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MATE

THE ALPHA  
SHIFTER COLLECTION

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
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# CRUEL MATE

*The Alpha Shifter Collection, 18*

Sam Crescent

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## Prologue

Ashley Simpkin raised the beer along with most of her peers. Not only had they all graduated from high school, but they just had their first turning. Even as her arms shook from the transition of human into wolf, she wanted to take the time to celebrate. Her entire body was on fire.

She felt sick and hungry at the same time. Her head felt like it had spent the past couple of hours banging against a brick wall. None of that was going to stop her from enjoying this very moment.

She was finally a wolf.

For a whole year she'd been afraid that she wouldn't be able to turn, that her parents would be pissed, and the pack would turn her away. Admittedly, for them to do that, their alpha, Phoenix Marshall, would have to be present, which he never was.

It was kind of weird for them to have a nomad biker as their alpha. She rarely saw him, but she always knew when he was in town because the pack just went nuts. He'd stop by from time to time. The truth was, he wasn't their true alpha, well, he was and he wasn't. Confusing, but the pack had been in trouble several years back. She was ten at the time, and hadn't been part of the drama that unfolded when it came to the pack. What she knew was from listening in to her parents' conversations. Nothing more.

Their previous alpha had been weak. He'd gained power by attempting to claim how strong he was and how he'd protect them all, but the truth was, he didn't have the first clue what he was doing. He'd used their obscure location as a way to keep his place at the top for years. He assumed his role of being a dickhead, until eight years ago when they had some wandering wolves stumble onto their private little town.

It hadn't taken long for the traveling wolves to realize they were powerless. For three days and nights, the pack had lived in fear while the alpha cowered and gave into their every

demand. Men had been killed, and some women had been ... raped.

Then one man, a nomad biker, rode in on his motorcycle, looking for a place to crash, and stumbled onto the men.

Ashley wasn't exactly sure on the details, but it sounded like Phoenix passed through town a few times. He'd take the time to stay for a beer and a couple of nights' rest before moving on. This time, he'd stayed, seen what had happened, and then her parents described him as going "full rabid mode." She'd never seen a wolf be uncontrollable before, but it had been him against possibly ten men. When she heard the story, which came around when he visited, it sounded a little far-fetched.

Until you saw him.

Phoenix was not an approachable man. He was tall, muscular, heavily inked, had a few scars that probably could tell a gazillion stories, and he wasn't very nice. But — and this was a big but — he kept the town freaking safe. Now he stopped by multiple times a year, and the women went crazy for him.

Ashley couldn't recall the last time she'd seen him. It had been a couple of years, but being a minor, unchanged, none of the pack allowed him to deal with the youngest. The truth was, Ashley had often wondered why the pack didn't appoint a deputy alpha, someone to take charge while Phoenix was riding off into the sunset.

Taking a large gulp of the beer, Ashley shook off the weird feeling that worked its way down her spine. The beer was disgusting and turned her stomach. The sick feeling wasn't going away. She put her beer down, and Daniel, one of her friends, gave her a quizzical look.

"I'm just heading outside," she said.

"Do you want me to come?"

"No, no, it's okay. You stay here. I'll be back in a moment." She forced a smile to her lips, even though it was

the last thing she felt.

She moved around the bar, heading toward the side door. There were not as many from the pack. The pack didn't like weakness. Since their attack, they had focused on nothing but strength. No one could show a sign of weakness, which at times was so hard to do.

Ashley stepped outside, leaned against the side of the building, and took several deep breaths of the warm night air. She stared up at the moon, which wasn't quite as high in the sky. Time didn't matter tonight. Her parents had told her to go and have fun. It was up to her when she returned home. This was a night of celebration. She should be in there with her friends.

That strange feeling swept over her body. Ashley didn't know what it was but as she went to turn, someone suddenly wrapped their fingers around her neck and pressed her up against the wall.

“What is the fucking meaning of this?” he asked.

She went to the hands around her neck and lifted her head in time to see that it was none other than the alpha, Phoenix Marshall. He was there, at the bar, with his fingers wrapped around her neck. There was no pressure to his hold. She wasn't uncomfortable. There was power to his grip, and she couldn't look away, even if she wanted to.

“Alpha,” she said.

His blue eyes turned to a dark amber, and then back again as he glared at her. “You're a fucking newbie.”

Ashley had never been with a man. She'd never shared a kiss with any of the pack. Even when some of them were fucking tonight after their transition, she had been more interested in exploring this new body. The feelings of her wolf, which were foreign to her — she wanted to understand that side of her life.

“What's happening?” Ashley said.

She wanted to touch him, to run her hands all over his body, to breathe him in. The scent of him was intoxicating.



Her mouth watered. Her nipples tightened. Her pussy grew slick with need.

She couldn't control the feelings that swept over her. Part of her wanted to get on her knees and beg him to fuck her, and another part wanted him to get on his knees and press that face between her thighs.

Phoenix wrapped his fingers around her neck, pulled her close, and then she shared her first kiss. The moment their lips touched, all of it became clear to her. This man, her alpha, was her mate.

*“One day, when you meet your mate, you will just know, sweetheart. We can't tell you exactly how we know this, but you have to trust us. It's this feeling, it is more powerful than anything you've ever felt. It is more exciting than Christmas, more enjoyable than chocolate ice cream, and so much more intense than any exam you've ever studied for.”*

Holy shit! Ashley couldn't believe it. This was impossible. Phoenix Marshall, the pack alpha, the wandering nomad biker, was her ... mate. This couldn't be happening.

She had never felt this way. It was shockingly overwhelming, almost terrifying, and she didn't know what to do. This man — it wasn't possible. He couldn't be her mate and yet, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his body close to hers. She loved the feeling of him against her. The wolf inside her seemed to come to life at the scent of him, and Ashley felt that need to mate.

She'd never wanted to have sex. Living with her parents, she had to get over the constant sounds of them ... doing it, all the freaking time. They'd been mated young and still loved each other. That was the power of the mating.

All too soon, the kiss stopped.

Staring into Phoenix's eyes, it was like her wolf instantly withdrew. She saw the threat, the anger, the hatred. Ashley didn't know how it was possible for this man to hate her when they had never even met, but it was there, clear to see by anyone willing to take notice. He despised her.

Phoenix leaned in close, his lips brushing against her ear. “You better have enjoyed that because that’s all you’re getting. I don’t want a fucking mate, and especially not someone like you. You keep this to yourself. You tell anyone and I’ll fucking kill you and your whole family, do you hear me?”

The threat was real.

Ashley couldn’t believe what she was hearing, but at the same time, she ... knew. For the longest time, she had always been bigger than the rest of the pack. She’d tried dieting and even starving herself so that she would meet the goal weight she had set herself. Nothing she did ever worked. Her parents hated her extreme dieting.

*“Especially not someone like you.”* That could only mean one thing — he found her unattractive. He didn’t want to fuck the fat girl. That was it, wasn’t it?

Ashley stared at her mate and watched as he stepped back into the bar. Tears filled her eyes, and pain slashed right through her chest. She couldn’t think. This had to be the most mortifying feeling in the world.

*“What happens if mates don’t ever want to be together? If they can’t stand each other?”* It was a question she had asked her parents over dinner a few years ago.

Both of them had laughed. *“Oh, honey, that kind of thing doesn’t happen. Once you find your mate, you don’t ever want to leave them. All you want is to be with them. There is no denying the pull of your mate. It just isn’t possible.”*

Her mate had rejected her. He hated her. He was disgusted by her.

No one could ever find out.

From the high of the transition, Ashley hit the low of this intense secret. She could never tell anyone she had found her mate, or that her mate didn’t want her.

## Chapter One

### *Five Years Later*

Ashley sat at the edge of the forest, high on a cliff. One fall would cause her problems for several weeks afterward. Her wolf could withstand a great deal of pain and injury but there came a point where even she would die. Not that she had a wish to jump off the cliff. None at all. She just loved to sit at the edge, looking over the forest.

In the distance, she saw the glinting lights of the few towns that were spread out. From this vantage point, they didn't look too far apart, but in true distance, they were a few hours away. This was how she spent a lot of her time during the full moon. It was all she could do.

Her wolf had to stay away from the pack. Ever since Phoenix had rejected them, it had been hard for her wolf to even want to join in with the monthly moon run. Her parents didn't like her withdrawal. They also didn't like that whenever the alpha came to town, she made sure to stay the fuck away from him. The past three times he'd been in town, she'd taken a tent and gone hiking for over a week.

Living in the woods, far away from the pack, had been an interesting experience. Daniel, her friend, often came to get her. He also didn't like her withdrawal. She knew he was upset that they were not mates. Ashley hadn't known the truth but in high school, he had a huge crush on her. Once he told her how he felt, which happened twenty-four hours after the ultimate rejection. She had no choice but to let him down. There was no way they could have been together. Daniel had understood. They remained friends, but she made the effort to try and find him a mate. She never allowed him to get too close to her either.

In fact, there was a lot of things she did now that kept her separate from the pack.

It had taken her a year to figure out that when Phoenix Marshall came to town, the only place he didn't visit was the

DIY store. She had quit her job at the library, then the café, followed by the diner and the bar, until she settled on the DIY store, and she had so far worked there for the past four years. She was pretty good at it as well. Ashley absolutely hated it, but she helped the pack whenever they came into the store, and when needed, filled some online orders. John, the owner, was a nice guy. He was fair as well.

She hadn't been able to move out of her parents' home yet, but she was close to saving for an apartment of her own. Actually, she had enough money, but what stopped her was a decision. A choice. To leave the pack for good and to start fresh, or to stay.

Nibbling her lip, she looked toward the two towns. Some wolves, like Phoenix, survived without a pack. There was nothing bad about being alone. Of course, the battle would be in being lonely. That was the only part she wasn't looking forward to. In fact, it did kind of worry her.

Tucking some hair behind her ears, she took a deep breath, trying to convince herself she was fine and happy. She hadn't told a single soul what happened that night. Staring up at the full moon, she closed her eyes as she felt the tears welling up. Crying never helped but each full moon came with the stark memory. She was alone and her own mate didn't want anything to do with her.

Ashley had tried to starve herself. She had tried to do whatever she could to change herself, but the weight didn't budge. She swiped at her eyes, swatting away the tears.

"Stupid," she said.

"What's stupid?"

She turned to see Daniel walking toward her. He was dressed in a pair of shorts. Ashley was no longer naked either. She kept a crop top and shorts close by, after spending an entire week figuring out the sites of the woods where she often stopped during the full moon.

"Nothing is stupid," she said. "What are you doing here?"

“Figured you were here. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine.”

Daniel dropped down beside her. “Damn, that’s a pretty sight.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready to go on a date?” she asked.

“Nah, no date for me. I decided to change it.”

“Daniel, you can’t keep doing that to a girl.”

“And with the full moon and the run, I’m not going to ruin the moment with emotions already running high. If she doesn’t want to see me, then it wasn’t meant to be. End of story.”

She tutted. “How do you expect to find your mate without dating?”

“Why aren’t *you* dating?”

“I don’t want to find my mate,” she said. The lie formed easily on her lips.

“Come on, Ashley. Everyone wants to find their mate. None of us wants to end up sad and lonely.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll go out and find my mate when the time is right. I have a little faith.”

He chuckled. “Is that why you won’t move out of your parents’ house?”

“There are more people out there, Daniel. More to life than the pack, and it’s been five years.” It was technically a lie.

No one knew that Phoenix was her soulmate ... her fated mate. How cruel could the fates be?

“Maybe I should go with you,” he said. “Let’s face it, the past five years have been a bit of a bust. None of the women here are my mate.”

She shrugged. “They might not have turned yet.”

“True, but that means my woman is going to be so damn young.” He groaned. “I’ll feel like a freaking pervert.”

She chuckled. “Is that your problem? Feeling like a pervert?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

She thought about it. “I guess so. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“If my mate isn’t of age yet, that could mean yours isn’t either.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “We do not need to have this conversation about mates right now, do we.”

All she could see was Phoenix. Her true mate.

“Aren’t you interested in finding out where your mate is?”

“No, not really.” She got to her feet. “I’m heading back. Are you coming?”

“Of course. Heights scare the fucking shit out of me. I don’t know how you do it.”

The moment he got to his feet, he rushed toward her and wrapped his arms across her shoulders. “Maybe we should make some kind of pact.”

“Stop it, Daniel.”

“Come on. You’re unmated. I’m unmated. We’re both lonely. If we’re still without a mate when we’re like forty, we should agree to mating.”

“And then have to deal with that kind of rejection as well when your true mate suddenly makes an appearance? No, thanks.”

“As well?” Daniel asked. “What other rejection have you had to deal with?”

“Huh?”

“You just said you’d have to deal with that kind of rejection as well. I’m just curious who else has rejected you?”

Or what you've been rejected for?"

She licked her lips, trying to find a good enough lie that would make him leave her alone. She couldn't think. Her mind was all over the place.

"It's been a long night, Daniel. I misspoke. It's nothing. Trust me." She forced a smile to her lips. She shoved his arm off her shoulder. "Come on. I'll race you."

Before she gave him time to question her further, she started running, heading back toward town. She didn't turn back into her wolf. Ashley wanted the distraction of running, of feeling her body pulsing with the energy she was spending. Each crash down on the ground sent the pulsing heat rushing through her body. Her feet sunk into the earth with each step she took. She sped up, feeling the earth, the wind, the freedom of just running. That was all she wanted — to be free.

For five years she'd been trapped, locked up with this horrible secret. The humiliation of knowing he didn't want her. The alpha of the pack didn't want her.

*It's time to move on.*

Daniel was gaining on her and they were soon running together and the moment they cleared the woods, Ashley came to an abrupt stop.

Phoenix was there at the edge of the forest, with his arms folded. He didn't look happy. It had been five years since she'd been this close to him. Every chance she got, she had been far away. Taking a deep breath, she slowly looked up until she met his gaze, and then glanced away. She had no idea why he was there, and she didn't care to find out.

\*\*\*\*

Five years ago, Phoenix Marshall had walked into a bar, the same bar he'd been inside for eight years straight, perhaps even longer. He'd walked into that bar as the alpha of the pack, and nothing life-changing had ever occurred. He'd seen groups over that time celebrating their transition. Some large groups, others small. He'd often had a drink with them,

given them a slap on the back in celebration, and waited a couple of days before moving on.

That night, it had been different. He'd walked into that bar and the moment he inhaled, he smelled her. His mate — the woman who was meant for him.

He'd seen her take a drink of her beer, wrinkle her nose, and step out of the bar. Phoenix hadn't been able to stop himself. He'd followed her, intrigued by the woman, besotted. There was no escape from it. None whatsoever. She was a newbie. Young. Eighteen freaking years old.

He was a nomad. He'd taken a vow to be on his own. Each time he came back to this fucking pack, he broke that bastard vow, but he loved the town, adored the people, and when he came to them in their time of need, he'd kept his word in protecting them. They were all good people, a great pack that banded together.

This woman, this young girl — because that was what she truly was — had shaken his world. Kissing her had been a fucking nightmare to him. All he'd needed in his life was his bike, the open road, and that was it. Not women. Not anyone.

Until he scented her.

He had to be cruel. She had known who he was, had felt that pull. He had to reject her. Ashley was too young, too ... new ... too shiny. She was not the kind of woman he would imagine as a mate for himself. He was too jaded. Phoenix had seen the cruelties of the world and knew without a shadow of a doubt that Ashley wasn't ready. She had to be protected.

Being cruel was part of who he was. It was how he learned to survive. So for the last five years he'd constantly convinced himself not to return, to stay as far away from her as possible. Only he found himself coming back repeatedly, more often than ever before, to perhaps catch a glimpse of the woman he couldn't have.

Ashley Simpkin was a fucking dream. A beauty with full, rounded hips, big, juicy tits, and damn, her ass. He hadn't seen it in so long, but he loved her ass. Of course, after that



first year, the last four had been impossible. She was never around. He had politely asked about her without drawing attention, and they had told him she'd gone camping, or hiking, or she was running an errand. She avoided him. Like now. He saw her coming out of the woods, and she wasn't alone.

He looked at the man, Daniel, he recalled his name was. They were dressed from their run. The full moon had been high up in the sky. He knew Daniel had a crush on her. The few times he'd visited, Daniel had been his right-hand man, and he had talked about her nonstop. Not that he minded. He learned a lot from the man.

Ashley was an adored member of the pack. Even before she turned, she was a nice person. Sweet, kind, loving. She would do anything for anyone. She worked at the DIY store, even though according to Daniel, she hated the place. She hated decorating or having to fix anything. She loved to read and to bake.

“Alpha,” Daniel said, drawing his attention.

“Where have you two been?” Phoenix asked.

Ashley lifted her head. “It's a full moon, we just came from the woods, I'm pretty sure you can figure it out.”

She went to brush past him, but he grabbed her arm.

“Ashley doesn't mean no disrespect, Alpha,” Daniel said.

He hated being called Alpha.

“Do you, Ashley?”

“No, of course not.” She turned to look at him. “No, Alpha.” She pulled out of his grip, bent forward, and gave him a little curtsy. “I'm so pleased you could grace us with your presence.”

She bowed her head forward and he gritted his teeth.

Ashley smelled amazing. His mouth watered for a taste of her. He wanted to pull her in close and press his whole body against hers. To feel her wrapped around him, and damn it, he

wanted to feel her wrapped around his dick. He felt himself getting hard.

Five years. Technically longer, but it had been just over five years since he was with another woman. He couldn't bring himself to look at anyone else. She dominated his fucking world. He wanted her, couldn't stop thinking about her.

“Alpha, is there anything you need? I was not told that you required anything.”

He looked toward Daniel. “You may go home. I hope you enjoyed your run.”

“I did. I was going to help Ashley home.”

“I can walk myself home. I've been doing it for a long time. Trust me, I know the way.” She stood and was about to walk past him again and he captured her arm, not letting her go.

She glared at him, her lips pressed together. He stared right back at her. She was so beautiful, even hating him like she did. Did she realize what she was doing? How hard she was making him?

Daniel hesitated.

“I'll make sure she gets home,” Phoenix said.

“O-okay.”

And that was another reason why Daniel was never going to win her over. He'd tried to get his advice on how to win Ashley, to become her mate. That was never going to happen. She belonged to him. Ashley was *his* mate, and no matter what men tried to do, they would not win. They had a bond nothing and no one could break.

Phoenix didn't let Ashley go. Instead, he waited, watching Daniel leave until they were alone.

Ashley grabbed his wrist, sinking her nails into his flesh. “Let me go!”

He didn't want to. She was no match for him. It was going to take more than a few nails in his flesh to hurt him. Pulling her in close, he stared into her brown eyes. They were lovely and dark, but he saw the spark of her wolf lying just beneath the surface. She was a strong woman, and she shared a bond with her wolf. He liked that.

"How have you been?" he asked.

"You don't get to ask me that question. I can find my own way home." She moved her hand up to his fingers, and this time, as she pulled them back so he'd let her go, he did as she asked.

He didn't want broken fingers, and something told him Ashley hated him. Not that he could blame her, he'd been cruel to her five years ago. In his defense, she'd been freaking young. A baby. Eighteen years old. A newbie. She had her whole life ahead of her, and he ... well, he'd seen shit that would make her scream. He had the scars on his body to prove it. He had no choice but to allow her time to adapt, to grow up.

Staring at her now, he couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. She'd been beautiful back then, in fact, she'd been as stunning back then as she was now. At twenty-three years old, she was still young, but ... he couldn't go another visit without seeing her, without smelling her. He probably sounded so fucking freaky, but he didn't care. When it came to her, he felt this overwhelming need. His bike had lost its appeal. The open road had faded and no longer looked like a freedom road, but a death trap. The only time he felt free was when he visited this fucking pack. The pack he was alpha to. The pack that homed his mate.

He wanted her so badly. That need hadn't faded.

She pushed his arm out of the way, but if she thought for a second that he was leaving, she would be in for a shock. He wasn't going anywhere.

Stepping in beside her, Phoenix took several steps, and she stopped and turned to him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm walking you home."

“No, you’re not. I can find my own way home. You don’t have to follow me.” She moved again, and he tagged along.

“I told your parents I’d come find you and return you. This is what I’m doing.”

“I don’t know what game you’re playing, but leave me out of it.” She kept walking, and he, well, he kept following.

## Chapter Two

The scent of frying bacon woke her up.

Ashley laid in bed, staring up at the ceiling as the events of the previous night came rushing back to her. The run, the majestic view, chatting with Daniel, running with him, and then ... Phoenix.

She sat up in bed. He'd walked her all the way home. Her father, Ben, had been waiting up for her, while her mother, Leah, was in bed.

Running a hand over her face, she reached out for the clock and groaned. It was a little after 7:00. She hadn't slept in, even though it was a Sunday, and the DIY store was closed.

She spent Sundays at home, helping her mother cook, chilling out, possibly reading a book, and just relaxing before the week ahead. Unless her parents disappeared for sex. They were never quiet. It didn't help that she now had great hearing. It made listening to her parents easier than it did as a child. She had no choice but to leave the house for several hours, or at least until she assumed they were done.

She stepped out of the blanket and quickly made her bed, before disappearing into the bathroom. Her parents had insisted she have her own en suite, and she couldn't argue with them. They had sex everywhere and the bathroom wasn't a sacred place. She had walked in on them doing it there when she was twelve years old. She accepted that her parents loved one another.

A bathroom had been installed in her room less than three months later. Her bedroom and bathroom were the only sacred, non-parent fucking rooms. She didn't doubt for a second that would all change the moment she moved out. After using the toilet, she flushed, washed her hands, and then grabbed her toothbrush. She glanced at her reflection and winced.

Ashley had gotten into the habit after her first real encounter with her mate, of not looking at her reflection. He'd

found her disgusting, and with her inability to lose weight, she hated the sight of herself. Once her teeth were brushed, she ran a comb through her hair and left the bathroom. Heading downstairs, she stretched and yawned, then stepped into the kitchen.

“Something smells good,” she said.

All too soon she became alert to the fact they were not alone. This never happened. Her parents took Sundays seriously. It was their time together, it was family time. Even as she got older, they wouldn’t allow her to work on a Sunday.

Ashley stared at the man who rejected her. Phoenix was at the kitchen counter, a mug of coffee in his hand, and her parents looked happy.

“Yes, something does smell good,” Phoenix said, looking at her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Ashley, that is no way to speak to the alpha!” Leah, her mother, sounded outraged.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you go and get changed?”

She wore an oversized shirt, one she’d had for several years that was well-worn, but so comfortable. Glaring at Phoenix, she wouldn’t let him see that she was horrified he’d seen her like this.

“I’m good.” She moved toward the kitchen counter, keeping a good distance between the two of them. She hated that her nipples had hardened at the sight of him.

“Something smells good, Mom.”

“Will you eat the bacon this time?” Leah asked.

“You don’t eat bacon?” Phoenix asked.

She shot him a glare. What business was it of his? Before she got a chance to tell him to shut up and mind his own business, her mother was already talking.

“She’s been on a diet for so long. I worry that she doesn’t eat enough.” Leah pouted.

Ashley wanted to growl.

“Diets are not healthy,” Phoenix said.

He could lie all he wanted to.

“I’ll have some bacon, Mom, thanks.”

She got to her feet, rounded the counter, and grabbed a mug from the top shelf.

“How was your run last night, honey?” Ben asked.

“It was fine. I got out to the cliff.”

Leah tutted. “I hate the thought of you hanging off that ledge. It’s not safe and you know it.”

“I don’t hang off the ledge. It’s a nice place with a good view.” She sipped at the hot black coffee, avoiding looking at Phoenix. She felt his gaze on hers. Her flesh seemed to heat and one quick glance confirmed her suspicions. He watched her.

“I still don’t like it. You spend way too much time on your own, exploring the woods. We’re worried half to death about the trouble you can get into.”

“Mom, I’m fine. Last night I wasn’t alone. Daniel was with me.”

Leah sighed. “That’s good. Daniel is a good boy. You haven’t had ... you know...”

“I’ve told you, Mom, that’s not going to happen. Daniel and I are not mates.”

The cup Phoenix had been holding shattered within his grip.

Ashley sipped her drink while staring at him over the rim.

“I don’t know my own strength,” he said, as an excuse.

Her father was already fussing over him, trying to clean up the mess.

“Let me grab you another one,” Leah said, reaching for a mug. “It’s such a shame. You and Daniel have been friends

for as long as I can remember. He'd make a nice mate, I'm sure of it."

"He's not mine."

"I know, but you are aware that some people mate even though they're not fated mates."

She chuckled. "I know that, Mom, and when his mate comes along, I'll be left high and dry. Trust me, I don't want that."

"You know, sweetheart, you always talk about Daniel and his mate coming along. What about your mate? Your mate might turn up. I know it hasn't happened yet."

She refused to look at her mate, the alpha — the one sitting in their kitchen.

"I will never be mated," Ashley said. She moved to her place at the counter and took a seat.

"I don't know why you are suddenly so 'doom on you'. Mates come out of nowhere. Trust us. We know," Leah said, walking to her own mate.

Ashley watched her parents. There was love between them. They were happy and together, but that was never going to happen between her and Phoenix.

"I've been thinking about moving out," Ashley said, changing the subject.

Her parents looked worried again.

"I've told you we don't need to talk about this."

"I know, I know, but you guys don't want me ruining all the fun you could be having." She smiled at them.

"I know several apartments have opened up. Deanna, the florist, told me the apartment above her shop is a nice one, reasonably priced."

"Actually," she said, stopping her mother before she could start organizing it, "I think it's time for me to leave town. You know, go out, explore, maybe learn something."



“That’s not happening,” Phoenix said.

Ashley ignored him.

“Honey, what about the pack? Your job?” Leah asked.

She shrugged. “I love the pack. You know that, but I ... John’s great. The store is great, but I just think it’s time, and we’ve talked about this in the past, remember. Some people move on, they go and find something they’re looking for.”

“This is not happening,” Phoenix said. “You are not leaving this pack.”

She took a deep breath and got to her feet. “I want you to think about it. I know it will be good for me.”

Her parents looked toward Phoenix and then her. He’d stood as well.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do. Not now. Not ever,” she said, glaring at him. Spinning on her heel, she headed out of the kitchen and down the hall. She didn’t get far before Phoenix grabbed her arm and tried to stop her from leaving.

“Let go of me!” She had no choice but to whisper the demand.

If her parents heard, they would be suspicious.

“You’re not leaving town.”

“Do you remember what happened a couple of years ago? Five to be exact. You don’t get to tell me what to do. Not then, not now, not ever.” She looked past his shoulder, hoping her parents were more focused on each other than what was going on between her and the alpha.

“Damn it, Ashley, you will do as you’re told.”

“Make me!” She pulled out of his arms. “But if you remember what you said to me that night, you have no right to even order me to do anything.” She looked at him, and then repeated exactly what he’d said to her. *“You better have enjoyed that because that is all you’re getting. I don’t want a fucking mate, and especially not someone like you. You keep*

*this to yourself. You tell anyone and I'll fucking kill you and your whole family, do you hear me?"* She glared at him. "Do you remember that?"

She certainly had. Not a day had gone by that those exact words hadn't played in her mind.

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Phoenix didn't remember the exact words he'd said to her. All he'd been focused on was being cruel to be kind. He watched her run up the stairs. The nightshirt she wore was a little long and covered the curve of her ass.

Damn it. He should have stayed away. He knew this, and yet, here he was, once again butting his fucking nose where it didn't belong. The wolf inside him was getting pissy. Five years without a mate. Without a good hard fuck. He'd been taking care of his own needs, and he wanted her. The truth was, he could blame his wolf, but he was the one who craved her. He'd never felt lonely, until he met her. The nights were long and the days even longer. Ashley Simpkin played in his mind and damn, he missed her all the freaking time.

He stepped into the kitchen to find Leah and Ben sitting at the counter. There was a plate of breakfast for him, but he didn't see one for Ashley, so he asked.

"She won't eat now," Leah said, sighing. "She ... I don't know what's going on with her."

"She doesn't like being the big girl," Ben said. "That's how some people see her. The big one." Ben winced. "She will always be my little girl."

"Ashley is a beautiful woman. There is nothing wrong with her body."

Leah cut into a piece of bacon. "I know that. I loved cooking for her. Growing up, she always had an appetite, and she was a pleasure to feed. Until her transition."

Phoenix stopped eating. "Her transition?"

Leah dropped the cutlery onto her plate and covered her face.

“We don’t know exactly what happened that night,” Ben said, reaching out to his woman. He rubbed her back, trying to offer her comfort. “From what we’ve heard from her friends and even Daniel, the night was a huge success. They were celebrating.”

“I heard her, Ben. I know you heard her too.”

“Heard her?” Phoenix asked. He was tired of hearing Daniel’s name already. The urge to crush him was so strong, but he gained control of himself. He could understand why the boy was besotted with her. Ashley was a fucking dream.

“She came home,” Leah said. “We were ... in the back garden, but she came home, and we listened.”

“She sobbed herself to sleep,” Ben said. “The next morning, her face was red and swollen from all the tears.”

“And suddenly she doesn’t want my food anymore. I can’t even bake. It’s been so long since I baked anything.” Leah covered her face again. “She won’t even have her favorite, chocolate cake with chocolate fudge buttercream, for her birthday. I don’t get to make her anything. She doesn’t eat anything sweet or fattening. She’s on a strict diet at all times.” Leah shook her head. “Where did I fail as a parent? She is beautiful. She’s our daughter and I love her. What happened that night?”

No one knew. It was their little secret.

Phoenix looked toward the doorway. He heard Ashley moving around upstairs. Her steps were light. Her body hadn’t changed much, but he noticed the paleness of her skin, the sunkeness around her eyes. She was tired all the time. He saw that. And he knew why. She was starving her body, starving her wolf. All because of him. He’d been the cause of her sobbing.

Leah sniffled. “Anyway, I’m so sorry for that. Ashley is our only daughter. We have not been blessed with a second child yet, but we love her. We want what is best for her.”

“She has been talking about leaving town for some time,” Ben said. “Neither of us wants her to go, but she’s not

happy here.”

“Does the pack have anything to do with that?” Phoenix asked.

“No, of course not. The pack adores her. She loves the pack as well,” Leah said. “But we know she’s not happy. In the beginning she changed jobs so often, neither of us knew what was going on, or what she was looking for.”

Phoenix knew. Ashley did everything she could to avoid him. That was her end game. He ran a hand down his face and looked toward the doorway. Ashley moved around upstairs, and then he tensed up as he heard her rushing downstairs.

“I’m heading out, I’ll be back late, goodbye,” she said.

The door slammed as he stood. He couldn’t chase after her. His breakfast was still in front of him. Every single fiber of his being told him to chase her, but instead he sat down and looked toward her parents. They looked so fucking sad and lost.

“She won’t leave.”

Leah got to her feet. “I don’t want her to leave, but there’s something different about her today. I had hoped she would come around to Daniel. He’s a good boy and he’d make a good mate.”

“Leah, honey, we don’t want that for our daughter,” Ben said.

Phoenix clenched his hands into fists. All he wanted to do was snap at them and say that Daniel was never going to touch her. No other man was ever going to touch her because she belonged to him. She was his mate. But instead, he kept his thoughts to himself. No one knew she was his mate.

He finished his breakfast and tried to calm Leah and Ben down. The couple didn’t deserve to be so sad. They loved their daughter so much. He didn’t know what to say to them to make it right, but he knew he wanted to.

After breakfast, Ben saw him out. The other man offered him his hand, and he took it, giving it a firm shake. "It's an honor you have come to visit us," Ben said.

"I don't do any of that formal crap, Ben. You know that."

"I know. The town owes you a great debt."

"You don't owe me anything."

Ben chuckled. "One day you will realize how important a pack is. We had no idea how ... weak we were, or how dangerous our previous ... you know."

Phoenix had noticed not a single pack member would refer to their previous alpha as such. They didn't speak of him by name or title. He was dead to the pack, not that he could blame them. The alpha hadn't been able to protect them. Phoenix had come too late. Men had died, women had been hurt.

He looked behind him. The town had always called to him and he knew why. His mate had been here. Each time he'd left in the past, he had told himself he would never visit again, but each time he found himself coming back again and again. For Ashley — always for his mate. A mate he'd not known until that night five years ago.

"I imagine the open road is calling to you," Ben said. "Where will your journey take you this time?"

"I'll be sticking around longer this time," Phoenix said. "I'm not heading out for some time."

"Oh," Ben said. "Do you need a place to stay? We have a spare room."

Being close to Ashley was ideal, but with her parents living under the same roof, he didn't think it was the best plan.

"Daniel told me last time I was here, that the alpha stayed in a house deep in the woods."

Ben nodded. "Yes, he did. He would tell us that was his place to talk to the elders and figure out what course of action to take."

Phoenix rolled his eyes and Ben laughed.

“Don’t judge, we all thought he was a little strange.”

“And you weren’t wrong.”

Another laugh filled the air.

“If you want, I can take you,” Ben said.

“I’ll get Daniel to take me. This is your Sunday with your wife,” Phoenix said. “It was a pleasure seeing you again.” He shook Ben’s hand.

If only Ben knew that he was the cause of the problems Ashley had. Why was she starving herself? He’d been cruel to her but that was for her own good. He didn’t understand what went wrong, but he was going to find out. He’d been gone too long and the call of the road had started to die. He didn’t even feel the compulsion to leave.

This time, he was sticking around. Ashley was his and it was time for him to stake his claim.

## Chapter Three

By Monday morning, Ashley pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to try and stifle a yawn. Yesterday she'd spent all day away from home and arrived late. Her mother had been worried, and had saved her a large dinner of beef, vegetables, and gravy, but she'd not been able to eat.

She'd been worried about going home in case Phoenix was there. He hadn't left town and she didn't know why. She hadn't slept well wondering what he was up to. Putting the nails on the shelf, she began cleaning away the loose ones, picking them up and placing them in the multi-box. Customers could come and grab a handful, and would be charged by the size of the bag. John was really excited when he came up with the idea. Ashley hadn't cared. She'd been smiling and encouraging, but it was still just a bag of nails and bolts. Boring.

With the shelf full, she straightened the rest of the boxes before heading toward the other supplies on her list. John had given her a list of items to check for stock. Checking each item off with a number beside it, she moved around the store, every now and then pausing to yawn. She hated when she couldn't sleep.

By lunchtime, she was ready to eat something. John had returned from his errand, and allowed her to leave the shop. She promised to bring him something back, which she did every single time.

She arrived at the diner to see that it was already busy. Waiting in line, she saw there was a single booth left. She made her order and walked over to the booth that was designed for two. An intimate booth. She took a seat, leaned back, and rubbed at her eyes. Her parents always told her that her exhaustion was caused by not eating enough. They didn't seem to understand the concept of dieting. Not that it was doing her any good.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a romance book that she'd allowed herself to indulge in. It was a book she'd gotten from the library. When she was younger, before her transition and that awful encounter with her *mate*, she had loved reading. She soaked up every single romance she could find. There was something intoxicating about a hero who would do anything for his woman.

Being a wolf, her parents had told her repeatedly, she would crave a connection, crave attention from her mate. If only they knew. That had to be the worst part of it. Even as she tried to avoid him, a part of her wanted to go and see him. Shaking her head, she jumped as someone sat opposite her. She lifted her head and saw it was ... Phoenix. What kind of game was he playing? Wasn't it bad enough he rejected her five years ago? She was so over this man.

*No, you're not!*

Ashley wanted to tell herself to shut up, but instead, she opted for glaring at him instead.

"I didn't invite you to sit."

"Ah, but as the alpha of this pack, you can't exactly kick me out."

She opened her mouth about to do exactly that, but he raised a single brow. There was nothing sexy or hypnotizing in the move. It was like it helped her come to her senses. There were rules when it came to the alpha, respect being high up on that list. If the pack started to question her, she'd have no choice but to expose the fact she was rejected. A rejected mate was unheard of.

Men and women went their whole lives trying to find the one. Ashley could imagine their horrible thoughts. Blaming her as if she were the defective one. Her hands were tied. Being rejected was one thing, being rejected by the pack's alpha was another thing entirely. She'd probably lose her job and no one would want anything to do with her. That was the worst-case scenario.



Phoenix leaned on the table. “You want to go ahead and tell me to fuck off.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“You won’t talk to me. All I want to do is talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“And why is that?”

She couldn’t even risk stating the obvious. Wolves had great hearing. They were in a crowded diner, with their pack. Everyone could hear.

“You know why, and right now, you’re being cruel. Don’t you have the endless open road to keep you warm at night?” she asked, trying not to picture herself keeping him warm. That was none of her business.

Gritting her teeth, she forced a smile to her lips, to try and remind herself of how dangerous their conversation could get. She could imagine some fate laughing at her ass right now. In a former life, she must have pissed a few people off. There was no other word for it.

“Ah, I’m so pleased you have brought that up,” he said. “I’ve decided to stay a little bit.”

“What?”

“Yeah, Daniel showed me the old alpha’s place. Not that he should ever be called a fucking alpha, piece of shit that he was.”

“No, that is ... why?”

“Simple. I want a place to stay but it would seem a lot of time has passed. It’s waterproof and decent but needs a lot of work. I just happened to go to the DIY place, and John sent me here. He said when you got back, you’d be able to give me a tour.”

“You asked for me, didn’t you?”

Phoenix smiled. “I certainly did.”

And because the pack wanted to impress the alpha, none of them would question why. Gritting her teeth, she looked up as the waitress, Susan, brought over their food. Phoenix had also ordered food. Could her day get any worse?

“Here you go, guys. Enjoy.” Susan winked at the two of them.

Oh, crap. This was big news. Not only was the alpha staying, which was exciting to the whole pack, but the first woman he was seen eating lunch with was her. This would be gossip. There was no getting away from it. Staring down at her burger and fries, she suddenly lost her appetite.

“You need to eat something,” Phoenix said.

“I’m not hungry.”

“That’s not acceptable. Do you know that you’re twenty-three years old and you’re the only one who looks like that?”

Was he going to say something mean? Cruel?

“Like what?”

“Like you’re going to fall down. It’s not a good look, babe. You need to eat something. I bet your wolf gets tired easily on a run, right?”

It was none of his business what happened to her. Why was he even talking about this? She picked up a fry and popped it into her mouth. It tasted good, but her stomach churned.

“See, it’s good.” Phoenix picked up his burger and took a bite. “I fucking love coming here. The food is always good.”

“Is that why you were always passing through?” she asked.

“Pretty much. Good food on the road can be hard to come by, but then you have these little delicacies, and you never forget good food.”

She shoved another fry into her mouth and started to chew, trying to think of ways to keep him talking. If he was coming to the DIY store, there was no a chance of her

avoiding him. Was he doing this on purpose? Rubbing in the fact he didn't want her? There was no one she could tell. A quick glance around the diner, and she saw that people were intrigued by the two of them.

“Do you regret stopping by when you did?” she asked.

Phoenix wiped his mouth. “What do you mean?”

“When you saved us all? Do you regret it?”

“No, I don't. My biggest regret is that I didn't ride faster to get here. I could have saved some more people. Their deaths will be forever on my conscience. It's why I'm going to take over the alpha's house. It's my rightful place, not that piece of shit's. The memory of him needs to be wiped out. The only people we should ever remember are those that lost their lives that day.”

“I was ten years old,” she said.

Phoenix paused in moving his burger to his mouth. “I know.”

“You're obsessed with math?”

“When it comes to you, it would seem I'm not giving a shit about a whole lot of math.”

She found that very hard to believe.

“Take a bite of your burger. You'll be surprised how good it tastes and how energized your wolf will become.”

She wanted to tell him to go to hell, to fuck off, to leave her the fuck alone. There were a lot of words she wanted to use. Instead, she gritted her teeth like nothing happened. She took another bite of her burger, not because he told her to, but because she wanted to eat her burger.

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What had he said to her all those years ago that stopped her from eating food? Yes, he rejected her, and he was cruel as he did so. She was eighteen freaking years old. What did she expect? He wasn't in the habit of fucking teenagers.

Five years had been a long time, though. There was no denying it. A long time on the road, missing her, only getting snippets of information about her. He'd not told anyone she was his mate.

What he did was unheard of, and it certainly didn't come without its price. A big old fat price of loneliness. His wolf had been pissed, so had he. No other woman could satisfy him either, or the craving. Fucking hell, the craving and the dreams, and the need, it had gotten worse as the years wore on. All he wanted was Ashley. She was so young. Her life hadn't been hit by the hardness of life, and he didn't want to be the one to sully her, and yet, he knew without a doubt he would have to.

He wasn't a good man. Even to save her pack, he'd murdered people. Her parents were right, even though it left a bad taste in his mouth to think about it. She deserved a nice man like Daniel. That made him feel sick to think about. Daniel was a good man.

Nope. He couldn't do it. There was no way he would ever allow Daniel to have his woman.

Following her back to the DIY store, he took pleasure in watching her ass. Did she even realize the swish of her hips, the teasing she did, and all because she had the energy to do so? The burger had given her a boost. He had to stop her from starving herself. It was simply unacceptable.

Arriving at the large store, they stepped inside. John was on the counter and he gave them a wave. "Ah, you found her, Alpha."

"Phoenix, please."

"Phoenix. Ashley, will you help him with his order? He's doing up the old alpha's place, and it seems the years haven't been kind to the place."

"Sure. Totally fine."

Phoenix smirked as he heard her mutter under her breath that she didn't see a good enough reason as to why he

couldn't help him. Ashley didn't realize that Phoenix had asked John for Ashley's help.

The gossip mill would certainly be running. He couldn't help but smirk. He wondered what would happen if he hinted at Daniel or some of the pack that he believed Ashley was his mate. It wasn't a lie, not technically. She was his mate. He wondered if she felt it too, felt happiness with him being close to her. Did she want to suddenly rub her sexy body against him? He certainly wanted to wrap his arms around her, touch her, make love to her, fuck her. He wanted to hear her scream his name. To beg him to fuck her.

*That's not going to happen.*

*She's way too pissed off at you.*

Not that he could blame her. He didn't exactly have a great track record right now.

They headed toward the back of the shop, passing toward a small alcove with a desk and a computer.

"Take a seat," she said, sliding behind the desk.

She clicked on the mouse and blew out a breath. He watched her work, clicking away, and then she spun the screen toward him.

"I'm going to need an idea of everything you'll require. I'm guessing this is a big job?"

"It certainly is," he said.

"Okay, how long you wait for supplies will depend on the order. Roughly between five and ten days for delivery."

"No," John said. "Put a note on the order that it's for me, and I'm willing to add the delivery cost."

Phoenix offered the man a smile.

"Sir, I think it's best if you come and take care of the order," Ashley said. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"Ashley, you've been working here for four years. You know what people need and our alpha needs your expertise."

Ashley's jaw clenched.

He'd charmed everyone but his mate.

"Certainly." She clicked away. "I think it would be best if you tell me what jobs you need to do."

For the next hour, Phoenix pulled out the lists he'd made in each room of the items he'd require. She also advised him on an electrician in town as well as a plumber. In between ordering their supplies, she put a call through to them, and even arranged a time for them to stop by at his convenience.

Watching her work was amazing, even if she did appear bored. Another hour went by, and when he came to the bottom of his list, he was fucking bummed.

She put the order through and then picked up the phone again to confirm. He listened to her laugh at someone's joke. He felt annoyed that someone else would make her laugh.

"Okay, so that's all ordered," she said. "They will make the delivery the day after tomorrow, so Wednesday. It's the earliest they could do it. With that quantity, they are advising you have someone ready to help you unload. A word of warning — the suppliers are not wolves, so you do have to keep yourself in check."

"Already done."

"Is there anything else you need?" she asked.

"Have dinner with me tonight?"

"No."

He wasn't used to being rejected. On the road, women were more than willing to share a small amount of time with him. Even with the scars on his face.

"Ashley?"

She got to her feet. "Look, I know you're clearly used to getting what you want, but I'm not going to have dinner with you. Please, just leave me alone." She went to walk away and he reached out, grabbing her arm.

Did she not feel anything in that moment he touched her?

“Will you stop doing that? People will start talking and I don’t want to be the gossip. Stop touching me, stop sitting with me, and stop ... just stop.”

“You’re my mate, Ashley.”

“And you didn’t give a fuck about that before, so why bother now?”

There was so much he wanted to say to her, but instead John arrived. He had no choice but to let her go, and he was pretty sure in the back of his mind his wolf whimpered. They’d been so long without her.

“How was everything?” John asked.

“Everything was fine,” Ashley said. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

John looked at Phoenix who smiled at him. He had no idea what Ashley was doing.

“Er, sure. I’ve already closed up shop for the night.”

Phoenix hadn’t even realized so much time had passed. He would walk Ashley home, that would extend their time together.

Ashley took the lead and John followed, walking toward the back. Phoenix knew he shouldn’t attempt to listen, but he couldn’t help himself.

“What is it, Ashley?”

“Sir, I have enjoyed working here, but I think it’s time I moved on. Please, consider this my two weeks’ notice.”

“Ashley? What?”

“It’s been a wonderful experience, but I know it’s time for me to move on. I’m planning on leaving town very soon. I’m already looking for work and intend to move into an apartment, which would stop me from working for you. It has been a pleasure.”

“I had no idea you were planning to leave.”

Phoenix walked away pissed off, leaving the shop. She wasn't leaving, no, she was running away, and he wouldn't allow that to happen. He stepped out into the night air. He tilted his head back, breathing in the warmth. The pack were going about their business. No one, not even a human, would know a pack lived here.

The full moon had already passed. Running fingers through his hair, he waited, knowing it wasn't long before she would step over the threshold and leave work. He knew what the problem was. *He* was the problem. It happened before. He'd go to one of her places of work, and the next time he went, she'd be working elsewhere. The DIY store had been her last resort to stay far away from him, and it just pissed him off. She couldn't keep running away from him.

Ashley stepped out of the store and stopped, staring up at the sky.

“It's rude to listen in on people's conversations.”

“I didn't take you for a coward.”

She spun toward him. “I'm not a coward. It's time for me to move on. I'm sure you have a lot of experience with that, since you do it all the time.”



## Chapter Four

Ben and Leah were already upset with Ashley's decision to leave. They had voiced their concerns and their lack of support. They didn't want her to leave, certainly not the pack.

No one would understand why she had to leave. It hurt. There was nothing but pain every single day she was with the pack. She had lived with that pain, hoping it would get better, hoping she'd stop thinking about Phoenix, or that she'd at least find someone to move on. But there was no way she could do that to Daniel, even though he offered himself all the time, which made her sad. He deserved someone better than her, someone who was going to love him for him.

"Is that what this is about? You want to punish your parents and your boss because of me?" Phoenix asked.

She snorted. "Get over yourself." She grabbed her bag and started walking away, heading toward home.

Ashley didn't get very far, as she wasn't just stopped but thrown over Phoenix's shoulder and carried none too gently away from the town. They entered the forest and when they were far enough away, she slapped his back.

"Put me down. I have no idea what you're doing or why, but you put me down now!" She growled.

Anger worked its way up until she couldn't control herself anymore and she bit him, on the ass. He was so infuriating.

"Ow!" He came to a stop near his home, where he lowered her to the ground.

Ashley wasn't able to catch her balance and she ended up on her ass. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Don't you see?" he asked.

"See what?" she asked, getting to her feet.

He spun her around, wrapped his arms around her body, and made her look across the forest at his home.

She noticed the leaves had been gathered up and made it look ... neat. Ashley had always loved the old alpha's house, not that she'd ever been invited or visited him while he'd been alive. While her parents were busy, she would wander the woods on her own and explore the outside of his home, which she loved. Even now, the house was beautiful. Set back as some kind of villainous fairy tale's home, she found it had a certain charm about it.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm here to stay."

She shook her head. "I don't care."

"Damn it, Ashley, what will it take?"

She shoved his hands away and spun around to face him. "Everything. Don't you get that? You think because you're sticking around this time and showing me a small bit of kindness, you expect me to what, lay down, show you my belly, and thank you for even giving me the tiniest shred of attention?"

He went to open his mouth but she held her finger up to stop him.

"Don't even think of answering that with a smart-ass answer. I get it. You think ... ugh, you think this is easy for me. Do you have any idea what it's been like these past five years?"

She hated how her voiced wavered. She wasn't going to cry. She refused to allow those tears to fall. It wasn't fucking fair. He was so strong. He'd left town, multiple times. He'd gotten on his bike and ridden off into the sunset like it was nothing. All the time she had to focus on his cutting words of rejection. She had to live with being the first woman and wolf to have been rejected.

"Do you know you ruined one of the best days of my life? I was riding high from my transition. Not only had I graduated high school, I'd gotten through my transition. I was

a wolf, finally. I had my place in the pack. The beer tasted rancid, but from everything that happened, I felt sick.”

“A wolf’s first time is hard,” Phoenix said.

“So I left. I ... I think I felt you before you were cruel to me. Before you said what you did. Before you rejected me. I felt you, and then, what were you going to do?” she asked. “Strangle me? Get rid of the evidence that you had a fucking fat mate?”

Phoenix frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t do that,” she said.

“I’m not doing anything. I never once told you, you were fat.”

*“You better have enjoyed that because that is all you’re getting. I don’t want a fucking mate, and especially not someone like you. You keep this to yourself. You tell anyone and I’ll fucking kill you and your whole family, do you hear me.”* She didn’t say it in his voice, but even as she spoke his words, exactly as he said them to her, she heard his gruff, rough voice. They had played in her mind on repeat for so long. She couldn’t *not* remember them. He’d been so angry.

“Fucking hell,” Phoenix said.

“I know you’re disappointed in who you were given. I’m not pretty. I’m not slender. I’m a failure to you as a mate.”

He grabbed her face. “Shut the fuck up. None of that is what I fucking meant.” He growled the words in her face, but she didn’t want to hear them.

“I know what I heard.”

“I’m not denying that you heard them. I know what I said, but it had nothing to do with how you looked or your fucking weight!”

He was so close. Even his touch came with torture.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying to you. I’m telling you how it is.” His thumb stroked across her lip. “You can choose to believe me

or not, but what I meant by those fucking words was that you were way too young for me. You were eighteen. I was forty years old. I'd been on the open road most of my life. I'd never had a pack to call my own. Being an alpha of a pack is not something I'm used to, but you, Ashley, you're so young. You have grown up in the loving embrace of a pack. They adore you."

Tears filled her eyes. "I don't believe you."

"You don't have to believe me. The truth is exactly that. You think I hate your body. It's the memory of your body, of you, that has kept me going all these years. Thinking about that juicy ass of yours. Imagining your thick thighs wrapped around my waist as I drive inside of you. Not to mention your full tits. Your body is a fucking dream and you have appeared all the time. You have a starring role. What I didn't like was your age, and I'm not going to lie, even five years older, it bothers me. I'm forty-five years old. I've seen the world. I've killed people. I've not been a good man for a long time. Nothing is going to change who I am." He sighed. "And I know deep down you deserve a man with the light shining bright in his fucking eyes. I'm not going to say his name, because we both know who deserves you, but I can't let him have you. You're mine, Ashley. I'm not going anywhere. That house is the start. I won't let you go. You belong to me, and I'm not giving you up, not for anyone or anything."

She stared at him a little taken aback. All this time, she had thought it was because he didn't like the way she looked.

"I don't believe you," she said.

Wolves didn't care about age. They turned at eighteen so any mates would always be legal. Finding their soulmate came in the transition. No one turned before that time. Age didn't matter. They aged slowly as well. She had seen men and women with the same age gap as her and Phoenix, grow old together in pictures. Her own grandparents had been the same.

"Believe what you want, it doesn't change the truth. Now, I can't be this close to you and not do this."

Ashley didn't have the time to stop him as he slammed his lips down on her and kissed her. She melted instantly in his embrace. His lips were hard as they pressed against hers, and she couldn't help but open up to him as he slid his tongue across her mouth. A moan escaped her, and he placed a hand at the base of her back and pulled her in close.

"Feel that," he said. "Feel what you do to me. If I wasn't attracted to you, I wouldn't be hard as a fucking rock right now. I want you, Ashley, that has never been a problem, trust me. I crave you. I hunger for you, and that is never going to change."

Was he really telling the truth?

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The following day, Phoenix arrived in town intent on meeting with Ashley. After the kiss they'd shared, he had taken her home. She thought he didn't want her because of the way she looked, which was so fucking wrong. It was always her age.

Arriving at her parents' home, he knocked on the door. Someone was there to see every move he made. He wondered if whoever was stalking him last night had followed him and Ashley into the woods. He wouldn't put it past them. The pack seemed intent on knowing every detail of his life.

Ben opened the door. "Alpha," he said.

"Phoenix, please." He didn't like to be called Alpha. He held out his hand to his soon-to-be father-in-law. Phoenix had to wonder if Ben would be quite so welcoming if he knew he was Ashley's mate. "Is Ashley home?" he asked.

"Er, she's already gone to work for the day."

Phoenix frowned. "It's not even eight o'clock."

"I know, but she already told us what happened."

"You mean about handing in her resignation?" Phoenix asked.

"Yes, it was quite a surprise. She is such a loyal woman and we know each job she leaves hurts her." He

sighed. “I wish I knew what to do.”

“I don’t want her leaving the pack,” he said. “I was there when she handed in her notice.” He rubbed the back of his head. “Actually, that’s something I wanted to ask you about. I’m moving into the old ... place, and er, it kind of needs a woman’s touch. With her working at the DIY store, I’m thinking she could come and help me out. She would know what I need, you know, that kind of thing.”

Ashley was going to kill him.

“That sounds like an amazing idea.” Ben shook his head. “Her mother and I don’t want her to leave. We get that young wolves like to go out and explore, and get all that wanderlust out of their body, but she is our baby girl.”

“I’m going to take care of her,” Phoenix said. “I promise. I better go and ask for Ashley’s help.”

Ben nodded. “Er, my daughter can be quite stubborn, and I don’t know what hurt her, or who, but she has a good heart. She loves this pack. I know she’ll be a huge help to you.”

Guilt swirled in his gut. Deep down, he knew he was the problem. He forced a smile to his lips. Phoenix wasn’t used to having to put this much effort in, or to even want to give this much effort to people.

Heading across town, he stared at the DIY store and saw it wasn’t particularly busy. For his plan to work, he would need to ask her when she was surrounded by the pack. The only way to do that was at lunchtime.

*Crap.*

What he was doing wasn’t fair. He knew that, but he had to keep Ashley close to him. Tapping his fingers across his thigh, he decided to take a quick walk around the town. He’d stumbled onto this place after he’d run out of gas and had no choice but to push his bike there.

Phoenix hadn’t planned to stick around. He’d intended to fill his bike and be gone, only the scent of the burgers had lured him to the diner. The pack had been lovely. Phoenix had

met the old alpha a few times, and he'd not been wowed by the bastard. In fact, he'd known deep in his core the man was a coward. It was all in his handshake. The old alpha had a weak wrist. There had also been a nervousness about him. Phoenix had seen how the pack depended on him, and it hadn't set well with him. It was one of the many reasons he kept visiting. He never went to the same place twice, and certainly not close together so he'd be remembered. Coming here, he'd broken so many rules.

He didn't lie to Ashley either. He did feel the guilt of not making it in time to save them, all because he'd been fucking debating coming to town. He wanted to visit the town, enjoy their food, and make sure they were safe and happy. His lack of trust in the alpha had gotten him on his bike, and he rode straight to town, only to find several dead, and the women ... he gritted his teeth. He blamed himself for not getting there on time. He had fucked up big time.

Wandering around town, he checked the time and saw he'd been walking for several hours. Some of the pack had stopped him to talk. Many had told him about their business. Flora at the florist had told him about the abundance of flowers, many of which she picked in the woods. Alice owned the natural herbs and medicines shop. She believed in the healing power of the mind, and he agreed. As wolves they had a natural ability to heal. They were all good people, all of them amazing. He stopped by another shop that had different signs outside. This was owned by Malcolm, who was a nice man as well. He liked to work with wood, to create artwork people would want.

Phoenix learned that most of them had websites, earning money through their orders and shipping worldwide. He'd already been introduced to Eric and Michael. They were the ones who carried the goods out of town to the local postal depots, to get them ready to export. It was a fully functioning, surviving town. They didn't need an alpha, but no matter what he did, they would not allow him to remove the title.

He arrived at the diner and sure enough, Ashley had taken a seat in the back. The diner was full to bursting with

many of the pack enjoying their lunch. Ashley ate slowly. Was that why she didn't eat? She was trying to lose weight because of what he'd said? Hell, no. He wouldn't allow her to lose any more weight. He loved her curves.

"Alpha," one guy said.

One by one, people stopped him to say hello.

He nodded, smiled, and then came to a stop beside Ashley's table. She looked up at him and he couldn't help but smile. Her eyes went wide. She didn't know what he was going to do.

"Ashley, I'm so pleased I found you."

"Alpha," she said, slowly.

"So, I've been talking to your father." He made sure to keep his voice loud enough for the pack to hear. "And he is happy for you to help me. I know you work tirelessly at the DIY store, and I need you to help me fix up the old house. John can't be spared but he said you know what you're doing. I have several in the pack willing to help when they are able, but I feel it would go a lot more smoothly with you onboard."

He heard the rumbles of gossip as the pack tried to quietly talk about the fact he was asking Ashley for help. She looked past his shoulder and he saw her jaw clench. To deny him would bring the pack's wrath. They adored him and she knew it. They loved her, of course they did, but he was the alpha.

He hated using this damn title to get what he wanted, but it would seem when it came to Ashley, he had fucked up big time. Shit had been lost in translation. He loved the way she looked. She aroused him and that would never change.

"Yes, Alpha, I would be honored to help you," she said.

"Excellent. I was thinking we could work on it immediately." He turned toward Susan.

"Already getting your usual ready," she said.



“Thank you.” He wasn’t raised with a pack. He’d learned at a young age to fend for himself, so the pack doing this for him, being so open, was new to him, and hard to comprehend.

He took a seat opposite Ashley. She glanced around the diner and he offered her a smile.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said. “My parents are not happy with my decision either.”

“There is no reason for you to leave.” He put his hands flat on the table. “It’s good to see you eat.”

Ashley sighed and picked up a fry. “So, is this a real job or something you’ve cooked up?”

He chuckled. “Trust me, it’s a real job and I don’t think you’re going to like it a whole lot of the time.”

The house was in need of some serious TLC.

## Chapter Five

Phoenix was not wrong. On the outside, the house looked amazing, beautiful, a little unkept, but on the inside it was a mess, and that was putting it nicely. Walls were missing. Electricals were exposed, and it looked like there had been a few animals using it as their sleeping grounds.

Ashley had dressed in a black shirt and a pair of dungarees that had seen much better days. She grabbed her hair and pinned it up. There were cobwebs everywhere. The supplies had already been delivered and the pack had helped.

“Where have you been sleeping?” she asked.

“Here,” Phoenix said. “It’s not too bad.”

“There’s no heating. No safe running water. Phoenix, this place is a dump and I don’t say that lightly.” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think I want to know the smell, do I?”

“No, I cleaned away what was ... rotting.”

“Gross. Wow, you wouldn’t know how bad this place is from the outside, would you?” she asked.

“I’ve got the electrician coming tomorrow. The plumber has already started to make progress.”

“I think we will need to call on the pack,” she said. “There’s no way this is going to be habitable for some time.” She hated to even suggest this. “I’ll ask my parents if you can come and live with us while we get this place up to scratch.”

“Ashley, you don’t need to do that.”

“Actually, I really do, because this is not good. None of this is good.” She sighed and felt bad for not asking him about his home. “It’s such a shame.”

“What is?”

“Well, from the outside this place is amazing. It looks like it needs a good spruce up, but the inside is so messed up.” She locked her fingers, turned them out, and then gave them a

crack. “I think the best thing for us to do is clean up. Remove all the cobwebs, the leaves, and give us something clean to work with.” She checked the stairs. “Is it as bad upstairs as it is down?”

“Yep. The only difference is, most of the walls are intact.”

“Okay, fine. I’m going to start upstairs and work my way down.”

She had come equipped with cleaning products. She wasn’t going to stand around doing nothing. This was going to need way more hands than just the two of them. She took her duster along with her bucket and brush and headed upstairs. There were no carpets anywhere. It looked like they’d been ripped up or taken by whatever wildlife had gotten in.

This was not good, but she had to start somewhere, so she went with the biggest mess of all — the bathroom. Starting with the bathtub in the corner, she worked at cleaning it. There was no running water, so instead of washing anything, she focused on getting the debris and cobwebs out. She had been working for ten minutes when Phoenix joined her.

“I think it makes sense for us to work together.”

In close proximity. That wasn’t good. She hadn’t forgiven him, and she didn’t truly believe the explanation he’d given as to why he’d rejected her.

“We’ll get through everything a little faster if we split up,” she said, trying to create space between them.

“True, but I think this is better and then we can work through each room together, just in case, you know...”

“In case what?”

“Something ... you know, runs out, or scares you, or anything,” he said.

“I don’t scare easily.”

“So if there’s a rat or roaches?” he asked.

She wasn't going to lie — the very thought of encountering either one grossed her out, but she had a job to do. "I'll deal with it." She could scream or do a horrible dance around the place because they made her feel gross. Anything would be better than being close to her ... mate. Phoenix being close was not good.

Her wolf was happy with him being close but she didn't want to be. He rejected her. Time had passed. Regardless of his reasons, which she didn't believe, there was not a future for them. She wanted to leave and start a new life, regardless of what her parents wanted.

*No, you don't. You want to stay with your pack. You love your pack.*

She sighed, because it was the truth.

"Fine." She could ignore him. She'd been playing the avoidance game for years. Nothing wrong with doing so again, even in a small bathroom.

Using her brush, she started at the top wall and ran it across, bringing with it the hanging cobwebs, all the leaves, everything. She used her small scooper to draw it out of the bathtub. There was a horrible brown stain all around creating a rim. She stepped back, hitting the sink, which suddenly fell, causing her to take a leap back and right into Phoenix's arms.

He wrapped his arms around her, trying to keep her balanced. "I've got you," he said.

"You can let go now."

"But I like holding you." His grip seemed to tighten even more and she couldn't help but close her eyes as her body went into hyperdrive. She felt her nipples tighten and her pussy grow slick.

This was not fair. She wanted him. Her body was a traitor to her mind. She refused to give in to him. Not now, not ever. He'd hurt her. His cruel words had stayed with her for so long, she didn't think she would ever get over them. Part of her hoped she could, but she didn't know how.

She patted his hand. “Let me go. We’ve got work to do.”

He didn’t do as she asked just then, but eventually he did and stepped away. She missed his touch straightaway, which only annoyed her.

“Okay, so we can now condemn the bathroom sink,” she said.

“I think it would be best if I actually purchase a whole new bathroom.”

She nodded. “You’re right, because, wow, my ass must be strong.”

He chuckled.

“I wouldn’t complain at your ass being in my hands.” He winked at her, and Ashley didn’t know what to do. Was he flirting?

“We’re going to need to ... you know ... deal with all of this, so we’re going to need help. I can call John. He’ll be able to send reliable hands. He’ll also know how to dispose of it as well,” she said.

“Then call him,” he said.

“I think it would be best if I told him in person.” She wanted a reason to leave and to put some much-needed space between them.

Phoenix smirked and took a step toward her, then another. She refused to move back, and not because she was worried about breaking more of his home.

“Do I make you nervous?” he asked.

“No, you don’t make me nervous, but I want to make sure this is done properly.” The lies fell from her lips easily. “Don’t you want me to do this right for you?”

“You know I do.” He put a hand on her hip. “But know this. While you’re gone, I am going to miss you.” He dropped a kiss to her lips. “A lot.”

She made her escape, stepped out of his home and headed to the DIY store. She didn't need to leave. John would have understood what she needed with a simple phone call.

Her lips tingled. Her body was on fire. She gripped the back of her neck and groaned. *You've got to get your shit together, Ashley.*

She took a deep breath and made her way back toward town, heading in the direction of the store. She hated everything to do with home décor. Arriving at the store, she saw it wasn't too busy and John was at the main counter, looking through a catalog.

"You're back already. With that order I figured his home was close to falling down."

"Oh, trust me, it is. He's going to need everything. New bathroom, kitchen, the works, and John, I'll need you to call in some friends. There's a lot of work, and we're going to need people. Lots and lots of people." Plenty of extra bodies meant they would never be alone, and she could survive this in time to leave. She was being mean. It was wrong of her to do this, but she did it anyway.

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Phoenix wasn't an idiot, nor was he a fool. He knew when he was being played and as he counted fifteen men and women arrive, he couldn't help but look at Ashley. This was his chance to be alone with her, and she'd invited more people. He folded his arms across his chest and tried to think of a way to keep her by his side.

"That didn't take long," he said, moving toward Ashley.

"Everyone likes you, Alpha. They only want what is best for you, and this house, they're all so upset you're having to deal with this."

"Does the offer still stand for me to stay at your folks' place tonight?"

She nodded. "Yes, it does. See, I told you I could get everything I needed face to face." She winked at him.

And so, the first day went quickly. By five o'clock, they had completely gutted the entire upstairs. Walls were taken down, and even some of the flooring had been pulled up. The electrician had arranged to be there tomorrow as well as the plumber. John had called and put in a good word, so the upstairs would take a few days, perhaps even a couple of weeks to get right, but they would get there. Phoenix saw everyone off, thanking them all, leaving him alone with Ashley. He locked up the house and left the building. Ashley was waiting by one of the trees.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“They’re all good people and I appreciate everything they’re doing for me.”

“We’re a great pack and we are always happy to come together to help people.”

“So why do you want to leave?” he asked.

She sighed. “You know my reasons.”

“I know what they are, but they are completely unfounded, Ashley. You know that. I also know you don’t believe me and there’s nothing I can do to change your mind.”

They walked side by side. He glanced down, looking at her hand. No one was around. He hadn’t told anyone their secret. Taking hold of her hand, he locked their fingers together.

“Phoenix?”

“Please, let me hold your hand. I’ve accepted that you’ve thwarted my attempts to be alone with you by bringing a whole army into my home. Let me have this.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to prove to you that you’re wrong. This had nothing to do with the way you look.”

“I’m still the same age.”

“You’re twenty-three years old now.”

“The age gap is still the damn same,” she said.

“But you’re older.”

“You do know I was legal back then. As I am legal now. All wolves turn around their eighteenth birthday.” She sighed. “You know what, forget it.”

“I knew you were legal but that didn’t make it comfortable for me.”

“No one gives a shit about the age difference. We have mated couples with five, ten, fifteen, even twenty, some even thirty years age difference. Age is a number, it doesn’t account for feelings. And everyone is legal.”

Phoenix smiled. “And I guess when you grow up in a pack and you witness matings, seeing two people come together, it is only natural to them.”

Ashley stopped. “You didn’t grow up in a pack?”

“No, I didn’t. I was found wandering the streets when I was five years old. Thrown into a foster home, left to the system. There was not a lot of demand for a sulky five-year-old, and then as I got older, a young kid with a temper.”

“I had no idea,” she said.

He shrugged.

“You have no idea who your family is?”

“Oh, I know who my family is. I found them, hunted them down after I turned eighteen and the nice little surprise I got during the first full moon ... *that* was an experience.”

He heard her gasp. “Oh, my God.”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t kill anyone and I was strong enough to survive, but after that, I had to get answers. So I did. I fought to earn money, and then I started to track down my family.”

“Was your mother part of a pack?”

He nodded. “She was. It turns out she had an affair. I was the result of that affair. Of course, she was pregnant with me before she met her true mate, so she concocted some kind of plan. She gave birth to me, handed me off to some human



parents, and paid them to keep me. When she and her mate fell on hard times and the pack did too, the money stopped, and my ass got thrown onto the streets.”

Phoenix looked at her and saw the horror across her face.

“Don’t feel sadness or pity.”

“But you were a kid.”

“I was a moneymaker to the woman.” He shrugged. “I lost value and she got rid of me.”

“That is just so ... awful. Nothing like that would ever happen here. At least, I don’t think it would.”

“No, I don’t think it would either.”

Ashley rushed in front of him holding up her hand. “I don’t want you to think this is anything other than ... me offering you comfort.”

“You don’t have to do anything.” He stopped as she wrapped her arms around him. At first, he wasn’t quite sure what to do. A couple of the pack had taken turns giving him hugs over the years. He’d always patted them on the back, not exactly sure of the proper etiquette. This time it was different. This wasn’t just any pack member. This was his mate, the woman he truly wanted. The woman he’d rejected for her own good, but now he wanted her more than anything. Slowly, so as not to startle her, he placed his palm flat on her back.

“I’m so sorry for what you had to go through. I couldn’t imagine going through a transition without the pack surrounding me. That must have been awful.”

“I got through it,” he said.

“But that’s the thing, Phoenix,” she said, pulling away. Her arms were still wrapped around him. He loved her touch. “You shouldn’t have had to.”

“Then tell me why you want to leave?” he asked. He knew it was a bad thing to mention as soon as she withdrew from him, but he couldn’t help it. He needed her to see reason.

“Don’t. You know why.”

He took hold of her hand, locking their fingers together. “I know all the reasons but I also know that I’m here now. There’s no reason for you to leave or run away.”

“And you think this is an easy decision for me?” she asked, trying to pull her hand away.

Phoenix refused to let her go.

“Damn it, let go!”

“Talk to me.”

“You hurt me. You don’t even know what you looked like, do you?” she asked. “You were utterly disgusted. You hated the idea of being mated to me. You expect me to just forget about that? It’s been five years.”

“And I grew up and I’ve been living out there in the real fucking world, where a forty-year-old man lusting after a minor, a teenager, is fucking illegal! I get it, with the pack. I get it all, but that doesn’t change who I’ve been.”

He saw the tears in her eyes.

“Damn it, Ashley, please don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying. These are not tears. I will not cry, but I ... I can’t just forget.”

“I should remind you, Ashley, you were the one avoiding *me*. Not the other way around.”

She shook her head. “You would have hated seeing me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Seeing you was the highlight of my life. You think I didn’t have consequences after rejecting you? Do you think there wasn’t pain, anger, loneliness?” he asked.

The tears fell down her cheeks and it was killing him to see them. He didn’t want to be the cause of her tears.

“Can we just go?” Ashley asked.

“Every single day I regretted saying what I did, doing what I did, but you and I, Ashley, we’re not the same people. I’ve not grown up in this. I grew up out there, fighting to survive.”

“And you expect me to believe your opinion has changed?” she asked.

He sighed. “No, I don’t expect anything at all. I want you to understand that I’m not going anywhere. Not now, not ever. I’m here to stay because I cannot go another period of time without seeing you, without being near you. Fuck, just holding your hand is more than enough for me right now. I’m willing to have anything you will give me.”

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“I want it all, Ashley. I want you as my mate, by my side, and above all else, I want you to forgive me.”

## Chapter Six

“Hey, sweetheart, I thought you had left already.”

Ashley looked up to see her mother enter the kitchen. She still wore her pajamas and her hair was pinned up but she could tell her mother hadn't brushed her hair. This is what she loved about her mother. There was no fakeness. She didn't care if people saw her less than perfect.

“Hey, Mom,” she said.

“I need some coffee. Please tell me you brewed a pot.”

“I have.” She did originally brew it for Phoenix. He had a mug the moment he woke up. They hadn't spoken though. They hadn't talked once they arrived here last night.

Leah had made a beautiful lasagna. It was so good. Phoenix had kept her parents talking, giving her time to think. She wasn't sure if she did think. If anything, she was torn.

“I thought you were helping Phoenix with his home,” Leah said.

“I am. I'm heading out there soon. I stayed behind to make sandwiches.”

“Ah, makes sense.” Leah poured herself a mug of coffee and didn't even bother with cream and sugar. “What's the matter, honey?”

“Nothing, why?”

“Ah, you see, it has been twenty-three years of knowing you and I know something is bothering you.”

“Nah, it's nothing.”

“I can't help you fix it unless you talk to me.” Leah moved closer to the counter. She pulled out the chair next to her and took a seat. “I'm all ears.”

“It's...”

“Does it have something to do with leaving the pack?” Leah asked.

“Yes and no. I don’t know.” She frowned. Her mother was the only person she wanted to talk to about this kind of thing. Anyone else would have way too many questions. “Actually, can I ask you questions about, er, about mates?”

“Have you found yours?” Leah asked, smiling.

She chuckled. “I was, er, I was curious, you know, about you and Dad, and I guess mates in general.”

“Go ahead. I will answer as best I can, but I will admit it’s not always easy,” Leah said.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, as I’m sure you’re aware, being mates is different for everyone. For your father and I, we grew up as friends. I had fallen in love with him long before the transition. When we finally did transition, it was a dream come true to be mated with him. The love I had for him felt like it exploded across my entire being.”

Ashley smiled. “And you love each other more now than ever before.”

“Of course, but don’t forget, we’ve not always been perfect for one another.” Leah tucked some hair behind her ear.

“I don’t understand.”

“Mates can argue and disagree. Even go so far as falling out for a short time. It doesn’t stop us being mates or anything like that, but what it does do is make us stronger.”

“You and Dad fell out?”

“I wouldn’t say we had a true falling out, not in that sense, but we did disagree on the previous alpha. I didn’t like him. Something about him made me believe he was weak. Your father felt we should trust him, give him the benefit of the doubt, even though on numerous occasions he’d shown himself to be too weak to lead.” Leah sighed. “You know what happened. I wanted to leave town. To get you as far away from that mess as possible.”

“Dad didn’t?”

“Because he was protecting you. We don’t know what it’s like, your father and I, to experience a transition without your pack. He feared pulling you away from the pack at a young age before your transition could hurt you.”

Ashley thought of Phoenix. “Oh.”

“So, that was our first true disagreement. Your father was utterly distraught over what happened. I’m just grateful Phoenix had decided to come and visit the town a second time.”

“But you forgave him?”

“Yes, of course I did. I love your father so very much. I would forgive him for a lot of things. Even if I thought he was making a mistake.” Leah reached out and tucked some of her hair away. “What’s going on, Ashley?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell her mother exactly what was going on, but she couldn’t find the right words to say. It felt impossible to her.

“It’s nothing.”

Leah didn’t look convinced.

“I better head to his place to help out. I kind of get why John and some of the pack had to rip out most of the upstairs.”

Leah chuckled. “Make it a mess before fixing it up. I like it.”

“The place is a mess.”

“I can imagine so. I’m surprised it’s still standing. After he failed us, a few of the pack went to destroy the place. I’m guessing they only started on the inside. They pulled out all his belongings and had a huge fire in the main part of town.”

“I had no idea.”

“You were there. I think you thought it was a celebration or something.”

She grabbed the two lunch boxes she’d made, moved to her mother, and kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll see you soon,

bye, love you.”

“Ashley,” Leah said, calling out to her as she stepped out of the kitchen.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“There’s a lot a mate can do that can be forgiven. You’ll feel it here, in your heart. Living without each other, that’s the real nightmare. You’ll learn to adapt — like living with each other for the first time. Your father and I had to learn.”

Ashley nodded. “So, it’s not a magical fairy tale.”

“You don’t want it to be, trust me. There is a lot of excitement and enjoyment to be had from being with your mate.” Leah waved her off. “Go, enjoy your work day.”

Ashley left her home and headed in the direction of the alpha’s house. She couldn’t remember the exact fire her mother spoke of. There had been a lot over the years. As a child, she hadn’t really paid attention.

She passed several of the workers on her way to the site. They greeted her, and then she came to the house. It was a revelation to her about her mother’s anger. It must have been hard for her that day. Gripping the back of her neck, she looked up at the house. She had only known her parents to agree, never to have a falling out. They had a perfect life. They still had a perfect life, but it also came with a few anomalies.

“You’ve arrived,” Phoenix said.

She gasped, placing a hand over her heart. “Yes, I’ve arrived. You scared me.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“Have you cleaned the outside?” she asked. “It looks a little different.”

“I’ve gone over the windows with a brush and some water while I was waiting for the electrical verdict.”

“Does it need a complete rewiring?” Ashley asked.

“Yes. Not only is it outdated, but the whole house is shot.”

She winced. “My mom was telling me this morning that the pack, after ... you know ... they came here to destroy the house.”

“Ah, yes, I remember the alpha burning.”

“What?” Ashley asked. “They burned the alpha? Alive?”

Phoenix chuckled. “No, no, of course not. The alpha was already dead. He’d offered up the pack for his own life.” He growled the last part. “That’s why some of the men were dead and the women were ... you know.”

Ashley wrapped her arms around herself. “So what happened to the alpha?”

She looked at him and Phoenix stared right back at her. “Do you really want to know the answer to that question?”

“Yes, of course I do. I wouldn’t have asked.”

“He was still alive when I got to town. He was just picking off men and women to keep his own neck safe.”

“So what happened?” Ashley hadn’t heard this part.

He sighed. “After I killed the men that were hurting the pack, the old ... he got up, he looked me in the eyes and tried to thank me for saving them all. The pack told me what happened, and no pack should ever be at the mercy of the alpha like that.”

She stared at him. “You killed him.”

“I killed him.”

“Which makes so much sense as to why the pack viewed you as the alpha. You killed the other one and by our laws, you took his place.”

“Men died, women were hurt. That piece of shit didn’t deserve to breathe, and I don’t regret it.” He took a step toward her. “Which is another reason I was trying to protect you. I’m a killer, Ashley. I will kill anyone who even tries to hurt you.”



That shouldn't thrill her, but she knew he spoke the truth, and she kind of liked it.

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Phoenix hadn't thought of killing the alpha in a long time. He'd accepted it as part of what needed to be done. The bastard had harmed men and women for his own protection. The bastard had offered his hand as if he was grateful for the help. Until the pack had no choice but to turn on their alpha. They had told him, screaming out what the alpha had done, what he refused to do. After the carnage he'd seen, Phoenix knew long before then that the alpha hadn't deserved this pack.

Killing him had been easy. To him, it was fair, and now, knowing his mate had been part of that pack, he realized he had saved her too. He watched her, waiting for her to run away in terror.

She held up two bags. "I made lunch for us later. Do you want to show me what's been done so far?"

"You're not going to scream at me? Call me a murderer?"

Ashley shook her head. "I don't remember exactly what happened, but I know a lot of people were hurt because of it. The pack, for a long time afterward, changed. They invoked a curfew. There were a lot of changes made, and I know many of them hated that they'd not been able to protect their own. You saved us. How can I hate you for that?"

"A lot of people would."

"I don't hate you," Ashley said. "At least, not because of that." She smiled at him.

He stared at her. "So you do hate me?"

She held up one hand, two fingers together. "A little bit."

"Well, I wouldn't want my mate to hate me a whole lot." He held his fingers up and spread them apart. "So, I better distract you and show you my awful abode."

She started to chuckle. He loved the sound. Taking hold of her hand, he threaded it through his arm, and they started to walk inside.

“As you can see, my sweet, the stench of death is nearly all gone.”

Another laugh. “Don’t ever become a realtor.”

He snorted. “It’s not something I ever wanted to do.” She didn’t pull away from him. “I think it’s only fair I take you upstairs, or whatever is left of the place.”

“I’m sure it’s not too bad.”

They walked upstairs. They had to skip a few steps as they were indeed missing.

Arriving upstairs, he had no choice but to let her go, but he did move her in front of him. He placed his hands on her hips.

“No floor.”

“Enough to get people around, but it’ll be fine. The electrician has already made a lot of progress.” They moved toward the main bedroom, which had already had new floorboards started in the corner. He’d done most of them this morning. He’d spoken to the electrician, who had to rush off because of an emergency, but he had promised to be back before the end of the day to finish.

“Wow,” Ashley said. “It looks ... terrible.”

“Tell me about it. It’s a fucking mess.” He sighed. “But nothing that can’t be repaired. The plan is to get the flooring done, and then we’re going to work on the walls. One room at a time.”

Ashley slowly turned and as she did, it meant she ended up facing him, still in his arms.

“Are you tempted to leave?”

“Not a chance,” he said.

“This is not an easy fix.”

“Baby, haven’t you learned yet, I’m not the kind of guy that’s into easy fixing?” He tucked some of her brown hair behind her ear.

She tilted her head to one side. “You don’t miss the open road, no commitments, no crazy house that needs a lot of work?”

He leaned in close. “The open road doesn’t have *you*, so unless you’re willing to come with me, I’m staying.”

Ashley’s gaze fell to his lips, and he knew deep down she wanted to kiss him. He wanted to kiss her. Those lips were a fucking dream. Last night, sleeping in the spare bedroom, he was aware of her being so close to him, finally.

“Ashley, I’m going to kiss you.”

“Okay.” There was a slight hesitancy to her voice, as if she wasn’t quite sure if she wanted him to kiss her or not.

“Tell me if you don’t want this,” he said.

“I don’t know what I want.”

He sunk his fingers into her hair, which was so soft. Cupping the back of her head, he pulled her in close, and then slammed his lips down on hers.

Ashley melted against him. The hand that wasn’t holding the lunches splayed out across his chest, and he wanted to touch her even more. With his other hand, he curved it down her back, moving down toward her ass. She released a moan, but he wasn’t finished kissing those luscious lips. All night long he’d dreamt about kissing her, of exploring this sexy-as-fuck mouth, and he wasn’t about to give up the chance to do so.

He heard commotion downstairs, and Ashley pulled away, breaking the kiss. He wanted to go and yell at those who interrupted them.

She licked her lips. “I better ... you know, go and make myself useful.”

“Sticking by my side is useful,” he said.

Ashley smiled but didn't say anything, brushing past him.

"Tell me what I have to do," he said.

She stopped and turned to him. "What do you mean?"

"What do I have to do to make it up to you? For you to realize that I wanted you, God, I wanted you so badly, but I was trying to protect you?"

She nibbled her bottom lip. "I have no idea."

Her gaze fell away from him and then she walked away.

Running fingers through his hair, he felt the frustration and hopelessness of his situation. He had fucked up big time and he'd not even realized it all those years ago. This is what he hated for being cast aside, left out in the cold all these years. Being part of a pack was new to him. Ashley was still so young and he didn't want to be without her. Even his wolf wanted to stay. The wanderlust had faded quickly.

He'd looked at his bike this morning, parked outside of this house. He'd walked all the way home with Ashley last night, and this morning he'd gone through the town, greeting everyone, talking, chatting, feeling a part of the whole community. There was a time when his bike was his salvation. Straddling the machine was his way to escape. To move on. To not feel that clawing loneliness that had started to manifest. Wolves were pack creatures. They thrived together, but being alone, he'd tried to convince himself he didn't need anyone.

Abandonment had given him the chance to live his life without anything or anyone. But that was a lie. A big fat fucking lie. He didn't want to be alone.

Each time he saw Ashley and got close to her, he felt a peace he'd never experienced before. The desire to run had faded away to nothing. There was no reason for him to leave. His home — his salvation was right here, in a brown-haired, brown-eyed, sexy, curvy package. Phoenix didn't exactly know what he had to do to win her, or earn her forgiveness, but he wasn't going to stop. Not ever.

Following her downstairs, he watched her ass. He'd been trying to watch her for a long time. He hated that she successfully avoided him for so long. When he found out she worked at the DIY store, he'd been pissed as he couldn't come up with any logical way of stumbling into her. Damn it, he'd been a fucking loser. She was his mate.

Seeing her that night had caused a mixture of elation and disappointment. He'd wanted nothing more than to throw her over his shoulder, find the nearest bed, and fuck her until his name was the only one spilling from those beautiful lips. Instead, he rejected her, for her own good.

*It wasn't for her own good.*

*You failed.*

*You hurt her.*

And because of him, she had starved herself for a long time, but no more. Phoenix wasn't going anywhere. He was there at the pack to stay. Ashley would see that he meant to be her mate. He intended to give her a life she deserved, and he would never stop.

She didn't even realize it, but without even trying, she had given him something he had forgotten he craved.

Ashley had given him a home.

## Chapter Seven

The days passed rather productively. Ashley spent her mornings waking up, enjoying a cup of coffee, and watching Phoenix as he held up swatches for her to help him decide the color scheme of the house, even furniture. They were still a long way off from furnishing the house, but he wanted to be prepared with orders.

So far, most of the upstairs was fully plumbed and the electric outlets were all working. Ashley had gotten electrocuted downstairs over a miscommunication. Her tongue had been numb for a couple of hours afterward and some of her hair had stood on end. Phoenix was pissed and from that day forward, whenever the electrician was in, he made sure she went back to the DIY store to gather supplies.

While the men worked on the house, Ashley started to uncover the most breathtaking garden she had ever seen. It truly was a dream. The house was surrounded by forest, but there was a back porch that led onto a large thatch of grass, totally designed for late-summer picnics. Beyond the main garden, covered by large bushes, appeared to be a small field. She was trying to work on revealing the beauty. It was hard work, and she had no choice but to ask Daniel for help. Seeing as his father was the main gardener, it made sense to ask him.

Thankfully, Daniel saw what she did, and so they had worked together, only that came with another load of problems. The main one being that Phoenix was jealous, even though Daniel left before her each night, and she walked home with the alpha. They shared a meal together with her parents, and there had been a few occasions late at night when they'd been the only two up. Each time that happened, she couldn't help but think about the kiss they'd shared. His lips on hers, the feel of his hard body wrapped around her.

"I don't think the alpha likes me," Daniel said, after working for a couple of weeks on the garden.

Ashley stood up and wiped across her brow.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I don’t know what I’ve done, but he doesn’t like me.” Daniel sat back from where he was kneeling. “Do you think it is the way I smell?”

“I doubt very much that the alpha cares how you smell. In case you didn’t get the memo, we’re all stinking here.” Ashley bent forward and worked out several of the weeds from the field. She planned to clean it up, strip it all back, and then work the ground with fresh new seeds, bringing back the herb and vegetable garden.

“I don’t know, he keeps glaring at me, and he ignores me. I was telling him how I uncovered a few of the statues and asking him where he’d like them to be placed, and he walked away.”

Ashley sighed. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure he has a lot on his mind.” She was going to have to talk to him. “So, tell me, how did your date go?” she asked, wanting to change the subject to anything but what was going on with the alpha.

She knew what was going on, as did Phoenix. He was jealous of her, and he had no right to be. She had never strayed. At each point that Daniel had asked her to be his mate, she’d shot him down. She had told him point-blank, they were never going to be together that way. They were friends, nothing more. Which is why she was helping him date so he could find the mate he craved.

“It went okay, but like me, she’s looking for her one true mate.”

“Ah, you’re finally looking for her,” Ashley said.

“Yes, I admit it, okay. I watch my parents and the couples in town, and settling doesn’t sound like a whole lot of fun. You’re right and I’m wrong.”

Ashley laughed. “See, I told you.”

“Do you have time to be laughing?” Phoenix asked.

Ashley pressed her lips together as she looked over at her mate. Her hatred of him had somewhat faded in the past

few weeks. It was hard to hate a man who was being sweet and kind, and making her forget all that annoyed her about him in the first place.

“Sorry, Alpha,” Ashley said. “We were talking about mates.”

Phoenix glared and Daniel sighed.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a mate?” Daniel asked. “I’ve been on countless dates and I’m trying to find the woman for me.”

“It’s lunchtime,” Phoenix said.

“Of course it is, another lonely lunch for a lonely wolf,” Daniel said. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

She felt so bad for him and turned to look at Phoenix. “You’re not being very nice.”

“He has work to do. It’s not my job to pamper his need.”

“He thinks you hate him because he stinks.”

“He does stink,” Phoenix said.

“So this has nothing to do with jealousy?”

“It has everything to do with jealousy.”

Ashley smiled. She couldn’t help it.

“You think this is funny.”

“A little bit.”

“Daniel is in love with you.”

She shook her head. “No, he is in love with the idea of finding a mate. He had hoped I was that mate, but I’m not. I will never be his mate. You and I both know that.”

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have feelings for you.”

“And I squashed them down, Phoenix.”

“You did?”



“Yes. Even though you’d done what you did, I couldn’t let him think there was a chance with the two of us, so I told him no. I told him I would never love him that way, and the only chance we have is to be friends. Forever.”

“Wasn’t he your first?” Phoenix asked.

“First? You think he was my first lover?”

He didn’t say anything.

“Wow, okay, I’m going to tell you right now so we don’t end up with any cross-wiring or whatever, but I’m a virgin.”

“What?”

“That’s right, Alpha. I’m a virgin. No man has ever passed this threshold. I’ve never had sex. You were also my first kiss. You’ve been my only kiss.” She winked at him. “I think it’s time for lunch.”

She made to brush past him but Phoenix captured her in his arms. Whenever they were at his home, he rarely touched her. He only ever did so when they were alone.

“Someone might see,” she said.

“Let them fucking see. You’re all mine?”

“You’re not repulsed by that?”

“No.”

“Then yes,” Ashley said. “I’m all yours.” She didn’t know why she said that. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to be mated to him.

“You know this is going to happen between us,” he said.

It didn’t sound like a question to her.

She glanced down his body and then pressed hers against his. “Do you think you can handle it?” she asked. “I mean, I’m so young, a man of your age, you might not be able to keep up.”

Ashley had no idea what she was doing. None whatsoever. But she couldn't bring herself to stop.

She went to walk away, to get their lunch, but Phoenix had other ideas. He pressed her up against the outside of his home. He took hold of her hands, placing them above her head.

"I think I can handle it, I guess the real question is ... can you handle me?" He slammed his lips down on hers, and Ashley didn't realize how much she'd been craving his kisses. They'd not shared one in so long, and she missed them. Damn it. She didn't want to crave any part of him, but here she was doing exactly that.

He held her hands trapped above her head, but she didn't fight him or attempt to get away. All she wanted was to feel him. The moment he pressed his pelvis against her stomach and she felt the hard ridge of his cock, her whole body came to life. Her pussy went slick with arousal and her nipples tightened. She sunk her teeth against her lip as another moan escaped her.

"Oh, fuck, Ashley, what are you doing to me?" he asked.

"Please," she said.

"You've got to tell me to stop. Do you have any idea what it's like being with you and not being able to touch you?"

"Yes, I do." Because she felt it too.

Not a moment went by that she didn't feel this way about him. It was more than a need, more than anything she had ever felt. He let go of her hands, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her in close. She held him tight to her, kissing him back. She did not want to let him go.

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Phoenix didn't want to be jealous of her friend. Daniel was a good man. When she had ventured out into the garden, he followed her covertly to make sure the place was safe. He did not like when she got electrocuted, and he was pissed. The

electrician had known his wrath, and promised not to make the same mistake again.

Ashley's interest in the garden had pleased him. Each day, he got her to help him build their home together. He planned for them both to live here, together. The moment he saw Daniel arrive, he got angry. He knew Daniel wanted Ashley. The man had told him as much, but something had changed, he couldn't deny that. Now he knew Ashley was a virgin, and he didn't care. She belonged to him and he would not give her up to anyone. He was going to stay.

He didn't know how he was going to tell her parents that he was mated to their daughter. There would be a lot of questions and he could only imagine a great deal of anger, because he'd not been forthcoming from the start. He'd handle all of that in time.

The rest of the workers left the house, and he saw them off. The light had long since fallen. Daniel had also left, letting him know that Ashley had set up a couple of torches and was working in the bottom of the garden. With the house locked up and everyone gone, he made his way to the garden to find Ashley on her hands and knees, working the soil.

“Come on, babe, it's time for us to go.”

Ashley lifted her head up and wiped her brow with the back of her arm. “Already?”

“Yeah, already. We've got to go.”

“Wow,” she said. “Time has flown by this afternoon.”

It seemed like forever since he last kissed her, and all he wanted to do was kiss her again.

Ashley got to her feet and picked up the flashlights she had aimed for the ground. She turned them off. He followed her to the shed, where she placed the flashlights, locked it up, and then they left the main house together.

“I'm starving,” Ashley said.

“Good. It's good that you're eating again.”

She sighed. “The whole starving myself thing never really worked. Didn’t lose much weight.”

“But you always looked exhausted. You don’t anymore.”

She chuckled. “Are you telling me that when you came back to town, I looked like crap?”

He held up his fingers with a tiny gap.

She shoved him in the arm. “Asshole.”

“Just being honest.”

He grabbed her arm and threaded it through his so they were close together. She smelled like the earth with the underlying Ashley scent.

“I need a bath. I’m covered in sweat and dirt.”

“It has been a long day.” He sighed.

“Did I hear that you were having some difficulty?”

“Yeah, it would seem the attic is a bit of a problem. Lots of old wires, and some of the roof is a little unstable. Years of neglect will do that. At the moment it doesn’t leak, but I think it would only be a matter of time before it does.” He sighed. “I’m working on preventing that from happening.”

“I get it. This house is turning into a labor of love. Are you sure it’s worth it?” she asked.

“I’m sure. I have no plans to go anywhere.”

“But I’ve seen you looking at your bike,” Ashley said. “You’re not thinking about jumping on that thing and running away?”

“Never. I’m not running from you. Not now. Not ever.”

He was pretty sure he saw a smile dance across her lips. He didn’t point it out as he didn’t want her to feel self-conscious. In the past few weeks they had come a long way, but he didn’t want to spoil what they had built. Even though he wanted to go further. That kiss had been freaking ... everything.

They made it out of the woods and were heading to her home. Neither of them spoke but he felt Ashley withdraw her arm in case they were seen. He needed to fix this.

Arriving at her parents' home, he knew right away they were not there. Ashley let them in and called out to them.

“Mom? Dad?”

He closed and locked the door, seeing a note on the cabinet. “Here you go.”

It had both of their names on it, but seeing as this was Ashley's parents' home, he didn't want to read it. She took the letter from him and flipped it open.

“Ah, they've gone out on date night. They've booked a room at some fancy restaurant. They do this from time to time when they want to be alone.” Ashley gazed back down at the letter. “They've left us some food in the oven, and they'll see us tomorrow or the day after. I'm pretty sure they signed it off with a wink.”

“Your parents love each other very much.”

“Oh, yes. It became my childhood ambition to avoid them when they were ... you know ... having sex.”

“You caught them.”

“More times than I care to admit.” Ashley put the card down. “I'll go and see what's in the oven.”

They were alone in her home. He wasn't going to point out the obvious, but they were.

“Ah, I should have known. Whenever they go out of town, Mom always makes her lasagna. It heats well and keeps for several days.”

Ashley pulled it out of the oven then placed it on a heat-proof mat. She pulled her hair back and inhaled. “Smells good. Now if I know my mom, then I know she also left a salad.” She went to the fridge and pulled out a large tub as well as a small bottle of sauce. “Ah-ha, see, I told you. Salad and dressing.”

“I’ll grab the plates.”

“I’ll dish up.”

Ashley carried the food into the dining room and he grabbed the plates and cutlery. She served them both a large portion of lasagna and salad. She drizzled on some dressing to her own salad, and then handed him the bottle. He did the same, and they dived right in.

He was so hungry. The sandwiches never lasted long, but with all the work they had to do, it was hard to leave to get more food. Also, he didn’t want to hurt Ashley’s feelings.

“You know, I think I need to start making more food,” Ashley said, lifting a hand to her mouth. “I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, speaking with a mouthful of food. I’m starving.”

“Agreed. I’ve thought about calling the diner to deliver burgers.”

Ashley snorted. “We’d have to buy them for the whole crew. They’re all starving.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.” So long as he got to feed his woman, he didn’t care.

Ashley licked her lips and Phoenix couldn’t contain his growl. Her eyes flashed amber.

“I’m trying to be good right now.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Ashley, you look tempting to me.”

“My being a virgin hasn’t put you off?” she asked.

“No, it hasn’t. I don’t like that you’re still so young but I’m not letting you go. I told you, baby, I’m here to stay and you’re not getting rid of me.”

“Good,” Ashley said.

She finished her food and then stared at him.

“I’ll do the dishes,” she said.

“No.” He took her plate from her. “I’ll do the dishes. Go have a shower or a bath.”

“Are you trying to tell me I stink?” she asked.

“No, I’m trying to take care of you. You’ve worked hard today. You don’t need to work in the garden.”

“I’m not going to stand around doing nothing. That’s not who I am.”

“Then let me take care of the dishes so you can clean up.”

She nodded her head, getting to her feet.

His cock was so fucking hard. It was so tempting to follow her upstairs, but he didn’t want to scare her off. They were still so new at this — learning each other, knowing what the other wanted. He couldn’t fuck it up. His whole future depended on him not screwing this up with Ashley.

He loved her.

Even after everything that had happened between them, he knew how he felt and he knew it wasn’t going to change. His love for her was what kept them both going. If he had to wait a lifetime to finally win her, he would, but at least they would be together.

## Chapter Eight

They were alone in her parents' house.

Alone.

And together.

Ashley tried not to think about what that meant. She licked her lips and tilted her head back to allow the spray of the water to wash down her body. She'd already turned the bottom of the shower brown from all the mud washing off. It was messy work in the garden and she had a whole lot of digging to get done. She wanted it to look amazing for him.

*You want him to stay.*

Ashley paused as she ran the water over her body. Did she want him to stay?

*Yes, you do. You don't want him to ever think about leaving.*

Why?

*Because you want your mate.*

*You don't want to be alone anymore.*

*You want ... him.*

Ashley closed her eyes, spun around, and tilted her head back. This was not the time to think about the future. Phoenix would leave one day and then she'd have to deal with that rejection again.

The door of the shower opened and Ashley opened her eyes to find the man she'd been thinking about, standing in front of her. His gaze was on her. He was naked.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said.

"Tell me to leave, Ashley. Tell me to get the fuck out of your room and leave, because if you don't, I don't think I'll be able to leave."



She licked her lips. “And what if I don’t want you to leave?”

He took a step toward her. “Then I don’t leave and I finally have what is mine.”

He wasn’t touching her. His body was so heavily muscled and covered in ink. She couldn’t resist looking down the length of his body and as she did, she noticed his long, stiff dick. Phoenix was aroused.

“And I finally get what is *mine*,” she said, closing the distance between them.

Ashley didn’t know where she found the confidence to do what she did, but she tilted her head back, looked him in the eye, and she didn’t want him to leave.

His hands went to the base of her back, then down to cup her ass, squeezing her cheeks as he drew her closer. She felt his cock press against her stomach.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

“You won’t.”

“Your first time—”

“I can take it.” She had no doubt there would be pain. It would be her first time, but she wanted it with him. They had denied themselves for so long. She was desperate. Horny for him and only him. She cupped his face, staring into his deep blue eyes. She couldn’t believe this man had never known what pack life was. Ashley knew he must have hurt as a boy to be rejected like that and she hated it. Hated that he had felt this way. “Fuck me, Phoenix. Make me yours.”

He took possession of her mouth and she kissed him back, sliding her tongue between his lips. Phoenix growled her name and she felt him pressing against her. His cock didn’t terrify her. Sex didn’t scare her. She craved him, needed this more than anything.

Phoenix lifted her off her feet, turning off the shower as they stepped out of the stall. He didn’t wait to dry her, but carried her through to her bedroom. He dropped her down on

the bed and before she even got a chance to come to her senses, he had her legs spread.

“I’m going to taste this juicy pussy, Ashley. I can smell how desperately you want me.”

He pressed his face between her thighs and she cried out. Teeth sinking into her lips as his mouth kissed the flesh on her inner thigh. It was just the lightest of touches but she felt so sensitive.

“So fucking beautiful,” he said.

He moved down, kissing each of her thighs, trailing closer to her pussy. She licked her lips as his fingers grazed across the hairs of her pussy. She had never been touched there, not by anyone but herself. He touched the lips of her sex and spread her open. A moan fell from her lips. Already, it was amazing, but then he stroked across her clit, and true pleasure erupted over her body. His tongue danced back and forth across her clit, stroking her, and she felt her arousal building almost instantly.

“You taste so fucking good. I knew you would.”

His hands sunk beneath her, gripping her ass and lifting her up. His face pressed to her pussy as his tongue lapped at her nub.

Phoenix held her pussy to his face as he licked and sucked. When he used his teeth, Ashley didn’t know how she was going to survive. The pain was on that edge of pleasure, and she screamed his name. He moved his hands from her ass, up her body, cupping her tits. He played with her nipples, pinching the tips, then soothing them out with his palms.

“Please,” she said.

“I know you want to come for me, baby, but I want you soaking wet when I finally fuck you. I don’t want you to feel any pain.”

She didn’t have the heart to tell him it was going to hurt regardless. Crying out his name, she felt her orgasm building, and Phoenix seemed to know that was happening as well.

He kept pulling her away from the edge until she was so desperate, she couldn't help but beg him to let her come. Phoenix controlled her body and she knew she was soaking, as she felt her own arousal sliding between the cheeks of her ass.

“Now you're ready,” he said.

This time, he took her to the edge and thrust her over it. She screamed his name, begging for more, totally shocked by the force of her orgasm. Never had she experienced such bliss before.

Phoenix rode that wave with her, using his fingers to tease across her clit as he moved up between her thighs. He replaced his fingers with the tip of his cock.

Staring into his eyes, she knew this was it. Finally, she was going to be his mate. Ashley waited. Anticipated.

“I don't want to hurt you.”

She reached down, gripping his cock and moving him down so that he was at her entrance. Her heart raced and there were nerves but it was nothing compared to the need. Even her wolf wanted this. They had been lonely for so long, desperate for a man who'd rejected them.

With the tip of his cock at her entrance, she returned her gaze to his, and then she thrust up. With her grip still on him, she felt him move as he penetrated the walls of her virgin cunt. Tears sprung to her eyes from the instant spark of pain. She knew it was going to hurt.

“Fuck!” Phoenix pushed her hands out of the way and took hold of them, pressing them above her head as he slammed to the hilt inside her.

The moment his dick was balls deep, he stayed perfectly still. There was pain, a great deal of pain. Phoenix was a large man all over and his dick, well, that was just as large. He pressed his face against her neck, kissing her pulse.

“I didn't want to fucking hurt you,” he said.

“You didn't hurt me,” she said. “I hurt myself. I fucked you, Phoenix.”

He growled against her flesh and she knew it pissed him off. He lifted up and she looked into his pretty eyes.

Five years. They'd been long and lonely, but they were finally together and she felt that bond between them. Their wolves, their hearts, their minds, and their bodies. They were bound together and nothing and no one would break them apart.

“You're mine now, Ashley, and there's no turning back.”

Did this mean he wouldn't leave? Ashley didn't know if she should be happy or more fearful. Phoenix had been on the open road for so long. Could he even adapt to life without it? She knew he was happy to rebuild the old alpha's house and to stick around, but for how long? She didn't know about the call of freedom. To her, she'd been free from the start, surrounded by a pack and family that loved and supported her. What would happen when he wanted to leave? Could she go with him?

Pushing all those thoughts aside, Ashley stopped thinking about the what ifs, and instead focused on the man right now. This was her mate. They were together, and even if it was just a fleeting moment, she'd take it.

He let go of her hands. One of them went to her cheek and the other he placed beside her head on the bed. She felt him start to pull away, and she knew this was what she'd been waiting for.

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Ashley giggled as he kissed her neck.

Phoenix couldn't get enough of her and he knew it was only a matter of time before her parents arrived home, but he needed this. The truth was, he wanted to fix his house so that she could move in with him, and they'd have some privacy. Pressing her up against the stall of her shower, he ran his hand down her back, stroking her ass, and then gliding down toward her knee. He lifted her knee up and placed it over his hip. This helped to open her up.

They'd already put her bloodied sheets in the washing machine. His little virgin. Not anymore. She now belonged to him. Phoenix didn't want to go anywhere. Ashley was where he wanted to be.

She groaned.

He stopped. "Am I hurting you?"

"No." She reached between them, gripping his cock. "I want you again."

He lifted her up, using the wall as leverage as he lined his cock up with her entrance. She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip, and then, inch by inch, he lowered her onto his length, feeling her warm heat envelop him. She gasped and he stared into her eyes to make sure there was no pain. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

"Don't stop, please don't stop."

He slid all the way to the hilt inside her, but he didn't want her to just lie there, so he started to stroke her little clit. The moment he touched her, he felt her hot cunt tighten around him, squeezing him.

"Yes, yes, yes," she said, moaning his name.

"Come for me, beautiful. Let me feel how wet you get."

He glanced down at her tits, their fullness calling to him. Her body was utter perfection. Full tits, hips, and ass, and he couldn't get enough of her. She was more than a generous handful, and exactly what he wanted. A woman he could more than hold onto.

Ashley's breathing changed and he felt the fluttering of her pussy as she squeezed him a little more.

"I'm close," she said.

"Then come for me, baby. Let me hear it."

She cried out his name, and he felt her hot cunt tighten around him. He had no choice but to grit his teeth as she came.

He was so close to just fucking her hard and fast until he reached his own orgasm, but he held himself back, giving her time to go over the peak. But the moment it was too much, he pulled his fingers away.

Grabbing her hips, he used the wall for leverage and started slowly to pump in and out of her, taking his time, working her cunt, until she was moaning his name and begging him for more. There was only so much control he had, he'd denied them this for way too long, and now he finally knew what true pleasure was with a mate. He came, flooding her womb, filling her with his fertile seed. *Make her pregnant.*

He wanted everything with Ashley — a life, a family, the pack. He wanted it all. Seconds passed and he ran his hands all over her body, breathing her in.

“That was incredible,” Ashley said, smiling up at him.

“That’s because you’re incredible.”

“You’re just saying that,” she said.

He chuckled. “No, I’m not, trust me.”

She growled. “Does that mean you’re comparing me to the other women you’ve been with?” she asked.

He shook his head. “There is no other person worthy of comparing to you.” He kissed her lips. “You’re everything.”

He saw something flash in her eyes, but he wasn’t quite sure what it was. Was she jealous? To him, that made absolutely no sense. Ashley had nothing to be jealous of.

Stroking her cheek, he ran his thumb across her lips. All he wanted to do was stay right here, deep inside her, staring into her beautiful brown eyes.

*You wasted your time.*

*You pushed her away.*

He thought he was doing what was right, but now he saw all he did was torture both of them. They were never going to be happy apart. Their paths were always meant to be together.

She tilted her head back and he couldn't resist kissing her lips. He never wanted to let her go. Never wanted to give her up.

"I think we better get dried," Ashley said, but he saw her attempt to stifle a yawn.

They had both worked so hard today.

He reached out, turning off the shower. "Wait here," he said.

"You're being bossy."

"I have a feeling I'm going to have to be for you." He winked at her. Stepping out of the shower, he grabbed a towel for himself, wrapping it around his waist before taking one for Ashley. He looked inside the shower to find her still standing in the corner, smiling.

"Come on, baby."

She walked toward him, and there was no way he could look away. The temptation of her body, the sway of her hips, the possession he felt—it was not going away. He wanted her more than anything.

Phoenix wrapped the towel around her body as she stepped close to him. "You've got me," she said.

And he would never let her go. He helped her out of the shower, and then leaned forward, shoved her over his shoulder, and lifted her up. She started laughing.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He loved the sound of her laugh.

*You love her.*

This was not a revelation to him. Ashley had dominated his world for as long as he could remember, and that was not going to stop, not now, probably not ever.

Once inside her bedroom, which wasn't a long journey, seeing as she had an en suite, he placed her on her feet. He wasn't quite done with her, though. He took the towel, started to dry her body, and she continued to laugh. Ashley attacked

his towel and tried to dry him as well, but in the end they both landed in a heap on her bed.

“That didn’t quite go according to plan,” Ashley said.

He reached out, pushing some of her hair back off her face. “I don’t know, we’re both in your bed, so I’d say it worked to a certain extent.”

“You’re funny.” She giggled and leaned forward, kissing him. “So what are you going to do when the house is completely done?”

“I don’t know. Figure out the role of being the alpha. I don’t suppose you’ve got some pointers?”

Ashley pressed a finger to her lips. “I don’t have a clue,” she said and laughed. “Sorry. I guess the real answer is that they work hard, you know.” She shrugged. “The previous ... er, you know, well, he didn’t do a whole lot. Not that I can remember. You’re going to have to ask my parents.” She winced.

“What is it?” he asked, worried that he’d hurt her. He pressed a hand to her stomach. Had he fucked her too much her first time?

Ashley covered his hand. “It’s nothing. I was ... with me saying that you’d need to talk to my parents about what an alpha does, I was worried that you’d regret what we just did.” She had averted her gaze as she spoke the last part.

Her age. He’d not even thought about that. Placing a finger beneath her chin, he tilted her head back. “Look at me, Ashley.”

She glanced up.

“I know I fucked up and I’m not going to lie, your age is an issue for me, but this, between us, is real. I’m not giving that up.”

“Okay, I just don’t remember what life was like, not really. I was like ten years old, so I didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to what an alpha did.”



He looked at her, unable to think of what to say. Phoenix didn't have a clue what an alpha did. He'd never been in this position before so it was all new, but he didn't want Ashley to worry.

“Do you want to tell people?” he asked. This was a far more pressing issue to him. He'd figure out his role, but what did they do? They had kept their relationship a secret for so long. He didn't know what to do now. If it was left to him, he'd announce it from the freaking rooftops. He wanted the whole pack to know, including her parents.

“Maybe we should keep this between the two of us for now. You know, just in case.”

He agreed but couldn't help but wonder, just in case *what?*

## Chapter Nine

### *Two Weeks Later*

Her parents had nearly caught them so many times. Even this morning, Phoenix had no choice but to sneak out of her bedroom. Her father had been there waiting and Ashley had been on the other side, listening.

“Phoenix, are you coming out of my daughter’s bedroom?”

“No, er, I’m just about to knock. She wanted a wake-up call.”

“That’s not like Ashley,” her father said.

“She’s been working very hard.”

And while her parents were out at night, she and Phoenix had been making up for lost time. That was her morning wake-up call.

She had been so worried. The last two weeks were like a crazy dream. They spent every waking moment together, or at least as much as possible. Once they were at his home, it was hard for them to be alone. There were so many workers, and Phoenix was on hand for everything. As for her, she worked in the garden, and knowing that Phoenix was jealous of Daniel, she kept her distance from her friend, so he wasn’t uncomfortable. Once all the workers were gone, it was just the two of them.

Phoenix had told her it wouldn’t be long before they could stay at his home, and she was looking forward to that. The only time they could have sex was when her parents were out of the house. To just spend time with each other, without the sex, they waited for her parents to go to bed, and Phoenix would sneak into her bedroom, which she loved. It was like a dream — a forbidden, scary, dream — but it was one she didn’t want to wake up from.

“This is so beautiful,” Phoenix said, moving in behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist.

“Someone might see,” she said.

“I don’t care.” He kissed her neck. “It looks great. You and Daniel have done an amazing job.”

She leaned back against him. Ashley hadn’t wanted to tell anyone about their mating bond yet, because his bike still posed a big threat to her. She didn’t know what she would do if he needed to leave, to climb on that thing, and be gone in the next.

The last thing she wanted from the pack was pity. That was the only reason she didn’t want to tell the whole pack they were together. Otherwise, all she wanted to do was tell everyone. The night after she lost her virginity, her mother kept looking at her, claiming there was something different about her, but she couldn’t figure out what it was.

Phoenix pressed a kiss to her neck.

“People will see.”

“And I’ll tell them to avert their gaze.”

She chuckled. “We’ll be the gossip of the town.”

“I don’t mind.” He hugged her even tighter. “I’ve missed you today.”

She leaned back, closing her eyes. She had missed him as well. They hadn’t been able to share lunch today as there was something urgent Phoenix had to take care of.

“What happened earlier?” she asked.

“Some dispute about flowers,” Phoenix said. “Jake wanted to plant some roses in the town square boxes, but Flora wanted to plant daffodils. They were getting quite angry with one another.”

Ashley laughed. “You do know they’re mated, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Yeah, Flora and Jake, they’ve been mated for a lifetime, but they do like to argue as well. You didn’t get involved, I hope?”

Phoenix snorted. “Hell, no. I told them there are six planters, if they can’t figure it out, someone else will plant.”

“Oh, my, you told them that?”

“I had no idea what else to do. What would you have done?”

“It makes sense,” Ashley said. “You did the right thing.”

“I don’t want to come between mates.”

Someone cleared their throat and Ashley tensed up. She quickly stepped forward, creating distance between them. She figured they had been alone.

“Daniel,” Phoenix said.

Ashley turned to see her friend standing in the garden. He looked between the two of them.

*Fuck!*

Daniel was a great guy but he was a mega gossiper.

“I forgot my lunch box.” He pointed toward where she knelt. She hadn’t even seen it.

Forcing a smile to her lips, she picked up the lunch box and walked over to him. “Have a great night.”

Daniel looked at her then back at Phoenix.

“Night,” she said.

Her friend took the hint, nodded at the two of them, then stepped away and left them alone.

“I thought we were alone,” she said.

“We were, but I can’t control when they come back,” Phoenix said, gripping the back of his neck.

“He is going to tell everyone,” she said.

“Why is that so bad?”

She opened her mouth then closed it. “Seriously. He will gossip about everything. He doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut.”

This is why she didn't tell him what had happened all those years ago.

"We can handle it," Phoenix said.

"No, I don't think we can."

She ran fingers through her hair and tried to take a breath. Her parents would be so upset with her for not telling them. Ashley had never kept a secret from them, and this was a big one.

Phoenix captured her arms, pulling her in close. The moment his lips touched hers, all doubts and worries faded from her mind.

"Stop."

"But—"

"Stop. You don't need to panic or worry. You and I are here together."

She closed her eyes. "I'm stressing."

"You know what I think?"

"What?" she asked.

"I think it's time I take you for a ride on my bike."

This made her pause. Opening her eyes, she looked up at him. "What?"

"You heard me. You and me, I think we should take a ride on my bike."

Was this because he was missing the open road? Did he hate being the alpha? Phoenix hadn't asked for the role. The pack had granted it to him. He'd earned it by killing their previous alpha. She didn't blame him. Ashley knew Phoenix was a much better alpha. He did care, in his own way, even if he had a hard time showing it.

"Why?"

"Because I want to take you for a ride, that's why." He took her hand.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea."

“You’ve got to have a little faith in me, baby,” he said.  
“Come on.”

“My parents are expecting us.”

“I’ve already told them I’m taking you out. I want you to relax and the only way I’m going to do that is getting you away for a while.”

She wanted to tell him no, that she didn’t need to leave town. But the moment she looked at his bike, she couldn’t deny the fascination or the temptation.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked.

“Of course it is. I wouldn’t do anything to put your life at risk.” He pulled her in close, running his hands all over her body. “I want to share this with you, Ashley.”

She wanted to share everything with him as well. Licking her suddenly dry lips, she nodded her head.

“I did get you this,” he said, holding up a helmet.

She shook her head and held up her hands. “Hell, no. I’m not wearing that thing. You are not taking me out on the open road for me to be locked up in a helmet.”

“Safety first.”

She smirked. “You said I was safe at your back, so I’m holding you to it.” She winked at him. “Do you think you can handle it?”

“Oh, baby, you have no idea exactly what I can handle.” He winked at her, climbing on his bike.

Ashley couldn’t deny it. He looked hot. She stared at his thick forearms as he gripped the handlebars. His place was definitely on the bike.

She licked her lips as he turned his head to look at her. “Come on, babe, climb on for the ride of your life.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle as he’d certainly given her several rides of her life. Climbing on the back of his bike, she didn’t know where to put her hands.

Phoenix reached for her arms and banded them around his waist.

“That is where they’re meant to go, baby. Always holding me, and don’t you ever forget it.”

Ashley couldn’t help but smile. A thrill rushed through her body and she rested her cheek against his back as she tightened her arms around him. For so long, longer than she thought possible, she had wanted this moment. Even after he rejected her. She had craved this. She avoided him because she had wanted this more than anything. And she was finally getting to live the dream.

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Riding his bike had lost its appeal. Phoenix had known the moment it happened, the instant he spotted Ashley in a bar five years ago. He thought he’d been doing the right thing in keeping his distance, but that wasn’t true. The last few years had been a constant punishment to him.

The freedom of the road had been more of a trap, and he only just realized it. Since coming back to Ashley, determined to not let his concerns get in the way, he finally felt at peace. With her arms wrapped around his waist, her face pressed against his back, he turned over the ignition and felt his bike growl to life. Again, none of it compared to the feel of Ashley beside him.

He took off, heading to the main town, and then, passing them as fast as he could, heading back to the main road. Phoenix didn’t know if this was the furthest she’d been away from town.

She held on even tighter to him, and he took her through the roads, up the hills, across the valley, and headed toward one of the main towns. He didn’t go riding through, but he came to a stop just outside before turning back. He didn’t go straight home but stopped the bike on the outskirts of the main forest.

“I need you to climb off, baby,” he said.

Ashley slid off the bike and seeing as it was her first time, he was more than prepared to catch her.

“Holy crap, that was amazing,” Ashley said. “I can see why you enjoy ... traveling. Riding.”

No, he didn't. Not anymore.

“When will you be leaving again?” she asked.

He moved his bike to be covered by the thick bushes and he stepped toward her. Cupping her cheeks, he tilted her head back.

“I have no plans to leave,” he said, pressing a kiss to her lips. “Come on.”

“Wait, what? You're not leaving?” He took her into the forest, past the line of trees, until they were far from prying eyes.

“No, I'm not leaving. Is that a problem?” he asked.

“It's not. Of course it's not. The pack is your home as well, it's just...”

She didn't finish and he moved her back until she was pressed up against a tree. “It's just what?” he asked.

“I, er, I'm not sure. Are you wanting to sneak around?”

He slammed his lips down on hers. He hated seeing the doubt within her gaze. She had nothing to doubt, nothing to fear. He fucking craved this woman. Sinking his fingers into her hair, he wrapped it around his fist as he pressed his cock against her body. She released a moan and as she did, he plundered her mouth. His cock was already hard and ready to fuck.

Ashley stroked down his chest, and as if reading his mind, sunk her hand inside his jeans, cupping him.

“Oh, fuck,” he said, growling.

“What do you want, Phoenix?” she asked.

“I don't want to sneak around. I don't want to fight. I was a fucking idiot, Ashley. I want it all with you. The bike,



the ride, none of it mattered to me. The moment I met you, it lost all appeal. I hated being on the road, hated being away from you. It was nothing but torture, and I don't want to feel that way again."

He saw the tears in her eyes as he stared into hers.

"What are you saying?" she asked.

He stepped toward her and stroked her hair. "What I'm saying is I want to tell your parents. I want the whole pack to know you're my mate. My life is here with you. It's not out on the road. I want to make a family with you. I want it all with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

He kissed her again and this time, he felt her reach for his jeans, then tear them from him.

Two could play this game. Within seconds, he had her clothes torn and on the ground. Taking her to the floor, Ashley shoved him hard, rolling him to his back and she stared down at him.

"I win."

He grabbed her hips, lifting her up. He heard her yelp but then he had her on her knees. His grip tightened at the back of her neck as he slowly stroked the other down her back, curving around her ass, and then cupping her pussy. She was so slick. She arched up as he plunged two fingers inside her. He twisted his fingers and pressed his thumb against her clit.

"Phoenix!" His name spilled from her lips in a pleased gasp and he loved the sound, but he wanted more.

Pulling his fingers from her pussy, he moved behind her, gripping his stiff prick. Lining up the length of his dick with her cunt, he slid in hard and deep. Ashley didn't cry out with pain. Her virginity was long gone. She was now his woman, completely. He wanted to feed her his cum, to flood her womb and make her pregnant.

Phoenix let go of the back of her neck to grip her hips. Holding them steady, he pulled out of her tight hole and watched her. Even though it was dark, his vision was perfect, and Ashley was fucking perfection. So beautiful. So ripe. So ready to be fucked, to be taken, to be bred. He'd never cared about being a family man or having children, but with Ashley, it was a need he couldn't squash. Ashley had become a desperate hunger.

Slamming balls deep inside her, he didn't give her a chance to rest. He pulled out, only to slam back inside her. Over and over, he pounded her cunt, feeling how wet she was. She was close to orgasm, so he pressed all the way inside her, feeling her pussy twitch around him. Sliding one hand between her thighs, he stroked her clit.

She moaned his name, pressing back against him, but there was nowhere else for her to go. She was imbedded on his cock. Phoenix had no choice but to close his eyes in an attempt to stem the pleasure. It was next to impossible. Gritting his teeth, he waited, teasing her clit, feeling how close she was.

“Come for me, Ashley,” he said.

She growled his name, and then he felt her. The tightening of her pussy as she attempted to milk his cock. Her body knew what it wanted. She wanted his seed and he was more than happy to give it to her. He didn't give her a chance for her orgasm to ebb. Returning his grip to her hips, he took her harder and faster than before, watching her open up around his length. He was so close. All it took was a couple of deep thrusts, and he came, shoving to the hilt inside her and pulsing his seed deep into her womb.

Phoenix had never wished for anything. Not when he was alone in the world. Not even during his first transition when he truly thought he was dying. There had been no one and nothing for him and he'd accepted his lot in life. No one wanted him. Nothing was out there for him. He was alone. But now, he wished, he prayed, and he was quite happy to fucking beg, for whatever crumb he could have of Ashley. Whatever she wanted, he'd give it to her. All she had to do was say the word.

She was his soulmate. His reason for existing. After rejecting her, he hadn't lived a peaceful life, but a hard one, filled with lonely agony. Wishing for her, desperate for her. They'd been strangers to each other but he'd never felt more at home in his life. Wherever Ashley was, that was where he belonged.

Phoenix pulled out of her, laid on the earth, and pulled Ashley down on top of him.

"That was incredible," she said.

He stroked a hand down her back. "I meant what I said, Ashley."

"Phoenix, don't."

He looked up at her. She nibbled her lip and he hated seeing the doubt within her eyes.

"I mean it. I'm not lying to you. I want to tell your parents and I want everyone within the pack to know that you belong to me, always."

She placed her hand on top of his beating heart. "I know you believe that now, but ... don't you think we should give it some time?"

"I know what I want."

"Five years, Phoenix," she said. "You didn't want me. You didn't want this, and I've had to learn to live without you."

"Ashley?" He cupped her cheek.

"Hear me out. You've lived your life by your own way and I'm not judging that. I promise, I'm not. It's just ... the pack is my family, and I don't want them to look at me with pity or sadness if you decide you want to leave."

"That's not going to happen."

"You don't know that," she said. "Please, for me, give it some time."

He would do it for her, but he knew she was the only person he wanted.

## Chapter Ten

“When were you going to tell the pack, your family, me, that you’re mated to the freaking alpha?”

Ashley grabbed hold of Daniel, shoved him to the ground, and covered his mouth. She lifted her head, hoping none of the other builders had heard anything. No one turned in their direction.

“Do not speak,” Ashley said.

Daniel glared at her.

She released her hand and then grabbed Daniel’s shirt, lifting him up and dragging him back toward the garden. She was proud of how she’d worked the land. It looked more beautiful and well kept. Together, with Daniel, they were helping to build a garden of dreams, even though she knew Phoenix was jealous of him. She kept her distance so no trouble began.

“Okay, so we’re far enough away from prying ears, but seriously, Ashley, what the fuck?” Daniel asked.

“Will you please keep your voice down?” She kept hers low.

Phoenix wasn’t happy with keeping their relationship a secret either. After their impromptu rendezvous last night, he’d not spoken to her. She wasn’t trying to be cruel, just protecting herself and her heart. She wanted nothing more than to accept his words and believe that was it, they were now mated and nothing was going to come between them, but she knew he felt free on the bike.

*Not anymore.*

*You’ve got to learn to listen to him.*

*He no longer feels free.*

*He wants you.*

She truly wanted to believe her own inner thoughts, but she couldn't help doubting them.

"My voice is down. Well?"

"You can't tell anyone."

"What the fuck, Ashley?"

"Please, you cannot tell a soul."

Daniel shook his head. "How long has this been going on?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"Ashley, I've been your friend for a damn lifetime. I saw you and Phoenix and I knew sparks were flying, so cut the shit and just be honest with me."

She nibbled her lip and sighed. "Okay, technically, I've known that he was my mate for five years."

"Five years!"

She pressed her palm flat against his mouth. "Shut up. Nothing happened. Okay. Phoenix wasn't ... happy."

"What?"

"You know he's never been part of a pack before, right?"

"Er, I think so."

"Well, I was eighteen and he was like forty years old."

"So."

"He grew up with people and I'm guessing age means something."

Daniel frowned. "So he what? Rejected you?"

She nodded.

"Holy shit, you're kidding, right?"

"I'm not kidding. For five years, he and I, we knew what we meant to each other, but nothing ever happened. He's still a little uncomfortable with my age."

“Okay, that makes no sense. Mates are like the most important thing.”

She shrugged. “We didn’t grow up the way he did. He doesn’t know how packs work. It’s still new to him.”

Daniel rubbed at his temple. “Okay, fine. I can sort of not understand that, but aside from that, you two are now mates. I mean, you stink of him.”

“Stop it.”

“You do. So I’m guessing the whole rejecting thing is on the back burner, so why haven’t you told anyone?”

Ashley sighed. “Because, what if he doesn’t want to stay? What if he wants to leave again? What if he can’t be part of a pack? I don’t want to get hurt.” She shrugged.

“And what if he *wants* to stay? What if he never wants to leave? What if he wants to start a family, be part of a pack for the first time in his life?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I do. You hold on for fucking dear life. Ashley, I don’t know what to say to you. I’ve not found my mate, I’ve not. She’s not out there right now for me, and I can tell you, it is fucking lonely. I’m not going to lie, I’ve fucked a couple of women, and it is ... it’s great, but it’s missing that special something. That connection. You have that. You have a guy who’s your mate, *your mate*. I can’t even tell you how precious that is.”

“He rejected me, Daniel. He was cruel.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t give a shit. People make mistakes, Ashley. But they do shit that makes you forgive them. Hasn’t he earned your forgiveness?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yeah, it is. He’s your mate and you have feelings for him. The reason I know that, his rejection wouldn’t have hurt so much. You have this chance with him, and you’re not taking it.” Daniel laughed.

“Where are you going?” she asked, watching him walk away.

“To work, because I can’t do this with you.”

“Please don’t say anything to anyone.”

“I won’t say anything, but you already know what I’m thinking.” Daniel shook his head, and she watched him leave.

Was she being too hard on Phoenix? She wrapped her arms around her body and glanced over at the house. Several of the windows were open, to try to rid the place of the paint fumes. Ashley closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She understood what Daniel meant. Keeping this a secret was hard.

Every morning her mother would smile and they’d talk, and all she wanted to do was tell her that she’d found her mate. But she didn’t. She’d hear Phoenix’s words in the back of her mind, and it would make her stop, because, what if? What if this was just a brief moment for him? Ashley didn’t know what it was like to live the way he had. She had always been part of a pack and always would be. She looked up at the house and saw Phoenix watching her. What was he thinking?

She held her hand up in a wave and before waiting for him to respond, she got back to work on fixing up the garden, using it as a distraction. She didn’t even stop for lunch, just worked, until hours later, she knew it was late and the sun had long since gone down. Daniel had already left, but didn’t say goodbye. It was the first day they had spent together where he’d not spoken to her. She didn’t like that.

Looking up, she saw Phoenix standing right in front of her.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Nothing.” She dropped the trowel she’d been working with and stood up, brushing the mud from her hands. “It’s been a long day.”

He folded his arms. “What did Daniel say to you?”

“How do you know Daniel said anything?” she asked.

“I saw you two in the garden.”

She sighed and wiped her brow with the back of her hand. “It’s nothing. Okay. He just, he knows about us, and he’s upset with me.”

Phoenix dropped his arms. “Why’s he upset with you?”

She shrugged. “He ... he’s been looking for his mate since we turned. He wants to find the love of his life and start a family. He doesn’t get that you and I are, you know, and that we’re keeping it a secret.”

“But you told him why, right?”

Ashley nodded.

“And he’s still upset with you.”

“Yeah, he’s still upset with me. He’s looking for his mate and has been doing so for some time. I get it, I do. I’ve found you, and not only that, we’d found each other for five years, and we’re still doing this ... dance.”

Phoenix cupped her face. “It’s none of their business what we do, Ashley. It’s just you and me.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips and she forgot all about her troubles and only focused on Phoenix. She had missed him all day long.

“Feeling better?” he asked, stroking his thumb across her bottom lip.

“Yeah, I’m feeling better. Are you going to show me all the work that’s been done?”

Phoenix dropped his hands again, only this time to take hold of hers as they moved into his home. Ashley breathed in, and there was certainly something different within the air. The walls were all freshly plastered, and most of the electrics had also been installed. It wouldn’t be long before they were decorating.

“Wow, you’ve certainly made some headway,” Ashley said, tugging on his hand to bring him to a stop.

“The pack know what they’re doing and they’ve been so helpful.”



“You’re the alpha. Of course they want to help you. Everyone will help. All you have to do is ask.” She wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her body against his.

“Everyone will help?” he asked.

His voice seemed to have gone deeper, and she had a feeling he was about to ask for something a little more intimate than fixing a house.

“Yeah, I’ll help you. Just ask.”

Phoenix didn’t ask, he showed.

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It was supposed to be a kiss. Just an intense brush of the lips, giving the merest hint of what was to come, but the moment his lips touched hers, all thought left his mind. One kiss ended with them naked in what would soon be his sitting room. He used his jacket on the floor as he took her down, stripping her of her clothes, licking at her pussy, before sliding balls deep inside her cunt.

That wasn’t enough, and within minutes of finding his own orgasm, he had her on her knees, sliding back inside her, fingering her pussy, drawing every last bit of ecstasy from her. He filled her up with his cum for a second time, and still he wanted more.

It was pitch black outside. They’d made love twice more, and now they laid on the soon-to-be dining room floor. He’d found a blanket as it had gotten a little cold, even though for the most part their bodies ran hot. He’d covered both of them. Phoenix slid the tips of his fingers up and down her back then he looked over at her and stared into her eyes.

“Have you ever thought about kids?” he asked.

“Of course I’ve thought about them.” She giggled as he traced near her armpit. Ashley was a little ticklish, which he found so adorable.

“And?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you. It might freak you out.”

“I want kids, Ashley. I’d love to fill this house with them.”

“Y-you do?”

“Yeah, I do. Don’t get me wrong, the thought of being a shit dad terrifies me, but I don’t know, I have this feeling that if I’m with you, nothing else matters. Do you feel that way?”

“Yeah, I do. I feel it with you.”

He looked at her. “I don’t want you to be afraid to share everything with me. I know with you I want kids. I want you to live with me, Ashley. To share the whole world with you.” He laid his hand flat on her back. “Do you want that as well?”

She nodded her head.

“I’m not going to leave.”

Ashley reached out, pressing a finger against his lips. “Don’t. Please.”

He took hold of her wrist and pressed a kiss to each finger. “I am so fucking sorry for what I did,” he said. “For what I said. I walked into the bar that night, and I smelled ... it was Heaven. I’d never known anything like it, and I needed to have a look, a taste, anything, and when I found you, I knew I’d found the woman for me.” He took a second to stare into her eyes. “But you were so young. You’d just gone through your first transition, and I knew I couldn’t take that away from you. I had to give you time. I had to allow you the opportunity to flourish.”

“I forgive you,” she said.

Phoenix stopped. “What?”

“I forgive you.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips. “Again.”

“I forgive you and ... I love you.”

He stared into her eyes, a little taken aback.

“You don’t have to say it back, but I love you. I’ve loved you for quite some time.”

Phoenix slammed his lips down on hers, and she moaned. “Ashley Simpkin, I am fucking in love with you, more than anything else. There is no one else I want more. Just you. Always just you.”

He saw the tears in her eyes, and he smiled at her, wanting her to see that his words were not lies. They were the truth. The complete and utter truth. This woman was his soulmate, his everything. He had fucked up, and for the last five years he’d been living with the consequences of what he’d done. No more. He was never going to live without her. He loved her, adored her, and would never let her go.

“I love you so fucking much. You’re an ache inside my gut and I’m pretty sure, here, all it says is Ashley.” He pressed a hand to his heart. “I’m not good with words, Ashley. I’m not good with anything, but I’m going to get better at it.”

She pushed him to his back. “Shut up.” She kissed him and at the same time moved to straddle him.

Her pussy was so slick with arousal, but also with the cum he’d spilled inside her.

“I want to get you pregnant, Ashley. I want us to have a family. I love you more than anything.”

She reached between them, and he saw the tears in her eyes, but this was different. They were joyful.

Ashley grabbed his dick, lining it up with her entrance, and as he was about to enter, he heard it — the sound of movement outside, but it was close. He had no time.

He got to his feet and pulled Ashley behind him. As he did this, the front door slammed open, and Ashley’s parents spilled into the cabin, along with several of the pack. They were holding baseball bats and he was pretty sure he saw someone with a shovel, and there even seemed to be a knife.

“Mom! Dad!” Ashley held onto his waist. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s nearly three in the morning,” Leah said. “We were worried. You didn’t come home. Neither of you, and you always come home.”

“So what did you do? Knock on every single door and hope that they what? Come and find me?”

There was a chorus of agreement. They had all done exactly that and some were standing in his hallway leading to the dining room, and spilling outside into the front garden.

“Are you going to tell me what this is about?” Ben asked.

“Dad, you can’t be here.”

Phoenix hadn’t wrapped the blanket around himself, so he stood before her parents and the town, completely naked. Ashley was covered by his body, and there were quite a few men.

“What is going on?” Ben asked for a second time.

He stared at Ashley’s father and was tempted to go to his knees and beg for forgiveness but then he’d expose Ashley, and no one was allowed to see her naked. That pleasure was intended for him and him alone.

“Sir,” he said. “Ashley is my mate.”

Ben looked at him and then past his shoulder where Ashley was peering over to look at her parents.

“This is absurd. I would have known about this. Is this some kind of trick?” Ben asked.

“No!” He and Ashley spoke in unison.

He reached behind him to take hold of her hand, locking their fingers together. “This is real. Ashley and I, we’re real.”

“We’ve been mates for a long time, Dad,” Ashley said.

“But how? I mean, with all due respect, I don’t think it’s even possible to keep a secret like this for long,” Leah said.

“I was a fool,” Phoenix said. “Five years ago, I walked into a bar, and there was this girl. A beautiful young woman who had just gone through her first transition. Eighteen, young, and I ... I couldn’t bring myself to see how important it was to ... love her.”

“She was of age.”

“To us, to our pack, but Phoenix didn’t live in a pack,” Ashley said. “He lived out in the normal world and to him, he saw age. He saw an eighteen-year-old young adult, just starting out in her life, while he was forty years old.”

“And I rejected her,” Phoenix said.

There was a chorus of shock at his words.

“I fucked up big time. I rejected her so that she would live her life. She deserves someone a million times better than me. She deserves to be happy, to fall in love, to have everything her heart desires.”

Ben glared at him. “What changed, because it doesn’t take a genius to see what’s going on?”

“I realized the error of my ways and I wanted to earn Ashley’s forgiveness. She is the love of my life, sir. I will do anything and everything for her.”

“And I—me, the one he hurt—I have completely forgiven him, and you don’t get to be angry at him,” Ashley said.

“I will do whatever it takes to earn back your trust,” Phoenix said.

Ashley growled and bent forward. She tugged on the blanket and he had no choice but to step on it. She wrapped the blanket around her body, and then stepped around him.

“Dad, he’s my mate. I love him more than anything, and sure, you can be pissed, but think about how he must have felt. He has never lived in a pack, been part of a pack. We’re all he has. We’re all he’s known, and you have to give him the benefit of the doubt. You have to. Please, for me. I’ve never asked you for anything, but I’m asking you now, forgive him.

Forgive us.” She moved toward him, taking his hand, and leaning against him. “Because Phoenix has protected us. He has kept coming back to protect us, and I know, deep down, he wants to be part of the pack.”

That was the complete truth.

Ben looked at him and turned to Leah, and then behind him at the suddenly quiet pack who were ready to do this man’s bidding. He noticed Daniel was silent in the corner, not judging or saying anything.

“Did you tell them?” Ashley asked, suddenly seeing her friend.

Daniel shook his head, and came forward. “I didn’t say anything. They were already on the way over here. I swear I didn’t say anything.”

Phoenix watched and waited as Daniel moved a little closer, but kept a relatively safe distance from his mate, which he was thankful for. He didn’t want the man anywhere near his woman.

“I’m sorry,” Ashley said.

“No, you don’t need to be sorry. It’s weird but hearing him say what happened, I don’t know. It makes sense to me why you’d do what you do.”

“Friends?” Ashley asked.

“Always. I can’t stay mad at you and besides, you’ve got to help me find my mate.”

Phoenix still held her shoulder as Ashley gave Daniel a quick hug. “Thank you,” she said.

“I couldn’t stay mad at you.”

Ashley pulled away and stepped into his arms.

Daniel moved back and now it was time for the rest of the pack to make their judgement.

He waited with bated breath. Never had he wanted to be accepted more than he did in that moment.

“I have one request,” Ben said.

“Yes, sir, anything.”

“You take care of her, that is all I need.”

“Yes, sir. I will.”

Ben nodded. “Good. I think it’s time for us to leave and give these two lovebirds some privacy.”

Ashley smiled up at him.

“I’ll do more than take care of you,” he said.

“Yeah, what will you do?”

He winked at her. “You’ll see.”

## Epilogue

### *Five Years Later*

“You’ve done good, Phoenix,” Ben Simpkin said

Phoenix turned to his father-in-law and he couldn’t help but smile. It was five years in coming, but he figured that was to be expected. Ben had accepted him into the family, and he was there for all the necessary family dinners, parties, Christmases, birthdays, and every single occasion they seemed to come up with. There was always some kind of event for him to be part of. Ashley was worried that he would hate it, but Phoenix loved it, every single one of them.

Forty-five years of going without, of living on the cold and empty road, with nothing to look forward to. He’d come to find that pack life was exactly what he wanted. But none of that mattered. He was pleased with Ben’s approval, but this was all for his wife, for Ashley.

Her birthday was often a very private affair between the two of them. This year, their official fifth anniversary of being together, but technically ten years, he’d decided to get the whole pack involved and throw her a surprise party. He’d insisted on their son’s help as well. Paul was running around the town square with all the other kids.

He held their daughter, Bella, and looked over at his wife. He didn’t know if others could tell she was already pregnant with their third. They had been very busy the past couple of years.

With the help of the pack, they finished his home, furnished it, and Ashley moved in. They got married, at her parents’ insistence. It wasn’t long after their wedding that they discovered she was pregnant, which had changed his whole world. Being a father was the single most terrifying and exciting thing to happen to him. He didn’t want to screw up any kid, but had a horrible feeling that was exactly what he would do.



Ashley helped him, as always. The alpha gig didn't come without complications. She was there by his side. The love of his life.

Ten years ago, he had fucked up big time. Five years ago, he had started to rectify his mistake, and now he hoped she was happy because he spent every single day making up for what he'd done.

Ashley glanced over at him, and she smiled. It was a subtle smile.

"Excuse me," he said.

He made his way across the town, nodding at the people, trying to get through the throngs, until he finally stood in front of his wife.

She reached out, stroking their daughter's cheek. "You didn't have to do this."

"Oh, yeah, I did. After what you did for me, I had to do this."

Ashley had made it her mission to find out his birthday. For four years, they'd been celebrating the day he came to the pack as his birthday, but she had made some calls, got their best pack hunters, and found out his real birth date. She never told him, but she arranged a surprise birthday, and it sure had surprised him.

Wrapping his free arm around her, he pulled her in close. "I want the very best for my wife, my mate, and the love of my life."

She sighed. "I'm never going to get tired of hearing that." She reached out and cupped his cheek. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*."

He knew what she was thanking him for. For stopping by that day, for saving them, for coming back. But he thanked her for giving him a chance and showing him that there was more to life than loneliness.

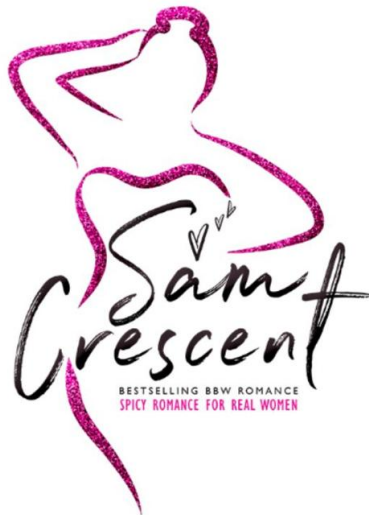
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# **BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER**

## **UNWANTED MATE**

### ***The Alpha Shifter Collection, 15***

**Sam Crescent**

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**Sample Chapter**

Sofia Foster tried to shield her entire body from the blows being rained down on her by her pack. The pain was excruciating, and nothing she did stopped them in their need to cause her harm. Each one took great pleasure in harming her. The sounds of her screams, along with their laughter, were all that could be heard.

It was freezing cold tonight, and it didn't matter how hard she tried to run or how far she tried to get, if they wanted to find her, they would.

“Fucking bitch.”

“Slut.”

“Fat cow.”

“Ugly whore.”

The words kept on coming, and she had no choice but to wait until their bloodthirst slowly left them.

Time ticked by. This had to be close to thirty minutes now before the final person spat at her, and they walked away.

She curled up in a tight ball, shivering as her body took the time to heal.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she tried to think of happy thoughts, but nothing would come to mind. Ever since her parents had abandoned her at the pack, there had been no kindness for her.

She was considered a burden. Unwanted. No matter how many times she tried to leave, her alpha wouldn't let her. She was nothing more than the pack's punching bag.

Sofia rolled onto her back, staring up at the sky. There was no moon tonight, but she felt her body slowly starting to mend.

No matter how many times they tried to break her, her body had a mind of its own. Within a matter of hours, she'd show only mottled bruises as if she'd been beaten weeks ago, and not hours.

As a wolf, her ability to heal was natural, but ... and this was the biggest but, she shouldn't heal quite as fast as she did. She imagined that was why people were so pissed within the pack. Even the alpha couldn't heal this fast.

As she lay, waiting for her body to finally heal itself, she wondered if there would ever come a point when she was free. Where nothing and no one scared her. She closed her eyes and imagined a life filled with happiness and laughter. One day, she wouldn't be afraid to go to sleep at night for fear of what would happen. There would be a time when she'd be part of a pack who had each other's backs rather than try to harm those that were different.

She took a deep breath, feeling the heat swirling in her gut.

Her body jerked and she whimpered. One day soon, her life within the pack would come to an end. Either that or

she'd find the strength to cross the pack line and finally leave. She hated that she stood at that pack line and never crossed over it. Always poised, but the alpha had given his instruction and there was no chance of her leaving.

She had to believe in a better future. Praying for an end of all of this, to find a life she deserved rather than being a constantly unwanted female. She'd done nothing wrong. Never harmed anyone, and yet, this was what happened to her.

There would be an end soon.

She'd cross that line.

She would find peace.

Until then, she had no choice but to stick with the abuse and hope for a miracle to one day come upon her.

*Two months later*

Sofia sat with her hands tied in front of her as the sounds of crying filled the air. This wasn't a miracle.

She didn't even know what had happened. One moment the alpha had been hitting her for spilling coffee on his pristine shoes that were some kind of designer brand, then they were running. The entire pack had tried to save themselves as they were attacked.

Seated in the center of the town, Sofia tried not to look, but she had no choice as the lead man who attacked stood in the center, right near the torn-down statue of their alpha. Their present alpha whimpered on the ground like a coward.

She didn't care what happened to her alpha. He was poison, pure evil. The man who had his foot on the alpha's chest, he captured her attention, and she wasn't sure why.

Her mouth went dry as she glanced from the top of his head, all the way down his body. He only wore a pair of pants and boots. His chest and arms were all bare, showing the sight

of his muscular chest. There was no ink on his body, but a lot of scars. Several of them she recognized as wolf marks.

The scent coming from him told her he was wolf.

If he was one of their kind, why did he attack their pack? Not that it was a problem for her. She was used to running, but it was rather strange being surrounded by those who often mocked her during the times she tried to save herself.

“You,” the new man said, pointing off at the group of men.

Sofia glanced to where he pointed and saw Bill, one of her many tormentors, was picked up and dragged to the center where their attacker waited.

They had all tried to run, but they hadn't gotten far before they were captured. The man in the center hadn't been alone.

Men of equal size surrounded him. They were present now, smiling at them. The women and men had been separated. The men chained up, the women bound with rope.

The feel of it against her flesh was uncomfortable. She hated being tied up.

Slow, deep breaths helped, but she gasped as the man, who she now assumed was the alpha, drew a knife, plunged it in Bill's stomach, and thrust it up to his heart.

The sight of blood made her feel sick, and she had no choice but to look away.

“You all think your alpha is going to save you? He is weak. He is nothing. Simpering on the floor like a damn coward,” he said.

Sofia raised her gaze in time to see him slam his hand against his chest.

“The name's Caspian, and each of you, you're going to pay.” His gaze ran over the crowd, and when it landed on her, he nodded for one of his men to grab her.



She didn't fight. There was no point.

Her pack wouldn't save her. There would be no victory here.

She was surprised as his men lifted her up, not brutally, but with care.

Why weren't they being rough? Why weren't they forcing her to the floor like an animal?

One of the men put a hand at her back and helped her move closer to ... Caspian.

It was a strange name. Not one she'd heard before.

Her heart raced as she was less than a foot in front of him. His men let her go, and she faced him, waiting for whatever decision he'd decided to make.

Sinking her teeth into her lip, she tried not to beg for mercy, or to ask for anything. Instead, she remained perfectly still, waiting for whatever verdict he intended to give.

She hoped for a quick death. One that didn't hurt her. She was so tired of pain.

Her hands were jerked in front of her, and then the rope was removed from her wrists. Sofia looked at Caspian, trying to see any sign of what he'd do. Any clue.

Nothing.

The man wasn't an open book.

The sharp gaze of his eyes, they were almost black, with hints of brown. Was the man mad? Had his wolf taken over?

His hair was shoulder-length, long and brown. To many women, he'd be considered handsome, even she found him ... attractive. This was unusual for her, seeing as most of the men in her pack had forced her to hate them right from the start.

He flicked the blade so that he held the tip in his fingers and presented the handle to her. "Finish him off," he said. His voice was deep, commanding.

She felt the alpha within his wolf.

Her own wolf was scared stiff, but she wasn't sure if that was her or not.

“What?”

“You heard me.” He kicked at the alpha, who lay curled up in a ball, groaning.

The beating she'd witnessed the alpha receive was bad, but she couldn't help but feel he was a coward, considering the number of times he'd ordered her own beating, and she'd had no choice but to take it.

In comparison, he truly didn't have what it took to lead.

Sofia shook her head, clasping her hands together. “No.” She couldn't do it.

Caspian burst out laughing. “Well, well, well, I am surprised.” He took a step toward her, and she couldn't help but tense up. “Do you think I don't know what this man is capable of?” He inhaled deep, and Sofia couldn't look away as his nose trailed from her cheek, up to her ear.

Her body came alive, and she hated herself.

At a time like this, why did she suddenly start acting like a wolf in heat?

Letting go of her hands, she clenched them into fists, hoping so damn much that her body would get control of itself. The thought of being aroused right now didn't bode well with her.

Caspian inhaled. “I can smell you. It's okay, little one. I am used to women being affected by me. You're not the first, and you won't be the last.”

“I'm not going to kill him,” she said.

“Why not? He means nothing to you. This man has done nothing but hurt and torture you for years. Has he broken your spirit that much you won't even think of taking revenge?” he asked.

“How do you know that?”

The whole pack would be able to hear their conversation. The thing about wolves was they had great hearing skills.

“Why do you think I came here, Sofia?” he asked. “I saw everything, and all of these creatures stood by, did nothing, or helped in your pain and misery. It is time for you to take your revenge and to kill all of those who harmed you.”

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Caspian had never sorted out a pack in his life.

Raised in the foster care system of normal humans, he'd known at a young age that he was different. He had these keen senses none of the other kids had. They didn't hear conversations feet away, especially those of whispers. None of them heard the rats or roaches in the homes.

None of them were ready for an attack, but he always was.

At the ripe age of sixteen, he found out exactly what he was. A wolf. Born to hunt, to lead.

In the last twenty-nine years, he'd learned to adapt, to hunt, to survive. During those years, he'd found out exactly what happened to him, and the men and women with him now were like him, in a way. None of them were leaders. They had been looking for an alpha, and as much as he hated it, Caspian didn't have a choice.

Rogue wolves were ... dangerous. He'd learned much during his time.

Just like he'd studied this woman in front of him.

Two months ago, he'd picked up a scent his wolf just couldn't deny. He'd tried to control himself, but the need to find that scent, to make her his, was overwhelming. He was aware of mates, the strength and bond a female could bring, but he hadn't wanted one himself.

He'd fucked his fair share of willing human and wolf females, but never had a woman made him feel this way.

Sofia Foster, a beautiful little wolf in a broken pack. He stared at her now, with the mark on her neck that must have been branded into her flesh before her first transition. He recognized the mark well. Every single member of his pack had it. The mark of the unwanted. The symbol that would stop all other packs from wanting her if the alpha decided to banish her from his pack.

Seeing the mark made him angry.

They had used this woman as their own personal punching bag. He'd watched them all beat her, curious as to what this female had done to earn such reactions.

Two months it had taken for him to realize she had done nothing but exist. They were afraid of her.

Caspian had never seen a wolf heal so fast in his life. He'd watched her as what would normally take a few days for wolves, she healed within hours. The damage had been so extensive that some weaker wolves would have even needed the help of the full moon and their wolf to heal from.

He couldn't believe it.

Staring at her now, he was struck once again by her beauty. Her long, black hair with streaks of gold fell down her back. There were leaves and some dirt within the strands from the hunt. He adored her brown eyes that also had flashes of amber, showcasing her wolf.

This woman was strong.

He especially loved seeing her full body. The dress she wore didn't do it justice, but he'd been watching her for two months now, and knew she hid nice, large tits, full hips, juicy, thick thighs, and a curvy butt beneath the horrid garment.

His cock started to thicken at just watching her.

"No," Sofia said, recoiling from the blade.

Caspian raised his brow. "No?"

She shook her head. "I'm not going to do it."

He threw back his head and laughed. “You’re not going to kill those responsible for making your life miserable?”

“No.” She frowned. “How do you—?”

“Know that these ... animals hurt you?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I’ve been watching you all. I’m the one who has seen what you all do to this woman, for fun.” He drew his foot back and kicked the alpha. This man was the biggest monster. He laughed and allowed it to happen, and took pride in doing it himself.

Revulsion filled Caspian. It was rare for his hatred to know such passions. He often ignored packs, especially the invites he received.

He was a rare wolf. Able to live among the humans, completely undetected.

“Stop,” Sofia said.

Caspian closed the distance between them, grabbing the back of her neck and pressing her up against him.

For the last two months, he’d been imagining what it would feel like to have this woman’s body pressed against his. He liked the feel of her, and he didn’t want it to stop.

His wolf wanted to claim her. To bend her over the nearest object and to claim her. She was ... beautiful, intoxicating, and his need to bury himself deep inside her cunt was so strong.

This need had never been so ... difficult to control.

Pressing his face against her neck, he breathed in her scent, trying to stop his need from overflowing, but it was impossible to do so.

All the people within this pack needed to be punished.

“I had to watch them all hurt you,” he said. “You never fought back, and I thought you were a coward. Then I realized why you never stopped them. You were not allowed, were you? The alpha stopped you. He told you to never stop anyone

from hitting you. To keep your hands by your sides like a good little bitch, and to take the beating.”

He saw the tears fill her eyes, and he wanted to hurt this man again. “He will not live for what he did to you.”

“I don’t want his death on my conscience.”

Caspian looked at her, a little ... taken aback.

He expected more thirst for blood. The men in his world all wanted the same thing, revenge and the desire to hurt. All that had happened to them was banishment and branding.

Sofia stood before him, branded and still with mottled bruises from another beating she had sustained.

Her body already healing, even before his gaze. It was miraculous.

“Please, I ... I don’t want anything to happen to the pack, I just want to leave,” Sofia said.

“Leave?”

“Yes, I have begged and pleaded with him to let me leave, but I fear if I kill him, I will be forced to remain here forever.”

Caspian watched her, seeing the desperation. He didn’t know how long she’d gone through this kind of treatment, but her needs were clear. She was more interested in getting away.

Caspian grabbed the alpha and lifted him up. He’d already broken both of the bastard’s legs, so keeping him still wasn’t a challenge.

“Tell the nice lady what she wants to hear,” Caspian said.

When the alpha made no sound, he grabbed the guy’s dick, knowing he’d be able to tear it right off him with a good firm tug.

The screams coming from him filled the air, and Sofia flinched, but he heard it.

“You can leave, Sofia Foster, and never come back.”

Caspian dropped the alpha to the floor and saw the first smile on the woman’s face. She looked ... mesmerizing. “I can leave,” she said, covering her mouth and smiling.

“Yes,” he said. “Go.”

“You’re going to let me leave?”

He smiled. “Consider me your guardian angel in this situation. Go and don’t come back. Run.”

She spun on her heel, and he nodded to his two men at the back of the pack, who immediately started to follow her.

Sofia would be able to leave the pack, but she wouldn’t go too far. She was his mate, and he was going to make sure she never wanted for anything.

Staring at the pack, he smiled.

Sofia got to leave, she got her wish, and now, it was up to him to deal with the pack for harming his woman.

“Where’s your branding iron?” Caspian asked.

The crowd gasped.

It was a great insult, just as he knew it was, but he didn’t give a shit.

A few men tried to escape, but none of them succeeded. It took less than ten minutes to find the branding tools at the alpha’s residence. The large iron lay in the fire, and Caspian used the glove, extracting it and pressing the flames into the bastard’s cheek.

The sounds of screams and the horrible stench of burning flesh filled the air, but he needed to make sure the son of a bitch didn’t lose this branding.

One by one, he took those he’d seen harming Sofia, and he branded all of them, holding the burning rod against their cheek, not caring if they were man or woman. The only people he saw be kind to Sofia were children, and so they remained unharmed.

This pack would have to live with their shame, with their brand of being unwanted. If Sofia had asked for it, he'd have killed every single one of them.

His woman had compassions.

Soon, she would belong to him completely.

End of sample chapter

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