb harasses Masen repeatedly about being claimed. It doesn't seem to have the effect he was hoping for though. Masen just puffs out his chest and says, "I know. She couldn't resist me," then sends me a heated look that makes all kinds of promises.

"That's nothing, you should have seen her the other day. She called Roxanne a cock chasing lint licker. Then, she told Mase she owned his..." I throw the apple I was peeling at Sniffer, nailing him right in the forehead, before he can finish.

"Don't even think about it," I threaten. His face is priceless, mouth hanging open with bits of apple dripping down his face. The red welt left behind indicates I might have thrown it a little too hard, but what he's trying to say is soon forgotten as everyone laughs at what I've done.

There's been no word about the rogues since Masen searched their compound. Jeff and Rob are still detained in the cells, but Masen tells me the cells were developed for young shifters who haven't yet gained control of themselves so they're pretty comfortable. He thinks they may be telling the truth about their involvement after questioning them a few more times.

Other than to tell me he fired Roxanne all together on Monday, we haven't talked about that day. He hasn't been back to his office this week, but he's working from home quite a bit to make up for the time he's taking off for us to have a short honeymoon. We will be leaving the Wednesday after our ceremony. He has a meeting Tuesday that he wasn't able to reschedule, but he's keeping where we are going a surprise.

I'm tired after dinner. Barely able to keep my eyes open, I crawl into bed alone. Masen and his dad have been spending hours in his office after dinner, usually not making it to bed until well after midnight. So, I'm surprised when I feel Masen's warm, naked body slide in beside me moments later. He molds every inch of his large frame to my back and coos into my ear, "I miss having you all to myself, Little One." His rough hand glides down the silky, light blue nighty I'm wearing then up under, finding my hardened nipple with ease to roll and pinch. We haven't made love since Monday

morning, and my body is on fire from the first caress. “I love your curvy little body. Every inch of you is so soft against me,” he growls. His fingers trail down to the apex of my thighs, and my legs part for him. I can feel his thick erection at my rear. Masen hooks my calf over his knee, opening me to his deft fingers. He circles my clit slowly, barely whisking his finger over me. “How much do you need me? Are you greedy for me, baby?”

My back arches, driving him into me deeper. “Masen,” I say breathlessly and try to push his hand closer to me. “Stop teasing me,” I beg.

He chuckles darkly but doesn’t budge an inch, not letting me control his movements at all. “You’ve been teasing me for days. When I get in bed with you, I feel your warm body pressed up against mine, but you’re sleeping so deeply. I can’t bring myself to wake you. Then today, in those things you call shorts, you bent over, and I could see this tiny beauty mark right here.” His hand leaves me and runs up the back of my thigh stopping right before my butt and brushes back and forth. “If my dad hadn’t been right there enjoying my torment, I’d have fucked you right then. I need to build a guest house. Then, they won’t have a reason to be here all the time,” he muses to himself.

“Later,” I huff at having lost his attention. The hand caressing me stops, and I whimper in frustration before he slaps my bottom quickly. “Hey!” I yelp and jerk, making his shaft rub through my wetness. He reaches around me again and circles himself between my legs. I shudder when his knuckles brush against me and groan.

“You’re so wet, baby. I can feel you dripping on my cock. Tell me what you need,” he commands, his voice is so low and deep.

“You, Masen! I need you,” I beg. His nose dips to the back of my ear, and he inhales deeply. His body goes rigid. He scents me again, and his chest rumbles. “Masen?” I question, immediately knowing something’s off.

He flips me on my back and cages my body with his so fast I barely register the fact that he has both of my wrists held above my head with one of his hands. I search his hard face for any clue what's wrong. Masen's almost white eyes glow as he stares at me before moving down my body, placing his face right below my belly button. He runs his nose slowly down to my short curls at my closed legs, never lifting his nose. "Open," he grates out, sounding garbled from his extended fangs. I obey, and he continues down to my bare lips before growling ferociously.

"What is wrong with you?" I ask incredulously, shock clear in my tone.

Masen covers my body with his quickly, leaving most of his weight on one hand, the other still brackets both of mine. He nuzzles my neck, breathing hard. He urges my face to the side with his. I feel his wide tongue lap over my Mark, and he rumbles gathering my body even closer and trapping my legs with his on either side. I still have no idea what he's doing, but at least he's being gentle now. When I try to move my hand, he gives a short warning grumble to stay put. After he grooms my Mark repeatedly, he finally lets my hands go and rolls me onto my belly with tender care. I turn my head and look at his hooded eyes and his teeth biting the corner of his lip. Masen is so trained on my bottom I don't think he realizes I'm watching him. His hands begin feathering up the back of my legs until he reaches the small of my back. I close my eyes and relax under his touch. I feel his knee wedge between mine, pushing me open, and I hear him hum in approval. Placing his hands on my hips, he pulls me back so I'm on my knees in front of him with my legs spread. He's seated on his knees that are slightly open behind me, his heavy cock pointing straight up at me. Seeing how much he still wants me makes me forget his curious behavior, and I wiggle a bit and lift up on my arms putting me on all fours. *My baby's body is even greedier than I thought. I'm gonna need to fill her up all the time.* I hear through our bond, and I feel how happy the thought makes him. Even his filthy thoughts excite me, and I'm sure he has no idea I can hear him.

“Come here, baby. I need more of me inside you, yeah?” I find his wording strange, but as long as he’s touching me, I don’t care how he says it. Masen tugs me closer using my hip, then he leans forward and wraps himself around my back hugging me and whispers in my ear, “I’m gonna let you do the work. I’m gonna let your greedy pussy take as much of me as you need.” Pulling up, he lines himself up with my opening and waits. I push back barely and feel his head slip inside me. Wanting more, I keep pushing. I moan at the fullness this position causes. “You need more.” It’s a statement, not a question as he thrusts like he can’t help himself, and that’s exactly what I want.

I need him to take control, to do whatever he wants to my body so I tell him, “Masen, I love when you take care of me. You always know what I need. Will you love me, please?” His hand fists in my hair, making me arch more and plunge back roughly. “Yes,” I hiss.

“You like me in control, like to be my naughty girl.”

Masen pushes me to my first orgasm fast and hard, slamming into me repeatedly. When I’m close, he squeezes my nipple so hard I scream, but he covers my mouth, muffling the noise. “I usually love to hear you scream my name, baby, but you will be quiet or I will punish you.” He pants, still advancing into me, pushing me through my orgasm. I know he’s keeping me quiet because of his parents, who I forgot about. I nod my head and try and swallow around my dry throat.

My arms collapse soon after I finish, but he’s still hard inside of me. He pulls out of me and rolls me on to my back and re-enters me slowly. His lips find mine for the first time tonight, and I marvel at how his mouth cherishes mine. “I love you, Sophia,” he says when he ends the kiss, looking into my eyes.

I’m overwhelmed with emotion as I respond, “I love you so much, Masen.”

He continues making love to me tenderly. When I close my eyes and tilt my head back from the pleasure, he stops and

demands I look at him. Masen's hand reaches down between our bodies and uses his thumb to push down on my clit, his strokes become erratic as he gets closer to his climax. "Come with me, baby. Let me fill you up while you squeeze me," so I do. Masen finishes and licks up the side of my throat, stopping at my thrumming pulse and places an open mouth kiss over it.

He rolls to the side, and I follow, keeping my body as close to his as possible. I pepper his neck and jaw with little kisses until I reach his full soft lips where I show him my thanks with my lips. "I hated falling asleep without you. It's crazy how fast I've come to need you. I love you, Masen. I'm really excited for our ceremony. I've had nervous butterflies all week."

A smile lights up his handsome face, making his eyes twinkle as he looks down at me. "Butterflies, huh? When did that start?"

I shrug, curled around him. "Oh, I don't know. A few days, I guess."

He grows serious. "It's not bad, is it?"

I shake my head dismissively. "No, I'm fine, just a little queasy is all."

He clears his throat and looks at the ceiling. "I'm not so sure it's just nerves, Little One."

I can hear the smirk in his voice. "Why is that?" I ask, confused.

He launches himself up, puts his lips right above my pubic bone, and whispers excitedly, "'Cause I got super sperm baby! You're all knocked up!"

Then, he starts kissing my belly before I jackknife up and yell, "What!"

His head gets pushed down so his face is between my thighs. He growls possessively. "You smell so good, all warm and needy and a lot like me." He looks up at me as his tongue darts out and licks up my slit. Holy shit, that has to be the most erotic thing I've ever seen.



I shake my head, remembering how he got there. “That’s impossible, Masen. I haven’t been through my heat yet, right?”

He shakes his head. “No, baby, you haven’t” —his eyes twinkle— “But I can’t wait for it.” He grins like a fool.

“Are you sure?” I ask, placing my hands over my lower tummy. He nods his head and uses his nose to push my hands away and crawls up my body. Then things start to click, his weird reaction before when make love, his strange wording wanting more of himself inside me. How can this be? “Were you upset? Is that why you were acting so weird?”

He scoffs. “Of course not, I had just realized my Mate was carrying my young. My wolf was feeling possessive and territorial. He was riding me hard. I need to protect you.” The last bit comes out so fiercely I can see the tips of his fangs.

I’m so excited and scared at the same time. I get a little teary-eyed. “Are you sure you’re okay with this? We aren’t even Mated yet. You don’t think it’s too much, too soon?”

His smile could light the sun. “Are you kidding? I never knew how excited I’d be, but I already love him!” he states vehemently.

“Oh, it’s a him, is it?” I giggle at his enthusiasm.

“My only problem is we’ll never get rid of my parents.” He hangs his head. “Now, we really need to build another house,” he pouts.

I throw myself at him, and he rolls over onto his back. “A baby,” I say in awe. “She’s gonna look just like you, big ole light eyes, inky dark hair, and a smile that’ll stop traffic,” I muse. “I love you, Masen.”

## CHAPTER 30



*B*y Saturday morning, I've made more cookies and brownies than I care to count. The counters and island are filled with sweets. The three cakes I made this morning are in the freezer so I can decorate them easily for tomorrow night. I'm officially done with all the desserts except Masen's which I'll make later today when he leaves for the traditional run with his Pack. I think Mickey will be here with me alone for most of the night.

Masen's parents are starting to suspect something because he finds any and every reason to touch my lower stomach. I caught Mickey starting last night with a strange look on her face when he was fussing over me about eating enough. I'm not sure when anyone besides Masen will be able to scent I'm carrying. We haven't talked about telling anyone yet. I think he's still worried about someone finding out about me being a white wolf before we are Mated, and there is no other excuse as to why we conceived without me going through a cycle other than my heritage. I know his parents already know what I am, but I like that it's our little secret for now.

Sniffer still hasn't said much about what's going on with him and Sam, only that things are different now. He looks sad a lot when he doesn't think anyone notices. Then, he plasters a smile on his face like there is nothing wrong. I hope they can repair whatever's happened to their relationship soon. I haven't seen Sam since Sunday night. I think he's spending most of his time with David.

Nicole and Red have been busy making sure the hall and the gathering place behind it are ready for our union. Red said she used the same caterer for other Pack events and has never been disappointed. I'm relieved everything seems to be going so well.

Thankfully, the packages I ordered a few days ago came today so I'll have plenty of clothes to take when we leave on Wednesday. There's nothing much better than new bras and panties. I pack up a few of my new things, knowing I won't need them before we leave.

I never did get to buy new shoes so Masen is taking me out to have lunch and shoe shop this afternoon. I'm just pulling my jeans up when he walks in the bedroom, looking distracted. "What's up, Big Guy?"

His brow furrows. "I'm not sure how I feel about you being alone tonight while we run. I think I'll cancel," he says, sounding torn.

"It's fine. Isn't your mom staying? I thought it was kinda a guy thing."

He wraps his arms around me and drops his chin on the top of my head. "Yes, she'll still be here, but I still feel funny about leaving."

"Will you guys be going far?" I'm curious. I didn't even know most of the traditions surrounding a shifter Union until he told me about them.

Apparently, the shifter version of a bachelor party involves a night run and a few other things that he said would probably gross me out. I think they hunt as wolves or some manly nonsense. "No, Little One, sometimes we go off the property, but I already told everyone we would be staying close." His hands tickle down my bare arms, and he turns me to face him. My head spins as I stare up at the most handsome face I've ever seen, and I'm astounded that he looks down at me the same way. I know I'm okay to look at, men have always been attracted to my large breasts and big butt. My skin is clear and light, and I've always been told my overly large amber eyes are expressive. But Masen makes me feel beautiful. The way

his eyes follow every move I make, the way they lower as he licks his lips like he can already taste me is empowering. I love that he doesn't hide the way he feels about me, even in front of others. How he's always touching me and telling me how much he loves me.

After a few moments of us just looking at each other, I finally tell him. "Go! Have fun. You'll be close, and in your wolf form if you or any of the others scent something strange, you can be home in minutes. We will be fine. I'll probably take this little girl to bed early anyway." I rub my hand over my belly.

"We'll see," is all he says, then swoops down and captures my lips in a scorching kiss. "Sorry my boy makes you so sleepy," he says to my lips before pulling back. I just shake my head. "Either put some clothes on, or I'll take the rest off," he murmurs while pushing both hands under the waistband of my pants and squeezing my butt. "Take them off," he demands suggestively.

As I'm about to agree, we hear his brother right outside the door. "Mase, I know you're busy, but can I talk to you for a minute?" His voice is timid.

"Fuck me." Masen growls. "Now?" he asks louder.

"Yeah man, I'm sorry, but I know you're leaving soon so it needs to be now." Masen throws his head back and blows out a deep breath.

"It's fine, baby. He needs you. Maybe you can find out what's really going on."

He looks down at me and grins. "Did you just call me baby? You're my baby. I'll be your stud or big daddy, you can even call me cowboy 'cause I love when you ride me." He picks me up, and my legs wrap around his waist. "But baby?" he questions jokingly.

"It just slipped out, Big Hoss, calm down. How about I just call you, Mine," I whisper the last part into his ear and nibble his lobe. His answer is a deep rumble up his chest right before my back hits the door. One hand is tugging on the button of

my pants, and the other is braced against the wall. His hips keep me pinned. My hands explore every inch of him I can reach.

I hear a strangled sigh and remember Sniffer needs Masen's help. "Masen." He grunts and uses his thumb to caress my nipple. "Masen," I say a little more insistently.

"Love when you say my name, baby," he coos and pulls my bra cup down having already unbuttoned my pants.

"He needs you." His brow furrows in confusion. "Sniffer needs you," I whisper.

His forehead drops to the door right beside my head. "Need a fucking guest house," he rants, setting me down as he continues to mumble he must say fuck, fucker, or fucking at least ten times.

I kiss his cheek. "Meet me in the kitchen when you're done, Big Daddy," I say playfully.

His nostrils flare, and he yells, "Fucking shit, Cass," before storming out the door.

We eat a late lunch at one of Masen's favorite places near his office. Every waitress knows him by name and flirts shamelessly, even when I'm attached to his side. It should be flattering to know these women want him, and he's mine. It's pissing me off.

When a bad bottle dyed redhead makes a point to shimmy to our table from across the room to refill his already full water glass, I've had enough. "Back off," I sneer loud enough for every woman watching our table to hear. "I'm getting you a wedding ring!" I state to his smirking face. "You think it's funny?" I gape, incredulous. "These women act like they're in heat, and you're the only scratching post! How funny would it be if I winked at that guy over there or touched his arm while I ask where the restroom is?"

His smile falls. "I'm not doing any of that," he defends, "They are. I'm not interested in any of these women. What man?"

“Yeah, but I’ve had to watch them do it to you, and no man would flirt with me when I’m sitting at the table with you,” I accuse. “They’re not stupid, but these tarts don’t care if I’m here or not,” I scoff.

“I won’t let it happen again. I didn’t realize. It’s just how it always is. I’ve never thought to stop it. Now, have you ever seen that man before? Has he flirted with you?”

My eyes go round in shock. Is he joking? “He hasn’t even looked at me! I was just making an example.”

Masen’s eyes lift to the stranger and narrow. “Well if he wants to walk out of here, he better keep it that way!” he says, looking right at the terrified young man, making sure he hears every word.

“Oh my God, you don’t get to be mad right now.”

His face softens when he looks at me. “I’m not mad at you, baby, never you,” he says sweetly and kisses the inside of my wrist as the waitress drops off our meals. “Eat up, my boy’s hungry.” I roll my eyes. After our discussion at the table, he is more aware of his surroundings, never letting women touch him or engage in conversation. I count no less than five that try to reach out and touch him asking the time, the time? Seriously? When we’re in the shoe store?

On the drive home, I ask, “Did Sniffer tell you what’s going on?”

He nods, keeping his eyes on the road. “Sam’s had crushes. Hell, he’s even had boyfriends, but he’s never been totally engrossed in someone the way he is with this David guy. Cass is feeling abandoned and a little territorial.” He looks over at me, judging my reaction.

“Have they ever been together, together?”

“Not that I know of, Sam has been in love with Cass for years. Everyone knows it, but Cass has always dated females. I know he loves Sam. I just don’t know if he is in love with him and apparently neither does he.”

“Do you think he worries what people would think?”

“No, Little One. I think he’s just genuinely confused. Sam has always been in the background waiting for Cass, and now that he’s not, I think it’s got Cass running scared.”

“Well, what was so important he needed you right away?” Masen turns his head and looks over at me with sad eyes. “He’s thinking about leaving, going up to Pop’s place for a bit, then maybe going out to search for his Mate. He doesn’t want to ruin what Sam has with David, but he’s having a hard time dealing with it.” He sucks in a deep breath. “I think seeing us together has been hard on him, too. He’s surrounded by people who’ve found their Mates. I can’t blame him for wanting that.”

I think I might cry at the thought of him leaving. He was so kind to me when I had no one and hadn’t had anyone in years. “I don’t want him to leave, Masen.”

“I know, baby. He’s gonna come by tonight and talk to you.” We sit in silence the remainder of the drive.

I finally convince Masen to go around seven o’clock. He claims he’ll be home no later than midnight. Sniffer’s not going with them. He doesn’t want to chance seeing Sam and David. If he’s that worried about it, I think it’s more than the loss of a friendship bothering him. Masen tells me he’s coming by around eight to hang out with me and his mom.

Masen kisses me goodbye, and I tell Mickey I’ll be in my room finishing packing until Sniffer gets here. Then I’ll make Masen’s cheesecake. He’s only been gone for about ten minutes when I hear someone outside the bedroom door. Leaving my back to the door, I call out, “Did you forget something?” After a few seconds with no answer, I turn and fire ignites on the left side of my face causing me to stumble back and hit my head on the bed poster. I crumple to the ground with my arms laced protectively over my belly. My vision goes black around the edges as I fight to stay conscious, quickly losing the battle when I receive another blow to my head.

## CHAPTER 31



I wake suddenly. The back of my head throbs slowly with my beating heart. My pulse rises. When I remember what's happened, the thump increases. I keep my body still, not wanting whoever hit me to know I'm awake.

I'm still in Masen's bedroom, crumpled on the floor where I fell. The only pain I feel is coming from my head, so I think they stopped hitting me when I passed out.

Willing my pulse to slow, I lift the lid of my eye that's closer to the floor. The strangest thing is I can't scent whoever was or is still in the room with me. I don't see anyone, but with my limited sight, I didn't expect to unless they were right in front of me.

I don't think I was out more than a minute or two by the way I feel. I know Sniffer should be here in about an hour. Oh God, Mickey. Have they hurt her? Does she even know someone is in the house with us?

If I could shift, I could protect her and my baby, but being pregnant I can't risk the change. Finally, the sound of muffled footsteps near me comes from the hall outside the door. When I see a pair of my own shoes coming closer, I have to work hard to keep my breaths slow and even. I still can't tell who it is from the scent, but the shoes are from my condo. The pant legs are cuffed repeatedly and still fall over the tops of my limited edition leather Converse. The closer they come, the more my senses are confused. Masen is all I can scent, no one else.



It becomes painfully clear who my attacker is when I get a hard kick to my thigh. “Roll over you, fat bitch,” Roxanne sneers, while shoving me with her foot. “Not so tough, now, are you cunt?” she spits. “I wanted you to be awake for this, but either way, it’ll still hurt.”

I know what’s coming. I only have seconds to prepare for her assault. With one quick blow, my knee shatters. Not screaming is the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. My eyes roll back in my head as the pain almost pulls me back under. “Stop, stop. You can’t leave evidence, no blood,” she tells herself right before landing a kick to my side. God, no, I have to protect my stomach. Thankfully, she turns around and paces the room, seeming to stop at random moments, then continues quickly pacing. “I still have hours before he gets home. She’ll wake up soon, then this will be over, like it never happened.” She comes back closer and grabs my hand roughly, pulling a plastic strip over my wrist. I don’t think anyone is with her. This is my chance to get out. I know if she gets me off of this property I’m dead. Slowly making a fist, I risk opening my eyes a slit to see where she is. She’s so focused on getting my wrist bound she doesn’t notice me preparing to strike. I have to get this just right. If I have to fight, there’s a chance of her hurting my baby.

I pull my arm back as slowly as I can risk and jerk my arm up as hard as I can, catching her under the chin causing her head to snap back, taking her crouching body off balance enough she falls back and yells, totally surprised.

I leap off the floor only to collapse on my broken knee and scream. The pain is so intense. I stop breathing for a few seconds, then I try crawling from the room. “MASEN! MASEN!” I bellow as loud as possible while repeating it in my head, hoping he hears me through our bond or my screams for him. I can hear her shuffling behind me, my hit not causing nearly enough damage to slow her down.

“He won’t hear you,” she cackles. “Do you have any idea what they do on the run?” She comes closer, but I still drag myself through the room. “No? I’ll tell you. They hunt. Any and everything they can find. Any prey they come across is

theirs for the taking. Animals, women, anything!” she spits. “I’ve taken the liberty of having every unmated female in our Pack in those woods. Only the fully Mated will be able to resist the pull of the Pack so close to the moon. He timed it just right, don’t you think?” She’s trailing behind me, letting me crawl through the house on my belly.

“What did you do with Mickey?”

“Oh, she’ll be fine, I can’t have my mother-in-law hurt, now, can I? Mickey will wake up none the wiser after a good night’s sleep. Masen will be upset for a few days when he finds you’ve left, but soon, he will come to me for comfort, just like he did five years ago.” Her foot smashes down on the small of my back, pushing me down on the floor. *Masen, if you can hear me, please, we need you. Help us.* I beg, but I hear no response. A sob escapes my mouth as I realize we might not make it out of here alive.

“Ah, don’t cry now. If you would have just died with your parents like you were supposed to all those years ago, this would have never happened!” She’s ranting, and her crazy words are punctuated by blows to my weakened body. “You’ve ruined everything!” Kick. “Why couldn’t you just stay gone?” A fist to my back. At least, I’m on my stomach, and our child will be protected as long as possible. “I thought when they left you in foster care you’d be broken. What human can resist a female shifter, right? How many times did you get fucked by some dirty human? I can’t believe Masen would still touch you. You probably loved it, you Nasty Whore!” I can’t let her words penetrate through my pain-filled fog. I have to concentrate on saving myself and my baby.

Maybe if I shift, we’ll both make it. I shifted Monday, and she was fine. Can I risk any more damage to my body before none of it matters?

“Don’t go checking out on me yet. I have plans for you and don’t bother trying to shift. That band on your wrist won’t let your wolf free. That pussy of a prick William chickened out after he saw you and Masen leave the mall, but I need Masen to think you left with him of your own free will.” Is she fucking crazy? Masen knows I’d never leave him. I turn back

and finally look at her. The shirt and pants she wears are Masen's, rolled and folded to fit her much smaller frame. That's why I scented him. She must be masking her natural scent somehow, too.

How many times has she been here, just like this? I can tell she's familiar with her surroundings, never faltering on where to go as she shoves and kicks me until I move in her desired direction. If I can just hold out a little longer, Sniffer will be close enough to hear me. "Why? Why are you doing this to me?" It comes out barely above a whisper.

"TO YOU? THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT! He loved me before you. After the night in Podunk Kenfuckingtucky, he was never the same. Always distracted, never touching me, never needing me. Do you have any idea what that's like? To love someone so deeply and know he feels the same only to have it taken away by a FUCKING CHILD!" I cower under her screams hoping the blows don't come. "He'll love me again, you know. He was so close before you came back. Do you know he fucked me Saturday morning, just days before you came here and ruined us?" she shrieks. Her hands hammer my head, slamming my face into the hard ground.

Blood drips from my mouth as I scream for help once again, my voice much weaker this time. "Masen, help me, MASEN..." I close my eyes as the next blow to my back makes my stomach cramp. "NO, NO!" I yell and kick out with my good leg trying in vain to get her away from me. "No, please," I beg before the blackness swallows me.

## MASEN

I don't even want to be here. Those are my thoughts as my father and I meet the others behind the hall. Pop knows my feelings and said he felt the same way when it was time for his final free run. "It's almost more for your Pack than you, son. They need to know they won't be losing you as a brother, friend, or leader. It'll be over before you know it. You'll go home with a full belly to your little Mate, and tomorrow, everything will be right." He smiles and smacks me on the back. My dad is seventy-five but doesn't look a day over forty.

He still loves my mother more than most newlyweds. That's what I want for us.

I almost tell him my Sophia is with young, but I want to tell him, Mom, and Cass together. I know my mother will insist on staying, especially since Sophia has no mother to be with her. Pop will give up his pack and move here so they can be closer to us and my son that I know grows in her belly.

I can feel the excitement growing as most of the males gather for the run. The moon is almost full, making our need to shift all the more powerful. My pop gives a short speech saying how blessed he is to be present on such a special night. Finally, he howls and yells, "Happy hunting boys. You find it, you keep it!" He shifts in an explosive blast and many of the weaker of my Pack can't help but shift from his pull.

I stand before them and a hush falls over the crowd. "May your blood heat with the thrill of the hunt, may your lungs fill with the scent of your prey, and may your heart beat for the love of your Mate," I rally before closing my eyes and letting my wolf burst forward. Not one man is left standing. My howl starts a chorus as we rush through the woods in a frenzy. My wolf wants to lead like the ruler he is, but I still just want to be with my Mate. I run a few miles, joining the group as they search for first prey.

Females dot the forest. As we pass, each hopes to be taken for the night or longer in some cases. Knowing the moon and Pack mentality ride us hard, some almost Mated males have fallen to the lure. Endangering their upcoming Union, not one entices me in the slightest. I know what I want, and it's not here.

I run closer to my side of the property, making sure no one follows me. I don't want anyone near her. My heart stutters as I feel and hear Sophia call for me through our bond. I'm still minutes away when I hear her begging. *I'm coming, baby. I'm coming.* I hear nothing in response. *Cass, can you hear me? CASS, are you with her? What's wrong?* He doesn't answer either.

When I get to the house, I can't see anything wrong, but I know that there is. Right before I shift back to sneak into the house, I scent her blood, lots of it. God please, let her be okay. My wolf is furious that his Mate may be hurt. I'm barely able to keep from snarling my warning to whoever is harming her.

I can't scent another wolf in the house, but it feels wrong. I'm not able to reach her at all. Her mind is closed to me, and I won't think about what that could mean.

As I creep through the kitchen, I see my mother with her head lying on the counter. I know she's not dead. My father would be here now if he felt that. I move to her quickly and find a steady pulse. Rushing past her toward our room, my chest aches when I see a blood trail across the floor. The wall where my hand is braced cracks under the pressure. Unable to control my rage further, I throw myself down the hall, following the path of blood closer to the garage. I bellow, enraged as I see her broken body lying in a pool of her own blood. The figure near her backs away slowly. Her mouth moves rapidly, but the only sound I hear is my heart beating as it breaks for the beautiful creature crumpled at my feet. I don't dare touch her for fear of hurting her further. When the figure moves, I reach out grabbing her neck. It snaps like a twig in my crushing hand. Her eyes plead with me as she dies. I wish I could make her suffer more, I wish she could feel the pain searing my insides right now.

I throw the body far from my beloved and fall to my knees and roar before I put my ear to her lips, hoping to hear a breath. "Why didn't you shift?" I cry as I feel one small puff of air hit my neck. That's the only sign I need.

I push every ounce of my strength through our bond. I will not let her die. No one will take her from me!

"Mase!" I hear Cass yell in a panicked voice down the hall. "What the fuck is going on? Oh God, how?"

"Doctor, I need a doctor and Dad. Please help me, Casper. I need to fix her." My face is wet with tears, my eyes are blurry as I look at my brother's stricken face.

## CHAPTER 32



The first sound I hear is Masen's deep voice begging me not to leave him. Does he think I've left? Did she somehow convince him I've left him? "Masen," I croak, my voice sounding broken and rough.

"Shh, I'm here, baby. Don't try to talk. You're safe now." His voice is strangled.

"Alpha, I need you to back up so I can get a closer look," says an unfamiliar voice. A snarl followed by growling splits the air.

"Son, he needs to get closer to help her. She needs help. You want her pain to stop, right, Mase? Let him help her." I moan when he says pain like the word triggers the response in my body. I'm still face down on the floor. Masen's rough hand clasps over mine.

"Alpha, can you tell her to shift? I think a lot of her injuries would heal, and you'd feel better about me being closer to her."

"She's pregnant," Masen says hoarsely. A pain fueled whimper sounds from my throat. "It's okay, baby. You're going to be okay," he coos at me. "Careful, if you cause her anymore pain, you die!" he grates through his clenched teeth.

"Mase, he's here to help. Let go of him!" Caleb says, and I hear a rustling.

What starts as a whispered confession ends in a pain-filled roar when he says, "This is my fault. How could I let this happen?"

I cry when I hear the agony in his words. “You’re upsetting her, Mase. She needs you.” This time, it’s Sniffer who speaks.

I can feel a gentle prodding on to my head, and a voice comes closer asking me if I can open my eyes. My left eye is swollen shut, but I manage to narrowly open the right, getting my first look at an older male. He has gray hair and dark, kind eyes that look at me with sympathy. “I hurt,” I offer lamely as he touches my neck and back.

“I know, sweet girl. We’re gonna make it better soon.” He tries to smile. “Can you move your fingers and toes, Luna? That’s good, real good. What hurts the most?” I hear a low groan from Masen as I take stock of my aching body.

“My belly is cramping, and that scares me. I don’t want to lose our baby,” I sob, my body jerking from the force.

“Okay, okay, shh. Is that what hurts the most, your belly?”

“I don’t know. My knee is broken, and she hit my head and back the most. I’m just really scared.” I hear a loud thump, then I see Masen’s determined face right next to mine.

“No matter what happens, Little One, you’ll be okay,” he promises. I sag in relief just from seeing his lovely face. The hand with the plastic band reaches up and strokes his jaw. His eyes close like it’s too much but open quickly, staring back at me.

“How far along is she? When was her cycle? She may still be able to shift with minimal threat to the fetus.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. She said this would stop me from shifting.” The band around my wrist is pulled tight, the ends hang limply from arm.

“What the fuck!” Sniffer spews.

“Cass, go get some snips. There’s metal running through the plastic,” Masen says as he holds my hand with tender care. His lips feather over my pulse, his eyes never leave mine. “She never went through her heat cycle, but she can’t be more than a week along. I noticed the change in her scent Thursday night. The last time she shifted was Monday,” he says solemnly.

“How is she pregnant without having had a cycle? Are you sure?”

Masen’s eyes leave mine and the doctor rushes to explain. “I’m sorry, Alpha. Yes, yes, you’d know,” he agrees quickly, and I hear him blow out a loud whoosh of air when Masen’s eyes leave him for mine again.

“We didn’t know she was carrying, but she’s a white wolf,” Caleb states, and I finally remember Mickey is somewhere in the house. “Caleb, Mickey. I’m sorry I didn’t protect her. Roxanne, she said she was okay, just sleeping. Is she okay?” I question, growing frantic.

“She’s okay, sweets. She’s right here. She’s been drugged, but she’ll be okay. She’ll be madder than a wet cat when she wakes up but don’t you worry about that now.” The pain in my body is lifting gradually, leaving the ache in my knee as the worst of my hurt. I’m still distressed about the baby, but the cramping has lessened. The doctor doesn’t acknowledge Caleb’s confession about me being a white wolf.

“Unless we find internal injuries, I don’t think we should risk her shifting then unless the fetus is compromised.”

“What did you just say?” Masen’s eyes are fully black as he stares at the doctor. “Oh fuck, aren’t you a doctor? Are you that fucking stupid, or do you want to die?” Caleb inches in front of the man and lowers so he’s in front of Masen.

“Son, look at your little Mate. She’s already getting better. I’ve never seen anything like it.” He’s right. The swelling in my face is already going down, I can move my arms with no pain. I’m still really sore and my knee is killing me, but my body is healing very quickly.

“Can you help me turn to my side?” I use my arms to push myself over, but I’m not willing to move my lower half. The memory of the pain when I tried to walk is still too fresh. Masen’s hands guide me over, my hips turn, leaving my bad leg almost completely still.

“I think we should brace her leg before she moves anymore,” the doctor says quietly.



“Then get what we fucking need. I don’t want her on the floor,” Masen yells at the nervous man.

“It’s not his fault, Masen. I’m okay. I feel so much better with you here. Calm down, okay?” I know him being here is helping me heal. I’ve never healed this fast before. “Did she get away?” I ask, hesitant to hear the answer.

“No, she didn’t,” Masen replies darkly, looking over to the corner of the room where her body lies at an odd angle. I shudder remembering the crazed look in her eyes.

My heart gives a painful throb when I think about all the torment she caused us. Silent tears fall down my cheeks as I mourn my parents’ death all over again. “What can I do?” Masen asks ruefully.

“Where’s the doctor? Is our baby, okay? I’m so tired.” My voice sounds pitiful even to my own ears.

“He’s coming. I’m sure the baby’s fine.”

A tall woman enters the room with the doctor. She carries a leg board. “We’ll get this on then take her over to my office for an ultrasound. Alpha, you’ll need to be with her, depending on the baby’s position, the ultrasound may need to be internal,” he says, not making eye contact.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Masen barks.

I understand what he means, so I squeeze Masen’s hand. “It’ll be fine. Help me get ready to go,” I tell him firmly.

He jumps up and takes the board from the woman then pushes it into the doctor’s hands. “Fix it,” he orders.



LAYING ON THE FIRM BED, paper crinkles beneath me as I wait for the doctor to enter. Masen cut the pants and panties I was wearing off. The doctor tells him to check for blood. Thankfully, there is none.

I wear one of Masen’s long t-shirts and a paper blanket over my lap. My leg is still bound to the board. I’ll need an X-

ray later to determine the damage.

The door opens, and a very pale doctor walks in alone. “Alpha, I’ll need to touch her lower belly with this wand to get a picture of the baby.” He clears his throat. “If I can’t find the baby, I can insert this wand into her vagina to get a closer look.” He holds up another thin stick.

“Not happening,” he growls.

“Do whatever you need, please,” I say and grab Masen’s hand. The doctor doesn’t look sure, but he picks up a bottle of gel and covers the wand. We hear a loud rustling noise followed by silence.

“Can you raise the shirt and lower the blanket?” I do using my free hand, keeping my pubic hair covered. Masen leans over me further, getting closer to the doctor.

More gel is squirted onto my belly, and he places the wand firmly just above the blanket. Moments later, he exhales a loud breath. “There it is.” He sighs in relief. “Let me see if I can find the heartbeat... ah there, we go, a strong one hundred and thirty-six beats.” I’m in awe of the little white dot blinking rapidly.

“Masen, do you see that?” I whisper.

“Yeah, baby, I see him.” His voice is full of emotion.

“Wait, what... ah.”

“What? What’s wrong?” I ask, panicked. Masen rumbles out a warning.

“Nothing’s wrong. I found another heartbeat. You’re having twins!”

Masen whoops in glee. “Super sperm, baby,” and smacks a loud kiss on my mouth that hangs open in shock.

“Twins? Are you sure?”

The doctor finally smiles and looks relaxed. “Yup, I’d say in about thirty-four weeks you’ll be the proud parents of the first set of shifter twins.”

After a quick X-ray, he sends us home with a stiff leg brace and instructions to return Monday morning for a follow up. With the way I'm healing, he suspects I will be fully functional by then. He also asks if I'd be willing to let him do blood work to chart any difference between my blood and a normal female shifter. I agree to give him a sample Monday after the check-up.

Sniffer meets us outside as we exit the office. He looks confused by the happy grin covering Masen's face. I'm sure mine still reads shocked. Twins? I still can't believe it.

As Masen pushes me in the wheelchair, I tell him it wasn't necessary, he smacks a large hand onto Sniffer's back, causing him to stumble forward. "Twins!" He beams.

Sniffer's eyes dart to mine. "No shit, twins?"

I nod my head slowly. "Twins."

When we finally get into bed, my mind replays the events of the evening, focusing on her vicious words. No longer able to keep it to myself, I say, "She did all this." I clear my throat as my voice cracks.

"I know. I'm so sorry I didn't listen to you about her. I should have never left you alone." He's trying to take the blame for everything again.

"That's not what I meant. I mean, she did all of this. She killed my parents, trying to kill me, and when that didn't work, she wanted me with humans. She wanted me violated by humans so you wouldn't want me," I say angrily, almost yelling at him. "She kept us apart all those years. She's also the one who was feeding William information."

Masen looks like he wants to throw up. "I didn't know. I'm so sorry," he pleads regrettably.

"I was so scared I couldn't even get mad. I want to kill her again. I want to make her suffer," I cry.

"Shh, she's gone. It's over," he coos, wrapping his body behind me holding me up. I calm instantly. The fire burns through me quickly, leaving exhaustion in its wake. The sorrow I feel for the loss of my parents is tempered by the joy

I feel knowing my babies will be okay. I fall asleep with Masen holding me as I dream of a blue-eyed little boy holding the hand of a dark-haired little girl.

## CHAPTER 33



Today, I watch as the Alpha of the Northern Territories calls a Pack meeting and exiles an entire family. Today, I watch as the Alpha throws the dead, limp body of the woman who tried to ruin us at her mother and sister's feet. Today, I watch as Masen gleefully tells his mother and father that their first grandchildren will be born in early April. Today, I watch as my Mate stands in front of his Pack and celebrates our union.

Masen stands in front of his entire Pack with his face so happy and calm he doesn't look like the same man that stood in the same spot this morning making decrees. His white blue eyes are clear and soft as he talks with his brother and Sam. The white, button-up shirt he wears is closely fitted to his well-defined body. The sleeves are rolled up his forearms, and the platinum band around his finger twinkles as it catches the light when he pushes his black hair back from his stunning face. His well-worn dark jeans fit over his thick thighs but aren't tight. The black boots he wears now, will come off soon when we walk into the woods.

He throws his head back and laughs uproariously at something Sam is saying. No one is unaffected by his charisma. The men closest to him laugh along, like they want to be part of what's making him so happy, and the women move closer, like they are drawn to him and can't physically stay away.

I'm seated near the front of the hall at Masen's behest. There are tables littered throughout the large room. Most are

empty as everyone visits or stands near a long bar brought in for the occasion. The heavy disappointment and anger from earlier is absent as they all celebrate with one another. I'm glad no one blames Masen for his rulings or the harsh treatment of Roxanne's family.

Mickey and Caleb will soon join me at the table while we wait for Masen. The food won't be brought out until he sits. I'm told typically the female's family would serve the males, but I'll only be serving them dessert. The rest will be handled by the caterers. I never got to start my Masen's cheesecake last night, so I threw a small one together this morning.

I'm lost in thought when the chair next to me pulls out, and Sniffer sits beside me. I knock shoulders with him, happy to see a genuine smile on his face. "You seem much better today," I tease.

"I am, and all it took was watching my brother almost lose the love of his life before I realized I don't want to lose mine either." His cryptic statement only confuses me. His hand finds mine on top of the table. "God, that was hard to witness, Sophie. Mase plays the tough guy, but I know it was ten times harder for him. When you wouldn't wake up, I knew he was going to go with you, scariest shit I've ever seen. I love Sam. Hell, I might even be in love with Sam, but as sad as it makes me, he's not my Mate. I know there's a chance I'll never find the person that was made for me but not to try would eventually kill me. I see the way you and Mase look at each other. I've seen it all my life watching my parents." He shrugs his shoulders, his face oddly very serious. "I want that. I want to know I'd rather die than live without my other half and be at peace about it. That was one of the damnedest things. I knew Mase would be gone if you didn't make it, and it didn't seem to bother him a bit. No thoughts of what he was leaving behind, his Pack, his family, and friends. He just knew he belonged with you." I wipe away a tear before anyone notices.

"You'll find them Sniffer! Whoever it may be will be almost the luckiest person out there," I try and joke.

He laughs a little and puts his arm over my shoulder. "I'm leaving you know."

I nod my head and a few more tears fall. “I do. Do you promise to come back?”

He ruffles my hair. “Awe Love, you couldn’t keep me away.” When he calls me Love, it makes me remember the first time we met.

Masen chooses that moment to walk up to the table. “Are you making her cry?” he asks, irritated at his brother.

“I’m just weepy. Leave him alone.” My voice is nasally from unshed tears.

Masen opens his arms. “Come here, baby.” I dash as quickly as my sore leg will take me into his chest. My hands curl up under my chin as he hugs me to him. I hide my face in his neck as the tears I was holding fall. The platform heels I wear give the extra height I need to nuzzle under his jaw.

The fancy white dress hangs in my closet. It just didn’t feel right. Mickey helped me braid my hair this afternoon, weaving the blue silken strand I bought for a belt through. The black leatherette leggings and sheer long-sleeved white tunic hide my healing cuts and scrapes much better. The bruising on my face has almost disappeared.

Masen gives me a few minutes to calm down before taking his seat at the table and pulling me onto his lap. I breathe a sigh of relief, touching him makes everything more bearable. The room quiets briefly as everyone else finds their seat. Food is delivered to our table first. The young women seem flustered by Masen’s, Caleb’s who looks more like an older brother rather than a father, and Sniffer’s presence. My being on Masen’s lap further stresses her, she can’t figure out where to place the plates. Finally, I take mercy on her and grab Masen’s plate, putting it right in front of him. He smirks and watches as I grab my own and drop it right next to his. The pink prime rib makes my stomach tumble, so I end up pushing it to the other side. “Blah, that looks gross,” I shudder.

He chuckles, and I squirm in his lap. “You picked it, Little One. You said you like it.”

I shake my head. “I usually do. It’s your babies that don’t seem to care for it,” I say dejected.

The whispers start at the first few tables and flow back quickly. It only takes a moment to realize my mistake. I’m not used to people watching and listening. I need to learn to keep quiet. “Well, that’ll give them something to talk about,” I whisper, embarrassed about my error.

He shrugs. “They would have found out soon, anyway.” Masen instructs the awestruck waitress to, “Bring us another plate without the meat.” She rushes off to complete his task without even putting the dish she was holding down.

After we finish eating, Masen, his dad, and Sniffer excuse themselves to go outside where our ceremony will take place. Mickey, Nicole, and Red led me through to the back of the hall. We gather in the empty bar until it’s time to head outside. Red pours four shots and passes them to each of us. I push the small glass back. “Ah, I can’t drink this.”

Mickey’s knowing smile makes Red’s eyebrows arch. “And why might that be?”

My cheeks pink up quickly. “Well, see um, I’m pregnant?” It sounds like I’m asking them instead of telling them.

“No shit?” Red says and looks at Mickey.

“Is that why Michael told me all the males thought you smelled so good, you were in heat?” Nicole asks suspiciously.

“Not exactly,” I hedge.

“What does not exactly mean?”

Well, just like Masen said, they’ll find out soon enough. “I didn’t know the significance before, but I guess I’m a white wolf. Apparently, I don’t need to be in heat to conceive.”

“No shit?” Red says again, this time in a wonder-filled statement. They both look me over like it’s something they should have seen or can see now.

Mickey throws back her shot and huffs. “Yup, grandbabies. By spring, you’ll have four new Pack members.”



“Four!” they both shout.

Mickey laughs at their expression. “Yup, two little and two big. Caleb and I will go back up north long enough to hand his Pack over to the new Alpha. We’ve both been ready for a while, and this is just the excuse we need.” She seemed so sure when she and Caleb told us this morning. I was flattered and grateful that they’ll both be here to help us. “My only problem now is convincing my son to let me build within a mile of his house,” she says, crestfallen.

“He was totally kidding. He was already planning to build a guest house. He’s just as excited to have you guys here as I am.”

The door to the bar flaps open, and Michael pokes his head in. “You ladies almost ready?”

The sunset leaves a clear twinkling sky. The low full moon cast a pinkish glow on the clearing around me. Michael stands in the forest, so I’m in clear view the entire time. Traditionally I would be alone, but Masen insisted his Beta accompany me.

I wait barefoot until Masen, who’s been separated from me for the past two hours, finds me by scent alone without shifting. He must prove he’s worthy of being my Mate.

I hear his deep howl the moment he was allowed out to seek me. I’m at least two miles from the hall, but I’m not sure where he was being kept. Michael and I walked here so Masen would have my scent trail to follow. It’s probably only been three minutes when I hear a deep growl coming from behind Michael. We both turn in the direction it came from. I watch as Michael starts moving further away from me, retreating deeper into the forest. Masen’s large frame comes into view, coming closer to me, but he stares in Michael’s general direction, still growling.

Finally, he reaches me and swoops me up in a fiery kiss. His hand travels down my back, and he squeezes my butt. It’s the first time all night I’ve regretted not wearing a dress. “Mine,” he thunders as he continues ravishing my mouth. Forever passes before he finally sets me back on the ground. He twines a thick leather cord around my wrist and attaches it

to his own, a way of binding us together for the trek back to the gathering place.

Masen makes sure to find the easiest path for me to follow and often picks me up and carries me to give my overused knee a break. As we near the clearing, I can see hundreds of candles suspended in small jars that hang from branches or are just set on the ground to illuminate the area. His father stands beneath a beautiful arch made of heavy vines dotted with white flowers. A white cord is swagged through some of the gnarled vines.

When we emerge through the tree line, the crowd whoops and howls in victory from our presence. Masen raises our bound hands high in the air. His large body seems to expand, and he lifts me in the air and shouts out a roar of triumph, causing his Pack to grow even louder.

He walks us to his father and takes hold of the white cord. Caleb smiles at both of us but whispers to Masen, “You need to set her down for this part, son.” He looks down like he’s forgotten I’m still in his strong arms then sets my bare feet on the ground.

“When a male is lucky enough to find his Mate, they celebrate with a Mating ceremony. When an Alpha is blessed with his Mate, the whole Pack celebrates for their union. Alpha Masen Black has sought and found his Mate in Sophia Brair. With the moon as their witness, we ask the Magic that makes us to bind their souls together just as this unbroken cord will bind their bodies together.”

Masen pulls the white cord from the branches and uses his free hand to loop it intricately over and around our joined hands and forearms. When he’s done, Caleb speaks again. “The journey of life is seldom easy, so these knots will show you the difficult times you will traverse, but just like these cords each will be overcome and lead you closer to the other.” Masen kisses me quickly and his dad laughs quietly. “We aren’t there yet, son.” A few of the Pack members whistle and clap. “We. Your family, your Pack, bless your Union.”

Masen's Mark on my shoulder tingles when he says, "I, Masen Black, accept you, Sophia Black, as my Mate." The air leaves my lungs in a whoosh as a strength I could never imagine fills my body. I can feel him inside me.

When I can breathe normally, I say, "I, Sophia Black, accept you, Masen Black, as my Mate."

Masen's hands shake, and his head falls back from our power exchange. When he looks back down at me, his smile is huge. "Damn, baby, that felt good," he groans sexily. Without instruction from his father, he kisses me deeply, his unbound arm wraps around my back and up to my neck. He caresses his fingers over my Mark, and it makes me gasp into his mouth.

The night air is filled with howls as he claims my mouth. His father stops our kiss before it turns into more. "Light the fire, and you can go, son."

Masen doesn't speak but walks us over to the massive fire ring. It's over filled with branches and twigs stacked by only Masen's hands to burn at least through the night, signifying our burning love. It ignites with a fiery whoosh. The wood crackles from the sudden heat. He looks down at his hand that hasn't yet touched the torch. "Oh shit," he says then looks over at me. No one seems to notice he never physically lit the blaze.

## EPILOGUE



The party is winding down. My little ones are curled together with their uncle, Sniffer, listening to his stories of the adventures he's had over the past five years. Every time he comes home he spends hours regaling them with his exploits. The difference this time, he's home to stay. After all these years, he hasn't found his Mate, but I do believe he's found himself.

Sniffer's white hair still remains the same, but his eyes tell a completely different story. The once clear dark blue has now been shadowed a bit with age and experience. His smile is still easy but sad, especially when they travel to his once best friend Sam. Over the years, they've spoken, but time and distance along with Sam's relationship with David seems to have strained their once vibrant friendship.

I've watched Sam's gaze wander to Sniffer repeatedly. The longing is almost palpable, even if it's just his friendship he misses. You can feel the loss.

David has been gone for almost two years now. Sam never fully divulged what happened, but I do know he was deeply hurt by the man. His smile isn't quite as bright, his laughter, which I've always loved, doesn't come so easy anymore. I hope with Sniffer being home they can rekindle what they once had.

My thoughts are interrupted as Stella launches her little body onto my lap. "Mama, did you hear that? Uncle Sniffer said he'd take me for ice cream tomorrow!" she exclaims

excitedly. Then in a not so quiet whisper, she adds, “I’m going to invite Uncle Sam, too!”

I laugh at her declaration. “Okay, sweet stuff, I’m sure he’d enjoy that.” She knows how close they once were from the stories she’s been told.

Aiden climbs onto my lap slowly, making sure not to bump or dislodge his excitable twin. The quiet confidence he displays is in complete contrast to his fiery little sister. He takes the role of big brother very seriously. Though, he was only born minutes before her. I’ve never seen closer or more complimentary siblings.

Masen walks in the room, and my breath falters. Still after all this time. He has a small smile playing at the corner of his lips as he reaches down and scoops Stella out of my lap, but before pulling away, he drops his lips to mine and lingers for just a moment. My neck instinctively arches up to catch more of his mouth as he pulls away, chuckling. My huff of disappointment goes unheard by most, but not him.

I look down when Aiden speaks, “Mama, can we have cake now?” His face which so closely resembles his father’s looks up to me.

“Sure can, Little Man,” I say and pat his legs so he knows to get up. He scampers out of my lap and makes a beeline to the table where both of the cakes I made last night are.

“Cake, cake, cake,” Stella says animatedly while bouncing in Masen’s grip. “Who wants cake?” she sing-songs. Most of the occupants answer affirmatively as we all convene around the table.

Aiden’s cake is a simple strawberry Bundt cake with thick white glaze drizzled over the top. One candle in the shape of the number five sits atop.

Stella’s cake on the other hand is anything but simple. The three-layer chocolate cake topped with shiny ganache, circled with homemade chocolate covered cherries screams decadence. She chose five candles to adorn her cake, stating, “I need ‘em for the wishes.” I shake my head and smile when I

remember both her and Aiden's faces as they discussed the different possibilities. I think he chose the single candle so hers would shine brighter. He's perfectly happy to let Stella be in the limelight.

Mickey lights the candles, and Caleb starts the singing in his deep baritone. Both of the children's faces volley back and forth from the cakes to the happily singing faces, in case the candles extinguish themselves before their wish taking blows are delivered. When silence falls, Aiden closes his eyes briefly before he purses his lips and blows slowly. The flame flickers and dies, and he smiles triumphantly. Stella's eyes are still squeezed shut, and her lips move silently as she concentrates on the task of wishing. When she finally opens up her caramel eyes, she blows like her life depends on it and giggles quickly when the smoke rises from the candles.

After the presents are opened and the crowd slowly leaves, Mickey and I clean up the remnants of the party. I open a few windows, letting the cool spring breeze filter through. "I was thinking about leaving for the lake tomorrow morning instead of Friday," Mickey says while wiping down the counter.

I shrug my shoulders. "That sounds fine by me, the sooner the better."

She nods her head slowly. "You mind if I take the kids home and have them ride with us?"

I tilt my head. It's not unusual for the kids to stay the night with her and Caleb with them being so close, but something seems off about the way she's not looking at me and the way she sounds. "Uhh sure, I guess," I answer, already thinking of the extra alone time I'll have with my Masen. My skin flushes so I open another window. "It's so warm in here," I say more to myself than her.

"Ah-huh." She smirks then calls loudly, "Caleb, collect my grandbabies. It's time we head out."

I'm taken back by her abrupt declaration. "I haven't packed a bag for tonight," I say while plucking the shirt from my frame and blowing down the neckline.

“Yeah, I had Cass put their pajamas on. We’ve got to go,” she replies and gives me a quick, one-armed hug. Stella and Aiden come in and give me a goodnight kiss before leaving with Masen’s parents.

Once the door shuts, I take a moment to see the area is clean, so I drop the towel I was using to dry dishes and head to Masen’s office where I know he is talking with Sniffer. I hear their muffled voices as I near the door. When I get closer, I hear Masen say, “Would be good for both of you. He’s not happy either. He hasn’t been happy in a long time, Cass.”

I make sure my steps are heard over their conversation so they have ample warning of my arrival. I know neither would care if I heard, but I’d hate to intrude. I peek my head around the door, and both men’s eyes are on me. “I’m beat. I’m going to bed.”

Masen looks at me sympathetically and nods. “I’ll be in soon, Little One.” I smile to myself, as I wave goodnight to Sniffer, that after all these years it’s still rare for Masen to call me by my name.

My shoulders are achy, and I’m feeling a bit feverish as I make my way to our room. I hope I’m not getting sick. Shifters are immune to most illnesses, but the common cold can affect us just as easily as a human. I’m grateful I made it through the party, but I hope I don’t get sick for our family vacation. I’ve been planning this getaway for months. Masen’s family, including Sniffer and a few of our close friends, will be joining us for ten days away from the pack, and I surely don’t want to be sick for it.

By the time I’m in the room, I’m lightheaded and wish Masen was here to shower with me. I strip my jeans and shirt off, dropping them to the floor as I turn the water on just above cold. My bra and panties fall carelessly before I step under the spray.

I shiver when the barely warm water hits my skin. My body is achy and sluggish as I stand under the downpour.

Minutes later, I feel every drop of the now frigid water as it pelts my over sensitive flesh. I’m still burning up though. I

feel even hotter with every minute that passes.

Turning my face up to the water, I close my eyes, and my mind flashes to this morning when we were in the shower together. The image is so powerful I can almost feel his fingers trailing down my back and farther down as he drops down before me. His eyes are almost black with need as he nuzzles my inner thigh. He looks up at me before lifting my leg to drape it over his shoulder. My back falls to the wall behind me leaving me leaning most of my weight on my one leg. When his lips brush against me for the first time, I sigh with the knowledge of what's to come.

I open my eyes on a long moan, finding my own fingers searching down my body. My breath hitches, and I'm almost in tears as I realize I'm alone. I need Masen! That is my only thought as my body starts shaking.

I turn off the water and step out with the intention of finding him, but as the icy water drips down my body, I scent him. The fire that was burning turns into an inferno when I realize he's close. "Masen." His name comes out pleadingly, just above a whisper.

His massive frame fills the door. Both hands grip the door molding, making the wood creak from the pressure. His breathing is hard, and his head is down low as he looks at me with hooded eyes from under his brow. He hasn't spoken yet, but his tongue licks his full bottom lip before his teeth, including his descended fangs, sink into the glistening flesh. I groan and squeeze my thighs together, and my clit throbs twice as I clutch them closed.

His head drops even lower, and he growls. I feel him scanning through my thoughts quickly, trying to find out how long I've been in Heat. Holy hell, that's what this is? As soon as I hear his thoughts, I realize he's right, and when I acknowledge the word, my body almost collapses under the onslaught of emotions, his and mine.

"Need me, Little One." It's a statement, a proclamation, that's spoken more on a growl than actual words. My body instantly responds to his voice. I shudder and close my eyes,



unable to voice my needs verbally. Closing my eyes only lets my mind wander as I vividly replay almost every erotic encounter over the past five years, and I whimper.

*NEED*, my mind sends to his. I'm broken down to the most basic of compulsions. His eyes darken impossibly more and he grunts.

His body is a breath away before I can blink. He uses his speed to reach me. My head falls back, and his cool hand lands on my lower belly. The relief is almost instantaneous. "I'm here, baby. I'll make it better, yeah?" The relief I felt evaporates quickly, and the fire returns even hotter, scorching me. I tremble, and I just know there won't be anything left of me but ash if he doesn't touch me soon.

Masen lifts me quickly and turns me to the sink. My back meets the cold mirror, and I hiss from the contact. I try uselessly to unbutton his pants, my hands fumble limply like I'm trying to perform surgery instead of a task I've done almost every day my entire life.

"Ahhh!" My cry of aggravated frustration prompts him to shush me. He grabs both of my wrists in one hand and starts to loosen his pants swiftly.

Not quick enough though because milliseconds later I feel him gasp as his clothes literally disappear, leaving him gloriously naked and harder than steel. I purr and ungulate my body, pushing us closer together. "Still learning new tricks, Little One?" I don't know how he's even speaking to me. I don't even try to understand what he's saying to me. I send my thoughts and how my body feels to him in heated waves, trying to get him to understand my condition.

Masen's jaw tenses and he pulls in a harsh breath through his teeth on a hiss. He reaches down between our bodies, grabs his heavy cock, and pushes the tip just inside me. I'm almost frantic as I try to impale myself on him. He holds me firmly, keeping me under his control. His dark grin tells me how much he enjoys doing just that.

I snarl fiercely, letting him know I'm about to lose control of myself. He pulls my upper body close to him still holding

my two hands in his one behind my back. The other arm embraces me closely, his lips are next to my temple, but his lower body is still barely touching me.

He inhales deeply. “Been waiting for this, baby. You ready for me?” He almost purrs, the heat from his breath feels like a cool breeze against me. I’m fully shaking now like an addict longing for a fix. I can admit this is exactly how I imagine they feel.

*Please*, I whimper through our bond. Before the thought is finished, he surges inside me, and I scream and come immediately.

I imagined I’d find relief, but there is none. I rip my hands from his grasp and climb his big body, tears stream down my face as I try to find solace from the pain, pulling myself closer to him. My nails gouge into his biceps and shoulders as I reach for purchase. When my nails drag down his back, he shouts out as he finds his own release.

Then, the relief comes, my body sags as my inner walls spasm, milking him for every drop of semen. I can finally breathe. I didn’t realize how badly I was going to crave him. My relief is short lived because as he turns us and carries my limp body to the bedroom, the fire in my lower belly is restocked. I’m mewling for more, and he’s still sheathed inside of me.

“Greedy.” He pants into my neck as he licks over my throat and collarbones, sucking and nipping. My inner walls spasm around his huge cock, trying to pull him deeper and get more of his seed inside of me. “God, I love how badly you need me,” he grunts, pounding into me. “Gonna fill you up, baby.” He does exactly that. Masen makes love to me in every way imaginable, and I take every caress and touch he has to offer then demand more.

In my desperation, I practically maul him. His wide back has tracks upon tracks from my nails, his neck is bloody from my bites, and I’m pretty sure from the sated but exhausted smile on his face he couldn’t have enjoyed it more when I was able to thank him for taking such good care of me.

It's now almost thirty-six hours later, and I finally feel more like myself without having Masen inside me. The short moments I've slept or rested, Masen has fed and cleaned us. Once, I woke while he was showering us both. He came three times before I let him finish rinsing us. I don't know how he's not dead or at least unconscious. Every time I needed him he was there, every time I slept, he stayed awake caring for me. If I didn't already love him with every fiber of my being, I certainly would now.

Mickey knew what was happening the night of the party and has thankfully been enjoying my little ones at the beach for the past couple days. We will join them for the remainder of the vacation in a couple of days.

I rise from bed feeling refreshed and well sated. Looking at Masen's beautiful face, I thank God we were able to find each other. I take my time showering, and when my soapy hand moves over my tummy, I wonder if we'll have another set of twins.

Masen is still asleep as I dress and move to the kitchen silently to make him the best and biggest breakfast imaginable. I laugh as I think about how I can't wait for him to wake up so I can show him how thankful I truly am. He walks into the kitchen as I'm giggling and wraps his arms around me, making me feel safe and protected. "What's so funny?" he purrs into my ear. His voice is deep and gravelly from sleep.

"I was just thinking," I answer dismissively. I turn in his embrace and look up to the same white blue eyes our son has and hope the next child growing in my belly has the same. "I love you so much," I say, choked up on the emotions I feel in the moment.

He nuzzles my Mark and says, "I love you more."

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# CONNECT WITH ALBANY

Albany lives in Michigan where she's happily married to her high school sweetheart. She spends most of her time juggling her four children's extracurricular activities, with her nose stuck in a book. When not reading you can find her writing her very own book boyfriends. Albany's passion is writing romance with real characters that are far from perfect, but always seem to find their own happily ever afters.

If you enjoyed my book, or any other consider leaving a review.

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